

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Something Fishy

Eating healthy has never been easy for me. Oh, I try. Really, I do. I walk past Krispy Kreme doughnuts and avert my eyes. I cross the street to avoid Burger King. I see a Cinnabon shop at the mall and pray “Lead me not into temptation.”

In my universe, the two most dangerous people on the planet, the dietary axis of evil, are Ben and Jerry.

Sometimes, I give in to temptation—curse you, Johnny Rocket!—but generally, I’m getting better at avoiding junk. My wife has become adept at making even healthy food beguiling. Thanks to her, I actually look forward to fish.

Which, according to the rules of the church, is the way it is supposed to be.

**Giving up is really about giving;
it is denying something we love,
as an act of silent sacrifice.**

We Catholics are famous for our consumption of fish—and believe it or not, Friday is *still* supposed to be fish day for the faithful.

Surprised? You better sit down for this.

In 1966, Pope Paul VI published *Panitemini*, the Apostolic Constitution on Penance. He wrote at length on the value of penance, abstinence and sacrifice, and said that many forms of sacrifice—economic and material, in particular—can serve as a form of penance.

But he also wrote: “By divine law, all the faithful are required to do penance ... abstinence is to be observed on every Friday which does not fall on a day of obligation ... the law of abstinence forbids the use of meat but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat.”

Later that same year, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States wrote that, because meat had become so commonplace a food, another means of abstinence might be more meaningful.

The NCCB decided to “terminate the traditional law of abstinence as binding under pain of sin.” Other means of abstinence are acceptable on Fridays, the bishops wrote. But they then added: “We give first place to abstinence from flesh meat.”

The NCCB suggested that every Friday should be like a “little Lent,” just as every Sunday is a “little Easter,” and therefore should be, in some way, a day of “self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ.”

The bottom line: Faithful Catholics are *still* asked to give up *something* on Friday. (Sorry: broccoli doesn’t count.) And going meatless is still, after all these centuries, a good idea.

The church teaches that any prayerful sacrifice will inevitably enrich the soul, and help redeem the world. (Some Catholics give up things on Friday for a specific intention: for an end to abortion, perhaps, or for peace.)

As we approach Advent—a season of preparation and penance—perhaps more of us should revisit the ancient idea of abstinence, and embrace it. The church admonishes us to do it every week. Do we?

Giving up is really about *giving*; it is denying something we love, as an act of silent sacrifice. A skipped lunch or a missed movie can be a kind of prayer—a canticle of contrition. Eating salmon could be considered a psalm.

So, this Friday, try a little fish.

Just for the halibut.

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