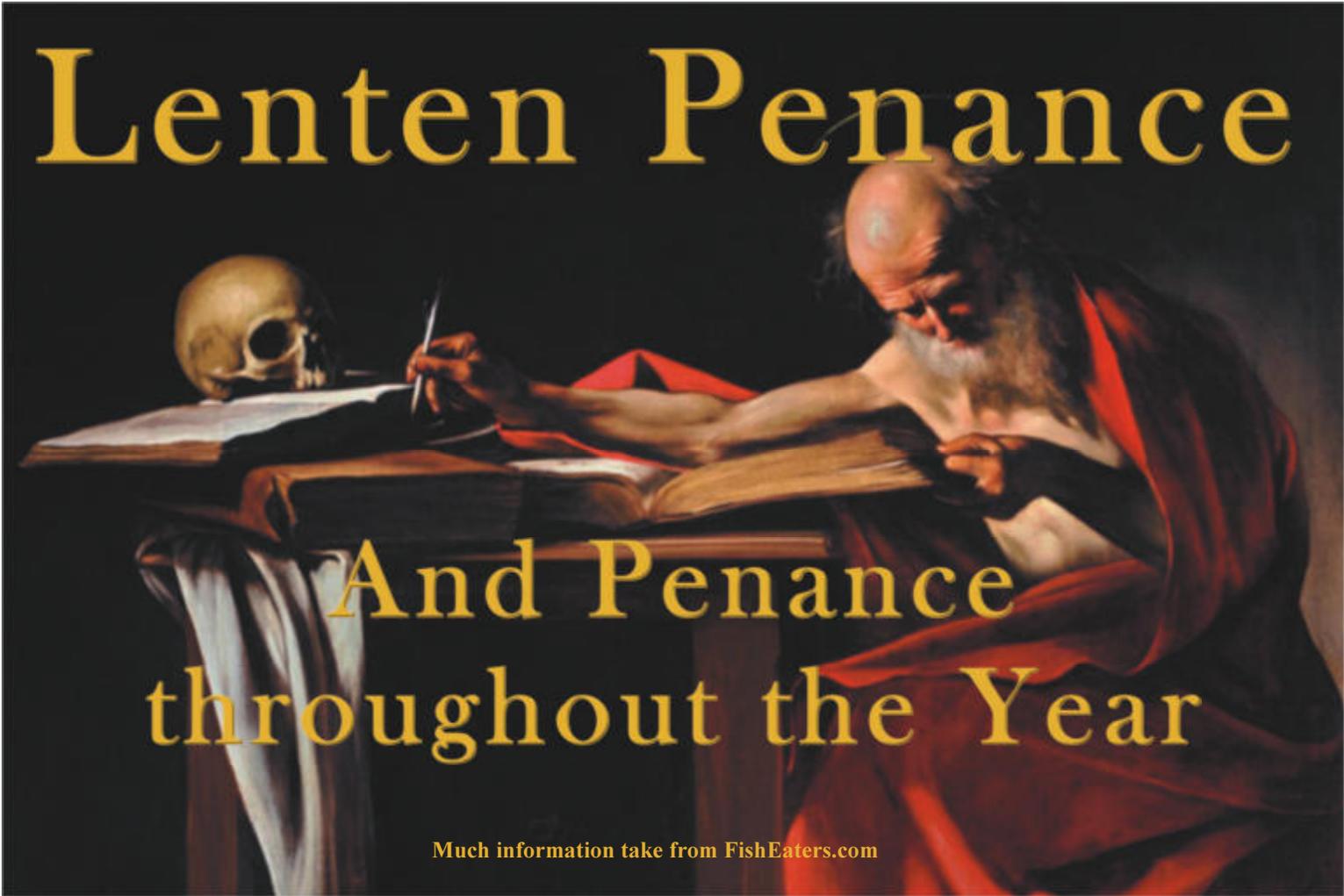


Lenten Penance



And Penance throughout the Year

Much information take from FishEaters.com

Lent (the word "Lent" comes from the Old English "lencten," meaning "springtime") lasts from Ash Wednesday to the Vespers of Holy Saturday -- forty days, never minding the six Sundays which don't count as part of the liturgical fast. The Latin name for Lent, Quadragesima, means forty and refers to the forty days Christ spent in the desert which is the origin of the Season. The last two weeks of Lent are known as "Passiontide," made up of Passion Week (which begins on Passion Sunday) and Holy Week (which begins on Palm Sunday). The last three days of Holy Week -- Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday -- are known as the "Sacred Triduum." Prior to Lent, there is the preparatory season known as "Septuagesima" which means Seventy and mystically refers to the seventy years of Babylonian Captivity in the Old Testament. This pre-Lent period begins two and a half weeks before Ash Wednesday and is a time to gently settle into our penitential practices of Lent. We might take the opportunity to work up to our full Lenten penances by adding some small penances during this season of Septuagesima, so that we are ready fully to embrace our Lenten Fast beginning on Ash Wednesday.

