

Ember Days are not something that most Catholics are aware of, though in fact they are a very ancient feature of the liturgy, going back at least to Pope Callistus in the third century – and probably before.

They were called the *quattuor tempora* in Latin – the “Four times” – marking in fact the beginning of each of the four seasons. (The name “ember” probably comes from a shortening of *quattuor tempora* in Latin to *Quatember* in German and thence “Ember” in English.) Being connected with the seasons, they were of course connected with agriculture, too, begging God for a successful sowing of seed, for adequate rain, for protection from tempests and in thanksgiving for harvests.

When the calendar was reformed in 1969, it was left to the bishops of each country to modify ember days and adjust them to the needs of each region. It took the Australian bishops about forty years, but in 2008 they decided that we would have just two ember days: the first Fridays in Autumn and in Spring. And they are to be “special days of prayer and penance”, according to the bishops, leaving to the priest the choice of a Mass text from the Masses for Special Needs and Occasions.

So today’s Ember Day reminds us that Spring is here. And this Spring is like no other. It seems that we are about to emerge from our “hibernation”, our confinement due to the epidemic, back to something approaching normal. It seemed appropriate then to choose the Mass “in time of pandemic”.

We can give thanks that, so far at least, we have been spared the worst of this disease, and pray that we may soon be able to resume a more normal life: especially that our people may be able to receive the sacraments, to attend Mass, to have the clergy and other parishioners visit them when they are ill and so on.

Every Friday is a day of penance, but the bishops asked that emphasis be placed on doing penance, on fasting and abstaining in connection with these Ember Days. Fasting is a kind of training, like training for a sport. It can be hard work to get fit: physically fit, or spiritually fit. Fasting is an exercise of the will: denying ourselves something good, like food, for a while, so that we can learn to say “No” to what is evil.

“The time will come, the time for the bridegroom to be taken away from them;” says Jesus in today’s Gospel, “that will be the time when they will fast.” As our people feel that Jesus, in his sacramental presence, has been taken away from them, fasting is a very appropriate response for all of us.

Martin Wallace OP
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