

Why no meat on Fridays in Lent?

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[The Pastor's Page](#)



Catholics abstain from flesh meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and the Fridays in Lent.

Abstinence is one of our oldest Christian traditions.

“From the first century, the day of the crucifixion has been traditionally observed as a day of abstaining from flesh meat (‘black fast’) to honor Christ who sacrificed his flesh on a Friday,” according to “The Catholic Source Book.”

Written up as law

Up until 1966, church law prohibited meat on all Fridays throughout the entire year. The new law was promulgated in 1983 in the revised Code of Canon Law, which states: “Abstinence [is] to be observed on Ash Wednesday and on the Friday of the Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Canon 1251).

“All persons who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence” (Canon 1252).

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops extended this law to include all Fridays in Lent.

Since Jesus sacrificed his flesh for us on Good Friday, we refrain from eating flesh meat in his honor on Fridays. Flesh meat included the meat of mammals and poultry, and the main foods that come under this heading are beef and pork, chicken and turkey. While flesh is prohibited, the non-flesh products of these animals are not (like milk, cheese, butter and eggs).

Fish do not belong to the flesh meat category. The Latin word for meat, “caro,” from which we get English words like “carnivore” and “carnivorous,” applies strictly to flesh meat and has never been understood to include fish.

Furthermore, in former times, flesh meat was more expensive, eaten only occasionally and associated with feasting and rejoicing; whereas fish was cheap, eaten more often and not associated with celebrations.

Abstinence is a form of penance. Penance expresses sorrow and contrition for our wrongdoing, indicates our intention to turn away from sin and turn back to God, and makes reparation for our sins. It helps to cancel the debt and pay the penalties incurred by our transgressions.

Abstinence is a form of asceticism, the practice of self-denial to grow in holiness. Jesus asks his disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross (Matthew 16:24).

Abstinence is a sober way to practice simplicity and austerity, to deny the cravings of our bodies to honor Jesus who practiced the ultimate form of self-denial when he gave his body for us on the cross.

Thus, to give up flesh meat on Fridays, only to feast on lobster tail or Alaskan king crab, is to defeat the ascetical purpose of abstinence. Less is more!

There are countless options for simple Friday meatless dinners: pancakes, waffles, soup and rolls, chipped tuna on toast, macaroni and cheese, fried egg sandwiches, grilled cheese sandwiches, cheese pizza and, of course, fish.

<http://catholichotdish.com/the-pastors-page/why-no-meat-on-fridays-in-lent/>

233



About Father Michael Van Sloun

Father Michael A. Van Sloun is the pastor of Saint Bartholomew of Wayzata, MN. Ministerial interests include weekly Bible study, articles on theological topics, religious photography, retreats on Cross spirituality, and pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Italy, Greece and Turkey.