

The Liturgical Year: Living the life of Jesus

We are used to the ebb and flow of time which moves between seasons and holidays. Winter turns into spring, spring into summer, summer into fall, and fall into winter. Thanksgiving is always on the fourth Thursday of November and Labor Day the first Monday of September. Our life in the Church is no different from the flow of events and seasons we experience in the rest of our lives. Yet, within the church there are two cycles of events that occur: seasons and feasts. The seasons encompass a large span of time and set a tone for a series of weeks or period of time. Feasts are specific to a date. Seasons and feasts have their own character and importance in the life of the Church and for the faithful. The combination of seasons and feasts are included in what we call the liturgical year, namely the cycle of celebrations directly related to our liturgy or Mass.

Feasts:

The earliest Christians focused on Sunday as the primary day to celebrate the breaking of the bread and to honor the Lord on the day he rose from the dead. As Christianity progressed into the following decades, the Christians experienced the death of many of their number during the Roman persecutions. Those who gave their lives for the sake of Christ were considered martyrs. These martyrs, now venerated as those who gave their life for the faith, took on a new role for the earliest Christians. Not only were they respected and honored for their sacrifice, but the people would gather at their graves on the anniversary of their death and celebrate Mass on their graves. This practice led to two common practices in the modern day church: keeping relics of the saints in the altars and the practice of daily Mass.

Daily Masses arose out of a desire to celebrate more than the life of Christ on Sunday but to honor the martyrs and saints as well as the other lesser important events of Jesus' life. The calendar became full of different celebrations with varying degrees of importance.

Solemnities: these days include Sundays and the most important events in the life of Jesus or for the faithful. Some examples include: Peter and Paul, The Annunciation, St. Joseph, and Mary, Mother of God. These days take precedence over any other celebration with the exception of the events of Holy Week.

Feasts: less important days but still significant in the life of the Church are feast days. These days rarely trump a Sunday. Some of the important feasts include: The Presentation, Holy Innocents, and St. Stephen.

Memorials: these days are a catch all for anything or anyone worth celebrating. Some memorials are optional, meaning they are significant to some parts of the world but not all, and some are obligatory, meaning necessary to be celebrated by the whole church. The vast majority of memorials are the celebration of saints.

Votive Masses: a rank below memorials and completely optional, the church set aside each day of the week to focus on people of significance. Mondays are the Holy Spirit, Tuesday are the angels, Wednesdays are St. Joseph, Thursdays are the priesthood or the Eucharist, Fridays are the Sacred Heart, and Saturdays are the Blessed Virgin Mary. Although completely optional, they

can only be celebrated on a day without an obligatory memorial or greater. Another class of votive Masses are situational. The church realized the importance of bringing the needs of the place, state, society, and world into the Mass so she created a series of votive Masses that respond to the needs of the time, i.e. planting and reaping crops, peace, justice, or civil needs.

Ferial day: these are ordinary days with no specific feast attached to them.

Colors: the church employs seven colors to add festivity but also to recognize the dignity and meaning of the day or the season. Green is for Ordinary Time or ferial days. White is for memorials of saints, Christmas, Easter, funerals, weddings, baptisms, and festive days. Red is for memorials of martyrs, confirmation, and days recognizing the Holy Spirit. Purple is for penitential days, funerals, Advent, and Lent. Rose (pink) is for the 3rd Sunday of Advent and the 4th Sunday of Lent. Black is for funerals and All Souls Day. Gold can substitute for almost any color on any day.

Seasons:

The Liturgical Year includes six seasons. One of these seasons is rather small and does not contain the same characteristics as the other five.

Advent: the Liturgical Year begins with the season of Advent. Advent encompasses the days starting from four Sundays before Christmas until the day before Christmas. The signs of this season include the color purple, the advent wreath, and candles. The focus of Advent is preparation and waiting with the central virtue of hope. We hope for the savior to come, we hope for the final restoration of all things in Christ, and we hope for his second coming. Each Sunday of Advent has a central theme or focus that aids in recognizing the purpose of Advent: 1st Sunday – prophesy, 2nd Sunday – Preparation, 3rd Sunday – Joy, 4th Sunday – love. During the Sundays and weekdays of Advent, the central readings come from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, who predicted the coming of the Messiah.

The Advent wreath and the candles are critically important for the celebration of the season. Not only are the wreath and candles used in homes but also as part of the Masses on each Sunday. The four candles of the Advent wreath correspond to the four Sundays of Advent. The lighting of the candles shows the progression of time leading up to the epic end of Advent, Christmas. The church gives two options for the colors of the candles: four blue, or three purple and one pink or rose. The four blue candles are a newer tradition practiced in very few locations that keep the color consistent for the four Sundays of Advent. The older tradition is the use of three purple and one pink candle. The pink candle represents the halfway point in the season, the third Sunday. This helps people to grow in anticipation for the coming of Christmas and make the appropriate preparations.

The majority of the Season of Advent is basically the same, until December 17th. The final eight days until Christmas are marked in a special way as we celebrate the final days of the season. These days are called the “O Antiphons” which relate to the eight stanzas of “O Come O Come Emmanuel” and the major eight names given to the Messiah that reflect the prophecies about the Messiah. The Gloria is not said during Advent.

