

# THE LITURGICAL YEAR:

## AN ANNUAL CYCLE OF THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIST, MARY AND THE SAINTS

THE CHURCH has established a way for the faithful to remember, celebrate, and live today the events of Christ's life on earth. By developing a special calendar, the Church gives us periodic reminders to keep our faith alive and inspire us to grow deeper in our love for Christ with the passing years. In the celebration of special days, the Church helps us to redeem the gift of time.

Like the four seasons, the Church year follows a cycle. There is indeed a natural ebb and flow to the spiritual life of the Church. In accordance with the motions of human nature, the Church year gradually unfolds the mysteries of Christ's life, repeating the cycle each year. Beginning with the immense anticipation of the Incarnation during the season of Advent, and the celebration of the Incarnation during the Christmas season, the Church remembers and celebrates Christ's public ministry; his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension; the coming of the Holy Spirit to the infant Church at Pentecost; and the ever-present hope for the coming of his reign as the King of Kings.

### A brief history and explanation of the Liturgical Calendar

The Church calendar has always revolved around the celebration of Easter and the mystery of Redemption. Easter was the first annual feast celebrated by the early Christians and the only feast the Church celebrated for the first three hundred years. The feast of Christmas was recorded as initially being celebrated in 335-336 AD. Over the centuries, the Church developed many special festival days to praise and worship God and celebrate his loving intervention in human history. In the early centuries, local church communities also remembered those who heroically witnessed to their faith especially the martyrs. Thus, the powerful example of the martyrs was elevated before the eyes of all the faithful, and their courageous testimony was remembered. Pope Pius V compiled a universal Church calendar in 1568, which was based on local church calendars. It was not until 1589 that the term "Church year" was first used. By 1955, the feast days of 338 saints were highlighted by the calendar. Vatican II established new norms for recognizing feast days and provided the simplified calendar that the Church uses today.

### A Description of the Liturgical Calendar

The liturgical calendar contains two cycles. The first is called the temporal Cycle and includes all Sundays and feasts of our Lord. Every Sunday is a renewed celebration of Christ's Resurrection from the dead; indeed, the Lord's Day is "a little Easter". We honor the Lord on this holy day by prayerfully participating in the Mass, spending time with our families and with those who are in need, and by avoiding unnecessary hard work and labor (see CCC 2186). Some of the feast days which are set aside to honor the Lord include the feasts of the Baptism of the Lord, Corpus Christi (the Body and Blood of Christ) the Transfiguration, Christ the King, and the Sacred Heart. These are special days of solemnity and celebration.

The second cycle in the liturgical calendar is called the Sanctoral Cycle and includes the feast days of the Virgin Mary, the martyrs, and the saints. Martyrs' feast days were developed in local churches as a way to honor those holy men and women who were persecuted and died for their faith. The Church community celebrates their martyrdom as their birth into the glory of eternal life. Later on, those who suffered for confessing the faith (confessors) were honored, as were holy virgins and other holy men and women, both lay and clergy. Amidst the feast days that commemorate the lives of the saints, there are

special days that honor the Queen of the Saints, the Mother of God. Some of the Marian feast days include the feasts of Mary the Mother of God, the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

There are three distinct levels for ranking the feast days in the Church.

A solemnity is the liturgical celebration of the highest rank that commemorates an event, a person, or a belief of the greatest significance and universal importance in salvation history. Examples of solemnities include Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Christ the King, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the Solemnity of St. Joseph.

A feast is also a liturgical celebration of great importance but is of a lower rank than a solemnity. Special feasts include the feasts of the Holy Family, the Baptism of the Lord, the Transfiguration, and the Birth of Mary.

The lowest rank of a feast day is a memorial. Some examples of memorials are those of the Guardian Angels, of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and of the saints (such as St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Therese of Lisieux).

**Holy days of obligation** (also known as feasts of precept) are days when the faithful are obliged to participate at Mass and abstain from unnecessary work or other activities which hinder the suitable relaxation of mind and body. Each Sunday is a holy day of obligation, and six Solemnities are also observed as feasts of precept in the United States.

January 1, the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter, the solemnity of the Ascension

August 15, the solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

November 1, the solemnity of All Saints

December 8, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

December 25, the solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Whenever January 1, the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, or August 15, the solemnity of the Assumption, or November 1, the solemnity of All Saints, falls on a Saturday or on a Monday, the precept to attend Mass is abrogated.

## THE LITURGICAL YEAR IS MADE UP OF SIX SEASONS:

### Advent

Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year and lasts between three and four weeks. It is a season filled with tremendous hope and anticipation as we await expectantly the Second Coming of the Lord. It is also a penitential season in which we repent for our sins and reform our lives so that we are ready to meet him when he comes. Through the liturgy, we share in the hope of the Jewish people; our anticipation resembles theirs as they waited for the coming of the Messiah. Toward the end of Advent, we remember again the events surrounding the Lord's birth and prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christmas. In the Advent liturgy, the whole Church cries out, "Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus, come!" (see Revelation 22:20).

Theme: Joyful expectation, penance, reform, hope.

### Christmas

During the Christmas season, we celebrate the birth of Christ our Savior and the events of his early childhood. We stand in awe of the God Man, the Word made flesh, who came to save us. We never tire of pondering the greatest event in human history the moment that Divine Love assumed the form of a human being. "And the word became flesh and dwelled among us" (Jn 1:14).

Theme: Joy, peace, Christ as the Light of the World, the Incarnation.

### Lent

Lent is the period of forty days that precede the holiest days of the year (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter). It is a time of preparation, of renewed repentance of—our sins and a new returning to God. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fasting and abstinence (fasting means we make a significant sacrifice in the amount of food we eat; abstinence means we abstain from meat), Fridays during Lent are days of abstinence.

Theme: Prayer, penance, sacrifice.

### Sacred Paschal Triduum - Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday

The holiest "Three Days" of the Church's year, where the Christian people recall the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

### Easter

The Easter season is 50 days of joyful celebration of the Lord's resurrection from the dead and his sending forth of the Holy Spirit. Through the proclamation of the Word in the liturgy we relive once more the miraculous events of that first Easter Sunday. The tomb is empty! Christ has risen from the dead, conquering it. It is because of the Resurrection of Christ that we need no longer fear death - if we live in Christ, we shall also rise from death. Forty days after Easter we celebrate his Ascension into Heaven, Ten days later we commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

Theme: New life in Christ, light, Christian victory.

## Ordinary Time

Ordinary time is divided into two sections (one span of 4-8 weeks after Christmas Time and another lasting about six months after Easter Time), wherein the faithful consider the fullness of Jesus' teachings and works among his people

During this season, we remember God's plan in salvation history and his covenant with his people. There are thirty-four weeks of ordinary time, a few between the end of the Christmas season and Lent, and the remainder following Pentecost through the end of the liturgical year.

Theme: Growth, journey in Christ.

Liturgical Color: Green