

What are the regulations for penance, fasting and abstinence during Lent?

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Penitential days – The penitential days for the universal Church are each Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes with the celebration of the Paschal Triduum. During this time the whole Church is invited to do penance in order to purify our hearts in preparation to celebrate the renewal of our baptismal promises on Easter Sunday.

The following regulations should be observed by Catholics during Lent:

Abstinence – Catholics 14 years of age and older must abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent. It is only on other Fridays of the year, outside of Lent, that a Catholic may substitute another form of penance instead of abstinence.

Fasting – Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 inclusive are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On these days one full meal is allowed. Food may be taken at two other times during the day, in order to maintain strength according to each one's needs, but together they should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted. Liquids, including milk and fruit juices, are allowed, however.

Sacrament of Penance – All the faithful who have reached the age of reason (second grade) are bound faithfully to confess their grave sins at least once a year. Lent is a good time to fulfill this precept of the Church. Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion without previously having been to sacramental confession (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1457). Of course, frequent confession, even of venial sins, is highly recommended to grow in God's grace (CCC, #1458).

Other Lenten Observances – Each weekday of Lent, with the exception of Solemnities, is also an obligatory day of penance and should be marked by prayer and increased devotion to spiritual practices. Some recommendations to fulfill this obligation include the participation in daily Mass, increased personal prayer time or spiritual study, self-imposed fasting or abstinence, works of charity, financial generosity to programs which benefit others, especially the poor, and participation in traditional Lenten Devotions (Stations of the Cross, Rosary, Retreats, Parish Missions, etc.).

The goal of all our Lenten disciplines is the conversion of our hearts. As the Catechism states, however, "interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance" (CCC, #1430). These penances help us to "repent" as the Lord asks, by redirecting our whole life toward God and away from the sin and evil which wounds our nature (CCC, #1430-1439).