

ADVENT NEED FOR FASTING



We celebrate feasts differently than we used to. Formerly, there was generally a long fast leading up to a feast, and then a joyous celebration afterwards. Today, usually, there is a long celebration leading up to the feast, and a fast afterwards.

The way we celebrate Christmas exemplifies this. Nearly two months before the actual day, we already begin to celebrate. The parties start, the decorations and lights go up, the cards go out, and the Christmas music begins to play.

When the day of Christmas finally arrives, we are already satiated with the specialness of the season, tired, over-saturated with celebration and ready to move on. By Christmas Day, we are ready to go back to ordinary life, and even to do some fasting...having had, already, enough of partying, lights, special music, and turkey dinners! The Christmas season used to last until February. Now, realistically, it is over on Dec. 25.

This is a curious reversal. Traditionally always the build-up was towards a feast, celebration came after. Today the feast is first, the fast comes after.

Why is this? And, are we the better or the worse for reversing the fast-feast cycle?

A colleague of mine recently commented that our society knows how to anticipate an event, but not how to sustain it. That's only partially true. The real issue is not so much that we do not know how to sustain something, we precisely do not know how to anticipate something. We confuse anticipation with celebration itself.

One of our weaknesses today is that we find it hard to live in the face of any anticipation, inconsummation, or unfulfilled tension without moving swiftly to resolve it. Longing and fasting are not our strong points. Neither is feasting. Because we cannot build properly towards a feast, we cannot celebrate properly either.

Celebration is an organic process. To feast, one must first fast: to come to consummation, one must first live in chastity; and to taste specialness, one must first have a sense of what's ordinary. When fasting, inconsummation, and the dour rhythm of the ordinary are short-circuited, then fatigue of the spirit, boredom, and disappointment replace celebration. We are left with the empty feeling that says: "All this hype, for this!" Something can only be sublime if, first of all, there is some sublimation.

I am old enough to have known another time. Like our own, this time too had its faults, but it also had its strengths. One of these strengths was its belief, a lived belief, that feasting depends upon prior fasting, that the sublime depends upon a prerequisite sublimation.

I've vivid memories of the Advents and Lents of my childhood. How strict these times were! These were seasons of fast and renunciation: no weddings, no dances, fewer parties, fewer drinks, fewer desserts, and generally less of everything that constitutes specialness and celebration. Churches were draped in purple and statues covered. The colours were dark and the mood was penitential...but the feasts that followed, Easter and Christmas, were oh so special!

We short-circuit fasting, inconsummation, and the prerequisite longing. Simply put, how can Christmas be special when we arrive at Dec. 25 exhausted from weeks of Christmas parties? How can Easter be special when we've treated Lent just as we treat any other season? How, indeed, can anything be sublime when we've all but lost our capacity for sublimation?

Celebration, as mentioned earlier, is an organic process. It is created by a dynamic interplay between anticipation and fulfilment, longing and inconsummation, ordinary and special, work and play.

Today the absence of genuine specialness and enjoyment within our lives is due largely to the breakdown of this rhythm. In a word, Christmas is no longer special because we've celebrated it during Advent, weddings are no longer special because we've already slept with the bride, and experiences of all kinds are often flat, boring, and unable to excite us because we had them prematurely.

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