LENTEN PENANCE

The Church’s Canon Law reaffirms our obligation to do penance. The special times of penance are all Fridays throughout the year, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and the season of Lent.

• We recall that St John the Baptist prepared for the coming of the Lord by “preaching a baptism of repentance”. Christ began his ministry on earth with the exhortation to repent: “Repent and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15).

• Repentance means the rejection of sin. It implies conversion to, and reconciliation with God.

• Penance is the concrete expression of repentance. It takes the forms of prayer, self-denial, and works of charity. Each of these identifies us more closely with our Saviour. By penance we make satisfaction for our sins, and take real steps in the renewal of our lives. Penance is the proof of our repentance.

• Repentance and conversion are central, ongoing features of Christian living. Penance has to be a constant, even daily, practice in our lives. In nominating special times of penance, the Church encourages and promotes in all of us the habit of penance.

• Furthermore, observance of these special times by all Catholics throughout the universal Church emphasises what we call “the social dimension of sin”. The sin of the individual member always in some measure infects the whole body. Therefore during Lent and on the Fridays of the year, we do penance, not only on our own account, but also in the name of the Church and of the world.

• We must take very seriously our penitential obligations and be sure to carry them out. The Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference has not restricted our penance to fast and abstinence in all cases, it has left room for our own responsible choice. Where we make the choice, we should carefully select the form of penance that we consider most appropriate for our own circumstances and growth in the Christian life.
PASCHAL PRECEPT

Each of the faithful is obliged to receive Holy Communion at least once a year. This is to be done between Ash Wednesday (18 February 2015) and Trinity Sunday (31 May 2015) unless for a good reason it is done at another time during the year.

All the faithful are obliged to confess their grave sins at least once a year.

DAYS OF PENANCE

All who have completed their eighteenth year and have not yet begun their sixtieth year are bound to fast.

All who have completed their fourteenth year are bound to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

On all other Fridays of the year the law of the common practice of penance is fulfilled by performing any one of the following:

a) Prayer — for example, Mass attendance; family prayer; a visit to a church or chapel; reading the Bible; making the Stations of the Cross; praying the Rosary.

b) Self-denial — for example, not eating meat; not eating sweets or dessert; giving up entertainment to spend time with the family; limiting food and drink so as to give to the poor of one’s own country (eg, Project Compassion).

c) Helping others — for example, special attention to someone who is poor, physically or mentally ill, elderly, lonely, bereaved, depressed, addicted or overburdened.

Again this year, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference calls on our clergy, religious and faithful to join us in observing the Fridays of Lent as special days of penance, particularly in the light of the child sexual abuse crisis. Appropriate penance would include setting aside regular time for the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture, spending an hour in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and the traditional acts such as fasting and abstaining from meat.

During Lent may we redouble our prayers and self-denial for the following intentions:

• The success of the Royal Commission
• Justice and healing of victims
• Wisdom and compassion for leaders and carers
• Repentance by perpetrators
• Consolation for all affected
• Respect for life and the human dignity of all from conception to natural death
• Safety for all young people
• Grace for those tempted to lose faith or hope

The current abuse crisis underlines our need for purification, as a Church made up of fragile and failing human beings. May we accept the challenge and respond with commitment.