

St. Francis Episcopal Church  
3838 Walnut Hill Lane  
Dallas Texas  
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2-21-77

Dear St. Francisfolk:

I have been asked by a parishioner to set out an outline or summary of the church's rules or customs of fasting. So here goes:

Why fast?

- 1) To remember the day. Like tying a string on your finger. You get hungry and reach for a goodie and check yourself and remember why - e.g., Christ died for us on Friday.
- 2) To make an offering to God. He gives us so much, and we have nothing really that we can give to him, but if we did give him something we'd be depriving ourselves of that something. So our fast becomes an oblation. You can also offer a fast as an act of intercession. Yes, you can. It's scriptural.
- 3) To discipline and train the bodily appetites in obedience to the higher faculties of intellect and will. To allow our appetites to control us is to deny our humanity and descend to the level of animals. Steady discipline in small things prepares us for the major crises when what we want badly has to be denied for the sake of what God wants.

Difference between fasting and abstinence: To fast is to diminish the quantity of food eaten; to abstain is to deny oneself certain kinds of foods. You can fast without abstaining and abstain without fasting.

Customary regulations of the church.

Days of abstinence: On all Fridays of the year (except between Xmas and Jan 6) and on all Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent, and on Wed. Fri. Sat. at the four ember tides -- the Christian denies himself the flesh of warm blooded animals.

Someone may say: "But it's no act of self denial to give up hamburger and eat lobster. True. But bear in mind that the rule goes back to the time when most poor folk (and the numerical majority of Christians have always been poor) only ate meat on festival occasions -- much as we only eat Turkey at Xmas and Thanksgiving. So the rule "no meat" really meant "no parties, no festivities." Poor people even today are of necessity mostly vegetarians. Meat is expensive, difficult to preserve, in short supply. You save it for birthdays and holidays. No meat on Fridays actually means don't treat Fridays as a day of celebration. Okay?

Days of fasting: Strict fasts -- Ash Wednesday and Good Friday -- are observed by eating a light breakfast -- cup of coffee and a piece of toast, or one egg and a small glass of juice -- and nothing else until after six p.m. at which time one eats a half meal with no meat.

Lesser fasts -- the forty week days of Lent (excluding Sundays) on which one eats two light meals and only one full meal, with no between meal snacks.

Communion fast -- so that the precious Body and Blood of Christ may be given priority, one fasts (strictly) from midnight the night before on days when one receives communion. Venial communions are observed by fasting one hour from liquids and four hours from solids.

(continued)

Fasting, continued

Certain classes of people have traditionally been excused from the rules of fasting. They are:

The very young and the very old  
Pregnant women  
The sick  
Those engaged in strenuous manual labor  
Travelers.

How young and how old? Basically the rule means that one should not fast if it will injure health. Those who are on a special diet prescribed by a doctor are excused - e.g., hypoglycemics. The rule about travelers goes back to the time when travelling was strenuous labor - people mostly travelled afoot. Obviously one should not exempt oneself merely because he is journeying on an airplane. The communion fast should not be observed if it is going to make one dizzy or headachey or nauseated. In the event one feels obliged to break the communion fast one should not eat an enormous breakfast. Consult your spiritual director.

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One should make oneself a Lenten rule. Write it down on a piece of paper. Put it in an envelope, sealed, with your name on it, and put it in the offering plate on Ash Wednesday to be blessed by the priest and returned to you (if you like.)

Lent grew out of the custom of the whole church sharing in the penitential discipline of those preparing for baptism at Easter. It becomes our own preparation for Easter.

Examine your life and note what spiritual exercises you are now customarily doing. Ask yourself what additional prayers or devotions you might do, and draw up a Lenten rule from those. Your rule should include some self-indulgence denied yourself -- tobacco, alcohol, chocolate, cola drinks, TV programs, frivolous reading, etc. Give up something for Lent. You might want to include a more strict observance of the alarm clock. Rise thirty minutes to an hour earlier than customary so you can spend the extra time in prayer or Bible study. Plan to attend the Friday evening stations. Make an extra mid-week Mass or office in church. Read some good book on religion. Work on improving your character in terms of ridding yourself of some besetting sin, or acquiring some virtue. Visit the sick or shut in once a week. Write a letter or two or three each week to some out of town friend you've been neglecting. Increase your money offering to the church by what you save on self-denial -- if anything. The earnest Christian will as a matter of course not give or attend parties, the theater, etc., etc. unless compelled to do so out of charity.

Don't make your Lenten rule too complicated. Select a few items from the above list, or from what God suggests to you; much better to keep a simple rule than to make an elaborate rule and flub it. But if you flub it, pick yourself up and start over. You might want to grade yourself on how you have kept your rule daily? weekly?

Plan to make your confession at the beginning of Lent (look up the word Shrove in your dictionary) (or better, the word "shrive") Make it again just before Easter. Make a daily evening self-examination. Make yourself a small notebook for intercessions and other prayers. Lots of goodies you can do for God and your soul's sake in Lent.

Whatever you make for your rule does not go for Sundays. If you are giving up watermelon for Lent you can eat it on Sundays -- if you can find any. More seriously -- Sundays are always days of festivity and the Sundays are in Lent but not of it.

Padre