

## Advent Fasting

As I've mentioned in years past, Advent is a penitential season that entails prayer, fasting, and penance – similar to Lent, though obviously much shorter and less arduous. Fasting and penance are things that set Catholic Christians apart from many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, as well as those who do not profess any faith. It is extremely counter-cultural to go against one's own comfort in a world that is dominated by the utilitarian philosophies that want to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. So it does us well as Catholic Christians to be informed and knowledgeable about the reasons underlying these practices. First, we seek to subordinate the passions that arise from the flesh to the higher purpose of the spiritual. We do not fast and do penance because we hate ourselves, any more than an athlete watches his diet and forgoes bodily pleasures. The athlete does it in order to be competitive. The same can be said for the Catholic Christian, who has an eternal motive for these practices.

## The Ember Days

In previous pastor's notes I explained the traditional Ember Days fast. This year's Advent Ember Days are: December 18, 20, and 21. The U. S. Bishops' Conference issued a Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence in 1966, and this is what they have to say about the Ember Days:

*17. Vigils and Ember Days, as most now know, no longer oblige to fast and abstinence. However, the liturgical renewal and the deeper appreciation of the joy of the holy days of the Christian year will, we hope, result in a renewed appreciation as to why our forefathers spoke of "a fast before a feast." We impose no fast before any feast-day, but we suggest that the devout will find greater Christian joy in the feasts of the liturgical calendar if they freely bind themselves, for their own motives and in their own spirit of piety, to prepare for each Church festival by a day of particular self-denial, penitential prayer and fasting.*

## The Friday Fast

The current Code of Canon Law indicates in Canon 1251, "Abstinence from eating meat or some other food according to the prescripts of the Conference of Bishops is to be observed on every Friday of the year.... unless a Friday occurs on a day listed as a Solemnity." This is the norm for the universal Church. In the U. S., the prescripts of the Bishops' Conference have indicated that this abstinence is obligatory only during Lent and "optional" in "the rest of the year". Quoting from the USCCB document mentioned above:

*18. Gratefully remembering this, Catholic peoples from time immemorial have set apart Friday for special penitential observance by which they gladly suffer with Christ that they may one day be glorified with Him. This is the heart of the tradition of abstinence from meat on Friday where that tradition has been observed in the holy Catholic Church.*

*19. Changing circumstances, including economic, dietary, and social elements, have made some of our people feel that the renunciation of the eating of meat is not always and for everyone the most effective means of practicing penance. Meat was once an exceptional form of food; now it is commonplace.*

*20. Accordingly, since the spirit of penance primarily suggests that we discipline ourselves in that which we enjoy most, to many in our day abstinence from meat no longer implies penance, while renunciation of other things would be more penitential.*

*21. For these and related reasons, the Catholic bishops of the United States, far from downgrading the traditional penitential observance of Friday, and motivated precisely by the desire to give the spirit of penance greater vitality, especially on Fridays, the day that Jesus died, urge our Catholic people henceforth to be guided by the following norms.*

*22. Friday itself remains a special day of penitential observance throughout the year, a time when those who seek perfection will be mindful of their personal sins and the sins of mankind which they are called upon to help expiate in union with Christ Crucified.*

*23. Friday should be in each week something of what Lent is in the entire year. For this reason we urge all to prepare for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday by freely making of every Friday a day of self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ.*

*24. Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Friday, even though we hereby terminate the traditional law of abstinence binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat. We do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as formerly we did in obedience to Church law. Our expectation is based on the following considerations:*

*We shall thus freely and out of love for Christ Crucified show our solidarity with the generations of believers to whom this practice frequently became, especially in times of persecution and of great poverty, no mean evidence of fidelity to Christ and His Church.*

*We shall thus also remind ourselves that as Christians, although immersed in the world and sharing its life, we must preserve a saving and necessary difference from the spirit of the world. Our deliberate, personal abstinence from meat, more especially because no longer required by law, will be an outward sign of inward spiritual values that we cherish.*

It is my prayer that this time of preparation for the coming of our Savior may be fruitful in your life as a Christian, and that these pious recommendations of our Church and faith might truly make a pathway in your heart to receive the Christ-Child.

*Rev. J. David Carter*