

Fact of FAITH

Lenten Fasting

By Rev. Larry Rice, CSP

Part of the Church's Lenten discipline is the practice of fasting and abstinence. Abstinence, in this case, is refraining from eating meat. We used to abstain from meat on every Friday, now it's only binding on the Fridays of Lent.* Any Catholic above the age of 14 is required to abstain during Lent. And since this is intended as a penitential practice, having a two-pound lobster instead kind of misses the point.

Fasting has a long history as a penitential practice. The ideal of giving up some food for the sake of one's spiritual life has been part of our tradition for centuries. Jesus himself went into the desert to fast and pray. Today's Lenten fast is pretty easy by comparison. The Lenten fast days are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On those days, Catholics between 18 and 59 years of age are expected to eat only one substantial meal and may eat two smaller meals if necessary. No snacking between meals is permitted. Obviously, the very young, the elderly, and anyone in poor health are exempt from these requirements.

But don't be too quick to let yourself off the hook. If you can't fast and give up meat, perhaps there's something similar you could be doing as a sign of repentance. One of my hypoglycemic friends, who has to eat every four hours or so, is giving up the television and the computer on fast days. For him, that's probably harder than not eating would be.

The point of these practices is to express sorrow for our sins and to help us live in solidarity with those whose hunger is never satisfied. To live for a few hours with a feeling of hunger is a reminder that we are constantly dependent on God for all that sustains us. That would be an appropriate dedication for all our fasting and abstinence this Lent.

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* The Catholic bishops of the United States still commend abstinence from meat on Fridays throughout the year as a voluntary penitential practice. See the bishops' Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence, no. 24: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/lent/us-bishops-pastoral-statement-on-penance-and-abstinence.cfm>.