

On Mandatory Fast Days

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Kinds of mandatory fasts

Mandatory fasts consist of yearly fasts, fasts imposed in emergency situations, fasts before ordinations, fasts before entering the Church, fasts before exorcisms, fasts imposed by confessors upon penitents, fasts imposed on members of religious orders, and fasts before receiving Holy Communion.

Old Covenant yearly fasts

There were several mandatory yearly fasts that the Jews observed, during which they fasted one day on each occasion. For example, the Feast of Expiation or Atonement was a penitential feast in which one day of fasting was required:

The Feast of Expiation: “And this shall be to you an everlasting ordinance: The seventh month, the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls. And shall do no work, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you. Upon this day shall be the expiation for you, and the cleansing from all your sins: you shall be cleansed before the Lord.” (Lev. 16:29-30)

Nominal *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lent: “**The sixth was the feast of Expiation**, the tenth day of the Seventh month; wherein solemn fast was also prescribed from Evening of the ninth day to Evening of the tenth, for remission of sins in general, besides particular sacrifices and satisfaction for every sin, whereof any man found himself guilty.”

One-day fasts were also imposed on other occasions. For example,

“Speak to all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying: When you fasted, and mourned in the fifth and the seventh month for these seventy years: did you keep a fast unto me?” (Zach. 7:5)

Catholic Commentary on Zach. 7:3: The fifth month. They fasted on the tenth day of the fifth month because on that day the temple was burnt. Therefore they inquire whether they are to continue that fast after the temple is rebuilt. See this query answered (Zach. 8:19). The third of the seventh month was also a fast on account of the death of Godolias during the captivity (4 Ki. 25:8), (4 Ki. 25:25).

The Prophet Zacharias decreed that four of the fasts are to no longer be observed:

“Thus saith the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth shall be to the house of Juda, joy, and gladness, and great solemnities: only love ye truth and peace.” (Zach. 8:19)

Catholic Commentary on Zach. 8:19. **Fast:** They fasted on the ninth day of the fourth month because on that day Nabuchodonosor took Jerusalem (Jer. 52:6); on the tenth day of the fifth month because on that day the temple was burnt (Jer. 52:12); on the third day of the seventh month for the murder of Godolias (Jer. 41:2); and on the tenth day of the tenth month because on that day the Chaldeans began to besiege Jerusalem (4 Ki. 25:1). All these fasts, if they will be obedient for the future, shall be changed (as is here promised) into joyful solemnities.”

Fasts in emergency situations

Fasts in emergency situations last from one to three days and are extreme fasts, either in which no food or drink is allowed or only water or only bread and water.

Esther

“And the king's scribes were called in the first month Nisan, on the thirteenth day of the same month. And they wrote as Aman had commanded... and the letters, sealed with his ring, were sent by the king's messengers to all provinces, to kill and destroy all the Jews, both young and old, little children, and women, in one day, that is, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is called Adar, and to make a spoil of their goods.” (Est. 3:12-13)

“And again Esther sent to Mardochai in these words: Go, and gather together all the Jews whom thou shalt find in Susan, and pray ye for me. Neither eat nor drink for three days and three nights. And I with my handmaids will fast in like manner, and then I will go in to the king, against the law, not being called, and expose myself to death and to danger.” (Est. 4:15-16)

Ninive

“And Jonas began to enter into the city one day's journey. And he cried and said: Yet forty days and Ninive shall be destroyed. And the men of Ninive believed in God. And they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least. And the word came to the king of Ninive, and he rose up out of his throne and cast away his robe from him and was clothed in sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published in Ninive from the mouth of the king and of his princes, saying: Let neither men nor beasts, oxen nor sheep, taste any thing. Let them not feed nor drink water. And let men and beasts be covered with sackcloth and cry to the Lord with all their strength, and let them turn everyone from his evil way and from the iniquity that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and forgive, and will turn away from his fierce anger, and we shall not perish? And God saw their works that they were turned from their evil way, and God had mercy with regard to the evil which he had said that he would do to them, and he did it not.” (Jona. 3:4-10)

Machabees

“But the king, with his mind full of rage, came on to shew himself worse to the Jews than his father was. Which, when Judas understood, he commanded the people to call upon the Lord day and night, that as he had always done, so now also he would help them because they were afraid to be deprived of the law, and of their country, and of the holy temple, and that he would not suffer the people that had of late taken breath for a little while, to be again in subjection to blasphemous nations. So when they had all done this together and had craved mercy of the Lord with weeping and fasting, lying prostrate on the ground for three days continually, Judas exhorted them to make themselves ready.” (2 Mac. 13:9-12)

