



# A SHORT INSTRUCTION ON **Fasting & Abstinence**

## 1. *What does the Church instruct us to do regarding Fasting and Abstinence?*

**Canon 1249**—All Christ's faithful are bound 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. On these days Christ's faithful are in a special manner to devote themselves to prayer, to engage in works of piety and charity, and to deny themselves, by fulfilling their obligations more faithfully and especially by observing the fast and abstinence which the following canons prescribe.

**Canon 1250**—The days and times of penance for the Universal Church are **each Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent.** [emphasis added]

**Canon 1251**—Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Bishops' Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

## 2. *Who is bound to observe these penitential days?*

**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 fasting up to the beginning of their sixtieth year... [The completion of the fourteenth year means the day after one's fourteenth birthday. The beginning of the sixtieth year means the obligation ceases the day after one's fifty-ninth birthday. The Code of Canon Law defines "adults" as those who have completed their eighteenth year, which happens the day after one's eighteenth birthday.]

## 3. *Can I use chicken broth on a day of Abstinence?*

According to the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Paul VI on Fast and Abstinence, *Poenitemini*, "the law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat" (ch. III). Thus, forbidden are the flesh of meat of warm-blooded animals (mammals and birds) and all parts of such animals. This does not include juices, broths, soups, lards, gravies, sauces, and liquid foods made from meat and animal fat so long as there is no meat parts or pieces in them (e.g., no pork in the beans). Also allowed are fish and all such cold-blooded animals such as frogs, shell-fish, clams, turtles, oysters, crabs, snails, mussels, and lobsters.

## 4. *If one recalled his duty to abstain from meat after eating a piece of meat in the morning, does this slip allow him to eat meat at later meals?*

No. He who has eaten meat on a day of abstinence must still observe the law once he recalls the law; and therefore, he is not free to eat meat again the same day.

## 5. *What about those serving in the armed forces?*

Traditionally, Catholics serving in the armed forces, while they are actually serving, they and their families, when eating with them, are dispensed from abstinence excepting Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

## 6. *What does it mean to fast?*

According to *Poenitemini*, "The law of fasting allows only one full meal a day, but it does not prohibit taking some food in the morning and evening, observing—as far as quantity and quality are concerned—approved local custom" (ch. III). The current ecclesiastical custom requires that the two smaller meals not add up to the amount of the full meal. Note that the "full meal" denotes what one would normally eat at a full meal on an ordinary day.

In general, a person may eat enough to enable him to do his work well and to continue the fast without considerable detriment to himself. In other words, the two smaller meals should be sufficient to maintain strength according to each one's needs but at the same time the person should strive to prevent them from adding up to another full meal.

One may not eat between the meals mentioned, but he may drink liquids that are not considered nourishing (e.g., water, juices, coffee, ordinary milk, and tea). Malted milks, milk shakes, and the like are not included in the term "milk."

## 7. *Why do Catholics fast or abstain from meat?*

Pope Paul VI taught that although the Church is "holy and without blemish, it is defective in its members and in continuous need of conversion and renewal, a renewal which must be implemented not only interiorly and individually but also externally and socially" (*Poenitemini*, Introduction).

Further, "salutary abstinence ... will forearm [the faithful] against the danger of allowing themselves to be delayed by the things of this world in their pilgrimage toward their home in heaven" (*Poen.*, Intro).

St. Augustine teaches us, saying, "The man who lets himself do everything that is allowed will very soon become slack and do what is not allowed." Thus, by learning to say "no" to ourselves in little things like meat on Fridays, we will be capable of saying "NO" to the big things that tempt us to turn our backs on Christ and His Church. After all, Our Lord said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:23-25).

Sources: 1983 Code of Canon Law and commentary; *Poenitemini* by Paul VI; "Moral Theology" by Jone & Adelman.