The focus of this Season is the Cross and penance, penance, penance as we imitate Christ's forty days of fasting, like Moses and Elias before Him, and await the triumph of Easter. We fast, abstain, mortify the flesh, give alms, and think more of charitable works. Awakening each morning with the thought, "How might I make amends for my sins? How can I serve God in a reparative way? How can I serve others today?" is the attitude to have.

As we meditate on "The Four Last Things" -- Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell -- we also practice mortifications by "giving up something" that would be a sacrifice to do without. The sacrifice could be anything from desserts to television, and it can entail, too, taking on something unpleasant that we'd normally avoid. Ideally, the practices one gives up and takes on during Lent should center around eliminating a particular vice, or bad habit, one has, and focus on cultivating the vice's opposite virtue, or good habit.

Because of the focus on penance and reparation, it is traditional to make sure we go to Confession at least once during this Season to fulfill the precept of the Church that we go to Confession at least once a year; this prepares us for our Easter Communion. A beautiful old custom associated with Lenten Confession is to, before going to see the priest, bow before each member of your household and to any you've sinned against, and say, "In the Name of Christ, forgive me if I've offended you." Responding "God will forgive you." With an extensive examination of conscience and a sincere heart, this practice can be quite healing.

Let's review the Canon Law of the Church:

Can. 1249 All Christ's faithful are obliged by divine law, each in his or her own way, to do penance. However, so that all may be joined together in a certain common practice of penance, days of penance are prescribed. [...]

Can. 1250 The days and times of penance for the universal Church are **each Friday** of the whole year and [every day of] the season of Lent.

Can. 1251 **Abstinence from meat**, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed **on all Fridays**, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. [...]

Can. 1253 **The Episcopal Conference** can determine more particular ways in which fasting and abstinence are to be observed. **In place of abstinence or fasting it can substitute**, in whole or in part, **other forms of penance**, especially works of charity and exercises of piety.

The Current Law of the Church

Abstinence from meat on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays of the year (except if there is a Solemnity), which is strictly mandatory during Lent but can be substituted with another penance outside of Lent. [This is mandatory for all 14 and up, until death.]

Fasting, meaning one regular meal and two small snacks, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday – and encouraged on Holy Saturday. [This is mandatory for all from 18 to 59.]

(Laws of fasting and abstinence bind gravely, so that it is objectively in the realm of mortal sin to break them significantly without a grave reason [like being very ill or having to perform some extreme physical labor, or pregnancy, etc].)

Father Ryan's Recommendations *(simply some ideas of how to enter more fully into Lent)*

Fasting has traditionally been understood to mean only one meal (taken after 3pm), and only one very small snack (like a piece of bread with honey, or a few veggies). Those who are grown and healthy might consider incorporating this practice on even a weekly basis, especially Fridays – however, growing children, the elderly, the sick, pregnant mothers, etc should speak first with their confessor.

Abstinence has traditionally been understood to mean not just avoiding meat, but also products derived from these animals – namely, broth, meat-gravy, dairy, eggs, etc. This is the origin of the “Easter egg,” since eggs were forbidden during Lent. This is also why Catholics were called “Fish eaters” because they couldn't eat meat or eggs or dairy – fish was a major part of the Lenten diet.

Less than 100 years ago, abstinence was practiced not only on Fridays, but also on Wednesdays and Saturdays – and even “partial abstinence” on every day of Lent (including Sundays), which meant that meat, eggs, or dairy could only be eaten at one meal during the day. The more ancient practice was to fully abstain from meat, eggs, and dairy on every single day of Lent, and to fast every day but Sunday!

For those who are able, it would be good to consider practicing abstinence from meat, eggs, and dairy on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays – especially on the Ember Days of the First Week of Lent. And even to adopt partial abstinence on every day of Lent.

Lesser variations on these penances can also be adopted throughout the season of Advent. Furthermore, the Ember Days and Rogation Days are traditionally days of fasting and abstinence. We might also adopt the pious practice of penance before significant feast days — Christmas Eve, for example, was traditionally seen as one of the most penitential days of the year, including fasting and abstinence. A great way to grow in devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as to St Joseph is to practice some small penance on the day before their principal feasts.

