



# SHROVE TUESDAY



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † February 2015

By Fr. William Saunders

Shrove Tuesday is the last day of what traditionally was called “Shrovetide,” the week preceding the beginning of Lent. The word itself, *Shrovetide*, is the English equivalent for “Carnival,” which is derived from the Latin words *carne[m] levare*, meaning “to take away the flesh.” (Note that in Germany, this period is called “Fasching,” and in parts of the United States, particularly Louisiana, “Mardi Gras.”) While this was seen as the last chance for merriment, and, unfortunately in some places, has resulted in excessive pleasure, Shrovetide was the time to cast off things of the flesh and to prepare spiritually for Lent.

Actually, the English term provides the best meaning for this period. “To shrive” meant to hear confessions. In the Anglo-Saxon “Ecclesiastical Institutes,” recorded by Theodulphus and translated by Abbot Aelfric about AD 1000, Shrovetide was described as follows: “In the week immediately before Lent everyone shall go to his confessor and confess his deeds and the confessor shall so shrive him as he then may hear by his deeds what he is to do in the way of penance.” To highlight the point and motivate the people, special plays or masques were performed which portrayed the passion of our Lord or final judgment. Clearly, this Shrovetide preparation for Lent included the confessing of sin and the reception of absolution; as such, Lent then would become a time for penance and renewal of faith.

While this week of Shrovetide condoned the partaking of pleasures from which a person would abstain during Lent, Shrove Tuesday had a special significance in England. Pancakes were prepared and enjoyed, because in so doing a family depleted their eggs, milk, butter, and fat which were part of the Lenten fast. At this time, some areas of the Church abstained from all forms of meat and animal products, while others made exceptions for food like fish. For example, Pope St. Gregory (d. 604), writing to St. Augustine of Canterbury, issued the following rule: “We abstain from flesh, meat, and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese, and eggs.” These were the fasting rules governing the Church in England; hence, the eating of pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.

Keep in mind, for this same reason, Easter was celebrated with decorated eggs and fresh breads. Another interesting note surrounding the Easter egg, just as an aside, is that it symbolized the resurrection: just as a little chick pecks its way out from the egg shell to emerge to new life, so Christ emerged from the tomb to new and everlasting life.

One last point: When the “carnival” or “mardi gras” became for some people a debauched party, the Church tried to restore the penitential nature of this time. In 1748, Pope Benedict XIV instituted the “Forty Hours of Carnival,” whereby prayers were offered and the Blessed Sacrament was exposed in churches during the three days preceding Ash Wednesday. In a letter entitled, “*Super Bacchanalibus*,” he granted a plenary indulgence to anyone who adored the exposed Blessed Sacrament by offering prayers and making atonement for sins.

As we prepare to begin Lent, perhaps after a hearty dinner of pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, may we take time for extra prayer, particularly the Stations of the Cross, and various penances to overcome our weaknesses and to atone for our sins.

Saunders, Rev. William. “Shrove Tuesday.” *Arlington Catholic Herald*; Catholic Education Resource Center: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/shrove-tuesday.html>.