



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

LENT:

A SEASON OF PRAYER & PENANCE

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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The Meaning of the Word

- ❖ The period of forty days of prayer and fasting that comes before Easter is commonly known throughout the Western world as *Quadragesima*, Latin for “the forty days.”
- ❖ In Great Britain and the United States, however, it is called *Lent* after *lenc ten*, the Old English word for “spring.”



Ash Wednesday

- ❖ In the Bible, putting ashes on one's head signifies mourning and repentance. Cf. Job 42:6, et al.
- ❖ Recalling God's words to Adam, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" Gen. 3:19, ashes are a stark reminder to us of our own mortality and need to turn away from our sins.



The Sacred Sign

- ❖ The sign of the cross on our forehead symbolizes our belonging to Christ Jesus through Baptism and our hope that we will share in His Resurrection. Cf. Rom. 8:11



The Sacred Sign

- ❖ A precedent for the sign of the cross can be found in the *Book of Revelation*, which speaks of the faithful receiving a protective mark upon their forehead. 7:3, et al.
- ❖ Early Christian historical writings refer to the sign of the cross as well.
- ❖ Around 200 A.D., Tertullian wrote, “In all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.”
The Crown 3



Prayer and Fasting

- ❖ The custom of a forty-day period of prayer and fasting follows after the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who spent forty days praying and fasting in the wilderness in preparation for His earthly ministry. Cf. Matt. 4:2
- ❖ On Ash Wednesday and every Friday during Lent, the faithful are called to fast.
- ❖ This means Catholics, who are in good health and between the ages of 18 and 59, are required to eat just one full meal and two small meals (which together would not equal a full meal).



Prayer and Fasting

- ❖ Fasting is a spiritual exercise designed to bring the flesh into submission.
- ❖ “I pommel my body,” wrote Saint Paul, “and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” 1 Cor. 9:27
- ❖ There is a supernatural power connected with fasting when it is performed out of love for God.
- ❖ Jesus advised His followers to fast and give alms, not for the approval of men but of God, “who sees in secret and will reward you.”
Matt. 6:4, 18



Prayer and Fasting

- ❖ When the disciples asked Jesus why they had been unable to cast out an evil spirit, He replied, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting.” Mark 9:29
- ❖ The angel appearing to Cornelius in the *Acts of the Apostles* revealed to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” 10:4



Abstinence

- ❖ On Ash Wednesday and every Friday during Lent, Catholics 14 years of age and older are called to abstain from eating meat.
- ❖ According to Canon Law, in fact, Catholics are called to abstain from meat or perform an equivalent act of penance on every Friday throughout the year. See Code of Canon Law 1250
- ❖ The Church's authority to make laws binding upon the faithful comes from Christ Himself, who said to the Apostles, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven."
Matt. 18:18



Abstinence

- ❖ As with all the laws of the Church, abstinence from meat on Friday was not established to be a burden to us, but to bring us closer to Jesus.
- ❖ Abstinence from meat on Friday reminds us that this is the day on which Our Lord suffered and died for our sins.



Abstinence

- ❖ In his *First Letter to Timothy*, Paul denounces those “who forbid marriage and enjoin in abstinence from foods.” 4:3
- ❖ Some have misused this verse to condemn the Catholic practices of celibacy and abstinence from meat.
- ❖ In this passage, though, Paul was referring to the Gnostics, who looked down on marriage and food because they believed the things of the physical world were evil.



Putting God First

- ❖ Catholics, on the other hand, do not practice celibacy and abstinence because they believe marriage and food are evil.
- ❖ To the contrary, we see them as gifts from God. Cf. Tim. 4:4
- ❖ Yet we abstain from them at certain times and under certain conditions to demonstrate that we love God first and foremost above all created things.



Putting God First

- ❖ Fasting, abstinence, and the other small sacrifices we offer during Lent, are not punishments but opportunities for us to turn away from the world and more fully towards God, to offer Him in praise and thanksgiving with our whole selves, body and spirit.



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