

## Friday abstinence from meat

Because it was the day on which Our Lord rose from the dead the first Christians celebrated Sunday, the first day of the week, as the principal Christian day of worship rather than the Jewish Sabbath (Acts 20:7). From that time each Sunday has always been viewed as a mini Easter Sunday. Correspondingly, each Friday has been viewed as a mini Good Friday on which we observe the Passion and death of Our Lord on the Cross. From the earliest days of the Church, Catholics have abstained from flesh meat as part of this observance for two reasons: first, to do homage to Christ who died in the flesh on Good Friday and, second, as an act of penance for our sins.

Although many thought this practice had been abolished in recent years, in fact it has continued to be the norm in the Catholic Church throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and down to the present day. However, in some places – including in England and Wales – the bishops were given authority by the Pope to allow people to substitute some other act of penance instead.

The bishops of England and Wales have decided that abstaining from meat on Fridays should become the norm once again for both of the reasons given above but also for a third reason. When he visited Britain, Pope Benedict called for all Catholics to have the courage and the confidence to take their Faith into the public square. Abstaining from flesh meat on Fridays is a way of marking our Catholic identity and proclaiming, in just one small but distinctive way, that the death of Christ on the Cross is the most important event in human history along with His resurrection on Easter Sunday. We already mark His resurrection by going to Mass on Sunday. Now, once more, we can share a common practice as we mark His Passion and death.

This practice does not mean that we have to eat fish; there are many alternatives to non-meat dishes these days. And if we are already vegetarian we can offer our existing practice up as a penance or undertake some other form of penance instead.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes penance as a repentance and a conversion of the heart, an “interior conversion, [which] urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance” (CCC 1430). It is not that we are parading our good works before men; rather, we are worshipping the living and true God with our whole being, body as well as soul, just as the prophet Joel urges us to do in the readings on Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:12-18), and as Our Lord himself teaches us to do – whilst not showing off – in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 6:1-6).

Let us respond generously, then, to this call from our holy Mother, the Church, to give witness to the Passion and death of our Saviour who died for us that we might live with Him.