

From the Pastor: Muskrat, Beaver, and Puffin for Lent

Some of you may read the following article and swear that you have read it before. You may be mostly correct. As promised a couple of weeks ago, I pulled this out of storage, dusted it off, adjusted the dates and a few other little things, and am presenting it to you once again. Of course, this comes from quite a few years back, and most of you would probably think it was all brand new if I wasn't writing this opening paragraph, so I could have just passed it off as original, but I don't want to be accused of plagiarizing my own writings!

Several years ago, as Lent was about to begin, I wrote about a strange custom found in Michigan wherein Catholics could eat muskrat without violating Church laws on abstinence. [Hopefully, you all know that Catholics are, by Church law (rather than Divine Law, which cannot be "tweaked" in the same way) required to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays in Lent. All other Fridays of the Year are considered penitential but we in the United States are allowed to choose a penance other than the traditional abstinence from meat outside of those days already mentioned. We don't get off the hook, we simply get to choose our own penance. Really. Vatican II did not get rid of Friday penance!] This year another story has been making the rounds that beavers in Quebec long ago also received the honorary title of "fish" (like tomatoes being honorary vegetables though they are really fruit) so that they, too, can be eaten on Fridays in Lent.

Our Michiganders have yet to start up a Lenten muskrat Friday "fish" fry, much to the disappointment of every other Epiphany parishioner, I am sure, but perhaps one of our Canadian snowbirds would be willing to bring down a truckload of beaver for the same purpose. Stories vary about whether the whole beaver or only the tail was allowed to be classified as "fish" for abstinence purposes, so I suppose we would need an official clarification before we start cooking. I don't know much about the laws regarding trapping and butchering either critter but if they are both in season right now it is possible that we could even get both of them brought down here to put on our menu. Imagine the envy of the other parishes when they discover that we offer a choice of either beaver or muskrat! The hardest part might be determining the side dishes. Both rodents are northern animals so it would seem strange to fix them with cheese grits and collard greens but what else would be a suitable substitute? For some strange reason, most of the vegetable dishes we find in local restaurants all seem foreign to our friends from the north. Just mention "stewed okra" and watch their noses scrunch up. Even something as normal as "fried green tomatoes" produces a look of bewilderment among the part-timers around here. Of course, it seems all the more strange that they don't eat those great foods when they are the ones bringing the rodents to the table!

Not to be outdone by the crazy North Americans, though, people from other parts of the world have some unusual "fish" equivalents as well. Look at the Venezuelans. They are allowed to eat the largest rodent in the world, the capybara, for Lent. One website quotes a restaurant owner (who, presumably, has capybara on the menu though that is never made clear) as saying, "I know it's a rat, but it tastes really good." I wonder if people from Venezuela with such discerning palates would have the audacity to turn their noses up at grits the way our own Yankees do? Or how about some French cooking for Lent? France brings us stories about being allowed to eat puffins on Lenten Fridays. You know those charming little birds at SeaWorld which are found in the cold weather displays along with the penguins? Those are puffins. Like the rodents above, these birds are semi-aquatic and so probably taste like fish or duck rather than like chicken. Unlike articles about those "brave" souls willing to eat rodents, where reporters seem to revel in the "gross" factor of eating rat-like animals, the articles about those who eat puffins (yes, you can find them easily enough) show outrage that anyone would eat a cute little birdie. So it is probably best that, as far as I know, anyway, we don't have any parishioners coming from northern France and we will keep the puffins off the Friday menu. Of course, now that I mentioned the controversial eating of puffins, I cannot go without mentioning that in some places whales, seals, and even (gulp) *porpoises* seem to have been allowed on some Friday Lenten dinner menus as well.

Because our social hall only seats about 120 people around the tables and we would have to exclude way too many of you who would be clamoring to chow down on such delectable dishes, this year we won't be able to host any of these Lenten dinners. But should we happen to have among our parishioners some avid muskrat or beaver trappers, puffin pursuants, capybara chasers, or seal stalkers willing to bring in a nice supply for next year, we might, with proper planning, be able to pull it off. Our Council of Catholic Women could bring back their tent for outdoor seating, the Knights of Columbus could do the cooking, the American Heritage Girls could serve, and, well, what a yummy penance!

With prayers for your holiness,
Rev. Fr. Edwin Palka