

# Not So Fast...

Do you know what Canon Law says about fasting?

# Lent, Canon Law, and Fasting



## Overview

Through the season of Lent, Catholics place a special focus on prayer, fasting, and charity to prepare for Christ's death and Resurrection. It is a special time to remember how Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16: 24). Abstinence from meat and fasting are some of the visible ways that individual Catholics deny themselves to grow closer to God. Do you know some of the reasons for those practices? What about "exceptions" to the "rules"?

**Directions:** Distribute the background essay and have students answer the questions that follow on their own paper. Then discuss their responses as a large group.

## Answer Key

### 1. What is Lent?

Lent is the liturgical season before Easter, which Catholics spend in a spirit of penance preparing for the death and Resurrection of Christ.

### 2. What are some of the visible signs of Lent in the Church?

These include violet drapes on crucifixes and statues, the omission of Alleluias and the *Gloria* during Mass, the absence of Holy Water on Good Friday, the silence of the organ from Holy Thursday to the Alleluia at the Easter Vigil, and others.

### 3. Why don't Catholics eat meat on Fridays during Lent? On what days do we fast?

#### What are Catholics required to do on all Fridays throughout the year?

We abstain and fast in recognition of the passion and death of Jesus Christ – God who became flesh. Catholics are obligated to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On all Fridays, Catholics must abstain from meat or substitute another form of penance.

### 4. What are Lenten reprieves, when do they occur, and who can grant special ones?

Catholics do not have to abstain on Sundays or solemnities. In addition, local bishops have the ability to grant reprieves on feast days falling on a Friday.)

### 5. Should Catholics "take a break" from their sacrifices on reprieve days?

Accept reasoned answers.

# Lent, Abstinence, and Fasting

Lent is the liturgical season before Easter, which Catholics spend preparing for the death and Resurrection of Christ. During this 40 day period, Catholics fast and abstain as a sacrifice to offer up to God.

## Visible Signs of Lent in Church

The Church makes the invisible visible in many ways. These include:

- Crucifixes and statues are draped in violet—the color of royalty as well as repentance from sin.
- Alleluias are not sung before the Gospel.
- The *Gloria* is excluded during Mass.

These signs increase during Holy Week. Holy water is removed from the fonts on Good Friday. Traditionally, the organ is silent from Holy Thursday until the Alleluia at the Easter Vigil. There is no consecration of bread into the Body of Christ on Good Friday. The Eucharist that is distributed was consecrated the day before.

Traditionally, individual Catholics and many other Christians perform a Lenten sacrifice – going without something good as a form of penance. All Catholics between the ages 14-59 are required by Canon Law to abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, unless a solemnity falls on a Friday (Can 1251).

## Why Is Fish Allowed, But Not Meat?

The word “Incarnation” comes from the Latin *caro*, which means flesh. (You may

recognize this root from words like “carnivore.”) Through the Incarnation, God became flesh. For the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, Catholics abstain from flesh meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays during Lent. Since fish has never been considered flesh meat, it is permitted.

The Church recommends Catholics observe meatless Fridays year-round. If they choose to eat meat, Catholics are required to substitute some form of penance on all Fridays in memory of Christ’s crucifixion.

In addition to abstinence from meat on Fridays, Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting means eating only one meal a day, plus two smaller amounts which together do not equal a full meal. Fasting is a form of self-denial. When we deny ourselves, we grow spiritually united to Christ’s sacrifice. Feeling hungry and being forced to deny ourselves the satisfaction of eating serves to remind us of Christ’s suffering and death for our sake.

## Rules for Reprieves

Since all Sundays are celebrations of the day Christ rose from the dead, Catholics can “take a break” from their Lenten obligations on Sundays. In addition, bishops may grant dispensations on major feast days. (For example, a local bishop may grant a dispensation to allow Catholics in his diocese to have corned beef on St. Patrick’s feast day if it falls on a Friday.)

During Lent, in addition to fasting and abstinence, the Church encourages additional almsgiving and corporal works of mercy. It is important to know the reasons and rules behind fasting, as well as to remember that fasting without charity and mercy is nothing but a change in diet.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is Lent?
2. What are some of the visible signs of Lent in the Church?
3. Why don't Catholics eat meat on Fridays during Lent? On what days in Lent do we fast? What are all Catholics required to do on all Fridays throughout the year?
4. What are Lenten reprieves, when do they occur, and who can grant special ones?
5. Do you think Catholics should take a break from their Lenten obligations on Sundays or Solemnities even though Canon law says Catholics are not obligated to abstain on those days? Explain your answer.