

Food for Thought: Is Fasting out of Fashion?

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Lent in my mother's youth seems a whole continent and time-warp away. She was born into a rural farming household in Limerick, in Easter 1916. Listening to her recall her childhood Lent, with its associated customs and fasting rituals, is like journeying through an unfamiliar landscape. It bears little resemblance to my own experience of Lent. As she describes her Lenten observances from the 1920s onwards I'm reminded of the religious practices carried out by Muslims during the sacred month of Ramadan.

She tells me that in her childhood everyone knew when Lent was and what Lent meant. It consisted of a communally observed period of forty days of fasting, excluding Sundays and St. Patrick's Day, when Catholics were absolved from the fast. There was a three-fold emphasis on Lent as a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. My mother recollects that during Lent the prayer life of the family continued much as usual. While it seems unimaginable today, morning prayers and communal nightly rosary were routinely said in most Catholic houses at all times of the year. Almsgiving manifested itself in Lent in the form of the payment of the Easter Dues, a stipend given to the local Parish where the donor and the amount donated were sometimes read aloud at Mass much to the shame of those who were economically disadvantaged. My mother noted that a generous donation from a 'strong' farmer consisted of £1 in the 1930s. However practices surrounding Lent in the decades before Vatican 11 (1962-5) placed overwhelming emphasis on fasting. This contrasts somewhat with contemporary observations of Lent, which situate Lent as a time for reflection, repentance and renewal. Almsgiving, in the form of donations to Trocaire, still form a key aspect of Lent. However while fasting and abstinence (Ash Wednesday & Good Friday) are still key ingredients of Lent they are less widely observed and emphasised.

In the 1920s the staple diet of my mother's religious instruction at national school, was a big fat catechism with a red cover. It contained information about the liturgical rhythm of Catholic life. As a woman of ninety five, she can still list the content of that catechism with clarity, although much of it now seems anachronistic. It did enable Catholics to know exactly what they believed and was a useful compendium of reference when it came to the correct observation of times of fasting and abstinence. Fast days consisted of 'the forty days of Lent, eves of certain feasts, the Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays of the four Ember Weeks and the Wednesdays and Fridays of Advent.' Fasting meant reducing food intake to one full meal and two collations, or minor meals, a day. Abstinence meant eating no meat. Some days were fast days while others were days of fast and abstinence. Spy Wednesday and Good Friday were Black Fasts or particularly austere fasting days when fasting and abstinence were observed. Before the 14th century, Black Fast days involved severe fast and abstinence consisting of one meal, eaten after sunset, containing no meat, dairy, oil or alcohol produce. By my mother's time Black Fast days were more relaxed and the meal could be eaten in the middle of the day and could also be accompanied by two minor meals.

Fasting had a specific meaning and it referred to a daily intake of food, consisting of one main meal and two lesser meals composed of 4 oz of food (113g) and 2 oz of food (56g) respectively. Some people weighed the food. Others relied on a rough estimate of a 4 or 2 oz portion. There was room for interpretation as some suggested that the ounces referred to pre-cooked, dried food, such as porridge oats, while others suggested that it referred to the cooked food or the contents of the cooked bowl of porridge. Those opting for the pre-cooked 4 oz might benefit from a larger quantity of the finished product of grains and oats but not of meat or vegetables. The regulations were somewhat flexible as the catechism stated that 'the poor, whose meals were

scanty and uncertain' were excused from the fast. However there was no mention of pregnant and breastfeeding women, and to the best of my mother's recollection, the catechism was silent about them.

All meals during Lent excluded eggs. On Shrove Tuesday, in anticipation of the ban on eating eggs during Lent, householders consumed as many eggs as possible. Throughout Lent the hen's eggs were collected and stored. The baking pattern of the household changed during this time, to accommodate the prohibition on eggs. Cakes, buns and rich pastries were avoided. By Easter Sunday morning there was an arsenal of eggs waiting to be eaten. In the days after Easter Sunday, children would inquire 'how many boiled eggs did you eat?' as some boasted of the four, five or six eggs they'd consumed themselves. An old rhyme captured the event.

