

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 celebration 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.

The Australian bishops have determined that there will be two Ember Days in Australia: the first Friday of March (our Autumn) and the first Friday of September (our Spring). We are recommended to keep them as days of fasting and abstaining from eating meat, as we do on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Normally the first Friday of March falls within Lent and so it is part of our fasting and almsgiving for Lent.

In recalling the link to the cosmic seasons we are reminded that we are part of the world of nature and we should also reflect on how we care for our environment.

Our Ember Day fast therefore can be linked to our need to care for the environment. Fasting and abstaining from eating meat will remind us of our responsibility for restraint in the use of our natural resources. It can be an expression of solidarity with those facing hunger and famine in many places in our world. Another practical example could be a "fast" from using our cars by walking rather than driving on those days.

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