

Church festivals and Fasching festivities

Most people know that Fasching, the “fifth season”, begins on the 11th day of November at exactly 11 minutes after 11am and ends at the stroke of midnight on Shrove Tuesday. The word “shrove” derives from the verb “shrive”, meaning to obtain absolution for one's sins by way of Confession and doing penance. Thus, Shrove Tuesday was named after the custom of Christians to be “shriven” before the start of Lent, the 40-day period traditionally associated with **abstinence**.

Now, giving something up for **Lent** is a concept we are all familiar with. Another expression for Shrove Tuesday is **Pancake Day**, the day when cupboards would be emptied of sugar, fat and eggs. Some believe the four ingredients used in pancakes represent the four pillars of the Christian faith - flour as ‘the staff of life’, eggs as ‘creation’, milk as ‘purity’ and salt as ‘wholesomeness’. In similar vein and in other parts of the world, we find the term **Carnival** (“saying goodbye to meat”) and **Fat Tuesday** (the literal translation of **Mardi Gras**).

Immediately after Shrove Tuesday comes **Ash Wednesday**, when repentant Christians return to church to receive upon the forehead the sign of the cross in ashes. This year it falls on 26th February. This marks the start of **Lent**, the 40-day period of abstinence and reflection, commemorating the departure of Jesus for the wilderness, where he prayed and fasted.

As you know, or might suspect, Fasching or carnival celebrations take place before the liturgical (serious!) season of Lent. The big German carnival parades, predominantly in Catholic cities along the Rhine, for example, Cologne, Dusseldorf and Mainz, are held on Rosenmontag, or on Shrove Tuesday (**Faschingsdienstag**). Hours of television time are given over to street parades with painstakingly prepared floats, often with cheeky political messages, and colourful gatherings organized by carnival societies with witty speeches (**Büttenreden**), loud music and dance routines. This is having fun on a ginormous, industrial scale. Last year the Cologne parade was 6 kilometres long and lasted about three hours. 10,096 people took part, and there were 350 horse riders and 117 different bands. And it hardly seems possible, but 140 tonnes of sweets, 700,000 bars of chocolate, 220,000 boxes of chocolate, 300,000 bunches of flowers, and thousands of soft toys and other gift articles were given to the bystanders. And the total cost? About 2.3 million Euro.

In the south west of Germany there are other traditions, referred to as the so-called Swabian-Alemannic Fastnacht. I remember, a good few years ago,

travelling to Rottweil, a small town in the Black Forest, to experience a very different tradition to what is celebrated in the Rhineland. First, it isn't called Carnival here, but **Fastnacht**. The word is derived from Old High German *fasta* (fast) and *naht* (eve), because on Ash Wednesday the celebration ends, and the time of Lent begins. Thousands of visitors descend on the town to witness the **Narrensprünge** (jesters' jumps) and many people wear thinly carved, quite intimidating wooden masks (on the left).



Here in Erlangen, however, the picture on the right, things are on a much smaller scale. We simply talk about **Fasching**. Fasching costumes are everywhere, parades take place, children have a wonderful time, and the oldies either love it or hate it!

"Alaaf" or "Helau" or "Aha" to you all!

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