



About the Ember Day letters

Ember Day Letter Practice

All postulants and candidates for ordination are required by canon to write a letter during Ember Days to the Bishop. This begins when you are made a postulant, and continues until you are ordained either vocational deacon or priest. Letters should be sent by email to Bishop Hirschfeld at arh@nhepiscopal.org with a cc to Canon Tina Pickering at tpickering@nhepiscopal.org. These letters are between you and your bishop, but Canon Tina will help the Bishop keep track of letters and responses. Your letter should be a reflection on your spiritual growth, any developments in your life or work, your prayer practice, and any insight into vocation you are gaining along the journey. They are also meant to inspire a discipline of reflection and connection to the church calendar. The Bishop will respond to Ember Day letters that are received on time as soon as he is able.

Background

The Ember Days are of ancient origin. In each season of the year, a Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday are devoted to fasting and prayer. Formerly, they were Roman festivals to beseech the blessings of the gods: one in summer for harvest, one in autumn for the vintage, and one in winter for the planting of seed. By the second century, Christians in Rome had baptized these observances and sometime (probably in the third century) a balancing fourth was added for spring. In fact, in the early days of Christian practice these four markers anchored the Church's year when its calendar was yet in its infancy – no Christmas yet, no Advent, an uncertain and emerging Lent – just Easter, Pentecost, and the Ember Days.

Originally tied to the earth, to the birth and growth of crops, a new meaning was given to them by the fifth century: the Ember Saturdays became the quarterly dates for the ordination of deacons and priests. Thus, the Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays became days of fasting and supplication not just for the earth, but for the Church, for its ministers and ministry. They became times to pray for the Church. (See BCP pp 205, 256)

As the centuries circled, contours of our current calendar began to appear and the Ember Days receded. They remain little known and little observed but for postulants in the Church; for these are the days when they are required to write letters to check in with their bishops.

As noted in the Book of Common Prayer and on liturgical calendars, Ember Days are the Wednesday, Friday and Saturday after:

The First Sunday in Lent
The Day of Pentecost

Holy Cross Day, September 14
The Third Sunday in Advent