“The observance of Lent is the very badge of the Christian warfare. By it, we prove ourselves not to be enemies of the cross of Christ. By it, we avert the scourges of divine justice. By it, we gain strength against the princes of darkness, for it shields us with heavenly help. Should mankind grow remiss in their observance of Lent, it would be a detriment to God's glory, a disgrace to the Catholic religion, and a danger to Christian souls. Neither can it be doubted that such negligence would become the source of misery to the world, of public calamity, and of private woe.”

(Pope Benedict XIV, in the Constitution *Non ambigimus* of 10 June 1745)

It is clear that each and every Friday through the entire year is a day of penance. This is prescribed by the Law of the Church. In the Universal Church, Catholics are obligated to abstain from meat on all Fridays of the year. **The US Bishops have obtained permission for some other form of penance for Fridays outside of Lent.** However, we must recall that **all US Catholics are obligated to do penance of some sort on every Friday of the year** (excepting if it be a solemnity; for example, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart). Penance on Fridays is binding on all Catholics from 14 years until death. **There is no upper age limit to abstaining from meat** or some other form of penance outside of Lent. However, the two days of fasting (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) bind only from 18 to 60 years – we are encouraged to fast also on Holy Saturday.

But how serious is this obligation? After Vatican II, **Pope Paul VI** issued a declaration regarding the necessity of penance in the Christian life. Regarding abstinence from meat (or some other penance as determined by the Bishops' Conference) on every Friday throughout the year, the Pope states, in 1966, **"Their substantial observance binds gravely."** (Paenitemini, Norm II.2) This was further clarified by the Vatican, stating that omitting a part of the prescript of penance "which is notable either quantitatively or qualitatively, without an excusing motive" is a grave sin. (Dubium of 31 March 1967).

What does this mean? It means that Catholics are bound under pain of mortal sin to practice penance on every Friday throughout the year, and not just during Lent. The universal way in which Catholics practice this penance is by abstaining from meat. However, in the USA other forms of penance may be substituted, but some sort of penance is mandatory. To omit penance on numerous Fridays outside of Lent (or even one Friday of Lent) without a grave reason would be a mortal sin.

Why haven't I heard about this before? If it really is an issue of mortal sin, why haven't other priests told me about this?! It is sad that there are many teachings which have not been communicated clearly over the past 50 years. Friday penance is a wonderful way to be united with Christ, who died on Sunday for our salvation – this is all about imitating Jesus with much love!

Father's Q&A on Friday Penance

Following up on the earlier handout regarding the obligation to do penance on all Fridays of the year, a little question and answer:

Does the Church really say I have to do penance on Fridays outside of Lent? Yes, if you are over 14, you are obligated to do penance on all Fridays excepting Solemnities. This was re-affirmed and declared to bind under pain of mortal sin by Pope Paul VI (See Canons 1250-1253 of the Code of Canon Law, and "Paenitemini" by Paul VI, 1966)

Do I have to abstain from meat on every Friday? The US Bishops have allowed you to practice some other penance on Fridays outside of Lent. However, the Bishops state the abstinence from meat on all Fridays still holds "first place" among all forms of penance. But Catholics in the USA are permitted to substitute some other form of penance on Fridays outside of Lent, if they so choose. (See Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence, 1966)

Is it a mortal sin to fail to do penance on Fridays? If you are over 14, it would be a mortal sin intentionally to fail substantially to do penance on Fridays. Thus, it would not necessarily be a mortal sin to fail to do penance on any one Friday, but it would be a mortal sin intentionally to fail to do penance on numerous Fridays throughout the year. Obviously, certain exceptional circumstances (like serious illness) can free us from the obligation to practice penance on a particular Friday.

Am I in mortal sin, if I've never heard about this and have never done Friday penance before?! If you truly did not know, but generally seek to follow the teachings of the Church, you are not guilty of committing a mortal sin you didn't know about. However, we all have the obligation to learn and spread the fullness of the Catholic teaching, so we must strive from now on to practice Friday penance.

Why haven't I heard about this before? If it really is an issue of mortal sin, why haven't other priests told me about this?! Sadly, this is one of many areas where many priests and bishops of the past 50 years have failed gravely in their duty to teach the Catholic faith and guide the people to holiness. And this is no small fault or slight oversight -- the fourth precept of the Church demands that we keep the days of fasting and penance as prescribed by the Church. Friday penance is just the bare minimum for being Catholic! (See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2043)

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