Christmas: The season of Christmas encompasses the day of Christmas until the Baptism of our Lord. From December 25th to January 1st is called the Octave of Christmas. These eight days, from which the name octave is derived, are treated with the same importance and heightened celebration as Christmas Day. The final day of the Octave, January 1st, ends the octave and reflects back upon the significance of Christmas. January 1st is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, which directly informed our understanding of Christmas. If a Sunday falls between Christmas and January 1st, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. After January 1st, we celebrate two more major events: Epiphany and the Baptism of our Lord. In the calendars prior to the Second Vatican Council, the feast of Epiphany was always celebrated on January 6th. Now the Feast of Epiphany is celebrated on the Sunday following January 1st. The older calendar also extended the Christmas season until February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the final event of the Infancy narratives. Now the Season of Christmas ends with the Baptism of our Lord, which is celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany.

The main symbols of Christmas are the nativity scene and the color white.

Lent: The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues for six weeks (40 days not including Sundays) until the eve of Holy Saturday. Lent is marked by simplicity, penance, and preparation. The three marks of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The season begins with the marking with ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of entrance into the season and the season of penance. Normally people choose a devotional practice for the season of Lent such as giving up sweets or not watching TV or praying more. The original intention of Lent was two-fold: preparation for Easter and to help the Catechumens who are preparing to enter the Church.

The six Sundays of Lent have their specific focus or theme as they aid those who are interested in entering the Church to progress to the final day. The 1st Sunday – sin and temptation, 2nd Sunday – Transfiguration, recognizing who Jesus is, 3rd Sunday – prayer and thirsting for Jesus, 4th Sunday – faith, 5th Sunday – resurrection from the dead, 6th Sunday or Passion/ Palm Sunday – the death of Jesus. The final Sunday of Lent is marked by the use of palm branches. This particular Sunday begins what is called Holy Week. We begin on Palm/ Passion Sunday with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem for his passion and death, we follow the final events of Jesus' life, and we end with the Resurrection. Like the 3rd Sunday of Advent, the color of the 4th Sunday of Lent is also rose marking the half-way point of the season.

During the season of Lent, memorials and votive Masses are forbidden. The use of the Gloria and the word Alleluia is also forbidden in order to fast from them so that they return with greater joy at Easter.

The Sacred Triduum: although it is technically a season, it does not have the characteristics common of the other seasons such as a specific color or focus. The Sacred Triduum encompasses the three days that Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead. The Triduum, or three days, begins on the eve of Holy Thursday, continues through Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and ends the evening of Easter Sunday.

Easter: The season of Easter begins Easter Sunday and continues for 7 weeks until the Feast of Pentecost. The eight days from Easter Sunday to Divine Mercy Sunday are called the Octave of

Easter. Like the Octave of Christmas, these eight days are celebrated as though they were Easter. The final day, Divine Mercy Sunday, was inaugurated by St. Pope John Paul II as way of recognizing and emphasizing God's mercy evident in Jesus' rising from the dead. Before this change, it was called Whit Sunday. After being baptized and clothed in white garments, the newly baptized wore these garments until Whit Sunday when they could take them off for the first time and become part of the community.

The date of Easter is becoming increasingly controversial. For many centuries the date of Easter was set on the 14th of Nissan, the day of the Jewish calendar on which Jesus rose from the dead. The reform of the calendar in the 6th century focused on Sundays as the day that Jesus rose from the dead and the primary day of the week. Thus Easter was fixed to the day of Sunday but moved with the changing calendars. Now, Easter is always the first Sunday following the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox (March 21st). From that date, Lent is calculated by counting back six weeks and four days to mark the date for Ash Wednesday.

Easter is marked by lilies and the color white. Easter is rather simple compared to the other seasons. Only three days are significant in the 50 days of Easter: Divine Mercy Sunday, Ascension Sunday, and Pentecost. Ascension Sunday was originally celebrated 40 days after Easter but recently moved to Sunday for convenience. Pentecost is always 50 days after Easter and celebrated with the color red.

Ordinary Time: prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the entire year centered on the two major feasts of Christmas and Easter. The weeks following the Christmas Season and before the start of Lent were called the "pre-lent weeks." The Second Vatican Council saw value in time and having a season of joy and life. For this reason we now have the season of Ordinary Time, which encompasses all the days that are not in another season. This includes the weeks between the end of the Christmas Season and before Lent and the days after the end of the Easter Season until the start of Advent. The color of this season is green signifying life.

Although Ordinary Time is rather basic and meant to encompass the rest of the nonseason-based time, many major celebrations are part of this season. Most of the major solemnities and feasts occur during Ordinary Time as well as the memorials for the saints. For example the two Sundays following Pentecost are Ordinary Time even though they follow from Easter. These Sundays are Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi or the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the largest season with 34 weeks.

Why such a complicated cycle of events?

The point of the Liturgical Year and the calendar of events is to walk through and celebrate the life of Jesus. The four major seasons focus on pivotal aspects of his life helping us to journey through the changing emotions as the year changes. These seasons also focus on the most important aspects of his life helping us to constantly call them to mind and celebrate them. The rest of the year reminds us of the many ways in which God works through the people of every age through the celebrations of the saints. The goal in all of this is to reflect on the life of Christ and the many things he has done.