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## THE LITURGICAL YEAR

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*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” – Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NABRE)*

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The **Liturgical Year** is the annual cycle or calendar through which the Church relives the saving mysteries of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This cycle of seasons, feasts, and solemnities is not arranged strictly in historical order but thematically, guiding the faithful through different aspects of Christ's work of salvation. By celebrating these mysteries in a prayerful way, Catholics are invited to enter more deeply into the meaning and grace of Christ's saving acts.

Through various seasons, the Church nurtures the faithful's spiritual growth by encouraging them to engage in traditional practices such as prayer, fasting, works of penance, and acts of mercy. Each season has its own focus and character, such as repentance in Lent or joyful celebration during Easter, helping form the faithful throughout the Liturgical Year.

The Liturgical Year also serves as a sacramental encounter with Christ's redeeming power. What Jesus accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection is re-presented to the faithful throughout the year. Through the Church's liturgical ministry, these mysteries are made present to us, allowing Catholics to experience and participate in the redemptive work of Christ today.

The **RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults)** integrates catechumens and the entire Christian community into this journey of conversion, celebrated through the feasts and seasons of the Liturgical Year. Catechumens, or those preparing for initiation into the Church, are introduced to the life of Christ through their experience of the Liturgical Year, especially as it culminates in the Easter Vigil, where they receive the Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

Historically, a catechumen was someone in the early Church who was preparing for initiation into the sacred mysteries through instruction and spiritual formation. Today, the term continues to apply to those receiving pastoral guidance as they prepare to fully participate in the Christian life through the sacraments.

Throughout the Liturgical Year, different aspects of the one **Paschal Mystery**—Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection—are unfolded for the faithful's contemplation and participation. In addition to this central mystery, the Church also celebrates the **mystery of the Incarnation**—the beginning of our redemption—with feasts such as the Annunciation, Christmas, and Epiphany. The seasons surrounding the Incarnation, especially Advent, prepare the faithful to welcome Christ in both His first coming and His anticipated return in glory.

In each season, the Church brings the faithful into closer union with Christ, offering them His redeeming power and guiding them through the mysteries of salvation. Through this journey, Catholics grow in holiness, deepen their relationship with God, and are continually renewed in faith, hope, and love.

## **Liturgical Seasons**

The Liturgical Year is structured around distinct liturgical seasons, each reflecting different aspects of the mystery of Christ:

- **Advent** begins with the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends on the evening of December 24. It is a season of preparation and anticipation for the coming of Christ.
- **Christmas Time** begins with Christmas and continues through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which typically falls on the Sunday after Epiphany.
- **Lent** begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes with the beginning of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening.
- **The Easter Triduum** begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes on Easter Sunday evening.
- **Easter Time** spans the fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost and is celebrated as a single, continuous season of rejoicing in the Resurrection.
- **Ordinary Time** encompasses thirty-three or thirty-four weeks outside of these major seasons. During Ordinary Time, the Church reflects on the life and teachings of Christ, emphasizing growth in the Christian life rather than a particular mystery of redemption.

### **Advent And Easter**

The Liturgical Year is organized around two major cycles: **Advent/Christmas** and **Lent/Easter**, with **Ordinary Time** occurring in between. Each of these cycles has a time of preparation (Advent and Lent) and a time of celebration (Christmas and Easter), allowing for a rhythm of conversion and rejoicing throughout the year.

The central event of the Liturgical Year is the **Easter Triduum**—the three days of **Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter**. As the Catechism describes, “Beginning with the Easter Triduum as its source of light, the resurrection of Christ fills the whole liturgical year with its brilliance. Gradually, on either side of the Easter Triduum, the entire year is transfigured by the liturgy” (CCC 1168). These three days lead us through the core mysteries of our salvation: the Passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. As Saint Athanasius called Easter the “Great Sunday,” it is recognized as the “Feast of feasts,” or the most solemn and central feast of the Church.

**Lent** begins on Ash Wednesday and serves as a season of repentance, fasting, and almsgiving in preparation for Easter. For catechumens, it is a time of spiritual preparation in anticipation of receiving the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. The Easter season, which begins with Easter Sunday and continues through Pentecost, celebrates the victory of Christ over death and the gift of new life.

The **Christmas cycle** begins with **Advent**, a season of hope and anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. Advent culminates in the celebration of **Christmas**, marking the

Incarnation—God becoming man in Jesus Christ. The Christmas season includes additional feasts, such as the Feast of the Holy Family, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord, each celebrating different aspects of Christ’s birth and early life.

Each liturgical season is visibly marked by changes in **vestments and church decorations**. Liturgical colors reflect the season’s focus: purple for Advent and Lent, white or gold for Christmas and Easter, red for Pentecost and feasts of martyrs, and green for Ordinary Time, symbolizing growth and hope. These changes in color and decor invite the faithful into the unique spirit of each season, helping to highlight the joy, solemnity, or penitential nature of the time.

This structure allows the faithful to journey through the life of Christ and the mysteries of faith, deepening their relationship with God and continually drawing them closer to the heart of the Paschal Mystery.

### **Solemnities, Feasts, and Memorials**

Solemnities, Feasts, and Memorials are special celebrations within the Liturgical Year that honor the mysteries of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints, each with varying levels of importance.

