

DEAR DEACON BULLETIN INSERT

❖ Dear Deacon Jim,

How and when did the rules of fasting and abstaining during Lent come about? It seems to be a manmade Rule. Is it stated anywhere in the Bible?

❖ Response

The penitential practices of fasting and abstinence are of ancient origin. We can find an ancient practice of fasting in sorrow and repentance for sins found in the Old Testament. The Church, in her earliest days, recognized the necessity to "chastise the body and bring it under subjection." In the early Church, we find that the apostles were familiar with fasting (Acts 13:2 ff; 14:23).

The practice of fasting during Lent can also be traced to our Lord's journey into the desert where he fasted and prayed for forty days and nights in preparation to begin his public ministry (Matt 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-3). So, the forty days of Lent are in imitation of Christ's time in the desert.

Regarding Abstinence, the Church uses this to signify depriving ourselves of meat, that the body may practice penance and the soul be sanctified. The Church has always observed days of abstinence in some form. However, over time, the diversity in customs, climate, and prices of food have gradually paved the way for modifications of the law of abstinence.

Fasting and abstinence formed part of the duties characterizing the Lenten season. but there was little or no uniformity in the manner of observance until the seventh century.

Before Second Vatican Council the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the Roman Pontifical, and the approved regulations for the United States (*Uniform Norms 1951, Modification 1956*) required observing rigorous fasting and abstinence. Then in 1966, Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic constitution, *Paenitemini*, changed the strictly regulated Roman Catholic fasting requirements. He recommended that fasting be appropriate to the local economic situation.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) produced a statement in 1966 called *Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence*, which was modified slightly in 1983, and the current practice is regulated by Canons 1250-1253.

So, although fasting and abstinence are certainly required disciplines by Roman Catholics, the specific application may vary depending on local conditions and in a sense, those conditions can be considered manmade. Current guidelines are as follows:

FASTING is observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday by all Catholics over 18 years of age to the beginning of their 60th year.

ABSTINENCE from meat is to be observed by all Catholics who are 14 years of age or older. Ash Wednesday, all the Fridays of Lent, and Good Friday are days of abstinence.

Regarding your question, "Can fasting and abstinence be found in the Bible?", as you can see above, the answer to that would be "Yes" - in the Old and New Testaments.

Deacon Jim