

Dispensation from abstinence/ Feelings after miscarriage

Q. Please settle a dispute I am having with a colleague. Our society's annual St. Patrick's dinner is normally held on a Friday during Lent. We therefore request a dispensation in order to serve steak that evening.

I contend that all we must do is to request that dispensation from the pastor of the parish in which the restaurant is located; my colleague, though, says that we need to go to the bishop of our diocese and that only a bishop can grant it. Who is correct?

(I went to a Jesuit college, St. Peter's; he went to a non-Jesuit school, Seton Hall, and I would love to prove him wrong. Of course, if he is right, I probably won't tell him!)
(central New Jersey)

A. Your question is a bit more complicated than you may have thought. The answer is that it depends on the diocese in which you are located. The church's Code of Canon Law situates the authority with the bishop:

"A diocesan bishop, whenever he judges that it contributes to their spiritual good, is able to dispense the faithful from universal and particular disciplinary laws issued for his territory or his subjects by the supreme authority of the church" (No. 87).

A later canon clarifies that "a pastor and other presbyters or deacons are not able to dispense from universal and particular law unless this power has been expressly granted to them" (No. 89). That later canon does seem to suggest, though, that the power to dispense from abstinence may at times be extended by a bishop to his priests — and that is, in fact, both the law and the practice.

In 2017, when the feast of St. Patrick (March 17) occurred on a Friday, a statement from the Archdiocese of Detroit (to use just one example) said:

"All priests ministering in the archdiocese possess the faculty to dispense (remove)

or commute (replace with something else) the obligation for an individual or family to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent. Therefore, those wanting to partake in a celebratory meal on St. Patrick's Day that includes meat simply need to talk to a priest, who may grant this 'for a just reason.'"

Generally, when a diocese on such an occasion lifts the obligation of abstinence, it stipulates that the person should choose some other penitential practice instead.

The Diocese of Dallas, for example, provided in 2017 that Catholics who chose to eat meat on March 17 should abstain either on March 16 or March 18. Creatively, the Dallas diocese offered still another option, viz., "for a person to offer a decade of the rosary for the plight of immigrants/refugees or for the intention of an increase in vocations to the priesthood."

So the answer to your question depends on what your own diocese has provided for. (I recognize that my response does not resolve the Jesuit/non-Jesuit rivalry — because both of you could be right!)

Q. A few years ago, I had a miscarriage early in a pregnancy. While my husband and I were sad, we never really felt a substantial loss — perhaps because we quickly became pregnant again.

This is in stark contrast to the experiences of friends who suffered miscarriages later in pregnancy. They have been devastated and truly felt that they lost a person, not just a pregnancy. Are my feelings wrong — or worse, sinful? (Cincinnati)

A. Please don't punish yourself. First of all, feelings are outside of our control; morally, we are not responsible for our feelings — only for our words, actions or omissions. Yes, the church does teach that a child in the womb is a person from the moment of conception. (And science would seem to support this — heartbeat at 24 days, brain waves at 43, etc.)

But surely, a mother's emotional link to the child grows as the pregnancy advances — which makes it not surprising that a child lost later in pregnancy would prompt deeper pain. Thank God for the children who are with you now — and look forward,

one day, to meeting the one who went to heaven early.

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