

The Traditional Catholic Liturgy

Adapted from *The Liturgical Year* by Abbot Gueranger

Origin of the Forty Hours Devotion

When the fullness of time came, the Son of God, Who was also Son of Abraham, declared His Eternal Father's power by saying that He was about to raise up a new progeny of Abraham's children from the very stones, that is, from the Gentiles (Matt. 3: 9). We Christians are this new generation. If therefore we be children of Abraham, we must, as the Church tells us during Septuagesima, look upon ourselves as exiles on the earth, and dwell by hope and desire in that true country of ours, from which we are now banished, but towards which we are each day drawing nearer, if like Abraham we are faithful in the various stations allotted us by Our Lord. We are commanded to use this world as though we used it not; to have an abiding conviction of our not having here a lasting city, and of the misery and danger we incur when we forget that death is one day to separate us from everything we possess in this life.

How far from being true children of Abraham are those so-called Christians who spend Quinquagesima and the two following days in intemperance and dissipation, because Lent is soon to be upon us! We can easily understand how the simple manners of our Catholic forefathers could keep a leave-taking of the ordinary way of living, which Lent was to interrupt, and reconcile their innocent carnival with Christian gravity; just as we can understand how their rigorous observance of the laws of the Church for Lent would inspire certain festive customs at Easter. Even in our times, a joyous carnival is not to be altogether reprobated, provided the Christian sentiment of the approaching holy season of Lent be strong enough to check the evil tendency of corrupt nature; otherwise the original intention of an innocent custom would be perverted, and the forethought of penance could in no sense be considered as the prompter of our joyous farewell to ease and comforts. While admitting all this, we would ask, what right or title have they to share in these carnival rejoicings, whose Lent will pass and find them out of the Church? And they, too, who claim dispensations from fasting during Lent and, for one reason or another, evade every penitential exercise during the solemn forty days of penance, and will find themselves at Easter as weighed down by the guilt and debt of their sins as they were on Ash Wednesday – what meaning, we would ask, can there possibly be in their feasting at "Mardi Gras."

In our modern world, when sinful indulgence is the rule all year long, it is especially sad to see the annual repetitions of the most decadent carnival celebrations taking place in formerly Catholic cities. But even long ago the need for reparation for such scandalous debauchery was recognized. The Church offered a substitute for frivolous amusements and dangerous pleasures; and those of Her children upon whom faith has not lost its influence, found a feast surpassing all earthly enjoyments, and a means whereby to make amends to God for the insults offered to His Divine Majesty during the days of carnival. The Lamb Who taketh away the sins of the world was exposed upon the altar. Here, on His throne of mercy, He received the homage of them who came to adore Him, and acknowledge Him for their King; He accepted the repentance of those who came to tell Him how grieved they were at having ever followed any other Master but Him; He offered Himself to His Eternal Father for poor sinners, who not only treated His favors with indifference, but seemed to have made a resolution to offend Him during these days more than at any other period of the year.

It is impossible to say who actually originated the practice of solemnly exposing the Blessed Sacrament for 40 hours, but it clearly was being practiced in Milan and other cities in the early part of the 16th century. At first it appears to have been a special means of invoking God's protection in the face of Islamic invasion and other dangers. For this purpose, the devotion would be scheduled in different churches, such that just as it was ending in one church, it would be resumed in another. In Milan it was thus kept up without interruption throughout all the year.

Some say it was the pious Cardinal Gabriel Paleotti, Archbishop of Bologna, who, in the 16th century, first established the devotion of the *Forty Hours* as a means of reparation during carnival. He was a contemporary of Saint Charles Borromeo, and like him, was eminent for his pastoral zeal. His object in this solemn Exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament was to offer the Divine Majesty some compensation for the sins of men, and, at the very time when the world was busiest in deserving His anger, to appease it by the sight of His own Son, the Mediator between



Heaven and earth. Saint Charles immediately introduced the devotion into his own diocese and province. He spoke of this practice of praying for forty hours as being very ancient, and he distinctly referred it to the forty hours Our Lord's Body remained in the tomb, since this was a period of watching, suspense and ardent prayer on the part of all His disciples. It was indeed a practice in the 13th and 14th centuries to reserve the Blessed Sacrament on the Altar of Repose (or *Easter sepulcher*) continuously from Holy Thursday until the Easter Vigil, and in some places the adoration before this altar was popularly known as the *Prayer of the Forty Hours*.

Later on, that is, in the 18th century, Prosper Lambertini was Archbishop of Bologna; he zealously continued the pious design of his ancient predecessor, Paleotti, by encouraging his flock to devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament during the three days of carnival; and when he was made Pope, under the name of Benedict XIV, he granted many indulgences to all who, during these days, visit Our Lord in this Mystery of His love, and pray for the pardon of sinners. This favor was, at first, restricted to the faithful of the Papal States; but in the year 1765 it was extended, by Pope Clement XIII, to the Universal Church. Thus the *Forty Hours' Devotion* was spread throughout the whole world, and became one of the most solemn expressions of Catholic piety.



In most places in today's world, it may be impossible to hold the *Forty Hours* with the solemnities prescribed in detail by Pope Clement XIII. Let us at least strive to make some reparation during these last three days of preparation for Lent. Let us, like Abraham, retire from the distracting dangers of the world, and seek the Lord our God. Let us go apart, for at least one short hour, from the dissipation of earthly enjoyments, and, kneeling in the presence of our Jesus, merit the grace to keep our hearts innocent and detached from the world.

Our work of preparation is over; we are ready to obey our Mother's call to Lent. During the past three weeks, we have, in the Divine Office, studied the fall of our first parents, and the miseries it brought upon man; the necessity of a Savior; the justice of God, against which the human race dared to rebel; the terrible chastisement of the deluge, wherewith that revolt was punished; and finally, the covenant made by God, through Abraham, with those who are faithful to Him, and shun the maxims of a perverse and guilty world.

Now we are to see the accomplishment of the great mysteries, whereby the wounds of our fall were healed, the Divine Justice was disarmed, and God's grace was poured out upon us, delivering us from the yoke of Satan, the world and fallen human nature.

The Man-God, Whose sweet presence has been less sensible during this Septuagesima season, is now about to show Himself to us again, but this time it is on His way to Calvary, where He is to be immolated for our redemption. The dolorous Passion, which our sins have imposed upon Him, is about to be brought before us: the greatest of anniversaries will soon be upon us.

Let us be all attention to these Mysteries: let us be fervent in the great work of our own purification. Let us walk on courageously in the path of penance, so that each day the burden of our sins may be lightened, and after we have partaken, by heartfelt compassion, of the chalice of our Redeemer's Passion, our lips will be once more permitted to sing the songs of joy, and our hearts will thrill at Easter with the loud burst of the Church's *Alleluia!*