

The relationship between penitential obligations on Fridays in Lent and Solemnities which fall upon a Saturday

Rev Timothy Eck, STL-Lit.¹

Update:

This article was originally entitled: *Question: When a Solemnity during Lent falls on a Saturday, does the celebration of the Solemnity which begins on the preceding evening dispense one from the obligation of abstinence during the evening of the Friday of Lent?* It was prompted by the Solemnity of Saint Joseph (March 19th) which fell on a Saturday during Lent of 2022. I missed a helpful rubric in the *Universal Norms On The Liturgical Year And The General Roman Calendar* in the original article which makes the matter even more clear. This updated article then is provided to be clearer upon the matter.

Introduction

The question this article seeks to address is: when a Solemnity during Lent falls on a Saturday, does the celebration of the Solemnity, which begins on the preceding evening, dispense one from the obligation of abstinence during the evening of the Friday of Lent? In brief the answer is no, the celebration of a Solemnity beginning on a Friday evening in Lent, does not lift the Friday obligation of abstinence. In order to answer this question more fully we need to first understand what a day is according to canon law. Then we need to understand what the norms regulating Fridays in Lent are. Finally, we must look at when does the day of a Solemnity begin and how it relates to these first two parts.

1. Canonical Definition of Time

There are three canons which are relevant for our question:

¹ Originally written on March 19, 2022. Published at verbumcaro.com on August 7, 2022.

Canon 200. Unless the law expressly provides otherwise, time is to be computed according to the norm of the following canons.

Canon 201. §1. Continuous time is understood as that which undergoes no interruption.

Canon 202. §1. In law, a day is understood as a period consisting of 24 continuous hours and begins at midnight unless other provision is expressly made.

These canons are straight forward. A day is defined as above unless explicitly defined otherwise. Also a day is a continuous period unless something explicitly interrupts this period. So this tells us what a day is. With this definition we can look at the law governing the particular day: Friday in Lent.

2. Canonical Norms Regulating Fridays in Lent

There are two canons which relevant for the penitential regulations on Fridays:

Canon 1250. The penitential days and times in the universal Church are every Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent.

Canon 1251. Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Once more these regulations are straight forward, a Friday in Lent is a Penitential day and therefore a) a day beginning at midnight and continuous for 24 continuous hours and so b) this period can only be interrupted by another explicit provision. The only provided provision for the abstinence from meat to be lifted is if *a solemnity should fall on a Friday*. That is, should the day of a solemnity correspond with a Friday, then the obligation of abstinence is not in force.

In the case which concerns us, the day of the Solemnity does not *in fact* fall on a Friday, but instead falls on a Saturday. So the immediate application of the provision provided in canon 1251 does not apply. Therefore the remaining options for the day of the Solemnity to lift the obligation of abstinence are either:

a) the day of the Solemnity explicitly interrupts the day of Friday, in which case the above canons no longer apply as the day of Friday has finished, or

b) the day of the Solemnity extends beyond the normal canonical day (which per canon 200 must be explicitly stated), in which case the day of Friday and the day of the Solemnity overlap for a period of time. Then there would be a partial correspondence of the day of the Solemnity falling on a Friday and so canon 1251 may apply.

3. Legal Norms Regulating the Definition of the Day of a Solemnity

To begin to explore these two potential cases we must remember that:

Canon 2. For the most part the Code does not define the rites which must be observed in celebrating liturgical actions. Therefore, liturgical laws in force until now retain their force unless one of them is contrary to the canons of the Code.

The answer to what a solemnity is, will not be found in the *Code of Canon Law*. Instead we must look to the beginning of the *Roman Missal* where most of the liturgical law is found. After the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* there is the *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar*. These norms define the liturgical year and what constitute different feasts (in the general sense). Paragraph 3 of the *Universal Norms* defines the Liturgical day as, “The liturgical day runs from midnight to midnight. However, the celebration of Sunday and of Solemnities begins already on the evening of the previous day.” This definition of the liturgical day corresponds perfectly with the definition of the canonical day. It further makes a distinction between the extension of the celebration and the day itself. The extension of the celebration extends beyond that of the day proper.

This immediately eliminates the opportunity for either option (a or b) from above to apply in lifting the obligation of abstinence on Fridays in Lent. The law concerning abstinence is governed by the day, not the celebration during part of the day. Since a liturgical day is explicitly defined to be the same as the canonical day, when the liturgical day is on a Saturday it cannot interrupt the day of the preceding Friday. Further, since the liturgical day is defined in temporal extension separate from the celebration’s temporal extension, the extension of the celebration cannot interrupt the previous day, since there is no provision for anything but a day to do so. Therefore a Solemnity on a Saturday does not lift the obligation for abstinence on a Friday.²

As a final word, canon 87. §1. gives the Bishop the authority to dispense any or all his subjects from observing a day of penance. Canon 1245 states that “a pastor can grant in individual cases a dispensation from the obligation of [...] a day of penance or can grant a commutation of the obligation into other pious works.” Therefore pastors can dispense in individual cases, however it is laudable to commute the penance into other pious works.

² Archbishop Hebda through a local decree promulgated on March 10, 2022, dispensed those under his suffrage from the obligation for abstinence on Friday evening as the Solemnity of St. Joseph fell on Saturday of March 19, 2022. This dispensation was granted upon the condition that the individual participated in either Evening Prayer I and/or an anticipatory Mass on Friday March 18, 2022. In this decree he interprets the celebration of the Solemnity on Friday evening as not lifting the obligation and so dispensed those who participate in the celebration. Cf. <https://archspmmainite.s3.amazonaws.com/News/2022/Abstinence+Dispensation+March+18+2022.pdf>.