Fasts before certain exorcisms

There are different degrees of possession and thus the devils are harder to cast out of some possessed men than others. Hence Jesus said that certain devils cannot be cast out of men unless fasting is done before the exorcism:

“Then came the disciples to Jesus secretly, and said: Why could not we cast him out? Jesus said to them: Because of your unbelief. For, amen I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Remove from hence hither, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you. But this kind is not cast out but by prayer and fasting.” (Mt. 17:18-20)

Hence the Catholic Church decrees that in most cases her exorcists fast before performing an exorcism on a possessed person.

Fasts before entering the Church by baptism or abjuration

Before entering the Church, a one or two day fast is imposed upon those entering the Church and the ministers who bring them into the Church either by baptism or abjuration.

Didache, 1st century: “Before the baptism let the baptizer fast and the baptized, and whatever others can. But you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.”¹

Fasts before ordinations

While the ordinations of Levites during the Old Covenant did not impose a fast on the one being ordained and the ministers, ordinations during the New Covenant era did impose fasting. During the New Covenant era, a fast of one to three days is decreed before ordinations, both for those to be ordained and the ministers.

“And when they had ordained to them priests in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, in whom they believed. (Acts 14:22)

Hence the Catholic Church has instituted the Ember Days four times a year in which men come into the Church and ordinations are done. The Ember Days on each occasion are on the 4th, 6th, and 7th day of the week. And these days are fast days for those to be ordained and the ministers and were eventually imposed upon all Catholics.

Fasts for penitents

Fasts are imposed upon penitents; that is, Catholics who repented of their sins and confessed them. Some fasts are more severe than other depending on if the type and number of their sins. Mortal sinners who repented and confessed are given more extreme fasts and other penances than then repentant venial sinners. Hence the type of fast and length of fasting varied depending on the circumstances. In the case of repentant mortal sinners, the fast can be extended to long periods of time:

Didascalia, 1st to 3rd centuries: “And then let them examine him that hath sinned, whether he forsaketh his evil way. And when he confesseth his sins and turneth to repentance, let them suffer him to enter the Church and bid him to fast according to

¹ c. 7.

the greatness of the sin he hath committeth, two weeks, or three weeks, or five weeks, or seven. It is right that thou shouldst teach the sinner, and instruct him, and admonish him, without anger or favour, that he may humble himself, and pray to God, and find compassion and mercy when he standeth before him.”²

Fasts imposed on members of religious orders

Fasts imposed on members of religious orders (such as the Benedictines and Franciscans) are mandatory.

Fasts before receiving Holy Communion

The faithful must fast before receiving Holy Communion. This fast can vary from 3 hours to 12 hours before receiving, depending on the current law of Catholic Church. The current law is 3 hours. During this fast, only water may be taken and thus nothing else.

The miraculous forty-day fasts of Moses and Jesus

Moses fasted two times for forty days and Jesus fasted once for forty days. And these forty-day fasts were miraculous extraordinary fasts because they did not eat nor drink anything for forty days. This kind of fast can only be done without dying by the power of God or the Devil. God’s faithful must never attempt to take on this kind of fast unless they are sure that God has ordained it. These fasts were done in preparation for some great event: Moses before he received the Ten Commandment and when he received them again and Jesus before he began his public ministry:

“When I [Moses] went up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you, and I continued in the mount forty days and nights, neither eating bread nor drinking water.” (Deut. 9:9)

“And when I came down from the burning mount and held the two tables of the covenant with both hands and saw that you had sinned against the Lord your God, and had made to yourselves a molten calf and had quickly forsaken his way which he had shewn you, I cast the tables out of my hands and broke them in your sight. And I fell down before the Lord as before, forty days and nights neither eating bread nor drinking water, for all your sins, which you had committed against the Lord and had provoked him to wrath.” (Deut. 9:15-18)

“Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterwards he was hungry. And the tempter coming said to him: If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. Who answered and said: It is written, Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.” (Mt. 4:1-4)

Non-miraculous fasts of no food did not last more than three days

A non-miraculous fast of no food was never extended beyond three days for danger of health or death.³ For example, when Jesus was preaching to the people for three days and they had

² c. 6.

