

# THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR

The Church uses the liturgical year to order her celebrations, especially the Mass, along the lines of the mysteries of our redemption, centered on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, as well as His return in glory. The liturgical year has five seasons, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time, with Ordinary Time divided into two parts. And throughout the year, there are special days that celebrate the saints and great events of the life of Christ and of salvation history. This article will describe the liturgical calendar and its seasons and special days, as well as the colors associated with those days.

## I. THE LITURGICAL SEASONS

The liturgical year begins with Advent, which is the 22 to 28 days just before Christmas. During this time, the Church focuses on the preparation of the Chosen People of old for the coming of the Messiah, and our on our own preparation to welcome Jesus into our lives, now and at the end of all things on earth. Advent, which continues from the fourth Sunday before Christmas to the day before Christmas, is followed by the Christmas season, during which we celebrate the birth and early years of Jesus and joy at His enduring presence. The Christmas season begins on Christmas Eve and is marked with celebrations for such feasts as that of the Holy Family; the Epiphany, when the magi came to visit Jesus; and the Baptism of the Lord, which launched Jesus' public ministry. The feast of the Baptism of the Lord is usually celebrated on the Sunday after January 6 (the traditional day for the Epiphany), concludes the Christmas season and prepares for Ordinary Time.

The concept of "Ordinary Time" comes from the Latin words *ordinarius* and *ordinatus*, which imply a time that is steady, orderly, and even rhythmic. The first part of Ordinary Time begins after the Christmas season and continues until Lent; and the second part of Ordinary Time begins after the Easter season and continues until Advent. It thus consists of thirty-three or thirty-four weeks, depending on how long the Advent and Christmas seasons are. The Scriptural readings at Mass during Ordinary Time describe the public ministry of Jesus from the time of His Baptism to the final confrontation with dark powers that led to His Crucifixion and then Resurrection. And there is a focus on the steady, ordered growth of the Christian life, both for each person and for the whole Church.

In between the two parts of Ordinary Time, and surrounding the highest point of the year are the Lenten and Easter seasons. The

Lenten season derives its name from the Latin word *lentus*, which means slow, tough and enduring. Beginning with Ash Wednesday and continuing 40 days (not including Sundays) through midday on Holy Thursday, Lent focuses on the final days of Christ's life leading up to His Crucifixion and especially on His sacrifice for us. That season calls for us to discipline our desires and comforts, focus more on prayer and charity, and so join more fully in Christ's self-sacrificing love for us and the world. Concluding Lent and beginning Easter is the Triduum, the highest time of the year. The Triduum goes from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening through Easter Sunday. During the Triduum we celebrate the central events of history, Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection, as well as the Eucharist that makes them present. Starting with the Easter Vigil and continuing 50 days through the Feast of Pentecost (when the Holy Spirit came in power to the first Christians) the Easter season focuses on the Resurrection and the early Church and calls for a joy and sense of mission with the risen Christ, anticipating everlasting glory in heaven.

## II. SACRED DAYS

Within the broad seasons are sacred days to celebrate different aspects of our faith. These days are of varying importance, but knowledge of all of them is helpful in plumbing the depths of our faith. The highest of all days in the Church year are the Easter Triduum, that is the time from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday. On these days, we celebrate the central events of all history: the death of Christ on Good Friday, His time among the dead on Holy Saturday, and His glorious Resurrection on Easter Sunday, all of which are commemorated and made present in the Eucharist and the Mass, which were established at the Last Supper that we celebrate on Holy Thursday night.

Next in line are the solemnities, glorious days of celebration and prayer. There are sixteen solemnities on the universal calendar, of which the highest are: Christmas, Epiphany (celebrating the arrival of the Magi before Jesus), the Ascension, which occurs on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of Easter, and Pentecost, which closes out the Easter season 10 days later. The other twelve universal solemnities are the celebrations of: Mary, the Mother of God (January 1); St. Joseph (March 19); the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary and the Incarnation of Christ (March 25); the Holy Trinity; Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Eucharist; the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the last three of which occur during the three weeks after Pentecost); the birth of John the Baptist (June 24); Saints Peter and Paul (June 29); the Assumption of Mary into heaven (August 15); All Saints' Day (November 1); Christ the King (the last Sunday before Advent); and the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8.) In addition, the memorial days for the main patron saint of a country, parish or religious order can be elevated to a solemnity for that parish or order. Thus, for example, St. Rita's day on May 22 can be a solemnity in this parish.

The next highest day is a feast day, which celebrates a particularly prominent saint or event in the life of Christ, Mary or the Church. Thus, for example, the days for all of the Apostles, some of the earliest martyrs, and the archangels are feasts, as are celebrations the Presentation, Baptism and Transfiguration of Christ, the Birth of Mary, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the conversion of St. Paul and the dedication of the Lateran Basilica, the mother church of Christendom. In addition, the day for the patron saint or saints of a diocese, an area or a religious order, or the anniversary of the dedication of a diocese's cathedral, can be a feast day. Thus, for example, Saints Thomas More and Elizabeth Ann Seton are the patrons for the Diocese of Arlington and thus their days can be celebrated as feasts here.

Most saints' days are memorials, as are the days for such devotions as the Immaculate Heart of Mary or the Rosary. However, if a saints' day occurs during the holy seasons of Advent or Lent, it is combined with the theme for that season and called a commemoration. Memorials can be obligatory or optional. If a memorial is obligatory, Masses and other liturgies of that day usually must celebrate that saint or devotion, with exceptions such as weddings, Confirmations, or funerals. If a memorial is optional it may be celebrated. In addition to memorials on the general calendar, specific places have memorials for special saints or blessed. Thus, for example, in the United States, we celebrate the memorials of Saint John Neumann, an early archbishop of Philadelphia and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a native American convert honored as the Lily of the Mohawks.

