

FROM FR. MARK

The Autumnal Equinox occurs this Thursday, September 22. The Church recognized the pattern of change of seasons and bringing in the harvest man needs to give thanks and renew our hearts. Originally these days were connected directly with Solemnity of the Exaltation of the cross, in 1960 under Pope St. John XXIII, the rules for establishing the dates for Ember Days changed, and connected the Ember Days to follow the Third Sunday of September, and celebrated on Wednesday (September 21) Friday (September 23) and Saturday (September 24).

What Are Ember Days? Even the Old Farmer's Almanac makes mention to Ember Days as it states: "Among many Christians, it is a custom to observe Ember Days, a cluster of four sets of three days in the calendar year, roughly around the start of the four seasons. They are set aside by the Church as a way to mark the passage of seasons through prayer and fasting."

On Ember Days the Church is accustomed to entreat the Lord for the various needs of humanity, especially for the fruits of the earth and for human labor, and to give thanks to him publicly. (Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, 45).

Four times a year, approximately three months apart, near the beginning of each season of the solar cycle (winter, spring, summer and autumn), the Church set aside three days (a total of twelve days in a year) to ask for blessings upon mankind, and to pray in gratitude for the blessings of nature, particularly those used by the Church in her Liturgy, such as olives, grapes, and wheat. This is also a time set apart to thank God for the sacraments and pray for priests, particularly those who were being ordained. These days are marked with prayer, fasting and abstinence and stress spiritual renewal; Ember Days could be regarded as quarterly spiritual check-ups.

The Code of Canon Law of 1983 no longer requires the observance of these fasting and abstinence rules for Ember Days. Ember Days also are no longer universally marked on the General Roman Calendar. In the 1969 Calendar reform the observance of Ember Days was left to the discretion of the conference of bishops, and can be adjusted and expanded. In the USA most bishops have chosen to not officially observe Ember Days, but in other countries they are observed. While Ember Days are not part of the whole community worship, personal observance at home or small communities is not discouraged.

With all the changes, it could be asked why bother with Ember Days? We can find several reasons why and how we can observe Ember Days:

1) In Thanksgiving for God's creation. First of all, the Ember Days can remind us that God speaks to us in His creation. In today's age of predominantly urban living with technology there can be a disconnect with God and creation.

"Contemporary man is often cut off from nature; he lives in a world that is reduced to a universe of tarmac, concrete, and all kinds of screens. He is the prisoner of a fabricated world, a virtual world, the projection of his own fantasies, instead of being in contact with creation. As a

result, he is sometimes cut off from God—and from himself” (Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, pp. 74-75).

Our food is shipped from all over the world, arriving in big box stores, wrapped in plastic and paper. We watch the weather forecast for our outdoor sports activities, not with an awareness of the nearby farmer’s need for his crops. By observing in small ways the quarterly Ember Days with a focus on the different harvest seasons, we can bring our thoughts back to God and His creation, and also unite with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

2) A Mini-Lent: Bringing Our Focus Back to God. Putting aside some time for God through prayer and penance each quarter of the year can help redirect our focus back to God. We are often pulled in all directions by worldly needs. The Ember Days could be considered a mini-Lent. A little fasting and self-denial can help jump-start our spiritual lives.

The idea remains that we must, of the abundance which is given us, offer the first fruits as a gift. No man can receive a gift worthily unless he makes himself like the one from whom he holds the gift. And how can we be like Him who gives us all? By giving, even as He gives.

3) A Family Program Brings Us Closer to God. We can look at Ember Days with a family focus. Formerly Ember Days were dreaded because of the penance involved. But four times a year, in a very special way holy Church runs to God, her helper and her strength and says her thanks.... Thankfulness is a happy expression of love and service and our ember days are days of thanksgiving for harvest and home.... At the same time she is doing penance because she will give up some of her blessings “to draw near to God” and acknowledge His bounty.

4) For Priests and Vocations. Our current vocation crisis cannot be denied. And those who are priests and religious need prayers to be strong and faithful in serving the Lord. We need to pray for our priests, pray for religious and pray for vocations.

Observing Ember Days is adding a few more feast days to our Liturgical celebrations, rounding out our prayers of petition, thanksgiving and penance. We do not have to make this complicated. The Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours is the focus of prayer in thanksgiving and petition. We don’t have to follow the traditional prescribed abstinence and fasting rules; days with added mortifications and perhaps abbreviated fasting or self-denial, but it’s keeping the spirit of the Ember Days.

While Ember Days are not the most complicated Catholic tradition, they can be confusing. Understanding some of the aspects of the origins and liturgy can shed some light on ways to personally observe this ancient treasure of the Church. In that way, with our hearts full of joy, we shall sing our praises of gratitude to God for His many blessings.