

FISH ON FRIDAY- GOOD FOR HEALTH?

BY ADRIAN TRELOAR

The reintroduction of Friday abstinence by the Bishops of England and Wales and Scotland this autumn provides a good opportunity for us to 'be Catholic' at work and also to influence those around us.



Careful observers of hospital food will find that almost all hospitals still serve fish on Friday each week. That's a relic from the days when all Catholics would fish each Friday. As a child I remember the protest that fish was no more a penance than meat and that if you wanted to do something for God, it ought to hurt more. But with the abandonment of Friday abstinence, the practice became forgotten by almost all Catholics. And yet we know that through denial and self control, we can gain in grace and virtue and come closer to Our Lord. While people can get the balance around penance wrong, and doctors at times pick up the pieces from that difficulty, we also know that throughout the whole of our lives, self control and denial form a part of the fabric through which we build virtues.

So what are the benefits of Friday abstinence? Some will rush to claim a small health benefit. But increasing the fish oils in one's diet is clearly a by product and was not the original purpose of this practice.

More importantly, for those who continued to abstain on Fridays, it turns out that abstaining is a weekly way in which we can do something for the love of God, and where in our daily lives (rather than at Church) we do something simply because we are Catholic. Setting out why we will not eat the meat in the sandwiches served at lunch can be a simple, non-confrontational way for us to let others know that our faith is important to us. That's a useful thing in a modern hospital. It is hard being Catholic and harder still if we are always having to think hard in the realms of medical ethics. It is much easier (and better) to show that our faith influences what we do in a much wider sense.



All caterers know they must cater for special diets and that is precisely what we have here. An interesting effect of this recently led to the refusal of a shopkeeper to sell a Catholic doctor chocolate! Having only been able to buy the fish or non meat sandwiches on Fridays, the WONDERFUL old ladies in the Friends shop have learnt to keep one such sandwich aside. In a difficult ward round, taking orders for others, a bar of chocolate was requested. "You can't have that, it is Lent!" came the reply. When we live our faith, others will support us in our faith.

Some will retort that abstinence should be a penance. But in fact, in a relationship of love, some of the things we do for love will be pleasurable. Going out for a meal with your spouse may mean forgoing a trip to the pub or a meeting but even though this act of abstaining is pleasurable, it is still a valid act of love, forming the will and leading to greater care of the other. So it is with abstinence on Friday; it may be pleasurable, but that does not invalidate its worth.

The reintroduction of Friday abstinence is just another way in which we can remind people around us that faith is important. So for those who like fish and chips, enjoying it on a Friday can be a real opportunity to bring Christ into our daily lives.