

What is the Origin of Shrove Tuesday?

Shrove Tuesday (also known in Australia as *Pancake Day*) is the day immediately before Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Pancakes are consumed as a means of putting on some weight before the Lenten season's fasting. The French term *Mardi Gras* for "Fat Tuesday" refers to this same practice of eating richer, fatty foods before the ritual fasting of Lent begins.

However significant these festivities may be to enduring the rigours of fasting throughout Lent, the origins of the term "Shrove Tuesday" is not found in these carnival aspects, but in term "shrove" itself. "Shrove" comes from the word *shrive*, meaning "absolve." Interestingly, *absolve* is a Latin word which means "loosed" or "free," the root word of *absolvere* which, when translated into English means "absolution." When we receive absolution through the ministry of the Church in the Sacrament of Reconciliation from the priest as he extends his hands or at least his right hand over our head, we are *loosed* from our sins in the manner Jesus explained to St Peter, the head of the Apostles, "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

What is significant about being free from sin at the beginning of Lent as observed in the Catholic Church's tradition on Shrove Tuesday? As you know, Lent is a season characterised by prayer, penance, and almsgiving. As such, in addition to becoming free from sin, this season is an opportunity to grow in God's grace. Put another way, growing in grace means attaining a greater reward by participating in the infinite merits of Christ's Sacrifice. This is a marvellous opportunity; yet, are you aware that when a person is not in the state of grace he cannot merit an *increase* in grace by asking for it in prayer? On this point, St Alphonsus Liguori said, "In order to obtain God's graces by prayer, it is necessary, first, to take away sin."¹ St Thomas Aquinas explains the reason for this prerequisite: "Neither prayer nor any other virtuous act is meritorious without sanctifying grace."² To expect otherwise would be to think that you can gain merit independent of any participation in the infinite merits Christ gained for us in his Sacrifice. Additionally, expecting to grow in grace while in mortal sin would contradict Jesus' words: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:1).

St James considers that a person's prayers do indeed bear more fruit when he is reconciled to God, for he said, "the heartfelt prayer of a good man works very powerfully" (James 5:16). In the context of these words of St James, a "good man" clearly refers to someone in the state of grace. Therefore, such a person's heartfelt prayers are indeed more efficacious, provided that he is not lacking in humility, for St James also said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Additionally, all the penance a person does while he is not in the state of grace has not merit. St Teresa of Avila said: "Nothing helps such a soul ... all the good works it might do while in mortal sin are fruitless for the attainment of glory." St Teresa further explains: "Since these works do not proceed from that principle, which is of God ... and are separated from Him, they cannot be pleasing in His sight."³

The Catholic Church's Shrove Tuesday tradition provides good food for thought. And no, I am not talking about pancakes. Rather than think Shrove Tuesday is *only* about stuffing as many pancakes in your mouth, have you also considered that this day is most significantly about how you can maximise your receptivity to God's grace and amassing a greater reward in Heaven?

What's the point of a person in mortal sin doing lots of penance throughout the 40 days of Lent knowing that there is no merit in doing so?

Think about it.

What about going to Confession after Lent? Does the penance and good works a person offers to God while he is in mortal sin become meritorious *after* he goes to Confession?

St Thomas Aquinas taught that this is not possible for the following reason: “Works generically good done without charity are said to be dead on account of the lack of grace and charity.”⁴ St Thomas verifies his teaching by quoting St Paul: “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Since God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16), St Thomas understands not having love in this context as not being in union with God. St Thomas concludes, “Therefore, it is impossible for dead works [works done in mortal sin] to be quickened [become meritorious] by Penance.”⁵ While it is true that the good works a person did while in the state of grace in the past are restored and given back in Confession, as long as a person is not in the state of grace, the penance and good works he does in that state are “dead.” Put more simply, such a person’s prayer and penance makes no reparation for his sins, neither are they effective to win eternal life. Confession does not render these dead works such a person undertook in the past to have any merit.

Conversely, when such a person makes a good Confession, he is able to gain graces for himself and others through the penitential practices of Lent (or any other time of the year for that matter). He can gain these graces through prayer and good works, provided that he performs them with love for God and with a good intention.

In conclusion, we can see that there is much wisdom in the Shrove Tuesday tradition.

¹ *Sermons of St Alphonsus Liguori* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN, 1982), Sermon 39.

² *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 83, art. 15.

³ *The Interior Castle*, I, ch. 2, no. 1.

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 89, art. 6.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 89, art. 6.



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