

The Liturgical Year – a simple guide

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church's year is divided into seasons, each with its own liturgical colour, topics and flavour. (The Eastern Catholic Church's year is somewhat different). The Roman year is;

- Advent: preparation and majesty; [**purple**, with **rose** for the 3rd Sunday];
- Christmas: celebration and new life; [**white/ gold**];
- Ordinary Time: growth in faith; [**green**]
- Lent: preparation, majesty and penitence; [**purple**, with **rose** for the 4th Sunday, and **red** for Palm Sunday];
- The Triduum: suffering and redemption; [**white** for Maundy Thursday, **red** for Good Friday, and **white/gold** for the Easter Vigil];
- Easter: celebration and commissioning [**white/gold**];
- Pentecost: mission and discipleship [**red**];
- Ordinary Time: growth in faith [**green**].

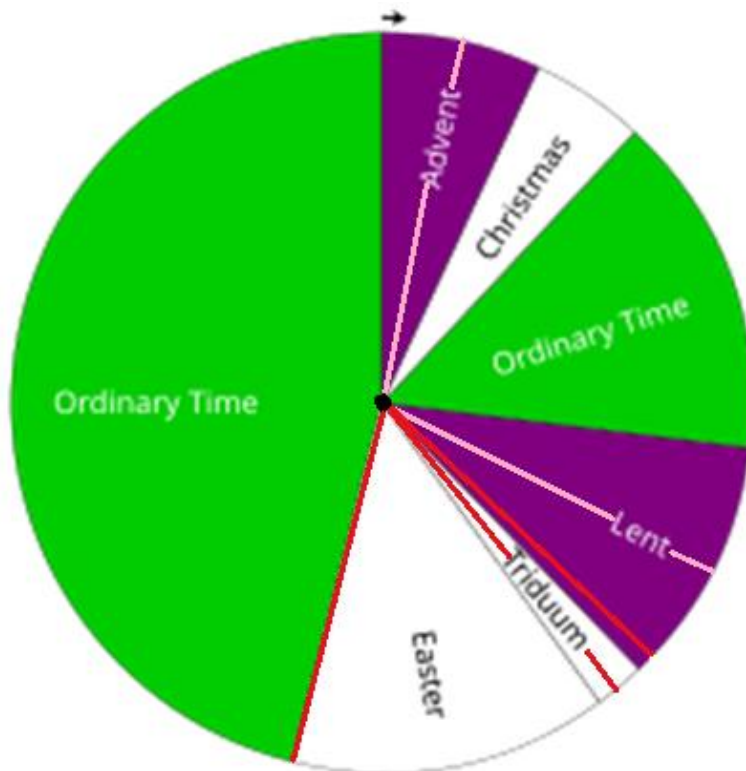


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How did it develop?

The Church year which we have now developed over many centuries.

- Easter, the day of the Lord's resurrection, stands at the peak of time and so it is the date around which the whole year pivots.
- From that peak, believers viewed the rest of the year and, over the centuries, developed what we now call the Church or liturgical year.
- Lent was the first of the liturgical seasons to take shape, and it was originally a time of preparation for those being baptised at Easter.
- Once Easter and Lent developed as seasons, the rest of the Church's year began to take shape around the celebration of other festivals such as Pentecost, Christmas, saints' days etc.
- It also was shaped by feast days which are less socially and financially important now than in earlier time such as Lady Day, Michaelmas, Candlemas.

What is its purpose?

The liturgical year encompasses the rites, celebrations and feasts that take place during the Church year and are highlighted in the Scripture readings and prayers of the Mass.

“Christ’s saving work is celebrated in sacred memory by the Church on fixed days throughout the course of the year. Each week on the day called the Lord’s Day the Church commemorates the Lord’s resurrection. Once a year at Easter the Church honours the resurrection of the Lord and his blessed passion with the utmost solemnity. In fact through the yearly cycle the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ and keeps the anniversaries of the saints.” (*General Norms for the Liturgical Year 1*)

The ebb and flow of the liturgical year

The Liturgical Calendar connects the seasons of the year to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, helping us to enter into the Paschal Mystery.

