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## Catholics are once again embracing meatless Fridays

FATHER RAYMOND J. DE SOUZA

*Fishnchips, anyone?*



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It's either that or, given the preponderance of Indian  
takeout in England today, vegetable samosas and prawn

curry for Catholics on Friday come this fall.

Near the beginning of May this year the Catholic bishops of England and Wales decided to bring back Friday abstinence from meat, an initiative of potentially enormous significance. The abandonment of Friday abstinence was one of the great pastoral blunders in history, a self-inflicted neutering of Catholic identity and an assault on our own tradition. Its restoration marks a sign of increasing Catholic confidence and common sense.



According to the universal law of the Church, all Fridays, save for those which coincide with solemn feasts (e.g. St. John the Baptist this year), are days of abstinence: no eating meat. But the code of canon law permits the bishops of various countries to modify the rule. Most countries did just that some 40 years ago, saying that while the obligation to do penance held, each Catholic could choose for himself what that penance might be.

The upshot was that Friday communal penance disappeared almost entirely. Not completely: I often eat at the cathedral in Kingston where, like many religious houses, there is no meat on Fridays, and at our chaplaincy activities at Newman House the students themselves are attentive to Friday abstinence. Yet most Catholics don't observe it, and several generations may not have even heard about it.

In England, the noted historian Eamon Duffy, a self-styled Catholic liberal, called for the return of Friday abstinence in 2004, writing in the flagship journal of all things Catholic and trendy, *The Tablet*:

"Friday abstinence in particular was a focus of Catholic identity which transcended class and educational barriers, uniting 'good' and 'bad' Catholics in a single eloquent

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observance. Here was a universally recognized expression of Catholicism which was nothing to do with priests or authority."

The trend of abolishing distinctive marks of Catholic identity now seems dated. In 1967, when getting rid of compulsory Friday abstinence, the English bishops wrote: "While an alternative dish is often available, it is questioned whether it is advisable in our mixed society for a Catholic to appear singular in this matter. Non-Catholics know and accept that we do not eat meat on Fridays, but often they do not understand why we do not, and in consequence regard us as odd."

By "odd" the bishops of the day meant "different," and by different, they meant not Protestant. In a desire to fit in, to seem less, well, Catholic, the English bishops made themselves, in fact, less Catholic.

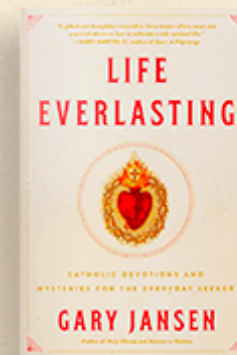
Today though, any Catholic serious about his faith wants to be different from the toxic culture in which he lives. Being different is helped by doing things differently. The spiritual purpose of Friday abstinence is a communal penance to recall the Lord's passion, but as a marker of Catholic identity it is far more needed now than 50 years ago when it was universally observed.

Friday abstinence gives us a chance for mutual encouragement and public witness. Invited for dinner on Friday? It permits us to mention ahead of time that we don't eat meat, an indirect way of saying that my Catholic faith is important and that I am not ashamed of it.

After all, if one can proudly announce that one doesn't eat beef because bovine flatulence is causing climate change, then abstaining from meat in recollection of the redemption of the whole world seems reasonable enough.

And if the world should think us odd? We then find ourselves in the tradition of St. Paul, who was willing to be thought a fool for Christ. Moreover, the far greater danger is that

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the world does not think us odd for being Catholic, given what the world considers normal.

In recent years, the practice of voluntary Friday abstinence has become more prevalent, especially among younger Catholics, who are precisely seeking for a greater sense of Catholic identity and for ways of bringing their faith into their daily lives. Friday abstinence is a relatively easy way to give witness at work, at school, and even in the family.

It's not a terribly great sacrifice, if at all. As a boy I looked forward to Friday dinners, as the aforementioned prawn curry and other fish and seafood dishes were my favourites. It can pinch at times, but at least a pinch of penance needs to be part of every Christian life, especially on Fridays.

Archbishop Gérald Lacroix of Quebec City wears a small fishhook pin on his lapel. It's a symbol of the new evangelization: he's a fisher of men. Fish on Friday can be a wider reminder too of who we are, and our evangelical mission.



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## Acknowledgement

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