

Should Catholic schools observe Fish Fridays all year?

I report here a conversation a trustworthy friend recently related. He could not recall, precisely, where the conversation took place. But he promises that it did take place and assures me his memory is accurate. I, for one, was edified by his story; I relay it here, trusting it will edify others.

Characters: Bob Beefy and Solomon Salmon, two colleagues, one a Catholic teacher, the other a new principal.

Setting: Over lunch, three weeks before the end-of-year barbecue.

BB: Really, Solomon, you cannot be serious. Are you proposing that we cancel this year's barbecue? The staff members look forward to this all winter.

SS: *(Laughing)* Not at all, not at all...I love BBQs – the redder the beef the better...

BB: Then why, at least as I heard, are you trying to get rid of the party? I've taught here 20 years. We've always hosted a BBQ first week after exams.

SS: Listen, Bob, I don't know what you heard. But I tell you plainly, I'm not against the BBQ. It's the meat...

BB: Meat! Oh yes. I see. I did not peg you for one of those environmental types, Solomon. But I agree. I've thought of that too. his is one of Pope Francis's themes isn't it? All the extra water it takes to produce beef. I suppose a lot of younger teachers are pretty sensitive to the environment.

SS: The environment?

BB: Yes, last week, somebody was talking about how we should be bringing in some kind of imported tofu for our staff meals. Very authentic, as I understand. Comes straight from Singapore, or somewhere – marvelous stuff they said. And good for the environment too.

SS: Bob, trust me. I'm not against burgers. It's the day that I don't like.

BB: Oh, Friday is the problem!

SS: Yes, Friday.

BB: Ah, I understand. You young ones. Solomon, look here: what do you see? *(gestures toward the garden out the open window)*

SS: Lovely daisies, Bob.

BB: Daisies, that is right. Lent is over, my friend. The Easter bunny has come...

SS: Thank you for the reassurance. (*Turns aside, sneezes*)

BB: God bless you.

SS: Oh, thank you.

BB: Vatican II did happen, you know. This seems rather reactionary. Next thing we know, you'll propose we start inflicting Latin on the poor kids again...

SS: Pace, pace... one charge at a time my friend! I'm aware we don't have to abstain from meat, strictly speaking. I'm not saying it's a sin to eat meat, Bob. I just think observing the discipline together speaks well to our efforts to keep the school Catholic. You know we've set that as one of our institutional priorities.

BB: I'm all for being Catholic. But this seems oppressive. Why would you want us all to conform to a rule that is obsolete? You probably don't remember being threatened as a child. I do. When my friends ate hotdogs at birthday parties, I wasn't allowed. The reason the Church – thank God – got rid of the Friday Fast is because pastors saw that *rituals don't count for modern people*. We're supposed to find a fast that is *personally* meaningful, and besides, a lot of people like fish, so what would be the point of fasting for them.

SS: OK, Bob. I'm sorry you felt threatened... On meaningful disciplines: you have a point. I don't like meaningless ritual either. Jesus does say, it's not what goes inside the body that counts... (*sneezes again*).

BB: God bless you.

SS: Thank you, allergies.

BB: No problem. Anyway, let's not be Pharisees.

SS: Hang on. I agree that the "inside" is more important. That doesn't mean the "outside" doesn't count. In fact, for most of us, most of the time, it's only when we act *through* the body that we ever make progress *in* the soul.

BB: I don't follow.

SS: Bob, if we were angels, we could be "spiritual" with our heads only. But we're not angels. Man cannot live by thoughts alone – we need signs and symbols and gestures. And it's the symbolism of Fish Friday as much as anything else that I want to encourage in our staff. You have grandchildren, right?

BB: Sure do. They're 12, 8 and 2.

SS: Wonderful. Do you ever pray with them?

BB: Of course....

SS: Before meals?

BB: Always.

SS: And how do you do that?

BB: What do you mean?

SS: What do you do together when you are at the table? Do the kids pray silently to themselves, and then fork into the spaghetti and meatballs?

BB: Of course not. No one touches their plate till grandma sits down. Then we hold hands, bow our heads, and I say a grace.

SS: Precisely, you see?

BB: See what?

SS: You hold hands.

BB: Every time. Listen, Solomon, lunch is nearly over. Are we going to get the barbecue or not?

SS: OK, I'm almost through. You hold hands because you know that your posture, that is, your body, matters. You know this instinctively, Bob, and so you are teaching your grandchildren well. To feel prayerful, we have to act prayerfully. The inside matters, but the outside gets us there.

BB: Fair enough. We all need disciplines. I don't see what this has to do with meat.

SS: Well, what I'm trying to get at is this: For 2,000 years Catholics have kept up the custom of abstaining from meat on Fridays. It is one of the few unbroken customs in the Church which we retained from the Jews. To break the custom in the Church is a little like stopping holding hands in your family. Sure, you may be able to pray alone – but holding hands while praying is one of the marks that identifies membership in your family. Fasting from meat is a mark that helps Catholics know they belong to the Church's family. It's kind of like wearing our school's colours.

BB: OK, I can see that. What about Vatican II? You and I both know that the old fasting rules were trashed....

SS: Well, that's not quite true. After Vatican Two, you are correct, the custom was not made obligatory year-round. Here. Look at my phone (pulls up the *Code of Canon Law*):

Canon 1251 Abstinence from eating meat or another food according to the

prescriptions of the conference of bishops is to be observed on Fridays throughout the year unless they are solemnities....

And then (*scrolling down*), this one:

Can. 1253 It is for the conference of bishops to determine more precisely the observance of fast and abstinence and to substitute in whole or in part for fast and abstinence other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety.

That doesn't look to me like the custom was trashed. It's only that, outside of Lent, a substitution to meat on Fridays may be granted.

BB: You know, I've never read that before.

SS: Abstinence from meat is still the default discipline, unless a country's bishops allow for a substitute.

BB: Hmm...Ok. But why should our school observe the fast?

SS: Well, why should your grandkids hold hands around your table? It's one of those "signs."

BB: It's true, we've been holding hands for 40 years.

SS: Forty years is a long time. It makes good sense that you'd want to defend that tradition. Two thousand years is longer. I guess that's partially why this seems a custom worth renewing for us at the school.

BB: Alright. I'm not sure if I agree. But I see what you're getting at.

SS: Oh yes, did you realize that the Bishops of Britain have already reinstated the common discipline? I wouldn't be surprised if more dioceses started doing the same.

BB: Well, Solomon. You've given me something to chew on. If you bring it up at our next faculty meeting, I won't like it, but I promise not to growl....

The bell rings. All exit.

-Dr. Ryan Topping is vice-president and academic dean of Newman Theological College. This piece was originally posted on the Cardinal Newman Society website.