

Holy Year 1983-84

The Fish on the Calendar

By Father Robert F. McNamara

Remember how on Catholic calendars before 1966, several dates in every month were stamped with a fish? That meant, of course, that they were Fridays or other days on which Catholic Church law required us to abstain (no flesh meat) or to fast (one full meal per day, and no snacks).

The fish was used as the symbol of abstinence because it said "no meat." Of course, the rule never said we must eat fish those days. We could eat anything else — eggs, cheese, etc. — so long as it was not the flesh of animals. But the expression "Fish on Friday" became so familiar a summary of Catholic penitential practice that even some Catholics, I imagine, thought it meant they had to eat seafood.

Catholics in this century have had an increasing difficulty in keeping the rules of fasting. We have become a tense and ulcer-prone society and our irregular eating habits have often made fasting problematic (although, in practice, most of us really eat only one full meal a day). On the other hand, abstinence imposed some economic and social inconveniences but was, in general, better kept. Thus "Fish on Friday" was so characteristic of average Catholics, that to break the Church law on Friday was considered a sort of denial of faith, or at least a scandal.

The Second Vatican Council authorized the adaptation of Church rules and regulations to the changed conditions of contemporary life. In keeping with this authorization, Pope Paul VI told the bishops of each nation that they might alter Church norms on fasting and abstinence. So, on Nov. 18, 1966, the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral statement that henceforth the law of abstinence from meat on Friday would be retained only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and on the other Fridays in Lent. The law of fasting was henceforth to bind solely on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Of course, Catholics all felt liberated to some degree by the lifting of rules that had occasionally caused everybody some bother. Not all Catholics were entirely happy about it, however. Some continued, to the best of their ability, to eat no meat on Fridays. They felt a little lonesome about foregoing a practice that had so long marked Catholics off from the rest of mankind.

Only in the past few years have commentators begun to evaluate the way in which the many changes were introduced as a result of Vatican II. Just a few months ago, the late Father John Reedy wrote: "Looking back to the time of Vatican II, I am convinced that many good things were done very badly, that many of us were terribly insensitive to the psychological impact of changes which had a liturgical, theological or ecclesiological validity. For

example, very few Church leaders appreciated the symbolic importance of the eliminating Friday abstinence. The sudden abandoning of traditions such as benediction, the way of the cross, Gregorian chant, many of the familiar hymns." He had a point. The abolition of these practices deprived Catholics of things that helped confirm their identity as Catholics.

But in the matter of their statement of penitential practices, the U.S. bishops cannot really be faulted. Catholics who welcomed the reduction of the laws of fasting and abstinence failed to read the fine print. In the fine print, the bishops said we are cancelling the law, so that you can do the same penances voluntarily. "Our deliberate personal abstinence from meat, more especially because no longer required by law, will be an outward sign of inward spiritual values that we cherish."

Some Catholics will boggle at the idea of denying themselves even for spiritual causes any type of amount of food. Yet don't we all practice self-denial for non-spiritual reasons? As religious historian Lawrence S. Cunningham has recently observed, "One of the great ironies of our time is that people will fast for their waistlines and deny themselves for cardiovascular fitness (think of the asceticism of the runner), but regard ascetic practices in the search for God suspiciously." (The Catholic Heritage, Crossroad, 1983.)

Fortunately, we are beginning to see that we cannot be true to the Cross of our Redeemer unless we take up our own crosses of self-denial — whether those crosses are imposed by the Church or by ourselves. In connection with their striking pastoral letter of 1983 on world peace, the American bishops advocated a voluntary return to fasting and abstinence as an offering for peace. "As a tangible sign of our need and desire to do penance, we commit ourselves as bishops and call the community of the Church to fast and abstinence every Friday in the name of peace. Such fast and abstinence should be accompanied by works of charity and service towards our neighbors."

On the basis of this resolution, our own Bishop Matthew H. Clark pledged himself at the beginning of this Holy Year 1983-84 to 1) eat neither meat, nor (because he prefers it to meat) fish on Fridays; 2) to fast by not eating between meals or at bedtime; 3) to dine always with the recollection that many in the world hunger for bread and peace.

Bishop Francis Stafford of Memphis has also summoned his people to voluntary self-denial. He was very happy last Christmas to receive a letter from one of his parishes signed by 100 parishioners who promised to fast and abstain on Fridays for world peace.

If we should all take the cue from our bishops, this Holy Year of Redemption might come to be remembered as the



year when all the fish returned to Catholic calendars. Only now, they would be less a reminder of Church law than of real self-discipline and self-giving.

Haitians

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considering Cubans and Haitians as a group. There are more similarities than differences between them.

