

The Forty Hours Devotion

Hours. Individual churches in that city had the devotion, but no cohesive diocesan schedule for it had been attempted. But Philadelphia was plagued with virulent anti-Catholic sentiment at the time. The Know-Nothing riots of 1844 saw two churches burned there, though a third was saved by parishioners armed with muskets. St. John was advised by his priests not to do the Forty Hours, since it would be too dangerous regarding the Know-Nothings as perhaps inflammatory to Protestants.

But one night he was working late at his desk and fell asleep in his chair. The candle on the desk burnt down and charred some of the papers, but they were still readable. He awoke, surprised and grateful that a fire hadn't started. He fell on his knees to give thanks to God for protection, and heard Him say, "As the flames are burning here without consuming or injuring the writing, so shall I pour out my grace in the Blessed Sacrament without prejudice to My honor. Fear no profanation, therefore, hesitate no longer to carry out your design for my glory."

He introduced the practice of the Forty Hours at the first diocesan synod in 1853, which began at St. Philip Neri parish, which was appropriate since St. Philip is credited with introducing the devotion to the city of Rome. St. John Neumann spent most of the three days in the church praying (a challenge to your pastor to be sure!). No trouble occurred in his diocese, and no other churches were attacked after the devotion was instituted.

Here are some examples of what saints say about adoring the Holy Eucharist:

"Every Holy Hour we make so pleases the Heart of Jesus that it is recorded in Heaven and retold for all eternity!" St. Teresa of Calcutta

"A Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is so important to Jesus that a multitude of souls go to Heaven who otherwise would have gone to hell." A locution of Christ to Blessed Dina Belanger

"Each time you approach the Blessed Sacrament remember that Jesus has been waiting for you for twenty centuries for this personal visit from you." St. Josemaria Escriva

"A Holy Hour of Eucharistic Adoration is a sharing in the work of Redemption." Archbishop Fulton Sheen

"The grace of adoration of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament is given to everybody." St. Peter Julian Eymard

"Our Lord hears our prayers anywhere, but He has revealed to His servants that those who visit Him in the Eucharist will obtain a more abundant measure of grace." St. Alphonsus de Ligouri

"It is impossible in human terms to exaggerate the importance of being in adoration before the Eucharist as often and for as long as our duties and state of life allow." Fr. John Hardon, S.J.

"By being faithful to a Holy Hour of Adoration you can teach by example. The young should be taught the value of Eucharistic Adoration." St. John Paul II

The number 40 signifies a sacred period of time in the Scriptures: the rains in the time of Noah lasted 40 days and 40 nights; the Jews wandered through the desert for 40 years; our Lord fasted and prayed for 40 days before beginning His public ministry. Each of these is connected to the devotion we are about to have in the parish – there can be no effective evangelization without prayer before the Most Blessed Sacrament.

A good explanation of the purpose of the Forty Hours was offered by Pope Paul III in granting his approval of the devotion, and its first indulgence:

"Since ... our beloved son the Vicar General of the Archbishop of Milan at the prayer of the inhabitants of the said city, in order to appease the anger of God provoked by the offenses of Christians, and in order to bring to naught the efforts and machinations of the Turks who are pressing forward to the destruction of Christendom, amongst other pious practices, has established a round of prayers and supplications to be offered both by day and night by all the faithful of Christ, before our Lord's Most Sacred Body, in all the churches of the said city, in such a manner that these prayers and supplications are made by the faithful themselves relieving each other in relays for forty hours continuously in each church in succession, according to the order determined by the Vicar ... We, approving in our Lord so pious an institution, and confirming the same by Our authority, grant and remit..."

"To appease the anger of God provoked by the offenses of Christians..." How timely, how appropriate to our times! The

mass apostasy and lukewarmness and infidelity of Catholics in our times is reason enough to have this devotion. And though the Turks do not constitute a threat to the very existence of the Church as they once did; ISIS, and Al-Queda, and Al-Nusra and all the other Al-this and Al-that certainly do.

This devotion will nurture our love for God and His Most Blessed Mother. It will protect from evil and temptation, make good reparation for sin, will help the poor souls in purgatory, and deliver from political, material and (above all) spiritual calamities.

The practice of the Forty Hours came from the Archdiocese of Milan around the year 1530. The true reformation of the Church was going well at that time, long before the false reformation of Luther began. By 1550, both St. Philip Neri and St. Ignatius of Loyola were enthusiastic in their support for the devotion. And by 1592, Pope Clement VIII proclaimed:

"We have determined to establish publicly in this Mother City of Rome an uninterrupted course of prayer in such ways that in the different churches, on appointed days, there be observed the pious and salutary devotion of the Forty Hours, with such an arrangement of churches and times that, at every hour of the day and night, the whole year round the incense of prayer shall ascend without intermission before the face of the Lord."

Ah, would that modern dioceses would do the same!

By the middle of the 19c, St. John Neumann, the fourth bishop of Philadelphia, was a very strong supporter of the Forty