

PENITENTIAL
PRACTICES
FOR
TODAY'S
CATHOLICS

*Committee on Pastoral Practices
National Conference of Catholic Bishops*

*United States Catholic Conference
Washington, D.C.*





In March 2000, the Administrative Committee authorized the Committee on Pastoral Practices to develop a brief summary of the Church's discipline with regard to penitential practices. This resource is intended to further the Jubilee Year observances undertaken throughout the dioceses and to complement the bishops' *Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence* (1966). The Committee on Pastoral Practices is indebted to the Most Reverend Robert F. Morneau, Auxiliary Bishop of Green Bay, for his generous assistance and keen insight in authoring the text. *Penitential Practices for Today's Catholics* was approved by the Committee on Pastoral Practices on November 12, 2000. It is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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General Secretary, NCCB/USCC

Cover images: Woodcuts by Helen Siegl, *Clip Art of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1994). Reprinted with permission. The front image, based on Sirach 3:30 ("so almsgiving atones for sin"), represents here the corporal works of mercy. The back image, based on Ruth 1:16 ("your people shall be my people"), represents here the spiritual works of mercy.

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During the Jubilee Year, we, the Church, focused our attention on the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, urged all the people of God to grow in conformity to Christ, who leads us to the Father through the gift of the Holy Spirit. One important way to grow in the Lord is to observe the penitential practices that strengthen us for resisting temptation, allow us to express our sorrow for the sins we have committed, and help to repair the tear caused by our sinning.*

Penitential practices take many forms: apologizing to an injured party, healing divisions within our families, fasting during the Lenten season, or graciously accepting the menial tasks of life. The purpose of penance is not to diminish life but to enrich it.

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, calls us to **pray**, to **fast**, and to **give alms**: "when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites," "when you fast, do not look gloomy," "when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing" (Mt 6:5, 16, 3, respectively). As a Church, we ponder and pray over this call every Ash Wednesday. In a most profound way, the three spiritual exercises identified by Jesus are directed toward the nurturing of relationships.


* This resource is presented as a pastoral tool for cultivating the penitential practices in one's daily life. While its focus is limited to a discussion of the Church's penitential practices, it serves to promote these practices as intimately related to the sacrament of penance. We exhort all of the faithful to accept the Lord's invitation to experience God's mercy through the sacrament of penance, which stands at the heart of the Church's penitential life.



Prayer, that process of listening to and responding to God's daily call, sustains and nurtures our relationship with our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without prayer, personal and communal, this relationship is diminished, sometimes to the point of complete silence on our part. Every day the Spirit of Jesus invites us to enter into that serious conversion that leads to blessed communion.

Fasting, a very special form of penance, and Jesus' second call, has been a consistent part of our Catholic tradition. Fasting assists us in getting our own house in order. All of us have to deal with areas of servitude, whether in regard to smoking or alcohol consumption, misused sexuality, uncontrolled gambling, psychological hang-ups, spiritual obsessions, use of stimulants, immoderate use of the Internet, excessive amounts of television watching, or preoccupations with other forms of entertainment. By fasting and self-denial, by living lives of moderation, we have more energy to devote to God's purposes and a better self-esteem that helps us to be more concerned with the well-being of others.

Voluntary fasting from food creates in us a greater openness to God's Spirit and deepens our compassion for those who are forced to go without food. The discomfort brought about by fasting unites us to the sufferings of Christ. Fasting should bring to mind the sufferings of all those for whom Christ suffered. One may refrain from certain foods strictly for dietary purposes, but this would not be Christian penance. Rather,



our fasting and refraining is in response to the workings of the Holy Spirit. By fasting we sense a deeper hunger and thirst for God. In a paradoxical way, we feast through fasting—we feast on the spiritual values that lead to works of charity and service. Did not the prophet Isaiah proclaim that such works characterize the fasting that God desires?

This . . . is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke;
Sharing your bread with the hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and the
homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your
own. (Is 58:6-7)

Our weekly—and for some, daily—celebration of the Eucharist also affords us the opportunity to fast before receiving the Lord. This eucharistic fast disposes us to experience more deeply the coming of the Lord and expresses our seriousness and reverence for the Lord's coming into our lives. This practice, along with all the other penitential practices, is a means to an end: growth in our life in Christ. Whenever the means becomes the end, we are vulnerable to self-righteousness and spiritual arrogance.

The third call of the Lord is to **give alms**. Jesus was always concerned about those who were poor and in need. He was impressed by



the widow who, though having so little, shared her resources with others: “I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood” (Lk 21:3-4). To be a disciple of Christ means to live a life of charity. To be a disciple of Jesus is to live a life of stewardship, generously giving of our time, talent, and treasure.

Our Lord’s threefold call to pray, to fast, and to give alms is richly interconnected. In prayer the Holy Spirit, always active in our lives, shows us those areas where we are not free—areas that call for penance—as well as those people who are in need of our care. Through fasting, our spirit becomes more open to hearing God’s call, and we receive new energies for performing works of charity. Almsgiving puts us in contact with the needy whom we then bring back to God in prayer.


