Lent is a time of grace, inner renewal, and preparation for the greatest mystery of our faith: the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. Among the spiritual practices that the Church proposes for us to live this season more profoundly, fasting and abstinence hold a central place.

But what do they really mean? Why are they important? How are they practiced today? In this article, we will delve into the history, spiritual significance, and proper way to observe these disciplines according to Catholic tradition.

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## 1. The Origin of Fasting and Abstinence in Christian Tradition

Since the early centuries of Christianity, the faithful have practiced fasting as a form of penance and spiritual preparation. The Bible contains many references to fasting as a means of drawing closer to God. Moses fasted for forty days on Mount Sinai before receiving the Law (Exodus 34:28), and the prophet Elijah also fasted for forty days on his journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8).

The supreme example is found in Christ Himself, who, before beginning His public ministry, was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert and fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:2). This is the biblical foundation of Lent, a 40-day period in which the Church invites us to imitate Christ in His preparation for His mission.

Since the fourth century, the Church has established specific rules for fasting and abstinence for all Christians. Over the centuries, these rules have varied in rigor, but their essence remains the same: they are a concrete form of mortification to draw us closer to God and help us master our passions.

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## 2. What Is Fasting, and How Is It Different from Abstinence?

### Fasting:

Fasting consists of reducing the amount of food consumed in a day. According to the current discipline of the Catholic Church, fasting means having **only one full meal per day**, and if necessary, two smaller meals (breakfast and dinner), which together should not equal a full meal.

### Abstinence:

Abstinence, on the other hand, does not refer to the amount of food but to its type. It means **not eating meat from warm-blooded animals (beef, pork, chicken, lamb, etc.)**. However, the consumption of fish, seafood, eggs, and dairy products is allowed.

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## 3. When Are We Required to Fast and Abstain?

According to the Code of Canon Law and Church tradition, there are specific days when the faithful are required to practice fasting and abstinence:

- **Ash Wednesday and Good Friday:** Both **fasting and abstinence** are required.
- **All Fridays of Lent: Abstinence from meat** is required.

It is important to remember that all Fridays of the year are penitential days, so abstinence from meat is recommended even outside of Lent, though many bishops' conferences allow it to be substituted with another act of penance or charity.

### Who Is Obliged to Observe These Rules?

- **Fasting** is obligatory for all Catholics **between 18 and 59 years old**.
- **Abstinence** is obligatory for all Catholics **14 years and older**.

However, there are exceptions: those who are sick, pregnant, nursing, engaged in physically demanding labor, or dependent on special diets for medical reasons are exempt.

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# 4. The Spiritual Meaning of Fasting and Abstinence

Fasting and abstinence are not merely external rules or empty practices; they hold deep spiritual significance.

### 1. An Act of Penance and Reparation

Jesus teaches us that certain evils can only be overcome “through prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). When we fast, we acknowledge our fragility and unite ourselves to the Cross of Christ, offering our small sacrifices in reparation for our sins and those of the world.

### 2. An Exercise in Self-Mastery

We live in a society marked by consumerism and the constant pursuit of immediate pleasure. Fasting and abstinence help us strengthen our will, learn to say “no” to ourselves, and practice the virtue of temperance.

### 3. A Gesture of Solidarity with the Needy

The Church has always viewed fasting as an opportunity for charity. St. Leo the Great said: “Fasting without mercy is only a disguise for penance.” What we save by fasting can be shared with the poor.

### 4. A Preparation for Easter

If we prepare for a great celebration, we make sacrifices and efforts to ensure everything goes well. Similarly, Lent is a time of preparation for the great celebration of the Lord’s Resurrection.

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# 5. How to Observe Fasting and Abstinence with a Renewed Spirit

### 1. Do It Out of Love, Not Just Obligation

It is not about mechanically following a rule but about living it with love.

### 2. Accompany It with Prayer

Fasting without prayer is just a diet. To make it a true experience of spiritual growth, it must be accompanied by moments of prayer.

### 3. Offer It for a Special Intention

Each fast and abstinence can be offered for the conversion of a loved one, for peace in the world, or for a special need.

### 4. Avoid Hypocrisy and Complaining

Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:16-18: “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites… But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.”

### 5. Combine It with Charity

We can use what we save on food to help someone in need.

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## 6. Conclusion: Fasting to Be Reborn in Christ

Fasting and abstinence are disciplines that, when lived well, can transform our hearts. They help us turn away from sin, strengthen our relationship with God, and prepare us for the joy of the Resurrection.

May this Lent be a time of grace in which, with God’s help, we purify our souls and draw closer to Him. As St. Augustine reminds us:

*“Kill what is evil in you, and what is good in you will be resurrected.”*

Let us not only fast from food but also from negative attitudes, unnecessary judgments, hurtful words, and everything that distances us from God. Instead, let us fill ourselves with prayer, love, and charity.

Have a blessed and holy Lent!