

Fish on Fridays

Abstinence from meat every Friday is still commanded by the Catholic Church (Code of Canon Law, 1251). The application of this precept varies from country to country. For example, American bishops allow individual Catholics to substitute another penance if they could not abstain from meat. During my childhood, my mother always cooked minestrone and perhaps some fish on Friday.

The origin of these 'prescribed days of fasting and obligation' is uncertain. We know for sure however that it was not an apostolic practice. The apostle Paul condemned obligatory dietary rules for Christians (see Colossians 2:16-23).

Of more importance than the historical origin, is the *reason* why Catholics don't eat meat on Fridays. A Catholic website answers: "Friday is a day of abstinence from meat for Catholics in order that this little sacrifice will be a work of satisfaction for the sins they have committed...The Church is a mother and knows that unless we are constantly reminded we will not make satisfaction for our sins." (www.netacc.net/~maf/que4040.htm). Similarly the Baltimore Catechism states that "the Church commands us to fast and abstain, in order that we may mortify our passions and satisfy for our sins."

So Catholics refrain from meat on Fridays (or perform some other sacrifice) in order to make reparation for their sins.

The concept of satisfaction is biblical. God is offended when we break His commandments; His justice demands punishment. Yet in His goodness, God provided deliverance for His people. He told the Jews: "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (Leviticus 17:11). The word translated "atonement" literally means "to cover." The shed blood of animal sacrifices "covered" their sins, and therefore God's anger was appeased and they were reconciled to Him.

Of course animal sacrifices were symbolical of the one true sacrifice of Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." By His death on the cross, Jesus fulfilled all the promises of God and obtained wonderful blessings:

1. **Cleansing** - spiritual purity instead of sinful defilement: "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).
2. **Forgiveness** - freedom from guilt and punishment: "We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14).
3. **Reconciliation** - enmity is replaced by friendship and intimate communion: "Having made peace through the blood of His cross...now He has reconciled [you] in the body of His flesh through death" (Colossians 1:20-22).
4. **Propitiation** - God's righteous anger against sin is appeased: "God set forth (Christ) to be propitiation by His blood, through faith" (Romans 3:25).
5. **Justification** - the Judge declares the believer 'righteous' and 'not guilty': "Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:9).

Jesus Christ made satisfaction for sin by shedding His precious blood. Why then does the magisterium prescribe fasting, and other human efforts, as additional means to make satisfaction?

We do not doubt that fasting is a beneficial spiritual discipline, to humble oneself before God and as an expression of repentance. But we are never taught in Sacred Scripture that fasting and other personal sacrifices atone for sin. Though good in itself, fasting becomes a bad practice when used for the wrong purpose.

How can anyone say, "I trust in Jesus and His blood for my salvation," while practicing abstinence and other forms of penance to make satisfaction for sin? What appeases God's wrath? What reconciles sinners to God? How can we be justified, forgiven and cleansed? Is it by our puny little sacrifices such as eating salmon instead of beef? What an insult to God! What an affront to the blood of Jesus!

May God open our eyes to see the gravity of our sin and the glory of Jesus' cross. How I pray that our dear Catholic friends would turn away from human traditions and every attempt to make satisfaction by personal effort; listen to God's Word and wholly trust in Christ whose blood cleanses from all sin.