

## FEATURES

# PENITENTIAL DAYS AND PRACTICES FOR THE FILIPINO CATHOLIC

By

Florencio Testera, O.P.

Penance is insistently recommended in both the old and the new Testaments as a necessary condition for the forgiveness of sins (Ezeq. 18:21; Joel 2:12; Eccl. 2:22; Mat. 3:2; Jn. 1:8; Acts 2:38...)

The fact of sin, the Scriptures declare further, is a universal phenomenon from which man can claim no exception: "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not with us" (Jn. 1:8). Hence the constant recognition of the Church that its members are in continuous need of conversion and renewal and thus bound by the divine precept of penitence. (*Lumen Gent.*, n. 8; *Const. on the Lit.*, n. 110).

Moreover, while reasserting the primacy of the supernatural value of penitence, the Church has always urged its faithful to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit—metanoia—with external acts of penance-asceticism. For this reason Christians have observed from the beginning penitential practices and seasons or days which have varied according to the needs and conditions of the various peoples and cultures.

The Church has reorganized its penitential discipline anew with practices more suited to modern times and conditions. Acknowledging, however, the fact that it is no longer feasible and practical to adopt a uniform rule valid for all peoples and times, the Church has limited itself to set apart certain penitential days and seasons which are to be observed by all united in a common celebration of penitence, leaving it up to the local Bishops' Conference to establish the specific norms which, in their pastoral solicitude and prudence and with the direct knowledge they have of local conditions, they consider the most appropriate and efficacious for their faithful.

It is, therefore, fitting to expound on the later penitential norms adopted by the local Bishops' Conference—CBCP—which are binding on all Filipino faithful. Such is the main objective of this brief study.

1. *Penitential Seasons and Days.*

All times and days are good for penitential prayers and practices. As a matter of fact, the faithful should be earnestly encouraged to extraordinary acts of penance for the purpose of expiation and petition all throughout the liturgical year, including the seasons and days which are no longer set aside by law for penitential purposes (*Const. "paenitemini", IX, 1*).

The Church from its early days has observed certain seasons and days of penance even if these have varied in accordance with the different ages and regions. Of all these ancient seasons only a few have survived and reached us, namely, advent, lent, ember days and vigils. Current legislation, however, has officially retained the penitential character of lent of all Fridays of the year, when penance is to be considered an important requirement of christian life.

Advent has lost by now most of its role of a penitential preparation for the Nativity of the Lord as the early anticipation of the holiday mood of Christmas has contributed in many ways to the alienation of the genuine spirit of the season. Vigils and ember days, likewise, no longer carry a penitential meaning. The old saying, "a fast before a feast", does no longer hold in a highly materialistic world.

The penitential discipline in the Philippines follows the general pattern set for the universal church, which makes the entire lenten season a period of penitential observance with special reference to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Lent remains to be a time of penitential preparation for Easter, and, unlike Advent, it still appeals to the penitential spirit of our people. The moral obligation to abstain or substitute therefore acts of charity or piety on fridays is retained as it is a part of the normal duty of penance for every christian (*Lit. Inf. Bulletin, 1976, p. 108*). Thus every Friday of the year becomes a day of self-denial and mortification in grateful remembrance of the Passion of the Lord.

It is lastly to be noted that the penitential discipline adopted by the CBCP for the faithful of the nation, while abrogating all privileges and indults of the past, in no way affects or changes the vows of any person - juridical or physical - nor the constitutions and rules of any religious or other approved institute (*Paenit. V*).

## 2. *Penitential Practices.*

The forms of penitence have indeed varied from time to time according to the needs of the different localities and epochs. The "privileged" forms which by reason of their evangelical or traditional values have prevailed through the centuries are fasting and abstinence, alms giving, prayers, works of mercy . . .

The Church in its latest legislation still imposes the obligation of fast and abstinence from meat as a common requirement for the practice of penance. Other forms of penitence, however, are ratified as well, provided it seems opportune to the local bishops to replace the traditional fast and abstinence in favor of more effective penitential exercises. The spirit of penance asks for the renunciation of those things which we enjoy most, which is not always the case with the eating of meat. Meat was once an exceptional form of food. Today, the economic, social, dietary conditions of some communities have altered that old pattern.

