

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

*The appointed feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim as holy convocations,  
my appointed feasts, are these. ~ Leviticus 23:2*

**T**HE CHURCH has established a way for the faithful to remember, celebrate, and live today the events of Christ's life on earth. She offers a way to sanctify (make holy) every moment of every day through the celebration of the Mass and the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours. 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 Year

The Church calendar has always revolved around the celebration of Easter and the



*White vestments denote special times of celebration in the life of Church such as Easter and Christmas*

mystery of the 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.

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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

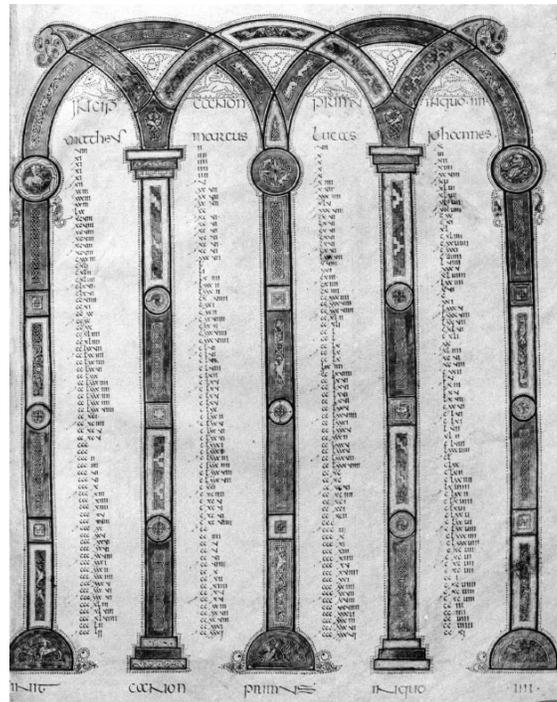
The liturgical calendar contains two cycles. The first is called the *Temporal Cycle* and includes all Sundays and feasts of our Lord. Every Sunday is a renewed celebration of Christ's Resurrection from the dead; indeed, the Lord's Day is "a little Easter." We honor the Lord on this holy day by prayerfully 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 cel-

ebration 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. Thérèse of Lisieux).

*"The Lord's Day is a little Easter."*



*Illuminated List of the Gospels, 8th century, St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, England*

### The Liturgical 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 Rv 22:20).

**Themes:** Joyful expectation, penance, reform, hope.

**Liturgical Color:** Purple.

**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 hu-

man history, the moment that Divine Love assumed the form of a human being. *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”* (Jn 1:14).

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

*Liturgical Color:* White.

**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 turning 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.

*Themes:* Prayer, penance, sacrifice.

*Liturgical Color:* Purple.

**Easter:** 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.

*Themes:* New life in Christ, light, Christian victory.

*Liturgical Color:* White (red for Pentecost).

**Ordinary Time:** 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.

*Themes:* Growth, journey in Christ.

*Liturgical Color:* Green.

### Holy Days of Obligation

In addition to every Sunday, there are other days in which the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharistic celebration. These days are called holy



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days of obligation and attending Mass on these days is required. These holy days commemorate Christian mysteries of profound and universal importance. There are six holy days (listed in the order they occur in the liturgical year:

*December 8*, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

*December 25*, Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord

*January 1*, Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God

*Ascension Thursday* (Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord), forty days after Easter Sunday unless the bishop transfers it to the last Sunday before Pentecost

*August 15*, Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

*November 1*, Solemnity of All Saints.

(CCC 1163-1173)

*“The Church year gradually unfolds  
the mysteries of Christ’s life.”*