At the heart of all penance is the call to conversion. Jesus’ imperative “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15) makes explicit this connection between authentic discipleship and penitential discipline. Discipleship, our following of Jesus, embraces discipline, a firm commitment to do whatever is demanded in furthering God’s kingdom. Viewed in this way, the virtue of penance is not optional, just as weeding a garden is not optional for a responsible caretaker. The gardener is concerned with a bountiful harvest; the disciple is concerned about greater conformity to the person of Jesus.



If we are serious about embracing the penitential discipline that is rooted in the call to discipleship, then we will identify specific times and places for prayer, penance, and works of charity. Growth in spiritual maturity demands a certain level of specificity, for it shows that we take seriously God’s call to discipline and are willing to hold ourselves accountable. In our Catholic tradition we specify certain days and seasons for special works of penance: **Fridays**, on which we commemorate the death of the Lord, and **Lent**, our forty days of preparation for the Easter mysteries.

Recalling our Lord’s Passion and death on Good Friday, we hold all **Fridays** to have special significance. Jesus’ self-denial and self-offering invite us to enter freely into his experience by forgoing food, bearing humiliations, and forgiving those who injure us. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of all spiritual transformation, this can be done—and done with a spirit of quiet joy. For Christians, suffering and joy are not incompatible.

The season of **Lent** has traditionally been a time of prolonged penance for the Christian community. Together we prepare for the great Easter mysteries by committing ourselves to fulfill our baptismal call to maturity, holiness, service, and community. Our response to each call will demand sacrifice, mortification, asceticism, and denial of our own self-will. Mortification helps to “put to death” the cancer cells of sin; asceticism brings a discipline that makes us increasingly free and responsible. Again, this



action and grace of the Holy Spirit are what enlighten, enkindle, and empower us to live more fully the way of discipleship.

Our American culture, which emphasizes having many possessions and an excessive self-preoccupation, has difficulty accepting the penitential practices of our Catholic tradition. Current philosophies would have us believe that we are here to be entertained and that we are born to be content. Jesus' message is one of service: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). In this modern context, we fulfill our mission of evangelization by living the Gospel. Witnessing to gospel values helps to transform our culture. Our culture is in great need of justice and charity, virtues that cannot be achieved without grace and openness to conversion. There are always unconverted areas of minds and hearts; there are always factors in our social structures that need uprooting, repair, or restoration. All of us are called to participate in this evangelizing work of transforming our world.

During the Jubilee Year, our Holy Father called us to conversion, reconciliation, and solidarity. To continue to live that call, we might take the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as a penitential model. These fourteen practices demand great sacrifice and generosity; they also draw us more deeply into conformity with the Lord. Focusing on one of these works each week may be a practical way of integrating them into our personal, family, and parish lives.



Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feeding the hungry
- Sheltering the homeless
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting the imprisoned
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Burying the dead

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Converting sinners
- Instructing the ignorant
- Advising the doubtful
- Comforting the sorrowful
- Bearing wrongs patiently
- Forgiving injuries
- Praying for the living and dead

Penitential practices express in visible signs and deeds the interior conversion of heart. Because we are called by Jesus to give our whole selves to the Father, conversion means a radical reorientation of our whole lives toward God's kingdom. We turn away from evil, resolve not to sin, and trust in God's amazing grace. There will be sadness for past wrongs but deep joy in the working of grace.

In the end, our life in Christ is about loving God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, and about sharing God's love with others. Penitential practices are essential if we are to turn away from sin, believe in the Gospel, and share God's love with one another. ■



APPENDIX

CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Through the sacrament of penance, we, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and, intending to reform our ways, receive God's forgiveness and become reconciled with God and with the Church.

THE SEASON OF LENT

During this forty-day period each year, the Church unites itself to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. To prepare to celebrate the Easter mysteries, we devote time during this special season to pray, to perform works of charity, and to deny ourselves by fulfilling obligations more faithfully.

THE SEASON OF ADVENT AS A TIME OF PREPARATION

Advent inaugurates the beginning of the liturgical year; it is the four-week period during which the Church prepares to celebrate Christmas. Advent has a twofold character. In addition to being a time of preparation for the commemoration of Jesus' first coming into the world, it is also directed to Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is a season of joyful and spiritual expectation.

PENITENTIAL DAYS

- **Ash Wednesday**—This day marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The imposition of ashes is an ancient penitential practice symbolizing our dependence upon God's mercy and forgiveness. Ash Wednesday is a day of fast and abstinence in the Church.

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- **Good Friday**—Christ suffered and died for our salvation on Friday. On the Friday that we call "Good," the Church gathers to commemorate Jesus' Passion and death. Good Friday is a day of fast and abstinence. The Good Friday fast is the Paschal fast—a fast of anticipation and longing for the Passover of the Lord, which should continue, when possible, through Holy Saturday.
 - **Fridays During Lent**—In the United States, the tradition of abstaining from meat on each Friday during Lent is maintained.
 - **Fridays Throughout the Year**—In memory of Christ's suffering and death, the Church prescribes making each Friday throughout the year a penitential day. All of us are urged to prepare appropriately for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday.

