

Meatless Fridays

It's a bit sad, really, when traditions vanish without a trace. Once upon a time a Catholic would never pass a Catholic church without calling in to spend a few minutes in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament - "paying a visit" as we used to say. Nowadays you'd be lucky to find a church open in the first place – another sign of the times – and because that's been the situation for some years now, younger generations of Catholics have never developed the practice. As a result the Blessed Sacrament goes largely unvisited; even if a church is locked, you can still pause and pray as you pass.

Another traditional practice that has gone by the board is that of abstaining from meat on Fridays. If there was one thing that everyone knew about Catholics, it was that they didn't eat meat on Fridays. Sadly younger generations of Catholics these days wouldn't even know that about themselves anymore much less do they do it. I say "sadly" not because I'm saddened by the loss of this particular practice, but that we have gradually lost a number of traditions that used to be important to us even if we didn't always fully understand why we did them. If we had understood, perhaps we wouldn't have let them fall by the wayside quite so readily, and not eating meat on Fridays is a case in point.

Why meat and why Fridays? Well, Friday because that was the day on which Our Lord was crucified. By tradition it became associated with acts of penance and spiritual devotions (First Fridays, novenas, devotion to the Sacred Heart, etc) associated with making reparation for the sins that caused Our Lord to die on the cross for us. And meat because at one time it probably constituted an important part of people's diet and to go without it for an entire day involved a degree of sacrifice and would have left them without a source of nourishment and energy at a time when there was little else available. These days it is no hardship at all to go without meat - not only because there are so many other alternatives, but also because we are so well fed that we are unlikely to miss one item from our diet for a day.

And this is the point really. If not eating meat for one day is no real hardship anymore, then ought we to have found something else to do to mark what should still be a significant day (Friday) for us? Well yes, because, as it turns out, no one actually changed Church teaching on the subject – not even Vatican II as many think. We are still meant to be marking Fridays, but we seem to have conveniently forgotten - a situation that it's difficult to understand given that it was a sin, and confessional matter, to deliberately eat meat on Fridays. If it isn't anymore, who said so?

Canon 1251 of the *Code of Canon Law* states:

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 Friday¹

and that's probably exactly what it has always said. What the Code now goes on to say is that:

The Episcopal Conference can determine more particular ways in which fasting and abstinence are to be observed. In place of abstinence or fasting it can substitute, in whole or in part, other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety (CC. 1253)

and that's the bit we seem to have missed post-Vatican II.

It wasn't actually Vatican II that changed things, but an Apostolic Constitution on Penance, *Paenitemini*, issued by Pope Paul VI in 1966 – the year after the Council ended. In it he announced that new penitential practices (“more suited to our times”) would be introduced, but that it would be up to individual bishops' conferences to determine exactly what local practice would be. While, he said, the Church would in general continue to observe the penitential practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays, that could be replaced “with exercises of prayer and works of charity” if that's what the local bishops' conference decided. As a result, the traditional practice in this country of not eating meat on Fridays became a matter of personal choice and it was no longer, therefore, a sin to eat meat.

The one area in which there was to be no choice was with regard to Lent when, the Pope said, the obligation to abstain from meat would apply not only to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but to all the Fridays of Lent. However, by the time the document was published, there had been a change of heart and the decision with regard to abstinence was again left to local bishops' conferences which were permitted to substitute abstinence (on days other than Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) “with other forms of penance and especially works of charity and the exercises of piety” – as our bishops did.

To be honest, while I can definitely remember the general requirement of Friday abstinence being dropped, I can only vaguely remember the rest of the teaching that if we chose not to eat meat Fridays were still to be days of penance observed by practising works of charity or by doing something spiritual, something extra, and that there was no longer any consequence in terms of sin for not doing so (at least that was my impression at the time).

¹ The law of abstinence applies to all those of fourteen years of age and older (strictly speaking from the day after they are fourteen) The obligation to fast applies to those aged eighteen to fifty-eight inclusive (again strictly speaking from the day after they are eighteen until the day after they are fifty-nine).

Because we no longer have to think about abstinence (and fasting) other than on just two days of the year (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) when it is still compulsory, it can be very easy to forget that we are meant to be doing something on Fridays instead. Many people chose to continue abstaining from meat (and it would be a particularly appropriate thing to do during Lent whether officially required or not) because it was easier to remember to do something they had been doing out of habit for years than to have to remember to do something else instead, something that wasn't habitual, something that they would have to think about doing. Those who stopped not eating meat joined the up-and-coming generation who had never not eaten meat in the first place and, forgetting (or never having known) the primary purpose of commemorating Friday as a special day, that association was soon lost as well.

An American commentary² on Canon Law that was recommended to us in the seminary, offers some interesting reflections drawn from two (U.S.) National Conference of Catholic Bishops sources.³

Abstinence from meat on all Fridays of the year [while not compulsory] is especially recommended. Also recommended is prayer, penance (especially by eating less food) and almsgiving... for the sake of world peace (and) the reason of self-denial in remembrance of the passion of the Lord as well as “freely and out of love for Christ crucified show(ing) our solidarity with generations of believers to whom this practice frequently became, especially in times of persecution and of great poverty, no mean evidence of fidelity to Christ and His Church.”

It is also a continuous reminder of our need of repentance and conversion: “we shall thus also remind ourselves that as Christians, although immersed in the world and sharing its life, we must preserve a saving and necessary difference from the spirit of the world. Our deliberate abstinence from meat, more especially because no longer required by law, will be an outward sign of the spiritual values that we cherish.”

And so, how can parents and teachers instil in Catholic youngsters (and priests in Catholic adults) once again the practice *still required by the Church* of making Fridays special because of their association with Our Lord's crucifixion - either by voluntarily abstaining from meat, or by some other act of penance or self-denial, or by some specific spiritual exercise? The fact that, for the last forty-five years, we should never have not been doing something has been a particularly well-kept secret. As soon as the aspect of obligation and sin was removed from the picture, we all-too-easily opted for the easy option of doing

² *The Pastoral Companion* by John M Huels.

³ One source I was reading said that the NCCB might even be considering rescinding its earlier decision and require American Catholics to abstain from meat on Fridays once again as an expression of their Catholicity and in reparation for the grave sin of abortion.

nothing (and North Sea cod stocks plummeted anyway!). Meatless Fridays don't have to be a thing of the past, but it seems so much better not only to know what the significance of the practice is, but that we are doing whatever we do by choice and not out of obligation.

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