³ See in this article “Esther,” p. 3; and, “Machabees,” p. 3.

nothing to eat, he did not send them away fasting but saw to it that they would have food before they went home:

“And Jesus called together his disciples, and said: I have compassion on the multitudes because they continue with me now three days and have not what to eat, and I will not send them away fasting lest they faint in the way.” (Mt. 15:32)

On the Lenten Fast

1st to 3rd centuries Lenten fast (six days and no forty-days preparation)

The Lenten fast for the Catholic Church during the first three centuries (from the 1st to the 4th centuries) was only for six days of Holy Week, the 2nd day of the week until the 7th day:

Didascalia, 1st to 3rd centuries: “And further let the fast of the holy Passover be from the second day of the week until the first Sabbath. And in the week of the Passion eat nothing except bread, and water, and salt. Abstain on these days of the Fast from eating flesh and drinking wine, for they are days of mourning and sorrow. Above all in these six days if any one be able to fast, let him patiently endure for two days; but if he be not able, let him fast on one day, and keep himself from evil-doing. For our Lord saith, ‘The sons of the bridegroom cannot fast so long as the bridegroom is with them, but days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them ; then shall they fast.’”⁴

Apostolic Constitutions, 1st to 4th centuries: “After which the fast of Lent is to be observed by you as containing a memorial of our Lord’s mode of life and legislation... Do you therefore fast on the days of the Passover, beginning from the second day of the week until the preparation, and the Sabbath, six days, making use of only bread, and salt, and herbs, and water for your drink; but do you abstain on these days from wine and flesh, for they are days of lamentation and not of feasting. Do ye who are able fast the day of the preparation and the Sabbath day entirely, tasting nothing till the cock-crowing of the night; but if any one is not able to join them both together, at least let him observe the Sabbath day; for the Lord says somewhere, speaking of Himself: ‘When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, in those days shall they fast.’ In these days, therefore, He was taken from us by the Jews, falsely so named, and fastened to the cross, and ‘was numbered among the transgressors.’ (Isa. 53:12)”⁵

St. Irenaeus (3rd century), quoted by Heretic Eusebius, *Church History*, Book V: “Xxiv “Among them was Irenaeus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom and after many other words he proceeds as follows:

‘For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace,

⁴ c. 30.

⁵ b. 5, sec. 3, XIII, XVII.

and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith.”

On the heretic Tertullian (3rd century) from the Nominal *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lent: “The same inference must be drawn from the language of Tertullian only a few years later. When writing as a Montanist, he contrasts the very slender term of fasting observed by the Catholics (i.e., ‘the days on which the bridegroom was taken away’, probably meaning the Friday and Saturday of Holy Week) with the longer but still restricted period of a fortnight which was kept by the Montanists. No doubt he was referring to fasting of a very strict kind (xerophagiæ — dry fasts), but there is no indication in his works, though he wrote an entire treatise ‘De Jejunio’, and often touches upon the subject elsewhere, that he was acquainted with any period of forty days consecrated to more or less continuous fasting (see Tertullian, ‘De Jejun.’, ii and xiv; cf. ‘de Orat.’, xviii; etc.).

“And there is the same silence observable in all the pre-Nicene Fathers, though many had occasion to mention such an Apostolic institution if it had existed. We may note for example that there is no mention of Lent in Dionysius of Alexandria (ed. Feltoe, 94 sqq.) or in the ‘Didascalia’, which Funk attributes to about the year 250; yet both speak diffusely of the paschal fast...

“Moreover, with the Easter festival there seems also to have established itself a preliminary fast, not as yet anywhere exceeding a week in duration, but very severe in character, which commemorated the Passion, or more generally, ‘the days on which the bridegroom was taken away’”

4th and 5th century Lenten fast (fifteen days of the forty-day preparation)

The first to impose a forty-day Lent upon his flock was St. Athanasius:

Nominal *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lent: “In any case it is certain from the ‘Festal Letters’ of St. Athanasius that in 331 the saint enjoined upon his flock a period of forty days of fasting preliminary to, but not inclusive of, the stricter fast of Holy Week.”

