

Fridays

Back in the sixties, when the U. S. Bishops relaxed the age-old law of mandatory abstinence from meat on Friday, I was in a small grocery store, owned by a Catholic family, when our parish priest entered and in a loud voice yelled out, “**We can eat meat on Friday now.**”

This rude introduction to the abolition of the mandatory Friday abstaining from meat was a disheartening revelation to me. The question that came to my mind was: What in the world is happening to my Church?

Now the reader might say, and rightly so, that the Church has the authority to make such a change. However, the little known fact is that the Church’s intention was not to do away with the abstaining from meat on Fridays, but rather to make Friday more meaningful and spiritually fruitful. The result however, was the exact opposite. We ended up with a church void of any semblance of what Friday penance was meant to be.

The Catholic Catechism states: *The essence of true penance is interior change of heart, from unruly attachment to creatures to a love of the Creator. Whatever helps in this conversion is penitential and truly pleasing to God.* As one can readily see, the interior change never took place, or if it did, it stayed interior and eventually dried up, and was quickly blown away by the winds of modernism.

To put this in proper perspective, it would be similar to telling your young boy that he should clean his room and keep it clean and neat, then sit back and expect him to do it. Now could it actually work? Possibly, after all anything is possible, but it is extremely unlikely that it will. Human beings are creatures that have to be told what to do and how to do it. Not just once, but over and over again. That is why businesses have supervisors on the job sites: to see to it that the employees are doing what they are supposed to do and doing it correctly. Have you ever seen a commercial aired only once? If you did, the company probably went out of business. Knowledgeable sales people know that you have to keep your product constantly before the public eye. Not only do they have to keep it before the public eye, they have to constantly remind us of the value of their product. Now do you get the picture? The changes failed, in large part, because they were not explained properly and they certainly were not kept before the eyes of the people as a constant reminder of the value of the changes. The majority of the faithful were unaware that the Church was actually asking them to be more heroic, to do more penance; not to just abstain from meat and then go out and eat a seafood platter. The Church was asking us to truly deny ourselves. We were being encouraged to give up something that we enjoyed and had a legitimate right to. We were to do this, not out of blind obedience, but out of love and imitation of Christ.

The Church in her wisdom knows that when we can control our carnal appetites to things which we have a legitimate right, (and control is the key word), we will more easily be able to control these appetites when it comes to sin. If we do not keep our animalistic appetite under control, then they are out of control. When that happens, we are heading for both physical and moral disaster.

The sad fact is that we went from a Church that abstained from eating meat on Friday with little understanding of why, to a Church that abandoned the practice with even less understanding of why. Evil will always triumph when good people fail to act properly. There is a saying that might be good to remember. **“Penance Promotes purity.”**

Good People are the Problem

A good question to ask ourselves might be, where does most of the blame lie? Well, we certainly cannot put the blame on the bad people in the Church, for they did what bad people are supposed to do, and that is to be bad. In fact, one would have to say that they did an exceptionally good job of being bad by distorting the Church’s teachings and leading the sheep (faithful) down the road to heartache and misery. However, we all know that evil exists, and we all know that as long as man has been on this planet, he has had to fight evil. To deny this would be absurd. Evil is like weeds in the garden; they are always there, and if we do not get rid of the weeds, our garden will be severely damaged. If we look at the Church as God’s

garden, and the people as the individual plants with the weeds as the evil one, then it is easy to see where most of the problem lies—*with those who are supposed to weed the garden*. The big problem was that the garden was never weeded, and consequently, many little plants were destroyed. Yes, a garden needs to be taken care of. It needs to be given the right amount of water, food and sunlight. The ground needs to be cultivated. You cannot have a beautiful garden without lots of involvement and work. If the gardener is not interested in his plants or doesn't know how to take care of them, the little plants will not have much of a chance. The weeds will sap the very life out of them, and they will become extremely weak and may even die.

