

Bishops seek to 'revitalise' Lent as season of penitence



The general secretary of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has been tasked with finding ways to revitalise Lent as the penitential season.

In the wake of Pope Benedict's September visit to Britain the bishops discussed restoring Friday penance during their November plenary meeting. They decided that it was important to re-emphasise Lent as a season of penitence first, in order to later look into ways of restoring the custom of Friday fasts, a source said. The move comes in a bid to restore public manifestations of Catholicism following the Pope's visit which was widely hailed as a success.

In the Advent letter to his flock, Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton spoke about restoring the Friday Fast.

He said: "This was one of the most obvious signs of Catholic identity, apart from going to Mass. It determined the diet in places like prison and hospital, and was something that Catholics were instinctively conscious of: we knew that we couldn't have meat like everybody else that day, and it was a source of a sort of pride – it marked us out as different.

"Today we are perhaps less willing to be marked out, in case we are marked out as not just different, but 'odd'. And that is what we had been told, and began to believe.

"But the Pope's visit has said to us that this is not 'odd', but that it's actually important. A few years ago I suggested that we might take up another of those old Catholic practices, grace before meals, if we had lost the habit of it. It's not difficult, doesn't take much time, but it's a gentle reminder.

“There are all sorts of small ways in which we quietly show to the world that we believe in Christ, and that we want to welcome Christ back into a world that has either largely forgotten him or never really heard of him. Pop into the church when you are passing, so that people can see it. Put a crucifix in the window. If you are at work or with friends and people ask you what you did at the weekend, mention the fact that you went to church. But make sure it’s true. And we can also show ourselves, by praying a little more often, and spending time reflecting on the Bible.”

Since Benedict XVI’s visit to Britain a number of bishops have called for more public gestures of Catholicity. Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster asked for Catholics to make more visible signs of their faith in his September pastoral letter, urging the faithful to make the Sign of the Cross, say grace at meals and say “Bless you” when people sneeze.

Anna Arco