In the 5th century, Pope St. Leo the Great speaks of a forty-day Lent:

Nominal *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lent: “Some of the Fathers as early as the fifth century supported the view that this forty days’ fast was of Apostolic institution. For example, St. Leo (d. 461) exhorts his hearers to abstain that they may ‘fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of the forty days’ — ut apostolica institutio quadraginta dierum jejuniis impleatur (P.L., LIV, 633), and the historian Socrates (d. 433) and Jerome (d. 420) use similar language (P.G., LXVII, 633; P.L., XXII, 475). But the best modern scholars are almost unanimous in rejecting this view, for in the existing remains of the first three centuries we find both considerable diversity of practice regarding the fast before Easter and also a gradual process of development in the matter of its duration.”

However, in the 5th century, Socrates Scholasticus says that of the forty days of Lent only three weeks were spent fasting, the first, fourth, and sixth weeks. And there was no fasting on the 1st and 7th weekdays of those weeks. Hence there was a total of fifteen fasting days in the forty days of Lent:

Nominal *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lent: “In Rome, in the fifth century, Lent lasted six weeks, but according to the historian Socrates there were only three weeks of actual fasting, exclusive even then of the Saturday and Sunday and if Duchesne’s view may be trusted, these weeks were not continuous, but were the first, the fourth, and sixth of the series, being connected with the ordinations (Christian Worship, 243).”

RJMI commentary of Lenten Fast

No doubt, the forty-day Lent imposed on all Catholics, in which fasting was prescribed for three or six weeks, was influenced by stoicism.⁶ It did not exist in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries. Monks and hermits, such as St. Athanasius, imposed it upon their flocks beginning in the 4th century. Hence they treated their flock, all the Catholics under their care, as if they were monks or hermits. While this kind of fast is suitable for monks and hermits, it is not for the other Catholics. Every Catholic has his vocation from God, and no Catholic should try to impose his vocation on Catholics who have different vocations. And, even worse, no Catholic should believe or teach that a Catholic in one vocation cannot become as saintly and holy as a Catholic in another vocation. While some vocations are greater than others, every vocation offers an equal path to sainthood and holiness. After all, who would dare say that the following non-monks and non-hermits, the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, and the apostles, were not as saintly and holy as monks and hermits! In fact, monks and hermits are not on the top of the list of vocations.⁷ After all, if all Catholics were monks and hermits, Catholics would eventually become extinct because they would not marry; there would be no evangelists to convert unbelievers; no priests to guide, rule, teach, and sanctify Catholic laymen; no Catholic soldiers to defend and expand Catholic nations; and, no bishops and popes to rule the Catholic Church.

Therefore, let no monk or hermit think or say, “Look how much holier I am than other Catholics because I fast much more than they do.” And let no Catholic who is not a monk or hermit think or say, “Look how much holier I am than monks and hermits who hide from the world and thus do not suffer the burden of the world as we do even though we are not of the world.”

If a Catholic’s ideal is to imitate Jesus, then he would not do more than one forty-day fast in his life time, unless he is a penitent in which a forty day fast was imposed upon as penance for his confessed mortal sins. And if a Catholic’s ideal is to imitate the apostles, then they would not do even one forty-day fast in his lifetime, as the apostles never did a forty day fast, unless he is a penitent in which a forty-day fast was imposed upon him for his mortal sins.

Fasts that extended beyond one week for non-monk or non-hermit Catholics were only imposed upon penitents. Fasts that extend beyond one week on non-penitent Catholics who are not monks or hermits are overly burdensome and can even be harmful to their vocation. Catholic penitents were only able to bear extended fasts on bread and water if they were in isolation, almost like in prison, in which they did not do hard manual or mental labor.

To conclude, a compromise can be made from the Lenten practice of the first three centuries in which the Lent and fast was no more than one week with the Lenten practice that followed in which the Lent was forty days and the fast was three or six weeks. And this fast was a regular fast; that is, a fast of one meal a day in which no meat or alcohol was allowed. Some even imposed a fast of bread, oil, herbs, salt, and water. The burden of that kind of fast for forty-days on Catholics who are not monks, hermits, or penitents is not only overly burdensome and possibly harmful to their vocation, but, even worse, it can cause some to not want to become Catholic or cause non-penitent Catholics who cannot bear it to leave the Catholic Church, as they would see an injustice in such a fast, year after year, imposed upon non-penitent Catholics. If non-penitent Catholics are treated the same as penitent Catholics, then there would be no real difference between them, no real punishment for penitent Catholics. The reward of not committing mortal sins would turn to a punishment, and the punishment for committing mortal sins would be no punishment.

⁶ Some stoics went as far as to impose a seventy-day Lent and fast.

