

Following this, the 1983 Code of Canon Law states:

Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. (Canon 1251)

In the United States, the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) promulgated a document shortly after Pope Paul VI issued his Apostolic Constitution, and took advantage of the faculties he had given them. The document, entitled "On Penance and Abstinence", says:

... the Catholic bishops of the United States, far from downgrading the traditional penitential observance of Friday, and motivated precisely by the desire to give the spirit of penance greater vitality, especially on Fridays, the day that Jesus died, urge our Catholic people henceforth to be guided by the following norms:

1. Friday itself remains a special day of penitential observance throughout the year, a time when those who seek perfection will be mindful of their personal sins and the sins of mankind which they are called upon to help expiate in union with Christ Crucified;
2. Friday should be in each week something of what Lent is in the entire year. For this reason we urge all to prepare for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday by freely making of every Friday a day of self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ;
3. Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Friday, even though we hereby terminate the traditional law of abstinence as binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat. We do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as formerly we did in obedience to Church law. (USCCB, "On Penance and Abstinence", November 18, 1966, source, emphasis added)

To sum up, the US Bishops have lifted the obligation to abstain from meat on Friday, which only means that failure to abstain from meat on Friday no longer involves a grave sin. This is hardly a loophole that should be interpreted as blanket approval to jettison this traditional practice; on the contrary, the Bishops then say that abstinence from meat on Friday is given "first place" among other penitential options, and remains the practice which should be "ordinarily" observed by Catholics in the United States. The only difference is that now Catholics will abstain from meat on Fridays "by free choice" instead of "in obedience to Church law," which was formerly binding on pain of grave sin.

Unfortunately, most Catholics have taken their new freedom and turned it into a false liberty, a license to abstain from any form of abstinence, even though the Bishops clearly state that Friday is to remain a day of penance and mortification. If a Catholic chooses to eat meat on a Friday, he is still bound by Church law to do some kind of penance and mortification, such as praying an extra decade of the Rosary, praying the stations of the Cross, fasting during the day, etc.

But the desire of the US Bishops, it must be emphasized again, is that abstinence from meat on Fridays will be the "ordinary" method of doing penance - not the extra-ordinary method. Abstinence from meat on Fridays is still, by the way, binding on the whole Church during the season of Lent. But even outside of Lent, Friday is still a day of penance and mortification, and abstinence from meat is still the primary and ordinary method of doing such penance. The question which Catholics must ask themselves, if they say that abstaining from meat on Fridays is no longer the Church law, is "what equivalent form of penance have I substituted in its place?"

In conclusion, we have examined two practices of the Church which have recently fallen into disuse, mostly through ignorance. The law of veiling woman is still in force, until Canon Law says otherwise; likewise, the law of penance and mortification on Fridays is also still in force, and the primary and normative method of doing penance on Fridays is still to abstain from meat.

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