

The Archbishop of Westminster told Catholics to try self-sacrifice and abstinence during Lent.



The Archbishop of Westminster told Catholics to try giving up their favourite food until Easter.

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales has called for a return to the tradition of self-sacrifice and abstinence during Lent.

Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols said Catholics should give up meat on Fridays and match self-denial with increased giving to the poor.

He argues that self-sacrifice during Lent, which begins on Wednesday, could help people cope with their busy lives.

A letter expressing his views has been read out at churches in his diocese.

Archbishop Nichols acknowledged that the increased pace of life has left less time for spiritual practices, but he insisted that self-denial and reflection could actually help people cope with stressful lives.

He called on people to give up meat on Fridays until Easter, or some other favourite food.

He told BBC Radio 5 live he always gave up alcohol during Lent and while such abstinence was "essentially a spiritual exercise" there could be "a lot of other benefits to it", such as losing weight.

"And I think you will find you get a better balance," he said.

"When we make space for God, we get a bit more peace ourselves and there's more space for others as well."

'Exploring spirituality'

The BBC's religious affairs correspondent Robert Pigott says it is a sign of the Church's belief that even as secularisation takes its toll on church attendance, its own ancient rituals and traditions can meet the continuing need of people to explore their spirituality.

Lent - derived from an Old English word reflecting the lengthening of Spring days - is based on the 40 days Jesus is said to have spent fasting in the wilderness preparing for his ministry.

It starts on Ash Wednesday next week and is traditionally a time of penitence for Christians in preparation for Easter.

Cafod, the official Catholic aid agency for churches in England and Wales, regularly organises fast days on which parishioners are encouraged to fast and donate what they would have spent on food to the agency's work in 40 countries around the world. It has announced a Lent Fast Day on Friday 18 March.

There are an estimated 5.2 million Roman Catholics in England and Wales.

BBC