

Lent Fasting Rules: Catholic Rules for Fasting During Lent

Along with prayer and almsgiving, fasting is one of the three pillars of Lent.

In a message for Lent in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI described these as “specific tasks that accompany the faithful concretely in this process of interior renewal.”

A decade earlier, St. (Pope) John Paul II described Lent as a “commitment to a new life, inspired by Gospel values,” moving away from selfishness and drawing closer to the path Christ.

That path, according to Pope John Paul II, can be summarized in the words of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, with fasting consisting of moderation in food and lifestyle as “a sincere effort to remove from our hearts all that is the result of sin and inclines us to evil.”

Prayer and almsgiving may be easier to fully grasp than fasting, for which the Church has provided specific rules and guidelines to help shape our Lenten journey towards renewal.

Here’s an overview of common questions about Lent fasting rules to guide your observance [this year]:

- What Is Fasting?

In the Catholic Church, fasting is a practice in self-discipline with a penitential focus. In the context of Lent, it refers to reducing food intake and limiting how many meals we have.

- What are the Lent fasting rules?

On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, fasting rules allow Catholics to eat only one full meal and two smaller meals which, combined, would not equal a single normal meal. Additionally, Catholics may not eat meat on these two days—or on any Friday during Lent.

- What are the Lent rules on abstinence?

In this context, abstinence refers to “abstaining” from meat on Fridays during Lent. Whereas Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday with just one large meal, Catholics must refrain from eating meat on other Fridays, though they can have three full meals.

- At what age do you start fasting for Lent?

Those ages 18-59, in reasonable health, are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Those 14 and older must abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent. Canon Law does mention that for young children not fasting, parents should still communicate the meaning and penance.

- Who is exempt from fasting during Lent?

Children, adults with physical and mental illness, pregnant women and those nursing are all exempt. The USCCB stresses that “common sense should prevail” and that no one should jeopardize their health to fast.

- When is fasting over?

Lent ends on Holy Thursday, but Lenten fasting (and personal commitments) usually continues until Easter. Papal document *Paschalis Solemnitatis* recommends this in order that we “with uplifted and welcoming heart be ready to celebrate the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection.”

- Can you eat meat on Good Friday?

On the one hand, Good Friday is part of the Easter Triduum, which marks the end of Lent. However, since Good Friday itself is a day of abstinence, it’s best to abstain from meat, as in the Fridays of Lent.

- Do Sundays count for fasting?

It’s been a custom for Catholics to give something up during Lent, in addition to the fastings and abstinence rules. Some keep their sacrifice continuously, but Sundays during Lent are not “prescribed days of fasting and abstinence.” Ultimately, it’s a personal decision.

- Are [our Parish] Fish Frys OK?

Your local church fish fry is a fine option for Fridays during Lent. Because the Lent season is one rooted in penance, a modest meal at your parish is probably a better option than a lavish seafood feast at a fine restaurant.

- What can you drink on Ash Wednesday? What are the fasting rules around liquids like coffee?

Normal rules around fasting before receiving Communion (abstaining from food an hour before Mass) apply during Lent. Outside of that, there are no specific rules around liquids, so coffee, tea and soda are fine. A smoothie that constitutes a meal would probably count as food.

- What are the fasting rules around alcohol?

The Church does not specifically limit alcohol. A person’s personal discretion is best.