

Mardi Gras and Lent

This is the fourth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on holidays. Previous installments have been Thanksgiving (*ET&N* 18), Christmas (21), Easter: Pascha or Eostre? (32), and All Hallow's Eve (87). The purpose of the series is to investigate these special days in light of Scripture and church history. Additional installments of this series will include Pentecost, Palm Sunday, and St. Patrick's Day.



Of the controversies that struck the early church, one of the most contentious involved the date on which Christians celebrated the Resurrection of Christ Jesus and, to a lesser degree, the observances of the season. [Note: for the sake of convenience, I will refer to this date as "Easter," even though that term actually came later.] The argument centered not on whether or not the Resurrection should be celebrated - that was almost universally assumed (rightfully so), but rather than specific date, since different traditions emerged in the east (Asia Minor) and west (Rome). Eventually, the argument became so rancorous that Victor, bishop of Rome from 189 to 199, threatened to ex-communicate churches that refused to bow to the Roman way.

The controversy was not about the day on which Jesus actually rose - here was broad agreement that the Resurrection occurred on a Sunday. Rather, the debate centered on when it was most appropriate to recognize the event. The eastern church opted for Nissan 14, the day of Passover (Pascha), focusing on the crucifixion. Historically, the position of the eastern church became known as Quartodeciman - the "14th" (day of the month). The Roman church, on the other hand, focused on the Resurrection itself, and held its observances on Sunday. The oldest account of this controversy is based on the writings of Irenaeus (195) as preserved by Eusebius in his *Church History*:

"And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus (bishop of Rome, 155-166), and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this (Quartodeciman) matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him."

Irenaeus went on to describe how Anicetus, despite their differences, honored Polycarp by allowing him to administer the Eucharist (Communion) in the Roman church. They parted, Irenaeus says, "in peace...maintaining the peace of the whole church" (Book V, Chapter 24). These early church leaders, one presiding

over the church in Smyrna, the other Rome, recognized that the unity of the church depended not on agreement in matters of conscience or tradition but on faith in Christ. Unfortunately, only four decades later, another bishop of Rome - Victor, who served from 189-199 - took a decidedly less accommodating approach, opting for authoritarianism over unity. Victor ordered the eastern churches to abandon their Quartodeciman practices in favor of the Roman Sunday and, when they refused to do so, effectively attempted to ex-communicate the entire eastern church! I'll have more on this incident in the next installment of *ET&N*.

What does all this have to do with Mardi Gras - a celebration that, at least as celebrated in New Orleans, seems to represent little more than hedonism? In fact, Mardi Gras (literally, "Fat Tuesday") has a Christian foundation, being the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent (middle English for "Spring"). Also known as Shrove (middle English for "to confess") Tuesday, Mardi Gras, originally known as "Carnival" from the Latin for "removal of meat or flesh," is the "last hurrah" before the presumed self-denial of Lent, leading to the observance of Easter. But if the actual celebration of the Lord's Resurrection found two expressions in the earliest churches, the fast leading up to it seems to have had dozens. Again, Eusebius is our source for a disparity of practices for what became known as Lent:

"For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith" (*ibid*).

Again, Irenaeus attests that the early church supported, or at least tolerated, a wide variety of practices the fast preceding Easter. Before Irenaeus (195), there is no indication whatsoever of an Easter fast, nor even of any Easter observance. The fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, an late fourth/early fifth century manual of clerical instructions (perhaps of Arian origin), claims that the Easter (Paschal) fast is of apostolic institutions, but even the online Catholic Encyclopedia denies this assertion, pointing out that "the Church in the Apostolic Age designed to commemorate the Resurrection of Christ, not by annual, but by a weekly celebration" (i.e., weekly communion). The article continues to state that "...the annual Easter festival was something superimposed by a process of natural development." Transition: lent is a tradition of Man without scriptural authority.

If the impressions of the modern Mardi Gras are valid, the holiday has come from circle from its earlier antecedents, because Carnival seems to have been another example of ecclesiastical imperialism as early church leaders attempted to stamp out pagan celebrations by absorbing them into the Christian calendar. Lupercalia was an early (pre-Roman) pagan pastoral festival intended to petition the gods for fruitful lands, fertile flocks, and general prosperity. As Rome grew and prospered in the republican and imperial eras, Lupercalia took on new meanings and practices. It became a celebration of the mythical founding of Rome by twin

brothers Romulus and Remas, who were said to have been suckled by a she-wolf (Lupus is Latin for "wolf"). Later, a lovers' lottery developed, where (according to a [Wikipedia article](#), "the names of available maidens were placed in a box and drawn out by young men. Each man accepted the girl whose name he drew as his love - for the duration of the festival, or sometimes longer." Perhaps from this practice, Lupercalia is also associated with Valentine's Day.

Now

Under its various names, Mardi Gras was a pastoral festival turned Roman love orgy turned Christian indulgence (before Lent) and finally, in its American incarnation, a secular celebration laced with commercialism. The holiday came to America in 1699 when French explorer Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville led an expedition up the Mississippi River. Setting up a camp on the west bank of the river about 60 miles south of present site of New Orleans on the date Mardi Gras was being celebrated in his native France, d'Iberville named the spot Point du Mardi Gras. Over the past 300 years, Mardi Gras suffered from a bad reputation a number of times, and local officials attempted to ban it, but citizens maintained the holiday.



Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur
d'Iberville
Rudolph Bohunek, 1908

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, there were serious doubts about whether there would be a Mardi Gras in 2006. Most of the arguments supporting Mardi Gras focused on the financial impact and the message to the world. An often-cited 2000 study documented that Mardi Gras brought more than \$1 billion into the region, including a five-to-one return to the city itself. Although understandably scaled down, Mardi Gras was celebrated in New Orleans in 2006. In the meantime, neo-pagans are attempting to bring Lupercalia back as well with celebrations in such disparate cities as Edmonton and Little Rock.

The concept of Mardi Gras/Shrove Tuesday is interesting. Is designated a "binge" day before a fast something like a sin day before baptism? The perceived need for such a day is a commentary on externally-imposed rules and restrictions, particularly those that the run-of-the-mill Christian would have difficulty connecting to anything vital to faith in Christ. In fact, the idea of a period of self-sacrifice seems to run counter to the teachings of Christ, where the entire life of a disciple is to be one of self-denial and self-sacrifice. What does Lent suggest about the other 325 days outside of Lent? Are they are Fat Tuesdays? Lent and other superimposed fasts are the product of a hierarchical church where intercessionary authority is invested in a specialized clerical caste, and the individual responsibility of the so-called laity is consequently minimized. The inevitable result is a superstitious, largely-ignorant church with little connection to the living Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that there are no faithful Catholics (or other rigidly hierarchical denominations). Some Catholics display a piety rarely seen in mainstream Protestants. Nor am I suggesting that no observance of Christ's death, burial and resurrection is appropriate. But hierarchical decrees do not generally breed individual spirituality. Better to teach people what Christ did for us and let them determine the response that best displays their gratitude. Personally, I agree with the genuine practices of the apostolic church - that the appropriate response

to Christ is a life of self-sacrifice (although I fall woefully short) commemorated weekly with the simple observance Jesus Himself instituted.



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NEXT ISSUE: Upon this Sand (Feb 20)

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