



IMMACULATE HEART^{OF}MARY CATHOLIC CHURCH

A LETTER FROM THE PASTOR FEBRUARY 23, 2020

Dear friends in the Lord,

Mardis Gras. Carnival. The words are sure to conjure up the lavish, over-the-top celebrations in New Orleans or Rio. Venice, Italy, too, is well known for its colorful and indulgent carnival season. Fewer will know that Alabama is home to the oldest Mardi Gras celebration in the U.S. In 1699 the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville recorded the first observance of Mardi Gras in Mobile, then the capital of the Louisiana Territory.

The day before Lent begins was once known as Shrove Tuesday. The name comes from the custom of going to confession (i.e. being “shriven”) before the onset of Lent, in order to unburden the soul of sin before embarking on the path of spiritual cleansing and renewal — carrying less baggage into the desert of Lent.

But the names we are most familiar with all seem to revolve around food: Carnival, which comes from *car-nis* (meat) and *vale* (farewell); Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday), or, in England and Ireland, Pancake Tuesday. These names harken back to a time when Lenten fasting was more rigorous—not just meatless Fridays, but a full 40 days of abstinence from all rich foods, including dairy, eggs, fat and meat. Tuesday was the day to use up all those items in the pantry.

And of course there is the King Cake, baked in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf Coast region, into which is placed a miniature doll of the baby Jesus. According to custom, whoever finds the baby Jesus in his or her slice provides the cake the following year. (I have to confess that all I’ve ever seen in that little plastic Jesus is a choking hazard!)

Despite all of the drunkenness and debauchery that often attend secular Carnivale or Mardi Gras celebrations, Tuesday will offer a real spiritual opportunity for people of faith. The food and drink on which we feast are reminders of the goodness of God’s creation; the jubilant company we share reminds us that we will need the support of one another on the pilgrimage from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday; our meal on the eve of the day of ashes will be a joyful foretaste of the rebirth and new life that are the promise of the Resurrection; together for the last time before the beginning of the 40 days, we will sing with confident voices the ancient song of victory: Alleluia!

Your brother in Christ’s word and work,