

The ancients had a saying, "You are what you eat." For a Catholic Christian, who feeds regularly on the Body and Blood of Christ, that is an especially happy thought. It is certainly true that, even in our daily food, what we eat - and don't eat - has a profound impact on us. Too many delicious sausages will most certainly produce heartburn. The Church has long recognized the importance of feasting and fasting. In our practice we follow both our Lord's prompting and the teaching of the Catholic Church (of which we, as Anglicans, are a part) from her earliest days.

## THE CHURCH'S FEASTS

We call our great Holy Days Feast Days. These days note some special celebration in the life of Christ or our Lady, one of the Saints or, in a few instances, a great doctrine of the Church. Most of these Feasts are noted in the Book of Common Prayer in the Table of Feasts and Fasts on page 1. The Prayer Book provides a special Collect (a prayer), Epistle (a reading from one of the letters of the Apostles) and Gospel (a reading from the story of Christ's life) for each of these Holy Days. This tells us something important about Feasts. They are intended by the Prayer Book to be marked by special celebrations of the Mass. The Prayer Book encourages us to keep the Church's Feasts, but hopes that we will keep them first of all by attending Mass. It's a happy custom to keep Feast Days in other ways, giving ourselves or others a special treat, perhaps. The best

celebration of a Feast Day is, when possible, to feast on the Lord Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Certain days, called Days of Obligation, are days that Tradition marked long ago as occasions that Christians should, if at all possible, attend Mass. In Anglican practice these days are:

1. Every Sunday of the year
2. Christmas Day (December 25)
3. Annunciation Day (March 25)
4. Ascension Day
5. All Saints Day (November 1)

On Christmas Day, Easter Day and Whitsunday the Church requires us to receive Holy Communion in order to keep up our status as Communicants (we should frequently receive Holy Communion but this standard was set in the Middle Ages as an irreducible minimum). If you are unable to attend Mass or Communicate on one of these days, you should speak with your Priest and ensure that you remedy the situation as soon as possible.

## THE CHURCH'S FASTS

The Book of Common Prayer also exhorts us to the practice of Fasting and Abstinence. "Fasting" refers to the amount of food we eat - we might say, the quantity. On Fast Days we eat less food than usual. We might, for example, have a very light breakfast and lunch with a normal evening meal. Some days, like Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, are days of

strict Fasting and Abstinence. The usual practice is not to eat at all until after sunset.

"Abstinence" refers to the sort of food we eat - we might say the quality. Usually on days of Abstinence we refrain from eating certain foods - meats, sweets or the like. For many centuries Christians have observed Fridays as days of Abstinence, remembering that our Lord was crucified on Friday. We abstain as a way of remembering and, in a small way, sharing His Sacrifice.

While both Fasting and Abstinence can be very useful in private spiritual growth, these are best undertaken with the guidance of a Spiritual Director. The Church calls all of us, though, to follow the guidelines of Fasting and Abstinence fixed in her liturgical cycle. The Book of Common Prayer lists these days:

1. Strict Fast with Abstinence  
Ash Wednesday  
Good Friday
2. Fasting with Abstinence  
The Forty Days of Lent  
The Ember Days
3. Abstinence  
All Fridays of the year (save those which fall within an Octave)

Generally speaking, we can say that these rules should apply to healthy individuals from roughly the age of Confirmation until the time of retirement (for those who need numbers -

from about 12-65 years). Those beyond this spectrum are usually excused as are sick or infirm persons, who should eat whatever their doctor says, regardless of the season.

### **THE EUCHARISTIC FAST**

From very early times the Church has encouraged Christians to receive the Holy Communion fasting. It is very fitting that the first food we receive each day we Communicate should be the Bread of Heaven. For this reason, many Christians fast from midnight on until the morning when they Communicate at Mass. In these days when the Eucharist is also offered in the evenings, this is not, for those who intend to Communicate at an evening Mass, very practical. For this reason it is customary to fast for three hours prior to attending Mass.

Communicating is far more important than fasting, but proper preparation for Holy Communion is more important yet. Fasting before receiving Communion is a good part of a proper preparation.

Once again, to those whose medical condition will not allow them to fast, there is no obligation of any sort.

### **THE PURPOSE OF FEASTING AND FASTING**

We feast as a prelude to the Unending Feast to which we are invited in the Kingdom of God. Scripture often describes heaven in terms of a feast, the "Marriage Feast of the Lamb." Celebrations of Holy Days help us to focus our faith and center it in our daily lives, while reminding us that ultimately our lives will be with the Lord in heaven.

We fast not because foodstuffs are evil, but because we need to be reminded that our fallen natures tend to abuse the good things that God has given us. Fasting reminds us (what we often want to forget) that we are sinners, and that the struggle in which we Christians are engaged is a spiritual one, but with its roots firmly set in this world.

Feasts and Fasts help keep us spiritually balanced. Of themselves, their value is indeed limited. But in conjunction with prayer and the Sacraments, they become indispensable tools in living the Christian life.

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# **An Anglican Guide to Feasting and Fasting**