### III. LITURGICAL COLORS

To reflect the difference themes of the Church's days and seasons, the Church has different colors for the vestments and often often for such other purposes as one of the altar cloths, Church decorations, and the vesture of people assisting in the liturgy. In the Latin rite that we are used to, there are four primary liturgical colors, violet, white (or gold), red and green, and two secondary colors, rose and black.

Violet is the color for Advent, Lent, other occasions of penance such as Reconciliation and sometimes funerals. Thus, the priests started wearing violet vestments last Wednesday (Ash Wednesday) when Lent began. For Lent, the color represents penance and mourning, as it is often the sky's color when the sun is just below the horizon. It reflects the desire to share with Jesus His suffering and to be cleansed of sins through repentance. For Advent, there is also a notion of penance and longing, but also combined with violet as the ancient symbol of royalty, the color that kings and queens used to wear. For in Advent, we reflect upon the ancient Jews' longing for the promised Messiah and our longing for Jesus and King of heaven and earth. The two seemingly very different meanings are joined in Jesus as He suffered and so won a kingdom, both for His own human nature and for us. Likewise, it is precisely by

repenting of sins and joining in the suffering of Christ that we share in His kingdom. Violet may also be used at funerals and other Masses for the dead, symbolizing the mourning at death, and the confidence that through penance we can assist the dead in arriving in His everlasting kingdom.

The color white reflects glory, joy, holiness and purity. It is thus the color for the Christmas season, when we celebrate the birth of Christ and His early life, and of the Easter season, a time of rejoicing at His Resurrection and presence with us. It is the color of glorious days such as the solemnities of Corpus Christi (the Eucharist) and Trinity and is used for the days of angels and of saints who did not die as martyrs; as such, it symbolizes their heroic sanctity and glory now in heaven. As the symbol of joy, white is also the usual color for such festive occasions as weddings, baptisms, ordinations, graduations, and the blessing of a church. Because she is the queen of heaven and earth, white is the color for Marian days and devotions, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, usually with the addition of blue for her in particular. White can also be the color for funerals, reflecting hope in the resurrection. For particularly high days or events, such as Christmas and Easter, gold can be combined with white to show even greater glory.

Red is the color for the Holy Spirit and for martyrs, those who died for the faith. Red symbolizes the spiritual fire of the Holy Spirit and is thus the color for Confirmations, including that of our parishioners last Tuesday, and for Pentecost, when Christ sent the Holy Spirit upon Mary, the Apostles and other early Christians ten days after the Ascension. For martyrs, red symbolizes their courage and the blood they shed for the faith, which consecrated their lives and their lands for Christ. For both the celebration of the Holy Spirit and the martyrs, red also represents the fire of charity that should inspire all Christians.

Green is the color for Ordinary Time, which emphasizes orderly, steady rhythmic progress in the Church and the spiritual life. Green is the color of hope and of the fields and trees. As the color of hope, green reflects the recognition that this life is meant to be the springtime of everlasting life. It is fitting for ordinary time, the time in which we entrust our lives to God, seeing that all of its joys, sorrows, successes and failures can be like the sun and the rain that produce a great harvest. As the color of the fields, green reminds us to dedicate our lives and the world around us as vineyards of the Lord, producing fruit worthy of everlasting life. See Luke 3:8; Catechism 755. Ordinary time emphasizes the need for the steady work of cleansing, cultivating and maintaining the field of our lives that God has given us so that, as in the parable of the sower, the Word of God may bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold now and forever. See Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23. Thus, during ordinary time, the color green is used for priest's vestments and often other adornments, unless the day is a solemnity, feast or memorial, in which case white or red would be the usual color.

In addition to the central colors for the liturgical year, the church sometimes uses rose or black. Rose is the color of Christian joy, combining purple, red and white, as distinct from pink, which is between red and white. It is used on two Sundays, Gaudete Sunday and Laetare Sunday. Gaudete means "Rejoice" with the connotation of gaining what one has longed for. And Gaudete Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent, during which there is an emphasis on the preliminary joy that we experience even now awaiting Christ, even as there is a poignant sense of longing. Laetare also means "Rejoice," with an additional connotation of having overcome some sorrow of struggle. And Laetare Sunday is the fourth Sunday of Lent, during which we anticipate the joy of having overcome the sorrows and struggles against sin in a fallen world, seeing the redemption of the world and ourselves. The Christian joy symbolized by rose on these Sundays is not mere happiness, an emotion of being pleased with something. Rather, as C.S. Lewis points out in his book Surprised by Joy, true joy evokes a yearning for the things of heaven that we do not fully have, a longing for a pure holy kingdom not yet in our possession, "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." On Gaudete and Laetare Sundays, the color rose combines white and red as the colors of the faith and sacrificing love that lead to this joy with purple as symbolic of longing for God as the source of this joy, and penance and sorrow for failing to serve Him.

Reflecting sorrow and mourning at loss is the color black. It can be used on Good Friday, funerals and other Masses for the dead. In such cases, this color symbolizes sorrow at death as Blessed Virgin Mary and the women of Jerusalem felt at the Cross, as Jesus felt at the death of Lazarus, and we feel at the parting of a loved one. See Luke 23:26-32; John 11:35, 19:25-27. The Talmud, a Jewish commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, says, "Sorrow at death is a sign of love during life" and we are willing to risk that sorrow here on earth for the sake of love, for the sorrow will be rewarded in a kingdom where the desires of all rightful loves are fulfilled. As Jesus says elsewhere, "Blessed are those who weep and mourn, for one day they will laugh." Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21.