FORMS OF PENANCE

- **Prayer**—In prayer, we encounter and walk with God. During the Lenten season, we are encouraged to make opportunities for individual and common prayer. Opportunities for prayer can include attending Mass, praying the liturgy of the hours, praying within the family, visiting a chapel, prayerfully reading the Bible, reciting the rosary, or praying before the Blessed Sacrament.
- **Fasting**—By refraining from eating, we signify our oneness with the Lord, acknowledge our need for conversion, and give witness to our solidarity with those less fortunate. Catholics who are eighteen years and older and in good health are bound until their fifty-ninth birthday by the obligation to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Traditionally, the canonical obligation of fasting has been understood in the Church as the taking of only one full meal a day.



- **Almsgiving**—This penitential practice entails giving money or other resources for the benefit of those in need. One possible source of this money is that which has been saved from fasting or other means of self-denial.
- **Abstinence**—In the United States, this penitential practice consists of refraining from the consumption of meat. The Latin Church's requirement of abstinence binds Catholics after they have celebrated their fourteenth birthday, and it is practiced on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Fridays during Lent. Pastors and parents are encouraged to see that children who are not bound by the obligation to fast and abstain are led to appreciate an authentic sense of penance.
- **The Practice of Charity "Which Covers a Multitude of Sins" (1 Pt 4:8)**—Motivated by love for God and for one's neighbor, we express solicitude through various works for those who are in need, especially the poor, the sick, the underprivileged, the aged, the lonely, the imprisoned, the discouraged, the bedridden, and the overburdened.
- **Works of Mercy**—Through charitable actions (see p. 7) we express compassionate care for others by easing their burdens and attending to their bodily and spiritual needs.
- **Penitential Rite at Mass**—This is part of the Introductory Rite of the Mass, following the entrance song and greeting, and preceding the Gloria and opening prayer. The rite's invitation to repentance enables us to express readiness to hear the Word of God, celebrate the Eucharist, and receive the Eucharist with a humble and contrite spirit.
- **Eucharistic Fast**—The eucharistic fast is an ancient custom whereby we prepare to receive holy communion and thereby show due reverence for the sacrament. Latin Catholics who are in good health are required to abstain from any food or drink, with the exceptions of water and medicine, for at least one hour before receiving holy communion.



- **Asceticism**—The practice of asceticism is a discipline based on self-control and self-denial that helps an individual or a community attain spiritual goals. This discipline is exercised with the aim of achieving greater freedom for self-giving in love. In this way, we seek to imitate the self-emptying of Christ.
- **Mortification**—In general terms, mortification refers to the radical self-denial and wholehearted giving of oneself to God that Jesus called for when he told his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24). More specifically, mortification is a form of ascetic discipline that involves denial of some kind of enjoyment in order to gain a greater detachment from one's desires. The goal of mortification is fullness of life, not death—freedom, not enslavement.
- **Sacrifices**—Joining ourselves to Christ's sacrifice, we freely give up time, energy, leisure, and other goods for the sake of others.
- **Examination of Conscience**—Through this prayerful and reflective process, we review the state of our spiritual health and identify those areas of our lives and of our relationships where we are not acting in a truly Christian manner and where reform is needed. Christians are encouraged to make a brief examination of conscience before retiring for the night.
- **Spiritual Direction**—Under the guidance of a spiritual director, a person is led to a deeper understanding of his or her relationship with God. Personal weaknesses and strengths are identified in view of their effect on spiritual growth.
- **Stations of the Cross**—This popular devotional practice was developed in order to permit those who could not make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to follow in the steps of Jesus along his journey from judgment to burial. Catholics throughout the centuries have paused to pray the stations of the cross, especially during the Lenten season.



- **Pilgrimages as Signs of Penance**—For centuries the Church has promoted the practice of pilgrimage as a means of atoning for sin and as an aid to personal conversion and holiness. Pilgrims, who journey to a specific holy place to commemorate a certain event, pause to reflect upon where they have been and where they are going along their journey in faith. Pilgrimages mirror symbolically the pilgrim nature of the Church, which is on a continuous journey to the new and heavenly Jerusalem.

SAMPLE EXPRESSIONS OF PENANCE

- Efforts at reconciliation with a family member or neighbor
- Tears of repentance
- Concern for the salvation of our sisters and brothers
- Prayer to the saints for their intercession
- Patient acceptance of the cross we must bear to be faithful to Christ
- Defense of justice and right
- Admission of faults to God and to one another
- Mutual correction
- Offer and acceptance of forgiveness
- Endurance of persecution for the sake of God's kingdom
- Development of a spirit of penance
- Witness to a Christian way of life

ALSO OF INTEREST

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