

A NOTE FROM FATHER PHIL



It is already the First Sunday of Lent. Thank God. Even if the temperatures hover around freezing and more snow is in the forecast, Lent is a hopeful sign that spring is on its way.

With Lent come questions. And not just those dealing with abstinence. Inquiring minds want to know things like “How is the date of Easter determined?” And “Do Sundays count when I give up something for Lent?” If these kinds of questions keep you up at night, may I suggest that during this holy season you resolve to get a life!

The general rule of thumb for most Christians is that Easter is always the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox, the first day of spring. For Church purposes, spring always begins on March 21st even when it doesn't, that is, even when scientists determine that the equinox actually occurs on March 19th, 20th (like this year) or the 22nd. What can I say? It's tradition. At least, it has been since the Council of Nicea in 325 when this formula was established.

Orthodox Christians calculate the celebration of Easter using the same formula, but a different calendar, an older one created by Julius Caesar, not the one promulgated by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, the one we use today. That is why the Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Easter long after the rest of us have run out of recipes to use up all the boiled Easter eggs.

Confused? I am. Personally, I like the idea of declaring the first Sunday in April as Easter Sunday. However, people have been excommunicated, tortured and killed over the date of our most important feast, so it must be a big deal. Therefore, I'll just do what I always do: let others do the calculating while I simply look at a calendar to see when Easter is.

Here is a question I sometimes have to field: “Do Sundays count when I decide to give up something for Lent?” Honey, that is completely up to you.

The Church asks that together we fast and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In addition, we are to abstain from meat on all the Fridays during Lent. Further, the Church encourages healthy people to adopt a fast of their own during this holy time. Since the fast is of one's own creation, one makes up one's own rules. For example, I may decide to give up corned beef and cabbage all during Lent, including Sundays, but not on St. Patrick's Day. Or I might choose to consume only bread and water on Mondays and give the money I save on these simple meals to the Rice Bowl Collection or to a favorite charity. Of course, too many exceptions to your practice would make your penance a sham. It would not help you meet the goal of Lent. Might even make your relationships with God and others worse.

In determining your own Lenten practice remember the goal: a deeper awareness of the presence of God and our oneness with one another. And remember the means to the goal: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These disciplines work best when all three are practiced regularly. Happy Lent.