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MAGAZINE

Fasting is not anymore what it used to be

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We are in Lent, the forty-day period preceding Easter which according to Catholic norms should be characterized by fasting and abstinence. Often the two terms are used interchangeably, but it is wrong to do so.

Fasting is the abstention from any food for a specific period (one meal a day for six weeks); **abstinence** instead calls for the elimination from the diet, for how long it does not matter, of specific food, which are usually greedy or substantial (meat, alcohol, chocolate).

As with every behavior and every concept, Catholic fasting and abstinence have their own history, over two thousand years long and in constant change. In the **sixteenth century**, when the **Lutheran Reformation** upset a large part of Europe, in some cities someone was paid for wandering through the alleys sniffing in search of hints of meat on the days of abstinence (those destined for fasting and abstinence in a rather rigid calendar). Breaking food rules was a grave sign of Protestantism and offenders could even be punished with death. This was not a rule destined to remain unobserved, there were really capital punishments.

Today there is little talk of meat and wine, the pope's annual Lent message has only mentioned **fasting in a figurative way** for some time now, while abstinence has basically disappeared. Some bishops have called for digital austerity (drop your smartphone and think about life), Pope Francis for 2021 asked the faithful to free themselves from clutter, giving examples of "saturation of information – true or false – and consumer products". Among Catholics, the limitations in food often result from ethical or health choices, not so much as of identity adhesion. In short, the believer who eats a steak in Lent while reading the tablet may be recalled by an imaginary confessor not for what he is skewering on his fork, but for what he is virtually leafing through.

Venerdì pesce. Digiuno e cristianesimo, (Friday fish. Fasting and Christianity) published by Mulino (2021), a book also designed for an audience of onlookers, not just hardened historians.

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