

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 17, 2011 at 9:11am

English, Welsh bishops reintroduce meatless Fridays

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

LONDON -- Catholics in England and Wales will be obliged to abstain from meat every Friday under a new rule brought by the bishops.

The "act of common witness" will take effect Sept. 16, the first anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Britain.

The rule, announced at a news conference in London in mid-May, reverses a relaxation of the Friday penance regulations introduced in England and Wales in 1984. This allowed Catholics to choose their own form of Friday penance -- such as offering additional prayers, attending Mass or abstaining from alcohol.

But critics have said that the end of a tradition in which Catholics ate fish or eggs instead of meat on Fridays led to a loss of common identity, with many Catholics today abstaining from meat only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

The return to an obligation to abstain from meat was a key resolution of the bishops' May plenary meeting held in Leeds, England, May 9-16.

"Every Friday is set aside by the church as a special day of penance, for it is the day of the death of Our Lord," said the bishops' resolution.

"The law of the church requires Catholics to abstain from meat on Fridays, or some other form of food, or to observe some other form of penance laid down by the bishops' conference," the statement said.

"The bishops wish to re-establish the practice of Friday penance in the lives of the faithful as a clear and distinctive mark of their own Catholic identity," it said.

The resolution said those "who cannot or choose not to eat meat as part of their normal diet should abstain from some other food of which they regularly partake."

Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, said the bishops wanted "to establish a shared practice, a shared habit, because habits that are carried out together are better learned and are stronger -- we give each other mutual support."

"So that's why there's a simple, across-the-board expectation that this will be something that Catholics will do," he added.

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