



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - July 2008

### Holidays and Holy Days

**E**VERY YEAR WE wonder whether the summer break is too long: are children and students away from their books and classrooms so many days that they forget what they have been learning? Isn't the long summer holiday the remains of a time, long past, when every hand – man, woman, child - was needed out in the fields to gather in the harvest? We agonise too about Christmas: why does the partying start too soon, why do the festivities end just as they should be beginning? And we agonise about Easter: the area where I live has separated off the Easter school holiday from the Easter weekend so that school terms are no longer affected by early and late Easters. Meanwhile we have our 'bank holidays', a Protestant invention to match the saints days' and solemnities of Catholic Europe, when everyone feasts and rests, after (in theory at least) going to Mass. Our May bank holidays are too close: one is a relic of May Day, a socialist celebration, the other of Whitsun, a feast now invisible beyond the Church's faithful. Both are too early for good weather to be likely and the summer bank holiday, at the end of August, too late.

More serious than this hotchpotch of holidays – the nearest we get to holy days – is our loss of the rhythm of fasting and feasting. A glance at the checkout queue at the local supermarket shows that Easter chocolate is a now a Lenten treat and 'hot cross buns' no longer mark Good Friday. Barbecuing, which ill suits our climate, happens under patio heaters (which also ill suit our climate) and festive foods are everyday fare. No more 'fish on Fridays' for the Catholics who, because of falling attendances at masses 'of obligation', have shifted Ascension Day and Corpus Christi to the nearest Sunday.

This all sounds such a grumble.... But it isn't! Amidst the remains of a Christian culture of Sundays and solemnities, feasts and fasts, holy days that are lengthened into holidays, there is a superb opportunity for Christians who are serious about their faith to recover, live out and witness to a better way. The challenge for every Christian household is to recover a rhythm of fasting and feasting, resting and working which glorifies God, honours his world and teaches others how to have life in all its abundance. Right now, the world is particularly receptive to this example. Many countries are faced with famine, because of high prices of food and fuel. People generally are beginning look for healthy, locally-sourced produce. There are constant debates obesity and bingedrinking. Magazines are packed with dietary and medical advice. What better time than to recover what we have all but lost: a sense of season, harmony with the natural world, penitence and praise.

For now we face a long, well-deserved holiday: a wonderful opportunity to rest and reflect, pray and plan how to fast and feast, ponder how God's blessing is known 'in the voice of praise and thanksgiving among such as keep holyday' (Psalm 42:5).

So, may God bless us.

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