⁷ See RJMI book *The Hellenization of Christianity by the Anti-Church Fathers and Scholastics: The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophies: Hermits and solitary monks are not on the top of the list of vocations.*

Here is the compromise: The Catholic Church can still have a forty-day Lent. But the first five weeks are a light fast; that is, two meals, no meat, and alcohol and a dessert are allowed. But there are no fasts on the Lord's Day and other Holy Days of Obligation, such as on the Annunciation which falls on 3/25. However, the last week of Lent, Holy Week, is a regular fast; that is, one meal a day, no meat, no alcohol, and no dessert. If a Holy Day of Obligation falls in Holy Week it must be transferred.

On the Advent Fast

Fasting was not imposed during the Advent season until the 5th century. Even though the Catholic New Agency is apostate and not Catholic, it teaches the truth in regard to the history of Advent:

The History of Advent, by the Catholic New Agency (CNA): "The name *Advent* (From the Latin word *Adventus*, which signifies a coming) is applied, in the Latin Church, to that period of the year, during which the Church requires the faithful to prepare for the celebration of the feast of Christmas, the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ... It would seem, however, that its observance first began in the west... We find, as far back as the fifth century, the custom of giving exhortations to the people in order to prepare them for the feast of Christmas. We have two sermons of Saint Maximus of Turin on this subject, not to speak of several others which were formerly attributed to St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, but which were probably written by St. Cesarius of Aries. If these documents do not tell us what was the duration and what the exercises of this holy season, they at least show us how ancient was the practice of distinguishing the time of Advent by special sermons...

"The oldest document in which we find the length and exercises of Advent mentioned with anything like clearness, is a passage in the second book of the *History of the Franks* by St. Gregory of Tours, where he says that St. Perpetuus, one of his predecessors, who held that see about the year 480, had decreed a fast three times a week, from the feast of St. Martin until Christmas. It would be impossible to decide whether St. Perpetuus, by his regulations, established a new custom, or merely enforced an already existing law. Let us, however, note this interval of forty, or rather of forty-three days, so expressly mentioned, and consecrated to penance, as though it were a second Lent, though less strict and severe than that which precedes Easter.

"Later on, we find the ninth canon of the first Council of Macon, held in 582, ordaining that during the same interval between St. Martin's day and Christmas, the Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, should be fasting days, and that the Sacrifice should be celebrated according to the Lenten rite. Not many years before that, namely in 567, the second Council of Tours had enjoined the monks to fast from the beginning of December till Christmas. This practice of penance soon extended to the whole forty days, even for the laity: and it was commonly called St. Martin's Lent. The *capitularia* of Charlemagne, in the sixth book, leave us no doubt on the matter; and Rabanus Maurus, in the second book of his *Institution of clerics*, bears testimony to this observance. There were even special rejoicings made on St. Martin's feast, just as we see them practised now at the approach of Lent and Easter.

"The obligation of observing this Lent, which, though introduced so imperceptibly, had by degrees acquired the force of a sacred law, began to be relaxed, and the forty days from St. Martin's day to Christmas were reduced to four weeks. We have seen that this fast began to be observed first in France; but thence it spread into England, as we find from Venerable Bede's history; into Italy, as appears from a diploma of Astolphus, king of the Lombards, dated 753; into Germany, Spain, &c., of which the proofs may be seen in the learned work of Dom Martene, *On the ancient rites of*

the Church. The first allusion to Advent's being reduced to four weeks is to be found in the ninth century, in a letter of Pope St. Nicholas I to the Bulgarians.

“The testimony of Ratherius of Verona, and of Abbo of Fleury, both writers of the tenth century, goes also to prove that, even then, the question of reducing the duration of the Advent fast by one-third was seriously entertained.”

Even though there was no fasting during Advent until the 5th century, a compromise can be made for the latter practice of three-day a week fast. Instead of a regular fast, a light fast is imposed on the 2nd, 4th, and 6th weekdays during Advent except from 12/17 through 12/24 in which a regular fast is imposed.

On Ember Days

The Ember Days are days of preparation for and the administration of ordinations, baptisms, and abjurations; as such, they are regular fast days.

On certain Vigils

A regular fast is imposed upon all Catholics on the vigils of Trinity Day, Pentecost Day, and the Feast of God the Father.

The mandatory penitential (fasting) days for Catholics

(See RJMI article *Things Catholics Must Believe and Do: Penance*)

For the glory of God; in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, St. John the Baptist, the other angels and saints; and for the salvation of men

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