

THE VIGILS & EVES OF THE CHURCH

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In the early days of the Church, the eve of special feasts was kept with fasting and penance, and often a vigil was held. The evening before the feast, the faithful would gather to pray. They would pray the office of Vespers and Matins. At midnight the eve with its fasting and penance was ended, and often the vigil ended at this time as well. The vigil was a regular institution of Christian life and was defended and highly recommended by St. Augustine and St. Jerome. The vigil and its fasting and penance ended at midnight. The Mass was celebrated much later in the morning.

A problem arose when the people would leave the Church at midnight and go into nearby homes or the street and begin their “celebration” of the feast, which often entailed dancing and partying in the streets in the pre-dawn hours. These activities were often shameful and scandalous. “The morning intermission gave rise to grave abuses; the people caroused and danced in the streets and halls around the church. St. Jerome speaks of these improprieties.” (Catholic Encyclopedia, “Eve” 1913) To put an end to this abuse, the Church put an end to many of the vigils that were celebrated. “As the feasts multiplied, the number of vigils was greatly reduced. But the abuses could be stopped only by abolishing the vigils. And where they could not be abrogated at once and entirely, they were to begin in the afternoon” (Ibid).

Christmas still maintains an eve and vigil, and Catholics are invited to keep watch for the Birth of Jesus at midnight – Christmas morning. Far from the materialistic or pagan celebrations, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered. It is “Christ’s Mass” – Christmas. While it is good and proper to set aside penitential fasting and abstinence, we must remember to avoid the extreme worldliness in which our natures are so inclined to become involved.

Another vigil that the Church has preserved is on Holy Saturday – the day before Easter. Due to the abuses that had crept into the very early “celebrations” that many indulged in, the Church gradually began to end the vigil earlier on the eve of Easter to curb the desecration of Easter by the debaucheries of the night. In 1955, Pope Pius XII modified the Law of fasting and abstinence. The law of fasting for Holy Saturday now continues until midnight. In restoring the penitential spirit of this eve and vigil, we are to rekindle the original intention of the penitential vigil while still avoiding the abuses so many fell into. The feast is not a license to sin and offend God. We should continue our penances until the actual beginning of the feast and then celebrate with moderation and modesty – giving no offense to God or our neighbors.

The law of abstinence is binding on all who have completed their seventh year of age (Can. 1254, par. 1), provided that they have attained the use of reason, which is usually presumed at this age (Can. 12). Abstinence may be *complete* or *partial*. Complete abstinence is to be observed on all Fridays, Ash Wednesday, and Christmas. On days of complete abstinence, meat and soup or gravy made from meat may not be used at all. Partial abstinence is observed on Ember Wednesdays and Saturdays and the Vigil of Pentecost. On days of partial abstinence, meat and soup or gravy made from meat may be taken only once a day, at the principal meal, the time of which is left to the discretion of each individual.

Everyone over twenty-one and under fifty-nine years of age is also bound to observe the law of fasting. The days of fast are the weekdays of Lent (including Holy Saturday until midnight), Ember days and the vigils of Pentecost, and Christmas. On days of fasting, only one full meal is permitted. Two other meatless meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each one's needs; but together, they should not equal another full meal. On a day of fast, meat may be taken at the principal meal, except on Fridays, Ash Wednesday, and the vigil Christmas. Eating between meals is prohibited, but liquids, including milk, coffee, tea, and fruit juices, are allowed.

When a holy day of obligation occurs on a day of fasting or abstinence, the law does not apply. Sometimes, too, local Ordinaries grant a dispensation when civil holidays occur on such days. When health or ability to work is seriously affected, the law of fast and abstinence does not oblige.

The eve of All Saints Day has carried over into the secular realm, and many of the abuses and evils of the past vigils have resurrected themselves and increased. The term "Halloween" comes down to us as a corruption of "All Hallows Eve" – the Eve of All Saints. The Catholic intention should be the approved desire of the early Church – a day of fasting and penance in preparation for the celebration of the great feast of All Saints. Sadly, many have given into the pagan influence to corrupt and profane the Holy Days. The feast of All Saints and the following celebration of All Souls Day allow us to unite the three parts of the Church in glorifying God. We – the Church Militant – unite with the Saints in Heaven, the Church Triumphant, and the Souls in Purgatory, the Church Suffering to praise and love God as we await our perfection and complete unity with Him in Heaven. The eve of All Saints is not supposed to be a macabre celebration of evil or death, but rather seeing past the temporary end of this life and into the eternal life of Heaven. The brutal deaths of the martyrs are celebrated not because of the evil or brutality inflicted upon them but rather because of the love of God that sustained them and carried them through the abuse and into the loving arms of Jesus in Heaven.

All that God has made is good. There are no evil days, places, or things. The only evil is sin, and sin is not the work of God. The evil of sin is the absence of some good that should be present but is not. We fast and abstain – not because food and things are bad – but to deprive ourselves of something good and to offer some good to God to prove our love for Him. It does not make sense to offer something that is not good to God – that would be an insult. Our self-denial also allows us to atone for our sins or transgressions or to follow Jesus more perfectly in taking up our daily cross.

"All things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify" (1 Cor. 10, 23). "All things are lawful to me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful to me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6, 12). "But take heed, lest perhaps this your liberty become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8, 9). In these passages, St. Paul teaches us that on some occasions, it is necessary to abstain even from things in themselves lawful, as in the case of meats consecrated to idols. Two excellent rules that can serve as guides on these occasions are the edification of the Church and our neighbor's spiritual good. Without the aid of these guides, we go astray ourselves and decoy others in doing what the letter of the law permits but what the spirit of the law, charity, forbids.

Though Advent is long for the Children, it is beneficial for them to make sacrifices and to earnestly long for the celebration of the Birth of Jesus. Those old enough to abstain should be encouraged to make offerings of these good things so they can give them to Jesus on His birthday. The world may tempt us with the realization that we are outside the social circle by doing penance while others are celebrating. And there may be nothing objectively sinful in their celebration. However, we should obey the Church in mortifying ourselves rather than the world. If we are humble and have a good heart, it just may be that we become the inspiration for others to love God more earnestly and make their own sacrificial offerings to Him. All will then work for the greater honor and glory of God and the salvation of humankind.