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Ember Days in the 21st century

Charles Morris | Sep. 20, 2011 Eco Catholic

Once not so long ago, this coming Wednesday (Sept. 21) would be marked as a day of fasting and abstinence. So would Friday, Sept. 23, and Saturday, Sept. 24. The church marks these three days as the fall Ember Days.

Although the fall Ember Days are marked as the first Wednesday following the Exaltation of the Cross (Sept. 14), they are inextricably tied to the fall equinox.

The winter, spring and summer Ember Days also occur at or around the seasonal equinoxes.

The winter Ember Days begin the first Wednesday following the Feast of St. Lucy (Dec. 13). The spring Ember Days begin on the Wednesday following Ash Wednesday. And the summer Ember Days begin the Wednesday after Pentecost.

Although they were fixed by Pope Gregory VII, their origins predate Christianity as a sacred time for marking the seasons.

I have felt for some time that we as a church, by our recent neglect of Ember Days, have lost an opportunity to connect ritually with those sacred rhythms of creation.

Given the psychic/spiritual cost of our contemporary era's alienation from those rhythms, I believe we need a revival of the potential power of Ember Days for the 21st century. Unlike our ancestors, we really don't ritualize the mysterious changing of the seasons and their relationship to the cycle of life.

About four years ago I gathered some of the folk from the Worship Commission and artists of our parish of St. Elizabeth to brainstorm some practices that we as a parish community could observe to rekindle a sense of the Sacred in terms of the great annual movement of the cosmos.

In addition to the traditional forms of fasting and abstinence, we challenged our community to some of the following methods of reconnection as part of the Ember Day observance. Following are some suggested practices we put out to our parishioners.

Fall

Tithe your grocery shopping during that period to a local food depot. Or volunteer for a soup kitchen.

Winter

Fast from electricity for one day. Limit yourself to only necessary cooking and driving. Take the phone off the hook. Have dinner by candlelight (with everyone present since no one drives that night). Go for a walk (weather permitting). Turn off the computer, television, cell phone and all electronic devices. Read a good book or have a good conversation. Go to bed at an early hour -- easy to do when the only source of lighting is by candle or fire in the fireplace.

Spring

Plant a seed (flower or vegetable) in a cup. Nurture that seed and transfer that seed out of doors when the weather permits.

Go for walk at night and try to do some stargazing.

Summer

Spend at least a few hours sometime during the three Ember Days at a park, hiking or some other quiet place of solitude.

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These are just a few of the ideas with which we came up. And any of these practices can be celebrated at any of the solstices (i.e. electricity fast).

What are some creative rituals you may suggest to re-engage our connection with the sacred rhythm of the Mystery of the changing season? How might you suggest your revival of Ember Days?

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