

Laws of Fasting and Abstinence

Purpose and Observance of Penitential Days

Canon 1249

All members of the Christian faithful in their own way are bound to do penance in virtue of divine law; in order that all may be joined in a common observance of penance, penitential days are prescribed in which the Christian faithful in a special way pray, exercise works of piety and charity, and deny themselves by fulfilling their responsibilities more faithfully and especially by observing fast and abstinence according to the norm of the following canons.

Penitential Days

Canon 1250

All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and times throughout the universal Church.

Days of Abstinence and Fasting

Canon 1251

Abstinence from eating meat or another food according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops is to be observed on Fridays throughout the year unless they are solemnities; abstinence and fast are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and on Friday of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Obligation to Abstain/Fast

Canon 1252

All persons who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence; all adults are bound by the law of fast up to the beginning of their sixtieth year. Nevertheless, pastors and parents are to see to it that minors who are not bound by the law of fast and abstinence are educated in an authentic sense of penance.

Discretion of Conference of Bishops

Canon 1253

It is for the conference of bishops to determine more precisely the observance of fast and abstinence and to substitute in whole and in part for fast and abstinence other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety. (This they did regarding abstinence on Fridays and thought the year and the exception of Lenten Fridays.)

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in their pastoral statement of November 18, 1966 determined the following:

Catholics in the United States are obliged to abstain from the eating of meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays during the season of Lent. They are also obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday. Self-imposed observance of fasting on all weekdays of Lent is strongly recommended. Abstinence from flesh meat on all Fridays of the year is especially recommended to individuals and to the Catholic community as a whole.