

The Liturgical Year - Catholic Holidays and Traditions

The liturgical year is made up of six seasons: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Sacred Paschal Triduum, Easter, and Ordinary Time. Additionally, Catholics follow a yearly liturgical calendar that highlights certain feast days, saints, and holy days of obligation.

Advent

Advent is the start of each liturgical year, and it encompasses the four Sundays leading up to the celebration of Christmas, or the birth of Christ. It is a season of waiting and preparation in which we open our minds and hearts to Christ's second coming and to the anniversary of His birth. We use the Advent wreath to mark each week leading up to the birth of Christ.

Christmas

The significance of Christmas for Catholics is enormous, second only to Easter, as we celebrate God becoming flesh. We recognize that He chose to become one of us - or Transcendent - and Immanent, with us as we rise toward Him. Christmas begins with Christmas Eve Masses (vigil Masses) and concludes on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (generally at the end of the first week of January). We also remember during Christmas that He chose to be born so that he could die for us, foreshadowing the next liturgical seasons.

Lent

Lent is a six week portion of the liturgical year that begins anytime from early February (on a Wednesday known as Ash Wednesday) to mid-March generally. Ash Wednesday is a day marked by prayer, fasting, and repentance, much like Lent itself. During Lent, we turn our focus more thoughtfully to prayer and Scripture, to service by almsgiving, and to sacrifice through fasting. Lent is a return to what we should already be doing throughout the year - regular Confession, giving to others, prayer, and abstaining from things to "offer them up" to God instead of enjoying or using them. In this way, we reflect on our sacramental commitments through Baptism, Communion, Reconciliation, etc., and renew our vows. Those converting to Catholicism receive their Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) during this time, as well. The key to understanding Lent is Baptism; we are renewing our Baptism and opening our hearts to Jesus, so that we might truly follow Him.

During Lent you will notice Catholics abstain from meat on Fridays (and indulge in the weekly fish fry!) and also devote themselves to the Stations of the Cross to prepare for the Triduum. On Palm Sunday we remember in particular Jesus' triumphant return to Jerusalem, just six days before his death, and the way palms were scattered in His path.

Triduum

The Liturgical Year hits its highest point at the Easter Triduum, which is from Holy Thursday to the evening of Easter Sunday. These days are a unit that help Catholics understand the mystery of Christ. We begin with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday evening, which is like Jesus' last supper; some parishes perform the washing of the feet, just as Jesus did. Good Friday of the Lord's Passion is marked with a service and typically the Veneration of the Cross, in which Catholics worship the cross to remember that during that day Jesus died for us. Good Friday is for Catholics a dark day, when we try to place our hearts with Jesus as He suffered. But the good news is coming! The Mass of the Resurrection of the Lord, at the Easter Vigil, is the glorious celebration that Jesus has risen; He is out of pain and has thrown open wide the doors of heaven for the rest of us to one day enter. From here, we enter Easter Time.

Easter

Easter is the 50 days from the first Sunday (Easter Sunday, a celebration of the Lord's Resurrection) to Pentecost. Easter is about joy, pure and simple! It is the most important of all the liturgical year because it represents the ultimate goal - to get to heaven and to live forever in His light. The word "Easter" is Old English and means "East" as in where the sun rises and brings light and warmth as Jesus did to the world. Forty days into Easter, we have the Ascension, in which Christ rose to heaven. Pentecost - at 50 days - represents the time when the Holy Spirit (the third part of the Holy Trinity) descended to the disciples and converted their hearts from doubt to unapologetic faith.

Ordinary Time

Ordinary Time takes us all the way from Pentecost to Advent (and pops in again after Christmas and before Lent), and is simply the telling of the story of the life of Christ. It takes its name not from being ordinary, but instead from the Latin ordinalis, which refers to numbers in a series, and the thirty-three to thirty-four weeks of ordinary time are numbered as such.

Other Days You May Notice

1. Days devoted to Mary. Mary the Mother of God holds a special place in the Catholic faith. We believe she was conceived without sin, meaning, unlike every other human, Mary was born without original sin and therefore did not need baptism. The month of May is devoted to Mary, and we celebrate her at the May crowning, when new First Communicants adorn her with flowers.
2. Feast Days! Every saint of the Catholic Church has a feast day. During this day, those devoted to those saints might honor their work or spirit in some way or celebrate them. Some Catholic families name their children after saints and celebrate these saints on their feast days.

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