

FASTING AND LENTEN PENANCE

Only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are now set down as days for fasting and abstaining from eating meat. However, all Christians are called to do some form of penance on Fridays throughout the year and during the season of Lent. The traditional penitential practices of prayer, fasting and alms-giving are still recommended. However, the form of penance that is practiced is left to each person.

We know that by the second century Christians were already preparing for Easter by a forty hour fast that began on Good Friday. By the first Council of Nicaea in 325 the preparation for Easter had been extended to forty days. It was seen to be a way to imitate the 40 day fast of Jesus after his baptism. This extended period of preparation became the season of Lent.

The Lenten fast at that time meant that people had only one meal each day and it was eaten after sunset. Abstinence from meat and wine and the further restriction on all dairy products during Lent were only added in later centuries.

Fasting for medical reasons was not uncommon in ancient Greece and Rome. However, the essential feature of Christian fasting was its link to prayer. In modern times we call fasting without prayer dieting. Christians also saw fasting as a preparation for the reception of the Spirit and so it was associated with preparing for Baptism and the Eucharist.

But against that background there were also many references in the early Church to the prophet Isaiah (Is 58:1-9) and to the teaching of Jesus (Mt 6:16-18) who both warned against fasting becoming only an external practice that did not touch the heart, the core of a person's being.

Penance is always about conversion and is summed up in the call to repent and believe in the Good News. It is linked therefore to prayer and reflecting on the Word of God.

The reflection draws on Adolf Adam's history of Lent in his book "The Liturgical Year" (Pueblo Publishing, New York 1981) which was originally published in Germany.

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