

Forty Hours Devotion

First Evening

Tonight we will examine three questions:

- *What is Forty Hours Devotion?*
- *Where did Forty Hours Devotion come from?*
- *Why are we here?*

What is Forty Hours Devotion?

Forty Hours devotion is a 40-hour period of continuous prayer made in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in solemn exposition.

The Second Vatican Council understands our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament both with the Mass and outside of the Mass as manifestations of the centrality of the Eucharist: “The source and summit of the Christian life,” or, as St. Francis de Sales calls it, “the sun of all spiritual exercises...the center of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, and the soul of piety...”

Why forty hours? Both Hebrew and Christian Scripture intuit “forty” as a sacred period of time. A sample of examples includes:

- *In the time of Noah it rained 40 days and 40 nights;*
- *The Israelites wandered through the desert for 40 years before they found the promised land;*
- *Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert before beginning his public ministry;*
- *40 hours also remembers the traditional 40-hour period from the time of Jesus’ burial until his Resurrection.*

Since its inception, the Forty Hours Devotion’s thrust was to help nourish and deepen the love of God in the Blessed Sacrament. Traditionally, this devotion has also included intentions for:

- *Protection from evil and strengthen us to resist temptation;*
- *Reparation for our sins and the poor souls in purgatory;*
- *Deliverance from political, material or spiritual calamities.*

Perhaps it is this latter intention that helps to explain how the Forty Hours Devotion began.

Where did Forty Hours Devotion come from?

Sources concur that the seeds that would grow into the Forty Hours Devotion were planted during the 1530's in Milan, Italy. While related to previous Eucharistic processions, exposition/benediction and other devotions to the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, something unique was emerging. In 1539, Pope Paul III approved a request from the Archdiocese of Milan for an indulgence for this new Forty Hours Devotion.

Consider the historical context:

- *The Christian faith was splintering in the face of the Protestant Reformation;*
- *The orthodox understanding of the Eucharist was facing serious assaults from the Protestant critique;*
- *The Church was increasingly concerned about the growing strength of the Ottoman Empire to the east;*
- *There was a rise in religious/geo-political conflict, persecution and violence in the west;*
- *There were pressing demands for reform within the Catholic Church itself.*

Taken together, one can understand why people of faith were praying to be delivered from “political, material or spiritual calamities.”

The practice of Forty Hours Devotion that began in northern Italy spread rapidly throughout Europe in the 1550's. Two people in particular – Philip Neri (who brought the practice to Rome) and Ignatius Loyola – are credited for raising both the profile and popularity of this devotion. Some forty years later, a newly-ordained Savoyard priest – St. Francis de Sales, who was a great admirer of Philip Neri as well as a product of Jesuit education – incorporated the Forty Hours Devotion as part of his missionary outreach among the Calvinists living between Annecy and Geneva between 1594 and 1596.

Speaking of “political, material or spiritual calamities,” let’s fast forward to a time closer to home. It was during a period of militant anti-Catholic activism in Philadelphia in the 1840’s (which culminated in the Know-Nothing Riots on 1844 during which two Catholic churches were burned to the ground) that the Redemptorist Bishop John Neumann first considered promoting the Forty Hours Devotion. Not wishing to inflame further flare-ups of Know-Nothing insurgency, Bishop Neumann discerned when and how to best introduce this devotion.

In 1853, while palpable anti-Catholic sentiment was still commonplace, he introduced the practice of the Forty Hours Devotion at the first Diocesan synod, and the first devotions were held (appropriately enough) at St. Philip Neri parish located in what is now known as the “Queen Village” section of Philadelphia. Neumann himself spent most of the three days praying before the Blessed Sacrament at the church. Subsequently, he promoted the Forty Hours Devotion for the diocese of Philadelphia as a whole, composing a special booklet for its practice and obtained special indulgences for the faithful who participated.

Thirteen years later, the Plenary Council of Baltimore approved the Forty Hours Devotion for all Catholic dioceses in the United States in 1866.

Why are we here, in this place, tonight?

Listen to the words of St. Francis de Sales.

“Experience has made me realize in my twenty-five years of saving souls the all-powerful virtue of this Divine Sacrament...

- *to strengthen hearts in good;*
- *to preserve hearts from evil;*
- *to console and encourage hearts with divine grace;*
- *and, in a word, to make hearts God-like in this world if it be frequented with faith, purity and devotion.”*

- ***Faith*** – “As long as the spirit of faith lives in us we are very well off. You see, Our Lord will give us his peace when we resolve ourselves to live humbly and gently in a state of war. Courage, keep your heart firm. Our Lord will help us and we shall belong to him and love him well.”
- ***Purity*** – “To do little actions with great purity of intention and a strong will to please God is to do them excellently, and then they greatly sanctify us.”
- ***Devotion*** – “Living devotion is nothing other than the love of God, and hence it is nothing else than the love of God. Inasmuch as divine love adorns the soul, it is called grace. Inasmuch as it gives us strength to do good, it is called charity. When it not only helps us to do good but to do it diligently, frequently and readily, it is called devotion.”

Let us pray...

Loving God, strengthen us in our resolve to do good. Help us in our efforts to turn away from evil. Console us, encourage us. Help us to live a God-like life in a down-to-earth way.

Above all, deepen our awareness and acceptance of your love for us. Challenge and support us in our efforts to love our neighbor as ourselves...we ask this through Christ Our Lord.