

Ember Days

OF FASTING AND ABSTINENCE



Troops Fully Alive

FAST OF THE FOUR SEASONS

1. In the Trailman Oath, we each pledge “to be a good steward of creation.” Four times a year, according to Church tradition, we set aside three days to honor God through his marvelous creation. Commonly known as the “Ember Days” (from *Jejunia quatuor tempora*, which in Latin means “fast of the four seasons”), these quarterly periods are days of prayer, penance, fasting, and abstinence. The term “Ember Days” does not refer to embers from a campfire but derives from a corruption of the German “*Quatember*.”

2. The Ember Days are celebrated near the beginning of the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) to ask God’s blessings upon humanity and the fruits of the earth and to pray in gratitude for the blessings of nature, particularly those used by the Church in her liturgy, such as wheat, grapes, olives, and beeswax.

3. In generations past, the livelihoods of most families were directly connected to agriculture. As a consequence, threats to production—such as

drought, flooding, freezes, insect infestation, or plant disease—were personally felt. In the modern economy, most do not as readily perceive their dependence upon nature. In the United States, preoccupation with acquisition of consumer goods—consumerism—has also become a serious problem. Accordingly, observance of the Ember Days is a good way to help remind us of our constant reliance upon God’s provision. They also help teach us to use God’s creation in moderation, avoid gluttony, and assist those in need.

SEASONAL DATES OF THE EMBER DAYS

4. Official observance of the Ember Days had its origin in Rome from the mid-5th century; although, by that time its seasonal schedule had lost connection with the agricultural harvest. The traditional dates for the Ember Days are the three-day periods (known as “Embertides”) occurring four times a year on the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday:

- **SPRING.** After Ash Wednesday (marked by harvests of beeswax, which is used to make liturgical candles, including the Paschal Candle).
- **SUMMER.** After Pentecost, during the traditional octave of Pentecost (marked by harvests of wheat, which is used to make communion hosts that become the Body of Christ in the Eucharist).
- **AUTUMN.** After the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14 (marked by harvests of grapes, which are used to make wine that becomes the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist).
- **WINTER.** After the memorial of Saint Lucy, December 13 (marked by harvests of olives, which are used to make sacred oils, including the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of the Catechumens, and Holy Chrism).

5. Many contemporary authors describe an English mnemonic helpful for remembering the arrangement of the Ember Days on the liturgical calendar: “Lenty, Penty, Cruci, Lucy.”



Figure inspired by original illustration by Sister M. A. Justina Knapp, O.S.B., from *With Christ through the Year: The Liturgical Year in Word and Symbols* by Rev. Bernard Strasser, O.S.B., Bruce Pub. Co. (1947).

6. Ember Saturdays have customarily been favored for ordinations to the priesthood or diaconate. The Ember Days have also been fitting days for First Communions, almsgiving and other penitential or charitable acts, prayers for priests and vocations, and prayers for souls in Purgatory.

DAYS OF PENANCE

7. In preparation for his public ministry, Jesus was led by the Spirit to the desert, fasted forty days and forty nights, and was repeatedly tempted by the devil (Mt 4:1-11). Self-control and self-denial equip us to govern our passions and strengthen our wills. Following Christ, fasting helps prepare us to deny temptations of the devil and avoid sin.

8. The Church teaches that repetition of sin creates vice—a greater proclivity to sin further (CCC 1865). According to tradition, vices can be classified according to the virtues they oppose, such as the seven capital sins: pride, avarice (greed), envy, wrath (anger), lust, gluttony, and sloth (CCC 1866). These deadly vices correspond to seven virtues: humility, charity, gratitude, patience, chastity, temperance, and diligence.

9. To help combat temptation and habituate virtue, the Church prescribes certain disciplines, including fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Since 1966, the Church has universally prescribed the following days of penitence to be observed under obligation:




- **FASTING.** Fasting is observed during Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (Canon 1250). In the United States, fasting is binding upon those who are at least 18 years old but younger than 60 years of age. Fasting allows only one full meal a day but does not prohibit taking some food (known as “collations” or small snacks) in the morning and evening (that together do not equal a full meal).
- **ABSTINENCE.** Abstinence is observed on Ash Wednesday and every Friday of the whole year, which does not fall on a solemnity, including Good Friday (Canon 1251). In the United States, abstinence is binding upon those who are at least

14 years old. Abstinence forbids the eating of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk, or condiments made of animal fat.

- **SUBSTITUTE PENANCE.** Canon 1253 allows a conference of bishops to substitute other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety, in whole or in part, for abstinence and fasting. In the United States, the bishops have preserved the obligation for abstention from meat on each Friday of Lent but allow substitute penance in lieu of abstention on Fridays throughout the remainder of the year.
- **DAILY MASS.** During all weekdays of Lent, the United States bishops strongly recommend daily Mass and self-imposed observance of fasting.

TRADITIONAL PENANCE ON THE EMBER DAYS

10. In addition to prayer, almsgiving, and frequenting the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, traditional penitential discipline during the Ember Days called for fasting on the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of each Embertide. As with every Friday of the whole year, abstinence was also practiced on Ember Fridays. Although meat was allowed during the one full meal on an Ember Wednesday or Ember Saturday, abstention from meat was practiced during the morning and evening collations (snacks). The figure helps illustrate fasting and abstinence during the Ember Days.

| WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY |
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TRAILMAN'S CALL TO PENANCE

11. Although observance of the Ember Days is no longer binding upon the universal Church, each Trailman is encouraged to incorporate these penitential disciplines of prayer, fasting, and abstinence into his own acts of piety and penance.



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