The present penitential discipline binding the filipino catholic follows once more the common pattern for the universal Church. The CBCP has officially prescribed, as a part of the normal duty of penance for a christian, fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstinence from meat—which can be substituted with acts of piety or charity—on all fridays of the year, (LIB., 1976, p. 108).

The law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products—cheese, butter, margarine...—, or condiments made of animal fats—lard, grease...— (*Paenit.*, III, 1).

The eating of broth or soup made of meat and meat gravies is now permitted on an abstinence day. In case of doubt as to whether a given food is to be considered as meat, the legitimate customs accepted in the locality should be followed.

The law of fasting allows only one full meal a day, but does not prohibit taking some nourishment in the morning and evening, but one should observe—as far as quality and quantity are concerned—approved local customs (*Paenit.*, III, 2).

The essence of the law of fasting consists in the taking of just one full meal to a day. Therefore, the food taken as morning and evening nourishments should not together amount in quantity to another full meal. The nourishment should be enough, however, for the person to discharge the ordinary tasks

of the day with due regard for the spirit of penance. It is not practical, therefore, to fix the amount of food that ought to be taken as nourishment or as a full meal. The needs of each person and the demand of penance should dictate the practice to be followed in each case.

As a corollary to the doctrine expounded above, eating between meals is not permitted. Liquids, however, such as milk, fruit juices, chocolate or soft drinks... are allowed as they do not come under the denomination of food and are taken as drinks.

An interchange of the time of the main meal with the morning or evening nourishment is held to be lawful as it will not really affect the essence of the law of fast.

Local customs or common usage ought to be considered in determining the quantity and quality of food to be taken both by way of nourishment or as main repast for the day.

### 3. *The Obligation to Fast and Abstain.*

The ecclesiastical precept of penitence is juridically and morally binding just on all Fridays of the year—unless they occur on a feast of obligation—and on Ash Wednesday. The law of abstinence is binding on those who have completed their fourteenth year. Old age in itself does not excuse from abstinence. Fasting is obligatory from the twenty first year of age to the beginning of the sixtieth (*Paenit.*, VI). In such cases the substantial observance of fast and abstinence is a grave obligation.

Moralists had hitherto commonly held that a deliberate violation of the law of fast and abstinence on a single occasion would constitute a grave sin. Such was and still is the belief of the faithful going to confession for having eaten meat on Friday.

Obviously this is no longer true today, as the new ruling on the matter holds that only the "substantial observance of fasting and abstinence days is a grave obligation" (*Paenit.*, II, § 2). The interpretation of the clause *substantial observance* entails some difficulties. An article that appeared in the semi-official organ of the Vatican—*L'Osservatore Romano* of Feb. 20, 1966—a few days after the publication of the *Const. "Paenite-mini"*, offers this interpretation of the word "substantial":

"We think the word *substantial* was chosen designedly especially in order the better to show the personal responsibility of each one before God, so that every one may practice penance in spirit and in truth without insisting too much on the traditional distinctions of casuistry between grave and light matter in the violation of the law. Consequently, a single violation could not be considered a grave sin, but the repeated and habitual violation would certainly be grave."

"Hence the more serious and sincere is the will to practice penance in the days and in the manner prescribed by the Church, the less inclined one should be to consider a partial violation as grave. The more serious the reason which prevents the observance of the law, the less grave will be the transgression. If the reason is really proportionately grave, it is certain that all obligation ceases. This may occur in cases of illness, where one can not take other food because of infirmity, where meals must be taken in common, in travelling when there is no choice, and so on. But when these excuses occur, there remains the obligation of divine law to practice penance in some other way according to the particular condition of the person."