Both groups came to the United States at a time when serious doubts had been raised about U.S. immigration policy and resistance to making room for more refugees was growing, he said. "Both groups have been riding out difficult times for refugees."

Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, Miami archdiocesan director of social ministry and an expert in the area of immigration and refugees, said he didn't want to see the Cubans deprived of what is theirs under the law, "but I want to see the Haitians treated equally well."

University of Miami law professor Bruce Winick, who two years ago assisted Haitians in winning a lawsuit against the INS, termed the tentative proposal "outrageous. It's a continuation of

the existing pattern of discrimination against Haitians which has been followed for many years by our government," he said.

Winick said he thinks granting legal status to Cubans is appropriate but there is no reason not to grant it to the Haitians also. "Both groups fled political oppression, both came here seeking asylum and they should be treated similarly."

The U.S. government has said the Haitians are economic, not political refugees, and therefore not automatically eligible for amnesty.

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Cardinal Bernardin Responds on Life Issues

Chicago (NC) — Following is the text of a column written by Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago explaining his speech last December at Fordham University.

Back in December I gave an address at Fordham University which received a great deal of attention here and nationally. Among other things, I spoke of the need to articulate and defend a "consistent ethic of life" on issues ranging from abortion to nuclear war.

I am glad my remarks have evoked so much comment. I am glad, too, that much of the comment has been favorable and supportive — not to me personally, but to the views I tried to express. For I was seeking to apply the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life to a number of pressing contemporary concerns.

Candidly, though, some of the comments I have received reflect a certain confusion about what I was trying to say. To some extent that may be my fault — perhaps I was not as clear and precise on all points as I should have been. But to some extent, too, the root of the confusion may lie elsewhere.

Here I want to deal with some of the points which have cropped up in the discussion of my remarks. My purpose is not to rebut critics but to contribute to the dialogue on some very important matters.

To begin with, at Fordham I was not making a policy statement for the Catholic bishops. I was speaking for myself. At the same time, what I said was consistent with much that the bishops have said and done, individually and collectively, as well as with the teaching of the Holy Father. In that sense I was not laying out a new position but calling attention to widely held convictions.

At least since 1972, for example, when the National Conference of Catholic Bishops initiated its Respect Life program, the conference has regularly addressed a broad range of "life" issues, precisely because there is linkage among them. That linkage arises from the sacredness of human life and our responsibility to protect and preserve life.

To say issues are linked, of course, is not the same as saying they are identical. I agree that the issues I treated at Fordham are different — both in terms of the moral analysis one might make of them and the strategies one might use in addressing them. I stated this clearly in the talk itself.

Still, I am convinced that it is right and necessary for bishops, as moral and religious teachers, to present a moral vision embracing these issues. I am further convinced that more must be done to develop and present such a vision than has been done up to now. Logically, it seems to me,

the likenesses among related issues must be made clear before the distinctions are spelled out.

Two obvious examples are abortion and nuclear warfare. Abortion, the direct taking of innocent life, is intrinsically evil and must be categorically condemned. Furthermore, the state should protect unborn human life through its laws and policy.

On the other hand, the various questions pertaining to nuclear warfare are often complex. The teaching of the Church, including the teaching set forth in the U.S. bishops' nuclear pastoral, makes it clear that we must condemn the use of nuclear or other weapons of mass slaughter for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly noncombatant targets.

But when it comes to such matters as the initiation of nuclear war and the merits of a "no-first-use" pledge, whether it is possible to confine the use of nuclear weapons within morally acceptable limits, whether and how deterrence can be morally justified, then reasonable people, working within the framework of Catholic teaching, can and do differ in their conclusions because of differences concerning facts and their evaluation of the facts.

Possibly the most unfortunate misinterpretation of my remarks is the suggestion that they reflect a failure to appreciate the significance of abortion and closely related issues like infanticide and euthanasia. That is not the case. I agree with one correspondent, who pointed out in a recent letter that abortion is "not a potential threat, as is nuclear warfare, but a holocaust now realized and probably underestimated."

For that reason I further agree that abortion demands priority attention.

Finally, I feel a need to clarify one statement in particular which I made in my address: "Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us."

Some seem to have interpreted this as a criticism of their own more or less exclusive emphasis on "pro-life" concerns. That was not my meaning. As a Churchman speaking to a Catholic university audience, I was trying primarily to describe a task of the Church itself.

The Church is often under pressure — from both ends of the secular political spectrum — to restrict its focus to one cluster of political issues or another. But the Church cannot conscientiously do that. Possessing a comprehensive vision of human life and destiny, it must address the spectrum of human concerns and show how they fit into that vision.

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