

CHURCH GUIDELINES FOR FAST AND ABSTINENCE AND DOING Penance DURING LENT

Why Do Lenten Penance?

The season of Lent focuses the Church on the upcoming Easter celebrations. These celebrations include baptizing and initiating new members into the community, renewal of baptismal promises for all who are baptized, and sharing fully, including receiving communion if possible, in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

Those preparing for full baptism and full initiation are asked to take the season of Lent as a time of spiritual formation and renewal in preparation for the Easter sacraments they will receive. To embrace in some way the three traditional Lenten practices of penance: fasting, extra prayer, extra almsgiving.

Those who are not reconciled with the Church due to choices in life that have led them seriously away from God and/or the community of faith are asked to take the season of Lent as a time of repentance and reconciliation in preparation for full participation at Easter. Part of that preparation includes Lenten penance.

And so the whole community of faith joins those preparing for full initiation and full reconciliation. We cannot ask them to do what we ourselves are unwilling to do. We join in the traditional Lenten practices. In so doing the whole community is in solidarity with each other, supporting the call to live a deeper Christian life.

As a minimum, the Church asks for some practices of penance that keep the baptized Christian focused on the spirit of the season. Such practices can include both acts of self-denial as well as positive acts of charity and prayer. In particular, the Church asks the whole community to take Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as full days of fasting. See below for the regulations, but in the spirit of the season, even those not obligated to fast are asked to do some form of penance on these days. In addition, even though all the Fridays of the year are traditionally days of penance and abstinence from meat is the recommended practice for every Friday, during Lent such abstinence becomes mandatory.

Keeping the Spirit of the Season:

None of this is a matter of following rules for their own sake or a matter of sinning if one does not follow the rule. Rather, the real issue is whether we are willing to join the whole community of faith in the spirit of the season, to enter into a penitential spirit and be open to renewal through God's Spirit at work. A closed heart and rejection of that Spirit would be the sin, if any is there.

But there are many ways to do penance and keep the spirit of the season. We list below the current regulations for the Church in the United States. We encourage all Christians to embrace them, not just those of a certain age. If these do not help you focus on the season of Lent, find some other action or act of self-denial that does so in a better way.

In all of this, embrace the spirit of the season, not just the letter of the law. Find little ways to break your regular routine and take a few moments in prayer. The spirit of penance is not about our ability to fast or do huge penances. It is about being open to God's own Spirit at work in our lives. In addition to the minimal requirements below, pick a penance that is do-able and regular enough that you will be

reminded that you are in Lent, joining the whole community in fasting, prayer and almsgiving (acts of charity).

Fasting:

Observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Required of all 18 years or older until their 59th birthday. Encouraged for all others in the spirit of the season. In addition, all Christians are encouraged to fast on Holy Saturday, along with the elect preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil. Health, ability to work, or other serious reasons **always** excuse.

On a fast day one full meal is allowed. Two other meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each one's needs, but together they should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted, but liquids, including milk and juices, are allowed.

Abstinence:

Observed on Ash Wednesday, all the Fridays of Lent and Good Friday. Required by all 14 years of age and older. Encouraged for all others in the spirit of the season, especially helping younger children enter into this practice. May be extended through the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday so to be in solidarity with those preparing for full initiation into the Church.

On days of abstinence no meat is allowed. Dairy products and bouillon-type flavored foods are allowed.