

If you are in South America during Lent and drop into a restaurant on a Friday night you are likely to be confronted with a curious menu choice. In these largely Roman Catholic countries you might EXPECT to see some kind of fish listed, given the Catholic practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays. But, no fish.

In the 17th century, South American Catholics who found themselves in a unique environment outside the abundant fishing waters of the North Atlantic decided to petition Rome for a different dining option during these 40 days – something they longed for like Americans look forward to turkey on Thanksgiving.

That dish you might be enjoying on a Friday night in Caracas? Well, it does spend a lot of time in the water; it swims and dives really well, and it has webbed feet, so it's kind of like a fish – except that it's a mammal – a rodent, to be exact. It's a capybara, a 100 pound water-dwelling RUSS -- rodent of unusual size, thank you Princess Bride!

I'm guessing it tastes like chicken.

We can imagine the folks in the Vatican scratching their heads about this request when it came in nearly 4 centuries ago. They'd probably never heard of a capybara. I never had until I read this. It's a delicacy in South America, though, so you can see why people would want to celebrate the holidays, or observe Lent, by sharing some roasted....well, you get the picture.

That's not the only bizarre item that our faithful Catholic brothers and sisters around the world have petitioned to add to their Lenten menus. Over the years and in different places, beavers, geese, puffins, assorted marine animals and even muskrats have been approved, though as one Michigan bishop put it, anyone who is chowing down on muskrat is 'doing penance worthy of the greatest saints.'

On a related note – the Catholic church has lately had to tighten up its regulations about what can be consumed as more and more species are threatened with extinction. In Mexico, for example, environmentalists are urging Rome to ban sea turtles from the approved Lenten list due to their endangered status. In other parts of Latin America, it's a green iguana that may soon be taken off the menu, prompting the end of those annual – WAIT FOR IT – 'Easter IG Hunts.' So I've decided I'm giving up PICKLED PIG'S FEET this year! (adapted from HOMILETICS, March-April 2007, author not specified)

OK, you get that free of charge! Now to the matter at hand, Lent. St. Benedict, whose RULE OF ST. BENEDICT has been the primary guidebook for Western monastic living for centuries, wrote: "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent." But being realistic, Benedict recognized that not many have the strength to live Lent all year long, so he suggested using Lent to 'wash away the negligence of other times.'

Debra Farrington has authored the book, LIVING FAITH DAY BY DAY: HOW THE SACRED RULES OF MONASTIC TRADITIONS CAN HELP YOU LIVE SPIRITUALLY IN THE MODERN WORLD (Perigee, 2000). She writes, "What most of us neglect – with more regularity than we might care to admit – is God," so Farrington suggest, "Don't give up chocolate for Lent this year. Or rather, give up chocolate – or whatever else you give up – IF it helps you think about God more often. But if all it does is make you think about chocolate, then let me offer some other Lenten practices to you." She suggests:

1. Have a heart-to heart with God. Take time for a long walk – or go to a quiet place to simply converse with God, as you would with an old friend that you have neglected to share from the heart. “Don’t forget to do some listening as well,” she adds.
2. Cut back on work. According to one study, Americans, on average, added 1 week of work per year to their schedules in the 1990’s. Rather than putting work at the center of our life, we might need to take a break from working so hard – and spend some of the newfound time with God in prayer, reflection, spiritual reading. Also with our spouse and children.
3. Sleep enough. John Cassian, one of the desert fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries, recognized that having a good relationship with God takes energy and attentiveness. He recommended to his disciples that they get enough sleep so they could vigorously pursue their spiritual lives. Make Lent a time for getting rested so you can attend to God without the heaviness of spirit that lack of sleep induces.
4. Seek a spirit of detachment. Most of us as Americans own more things than we need. Often our sense of self-worth and confidence is centered on our possessions rather than on our relationship with God as His beloved sons and daughters. Take a break from buying unnecessary things and give the money to the church or any organization that serves the needy.
5. Take care of yourself. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, our bodies are temples. So take steps to care for God’s dwelling place during Lent. Exercise, eat better, take time for leisure and play, being aware that in doing so, we are caring for one of God’s greatest gifts to us. (adapted from HOMILETICS, March-April 2007, author not specified)

The traditional Lenten practices are given every year in the gospel assigned for today – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. By all means, these should be our foundation – but this list might provide some helpful twists on them to make this a better Lent. I pray that this Lent is a fruitful time for all of us. Amen.