Later on a query was brought to the Cong. of the Council on: I. Whether the *substantial* observance of days of penance, which is declared to be of grave obligation in the dispositive part of the Const. *Paenitemini*, II § 2, of 17 Feb., 1966, refers to the individual days of penance which are to be observed as a matter of obligation in the whole Church;

II. Or does it refer rather to the whole complexus of penitential days to be observed with the penances attached to them. The Cong. of the Council replied, with the approval of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI:

1. *In the negative.*

II. *In the affirmative*; that is, one sins gravely against the law, who, without an excusing cause, omit a notable part, quantitative or qualitative, of the penitential observance which is prescribed as a whole". (AAS., 1967, p. 229; Canon Law Digest, VI. p. 684).

Individual violations of the law of penitence, therefore, are no longer to be considered seriously sinful. In this con-

text one who deliberately fails to fast on Good Friday can not be held guilty of grave sin. It is rather the substantial disregard of the law what constitutes grave matter. A substantial violation in this case would mean the repeated transgressions of the law of fast and abstinence, so that only when a person has habitually failed against one of these laws can the obligation be urged under pain of sin.

But what is an habitual violation of fast and abstinence? How often should one break the law to acquire the habit? It is difficult indeed to answer such questions. Still more, an attempt to do so could easily open the door to the much hated casuistry of the past and even defeat the very purpose of the law of penitence. One thing seems clear, though, that an intensive and well-coordinated catechesis on the matter of fast and abstinence is now imperative in order to develop in the faithful the type of well-informed conscience which in the final analysis will decide whether a substantial breach of the law has taken place in a given case.

#### 4. *The Transferring of Penitential Days and the Substitution of Penitential Practices.*

In keeping with the spirit of Vatican II (*Chr. Dom.*, n. 38. 4), Episcopal Conferences have been granted a couple of rather singular and relevant faculties on the matter of fast and abstinence.

The first one has to do with the transferring of days of penance. It is within the power of the local Conference to transfer days of penance for a just cause, always taking into account the time of Lent (*Paenit.*, VI, § 1, a).

The transferring of penitential days is made for the whole nation and, therefore, the cause for the change should be one of a rather general nature even if it does not affect each and all christians in the country.

There is no need to recourse to the transferring of days in cases where in the obligation of the obligation of fasting and abstinence can be legitimately dispensed with or it does no longer binds on account of certain circumstances.

The second faculty empowers the local Conference to substitute for abstinence and fast, either wholly or in part, other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety (*Paenit.*, VI, §1, b.).

Though nothing to the effect is said in the law, it is understood that the commutation of penance must be premised on the existence of a just, reasonable ground.

The decision of the Conference on the matter becomes juridically binding once it is approved by two thirds of the members with voting rights (*Chr. Dom.*, n. 38, 4). The Conference should notify the Holy See by way of information only on whatever was decreed on the matter. The reduction of days of penance, however, will require the permission of the Holy See.

##### 5. *Dispensation from Fast and Abstinence.*

Individual diocesan bishops have no power to transfer the days of penance or to substitute for fast and abstinence other forms of penitence. In particular cases, however, they can grant a dispensation from the law to their subjects if this is for their spiritual benefit (*Chr. Dom.*, n. 8, b).

For a just and proportionate reason, therefore, the bishop can use this faculty to grant a dispensation from fast and abstinence to an entire family and even to the whole diocese. He can likewise delegate the power to others as the faculty is a part of the ordinary jurisdiction.

The pastor, too, can, for a just cause and observing the prescriptions of the Ordinary, grant to the individual faithful and particular families a dispensation from abstinence and fast or their commutation to other pious works (*Paenit.*, VIII). This faculty can likewise be delegated even habitually. A dispensation for the whole parish community can not be given by the pastor. He may, however, dispense several individuals or families through a single act, vgr., all persons attending a seminar, those taking part in a graduation, wedding celebration . . .

Superiors (including the local ones) of clerical religious institutes and those of clerical societies, which are not religious in the strict sense, like secular institutes, societies of clerics living in common without vows, enjoy the same faculty as the pastors and can, therefore, dispense their subjects from fast and abstinence or commute them to other pious exercises. (*Paenit.*, VII).

Lastly, it is to be observed that a dispensation granted for a just and reasonable cause is not to be considered as a permanent relaxation of the law in favor of a person or group of persons, and it shall hold for as long as the cause for the dispensation exists.