WHAT IS AN EMBER DAY?

Ember weeks have been part of the Church's calendar in Rome since about the fifth century. They were originally associated with the change of seasons and on these four weeks of the year the Wednesday, Friday and Saturday were all days of fasting. Dates varied until 1078 when a Synod in Rome determined they were to be held in the week after the First Sunday of Lent, after Pentecost Sunday, after the Exaltation of the Cross (14 Sept) and after the feast of St Lucy (13 Dec).

While they were a special time of fasting and almsgiving at the beginning of the seasons, they also became associated with various harvest festivals. The Sunday after the Ember days became a thanksgiving for the various annual harvests.

When the Church's calendar was revised in 1969, the Ember Days were retained in principle, but it was left to each Bishops' Conference to determine their date and form.

In the modern world the connection to the traditional harvest festivals has been lost. However, in a world where many people have taken the natural environment for granted, it is important to recall and give thanks for the productivity of the earth and for human labour.

In 2009 the Australian bishops determined that two Ember Days were to be celebrated in Australia: the first Friday of March (our Autumn) and the first Friday of September (our Spring).

On these days we are encouraged to observe some penitential practice such as prayer or self-denial. Our Autumn Ember Day in March always falls in Lent and so it is part of our Lenten observance of prayer and almsgiving. The Spring Ember Day is often overlooked but could serve as a day to focus on our care for the environment.

In recalling the link to the cosmic seasons we are reminded that we are part of the world of nature. Our Ember Day "fast" therefore can be linked to our need to care for the environment. An example could be a "fast" from using our cars by walking rather than driving on those days.

Paul Crowley
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