The liturgical year:

- starts as we prepare in Advent to celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas;
- moves on to Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing in Ordinary Time;
- slows in Lent to recall the meaning of discipleship;
- follows Jesus to suffering and death in Holy Week;
- celebrates Jesus’ resurrection at Easter, his Ascension, and the coming of his Spirit at Pentecost;
- picks up Jesus’ life and ministry again in “Ordinary Time” and
- ends as we celebrate Jesus’ reign over all on the last Sunday of the year, Christ the King.

Advent

- As the liturgical year is bound up with the life of Jesus, the year begins with Advent as that is the season in which we prepare for Jesus’ birth;
- Advent lasts for four weeks plus the days up to 25th December;
- The readings at Mass retell the Old Testament prophecies foretelling the Messiah, speak about the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, and reflect on waiting for Christ’s return.

Christmas (which includes the Epiphany)

- At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation (God becoming human in Jesus) with Jesus’ birth, and how it was received by the world;
- The readings at Mass draw out different aspects of this in the Old and New Testaments.

Ordinary Time (meaning ‘ordered time’, hence “the sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time...”)

- Ordinary Time falls between Christmas and Lent, and between Pentecost and Advent;
- It therefore takes up the majority of the Church’s year;
- The readings in Ordinary Time focus on Jesus’s teachings and actions during his public ministry, in the light of relevant Old Testament texts which Jesus and the Apostles knew;
- It is interspersed with feast days e.g. the Assumption, All Saints, and individual saints’ days.
- On these occasions, the readings focus on the relevant saints (if biblical characters) or biblical passages which were meaningful to them.

Lent (which includes the first half of Holy Week)

- Lent lasts for 40 days, from Ash Wednesday to “Spy Wednesday” (which is in Holy Week);
- Lent is a time of preparation for Baptism and/or renewal at the Easter Vigil and the other Easter Sunday celebrations;
- In the early Church and as now, catechumens move deeper into the life of the community by learning the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer;
- We reflect on our relationships with God, each other and ourselves, and try to forgive and be forgiven. As such we prepare as individuals and communities for Holy Week and Easter.
- The readings in Lent remind us of the central teachings of our faith. We are reassured of God’s love and forgiveness and encouraged to follow God’s example in our own lives.

The Triduum (The Three Days)

- The Triduum culminating in the Easter Vigil is the liturgy of the year;
- This liturgy, over Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, brings the congregation into the experience of the first Holy Week as we accompany Jesus and his friends through it;
- We travel with Jesus from the Upper Room, through his trial and Passion, to the Cross and into the tomb where we linger. When the sun sets on Holy Saturday the Easter Vigil begins, and we celebrate rising to new life with Jesus.
- The Triduum’s readings cover the span of God’s engagement with his people over the centuries. They explain how this was prophesied in the Old Testament, how it was fulfilled in Jesus, and how it was understood by the writers of the Old and New Testaments.

Eastertide (which includes Ascension Day)

The season of Easter lasts for fifty days, from Easter Sunday to Pentecost.

- During it we celebrate the Resurrection and the presence of the Risen Jesus with the Apostles which enabled them to grow in faith and understanding.
- The Gospels in Easter retell the risen Jesus’ teachings and actions and these are unpacked in the New Testament readings in the light of the Old Testament readings.

Ascension Day occurs forty days after Easter Sunday.

- It falls on a Thursday (for some years though it was celebrated on the following Sunday).
- The Mass readings for Ascension focus on retelling and explaining the significance of Jesus returning to heaven and the unity of the Trinity.

Pentecost

- The period between Ascension and Pentecost is a set time of prayer for special intentions.
- Pentecost comes fifty days after Easter. It predates Christianity as it is named after the Jewish harvest feast that comes fifty days after Passover.
- It is the second most important feast in the Church’s year – more important than Christmas – as it is the birthday of the Church, and it marks the end of the Easter season;
- As it is the feast of the Holy Spirit, it is the season for young people to be confirmed.
- The readings for Pentecost focus on the Holy Spirit and its gifts, especially those given to the Apostles on the first Pentecost.

Ordinary Time

- After Pentecost we return to *Ordinary Time* which lasts till the start of Advent (which in itself marks the start of the new liturgical year).