#### **Holy Days and Special Cycles**

In addition to the main liturgical seasons, the Church’s calendar includes feast days, holy days, and cycles dedicated to Christ, Mary, and the saints. These days honor significant events in salvation history, mysteries of faith, and individuals who serve as models of Christian life.

#### **Holy Days of Obligation**

Holy Days of Obligation are specific feast days on which Catholics are required to attend Mass. While all Sundays are considered holy days of obligation, additional holy days vary by country. In the United States, they include:

- Christmas (December 25)
- Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1)
- Ascension Thursday (date varies)
- Assumption of Mary (August 15)
- All Saints Day (November 1)
- Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8)

These holy days focus on key mysteries of Christ’s life and Mary’s role in salvation, as well as the communion of saints.

#### **Universal and Local Celebrations of Saints**

Certain saints with universal significance, like St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, St. Peter, and St. Paul, are celebrated throughout the entire Church. Other saints, important to particular regions or communities, may have optional celebrations. Local observances, such as those of national patrons, vary by country or religious community.

### **Types of Celebrations**

Liturgical celebrations are distinguished by their level of importance, and each type has specific liturgical elements:

- **Solemnities:** The most important celebrations, Solemnities honor central mysteries of faith, such as the Resurrection, the Assumption, and the Trinity. They often begin with a Vigil Mass on the evening before and include the Gloria and the Creed. Some, like Christmas, have multiple Masses with unique readings (Christmas Eve, Mass at Dawn, and Mass during the day).
- **Feasts:** Feasts commemorate important events in the lives of Jesus, Mary, and major saints. They are celebrated within the regular liturgical day (from midnight to midnight) and include special prayers and readings appropriate to the event or saint.
- **Memorials:** Memorials honor saints or events of lesser prominence. They may be **Obligatory** or **Optional** and are often combined with the weekday celebration. Memorials allow flexibility for local customs and devotions.

### **Liturgical Colors and Decorations**

The significance of each celebration is also reflected in liturgical colors and decorations. For example, purple or violet is used for penitential seasons like Advent and Lent, while white or gold is used for Solemnities and major Feasts. During Ordinary Time, green is used to symbolize growth and hope. Red is used for the feasts of martyrs and Pentecost, signifying the Holy Spirit and sacrifice.

This structured hierarchy of Solemnities, Feasts, and Memorials enriches the Liturgical Year, guiding the faithful to honor Christ, Mary, and the saints in a way that deepens their understanding of the faith and inspires devotion.

### **Sunday Mass**

Sunday Mass is central to the Church's liturgical life as the weekly celebration of Christ's Resurrection. From Apostolic times, Sunday, known as the Lord's Day, has been observed as a memorial of the Resurrection, symbolizing the "new creation" that began through Christ's victory over sin and death. This tradition, passed down from the Apostles, forms the foundation of Sunday as a holy day.

Sunday Mass is the foremost holy day of obligation, and it stands at the heart of Catholic worship. Each Sunday, the faithful gather to celebrate the Paschal Mystery, making it a

cornerstone of Catholic spiritual life and fulfilling the commandment to keep the Lord's Day holy.

Due to its significance, the celebration of Sunday is only replaced by Solemnities or Feasts of the Lord. However, the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter Time take precedence over all Solemnities and Feasts, reflecting the unique focus of these liturgical seasons. Solemnities that fall on these Sundays are transferred to the following Monday, preserving both the solemnity of the feast and the integrity of these special Sunday observances.

### **Weekday Mass**

Each day of the week is sanctified by the liturgical celebrations of God's people, especially through the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours), which marks each hour of the day with prayer. The liturgical day typically runs from midnight to midnight, but observances of Sundays and Solemnities begin on the evening of the preceding day, following the ancient tradition of marking a day from evening to evening.

Weekday celebrations vary in importance, with some days holding greater liturgical prominence than others:

- **Ash Wednesday** and the days of **Holy Week** from Monday through Thursday are of significant liturgical importance and take precedence over other weekday celebrations.
- The **weekdays of Advent** from December 17 through December 24, as well as all weekdays of **Lent**, take precedence over Obligatory Memorials.
- **Solemnities** and **Feasts** are celebrated with greater importance than other weekdays and Memorials, marking events of central importance in the Church's calendar.

### **The Lectionary**

The **Lectionary** is a liturgical book that contains selected portions of the Bible organized for specific days throughout the year. It provides readings for Sundays, major feasts, and daily Masses, guiding the Church through a cycle of Scripture that reflects the seasons and themes of the Liturgical Year.

The Church follows a **three-year Sunday cycle** (Years A, B, and C) and a **two-year daily cycle** (Years I and II). On Sundays, the cycle emphasizes the Gospels: Year A focuses on Matthew, Year B on Mark, and Year C on Luke, with readings from the Gospel of John woven into important seasons such as Lent and Easter. This structure allows the faithful to encounter the primary narratives and teachings of each Gospel over three years.

While the Lectionary includes extensive portions of the Bible, it does not encompass the entire text. Instead, it is curated to convey the central story of salvation, providing Catholics with a broad but selective experience of Scripture in the context of worship. This focus helps guide the faithful through the key events and teachings of salvation history as part of the Church's liturgical celebration.

Sources

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