

## **A Bonus Day of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Happy Leap Day!

The elusive February 29<sup>th</sup> rolls around again this year, as it does in all years that are divisible by four – unless, oddly, they are years that are divisible by 100 but not by 400.

This quirky adjustment to the calendar has its origins in the astronomical reality that while ordinary years operate on the assumption that the earth takes 365 days to revolve around the sun, the reality is, inconveniently, not so neat. A solar year, in fact, takes about 365 days and six hours to complete.

In 1582, with the assistance of astronomers and mathematicians, Pope Gregory XIII tackled this problem by instituting the “Gregorian Calendar” still used today. He added a leap year every four years that would allow the calendar to “catch up” with astronomy. Adding an extra day quadrennially would compensate for the additional quarter day needed each year for the earth to rotate around the sun. This special day would right the wrong before it had much chance to wreak havoc with the ways we mark the seasons of the year and the orderly passage of time. While in any given year this six-hour discrepancy may not amount to a significant deviation, over time this could become significant. In a single life span of eighty years, this would shift the days of the year by twenty days – with a significant impact on the correlation of seasons and holidays to the months of the year

Because of its rarity, February 29<sup>th</sup> attracts attention, folklore and myths. “Leaplings” who celebrate their birthdays on February 29<sup>th</sup> have a special celebration this year. Happy birthday to you! The fact that February 29<sup>th</sup> falls on a Saturday will undoubtedly inspire leap-related festivities. Newspaper articles offer suggestions on how to make the most of the leap year, while some businesses have been advertising special promotions and events to mark this quadrennial event. There seems to be something in human nature that wants to celebrate days that are special, unique or different from other days.

This reality seems a bit more acute to me this year because “Leap Day” falls in the same week as Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. Because of this, the thought has crossed my mind that, in a very real way, Lent may be for our souls what Leap Day is for our calendars.

Leap Day is a special time to reset the clock of the world when, over time, it grows out of order and departs from what is ideal, perfect and good. Likewise, our journeys through life since last Lent may also have departed from what is ideal, perfect, and good. Maybe these departures have been small and easy to overlook – just like the six-hour annual discrepancy in counting our days. Yet, over time they can have a significant impact on our relationships with God and with each other. So, every year we are blessed with the season of Lent. It is the gift not merely of a single day to rest our calendars but of forty days to begin anew and to reset our hearts once again.

Every year, Lent is the opportunity to journey again toward Christ with a special season in which to do it. Lent – a word that literally means “spring” – is an annual chance to prepare for a new springtime for the soul when it has grown winter weary. It is a springtime that comes after a season to notice the things that may slowly be separating us from each other and from God. It is a chance to make those things right again through prayer, fasting, almsgiving – and through the ways that only our own hearts know.

A single special Leap Day helps right the misadventures in the way we mark our time. More importantly, the forty special days of Lent can help right the misadventures in the way we live our lives, imperfectly, in ordinary times.

*Wishing you a happy Leap Day ... and a blessed Lent.*

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