Ubh – fíordhuine uasal
Dhá ubh – duine uasal
Trí uibhe – bodach
Ceithre uibhe – féile bhodaigh.

One egg for a true gentleman
Two eggs for a gentleman
Three for a tramp
Four for a tramp's feast.

Of prior to Vatican 11 there was the perennial prohibition against Catholics eating meat on a Friday. Throughout the year Friday was a fish day. The fish is an ancient Christian symbol (Gk *Ichtyis* meaning Jesus, Christ, God's Son, Saviour) and fish are associated with the miracles and ministry of Jesus. In Ireland, the fish that many people ate during fast days, especially those living away from costal areas, was Ling, a large, salted, dried cheap and commonly available fish. It was usually hung up in the kitchen and

soaked overnight before consumption. The household cook might poach it in onions and milk to make a sauce to accompany it. It had the taste of a salty, smoked fish. Eating fish on Fridays was an essential ingredient of Catholic life. In the early decades of the twentieth century if someone visited a restaurant or a hotel in Ireland, on any Friday, the menu would generally consist of food that was appropriate for abstaining Catholics, with a proliferation of fish dishes. Of course hotels also catered for the diets of non-Catholic patrons as the requirement arose but the general diet reflected the faith tradition of the majority faith of the area.

Anyone receiving communion would fast from the previous midnight before receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist. This fast was taken very seriously indeed. My mother tells of her upset, in the mid nineteen-fifties, when she broke the fast before going to mass by dripping a drop of the milk from the baby's bottle on her hand, to test its temperature, and inadvertently tasting it. She went to confession before mass and asked the priest's advice. Could she receive communion at mass that morning? His advice was that she should not receive it during the mass but that he would give it to her in the sacristy after mass. Such scruples seem bizarre when viewed from the contemporary perspective but they were a significant part of Catholic faith life at the time.

In case Lent seems a dreadfully sinister and difficult time in early and mid twentieth century Ireland, it is important to state that it was not generally viewed as a sad time. In the 1920s and 30s people didn't usually give up many things for Lent. Their diet was generally quite simple. At most times of the year children rarely had access to sweets or confectionary and so giving them up at Lent required little or no change in lifestyle. Adults may have given up smoking, drinking alcohol or putting milk or sugar in their tea, but the main emphasis was not on giving up something, rather, it was on adhering to forty days of fast. There was a sense of solidarity in the collective fast. In my mother's eyes the

observation of strict fasting gave people backbone. Undoubtedly it was difficult for people engaging in manual work after eating a 2 or 4oz meal, but in general, people diligently adhered to the discipline.

The word Lent comes from the *Anglo-Saxon* word for spring and in rural communities there was a poignant sense of uplift during this season. Young life bursts forth everywhere in spring's shooting buds, in the farmyard poultry where geese produce goslings, sheep begin lambing and young chickens walked out with the hen. The fact that farmers and their families were fasting during Lenten time made them more conscious of the exuberance of new life all around them. The poignant contrast between people's diminishing food-intake and the abundance of vegetable and plant life was everywhere. The food pattern of the family rotated around periods of religious fast and feast. Chickens born during the spring were eaten from June to September. The goslings born in spring were fattened and eaten from September to Christmas and beyond. Lent with its restrictions on food intake and focus on the faith life of the community, had its own rhythm and sequence. Kavanagh's observation that 'Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder', is not only relevant for the Advent season for which he wrote this poem, but also for Lent. Whether fasting for Advent or Lent, in preparation for Christmas or Easter, the reduced food intake involved a reappraisal of things previously taken for granted and a heightened sense of sensory and spiritual awareness when the long-awaited festival arrived. In some sense those who combine fasting with prayer and repentance are strengthened in willpower, discipline and faith by doing so. Of course care must be taken not to indulge in excessive or unthinking fasting. However, as pilgrims to Lough Derg frequently testify, the act of fasting when accompanied by prayer and repentance can lead to a renewed faith and spiritual growth as well as empathy with those who hunger.