Christian strength

It must be understood that whether we are talking about people or plants, strength is required to survive. If Catholics are spiritually and physically weak, they will have great difficulty in living the Christian life. Both fasting and abstinence are great ways to build one's spiritual and physical stamina. Christ left His Church to teach and guide His people. For He being the God who created us, knew that if His people are left uneducated in their faith, they would not practice it. If Catholics see no value in being Catholic, why should they go through the trouble of following its rules and regulations? People need reasons to do what is good and holy. They need shepherds who will truly love them---shepherds who exhibit love by teaching, guiding and encouraging. Remember the saying, "Your actions speak so loudly I can't hear a word you are saying"? Catholics today treat Friday the same as they do the rest of the week. They party, eat, and now ***even marry***, which to my knowledge was never done in the past. They have little concern for this day that was set aside to do penance; something of a little Good Friday, a day to remember how Christ saved us from sin. Now, these things are not sinful, in and of themselves, but when good Catholic people begin to drop the things they were doing for God and replacing them with worldly activities, they cause their fellow Catholics to do likewise, often out of respect, in an effort not to offend. We need our shepherd to constantly remind us, to guide us, to correct us and not just to go along with us, just because it's not a mortal sin. The Friday penance could be described as a reminder; the little inconvenience it causes is a reminder, and though it might not be that much of a penance, it still pricks at us; it gets in the way of our worldly life, and that is exactly what it is all about. Penance, though it may not be that much that we do, gets in the way and causes us to remember what Christ did for us, and that is exactly why the enemies of Christ and His Church wanted it out. And the way they got it was by trivializing it out, making it seem insignificant. One young man made the statement: "If it is not a mortal sin, I am not going to worry about it." This young man is headed for a lot of trouble; he doesn't understand that a person can live his whole life without committing a single mortal sin, and yet destroy his whole family. He doesn't understand what Christianity is all about. He just wants to stay out of mortal sin; he is not interested in holiness and trying to serve his God. By the way, this is the problem with the majority of ***us*** good Catholics.

The Need to be Told and Retold

As mentioned before, we need to be told and retold all the things that are important to our Christian living. Any knowledgeable person, be they good or bad, knows that if you don't want to talk about something, then you don't think it is important.

Friday has become just another day in the week, not because of any Church teaching, but because our Shepherds, for the most part, failed to see the importance of fasting and abstinence. Some would refer to it as negative penance. They came to prefer a more positive penance. I guess in a way they got their wish, because we ended up with positively no penance.

The fruits of all this were very bitter, a decline in practically every virtue of Christianity. We lost both the understanding, as well as the desire to do penance. This in turn caused a weakening of the will to do good, as well as the strength to resist evil. I would imagine Satan was extremely pleased to see all the souls that had been completely stripped of the ***spiritual armor*** needed to resist his temptations.

No Gimmicks

There are no shortcuts or gimmicks in the living out of our Christianity. There is no such thing as learning ways to circumvent basic Christian principles. Christianity in its very essence is sacrificial. Does this give you a clue as to why Fridays are so important to a Catholic? Fridays are the days when Catholics exercise and build their spiritual muscles. Christianity is part of a person's very being! Yes, it goes deep into his very being; it makes him what he is. He becomes, in an imperfect way, a *Christ follower*, a *Christian*.

I leave you with these questions: What are you doing to build up your spiritual muscles? What are you doing that the world is not doing? After all, if you look, talk, act, and walk like the world, can you not honestly say that you are worldly and in no way resemble our Lord? Have you possibly bought the fool's gold and are now trying to pass it off as the real thing?

No one is perfect, and as stated earlier, penance is not the whole of Christianity. But it is a necessary part that has been deliberately left out, leaving Christians weak and unstable in their faith. To fight the world and maintain a proper spirituality, we need to do penance and if the ones who are supposed to guide, encourage, and teach us in our pursuit of holiness, will not help, then we must do it ourselves. After all, there was never a time in history when *all* the spiritual leaders were faithful to their duties. Though our problems are many and grave, God wants us to stand up and do battle with the enemy. To do this, we must be both strong and wise. Sacrifice and penance will help prepare us for the battle.