



Seasons of the Church Year

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There are many ways to count a year:

- The calendar year begins with January.
- The "school year" begins some time around the end of August/beginning of September.
- The seasonal year is measured by the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter.

The Church has a way of counting the year, too. It is divided into seasons and begins with Advent. The Church year is also called the "liturgical year."

Advent

The first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the new Church year. Advent begins four Sundays before December 25. (Depending on what day of the week Christmas falls on, Advent can be four full weeks at maximum or three weeks and a Sunday at minimum, as it is this year.)

Advent is to prepare us for the coming of Jesus. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, his first coming, at Christmas. But what we are really preparing for is not his *birth*. We are looking forward to his coming again. We don't know when this "second coming" (the "parousia") will be, but we try to always be ready. That way we are also ready to welcome Jesus every day in all the ways he comes to us.

During Advent we read a lot about the prophets and the people of the Old Testament and how they awaited the Messiah. Near the end of Advent, we read the stories of the things that happened right before the birth of Jesus: the birth of John the Baptist, the angel's visit to Mary, etc.

There are many beautiful customs for Advent, including the Advent wreath, Advent calendars, the Jesse Tree, and special hymns.

Christmas

December 25 is one of the immovable feasts of the Church year. It is a Holy Day of Obligation. But Christmas is not just one feast day; it is a liturgical season that lasts from December 25 until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Depending on what day December 25 falls on, Christmas lasts from two to almost three weeks.

During the season of Christmas, when the stores take down their Christmas decorations and decorate for Valentine's Day, the Church continues to sing Christmas songs and meditate on the Christmas story.

We celebrate the feasts of the Holy Innocents, the Holy Family, Mary Mother of God, and the Epiphany, which is the commemoration of the visit of the wise men from the East. The season ends with the feast of the Baptism, when Jesus' public ministry began.

Ordinary Time

After Christmas come several weeks of Ordinary Time.

Many people do not realize that the word "ordinary" here doesn't mean "regular" or "everyday." It comes from the fact that the Sundays are numbered with "ordinal numbers" (first, second, third, fourth, etc.).

This period of Ordinary Time is only a few weeks, its length depending on when Lent begins. During Ordinary Time, we reflect on the public life of Jesus: his teachings and miracles. We also have many feasts of saints to celebrate.

Lent

Lent is the period of forty days leading up to the greatest feast in the Church year—Easter. Originally the forty days were days of strict fasting, after the example of Jesus' forty days of fasting in the desert after his baptism. The time developed as preparation for baptism for catechumens (people preparing for baptism), and for those already baptized to renew their baptismal commitment and pray for those preparing for the sacrament.

The three traditional practices for this season are still prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. It's a good idea to spend more time in prayer during Lent. You could set aside a few minutes at the end of the day to talk to Jesus or read from the gospels. Some people go to Mass during the week.

"Fasting" means not eating. For example, you can skip the snacks before dinner or "fast" from your favorite candy. Fasting is good because it helps us to be disciplined. To say no to ourselves when we want some chips can help us to say no when we are tempted to sin. It reminds us that there are many people who don't have enough to eat. Fasting also helps us remember that God is more important than anything else in our life.

"Alms-giving" means giving money or other things to those who are in need. There may be programs organized at your parish or school to give help to people who live in poverty or who have other difficulties.

The color of the priest's vestments during Lent is purple. Purple reminds us of sorrow for our sins and the quiet seriousness of Lent.

Triduum

The Triduum is like a mini-season, just three days (which is what "Triduum" means.) It begins on Holy Thursday evening, with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This special Mass recalls the last supper Jesus had with his disciples before he died. During this supper, he gave us two sacraments: the sacrament of Holy Orders, which provides priests to continue the sacramental means of grace through the ages, and the sacrament of sacraments, the Eucharist. At this supper Jesus also solemnly renewed his command that we love one another and serve one another, following his example.

The Triduum continues through Good Friday and Holy Saturday (when the Eucharist is not celebrated). Holy Saturday evening, or rather, in the night between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, we celebrate the Easter Vigil. This Mass has many special rites, including the lighting of the new fire and the Easter candle, the proclamation of the Exultet, a long series of readings from the Bible that explain the meaning of this night, the blessing of the holy water, and the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism and Confirmation.

The Easter Triduum ends Easter Sunday evening.

Easter

Like Christmas, Easter is not just one day, but a whole season. Easter lasts seven weeks and ends with the great feast of Pentecost.

The Easter season is one long joyful celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. All through the Easter season, the Easter candle, lit at the Easter Vigil, burns. The light of the Easter candle symbolizes the life of Jesus, who, risen from the dead, will never die again. When we light our candles from the Easter candle, it reminds us that we share this life of Jesus and we will have eternal life, too.

We read a lot from the Acts of the Apostles during the Easter season. In Acts we get a view of the early Christian community living their Easter faith. They have difficulties and disagreements, but the Holy Spirit guides them, especially through their leaders, the apostles.

The color for Easter is white. We sing "Alleluia" a lot! "Alleluia" means "Praise the Lord!"

The last day of the Easter season is Pentecost. This feast day commemorates the day that the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples. They had been hiding in fear after seeing what happened to Jesus. But the Holy Spirit gave them courage and wisdom, and they went out to tell everyone the good news that Jesus died for us and is risen from the dead. This day is sometimes called the "birthday of the Church."

Ordinary Time

During Ordinary Time, which lasts for about 25 weeks, we continue reading the gospel stories of the life and teachings of Jesus. There are important feasts connected with our faith. The Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, when we contemplate the mystery of the three Persons in one God. The next Sunday is the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. The feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) and the Exultation of the Cross (September 14) are other important feasts of Jesus. There are many feasts and memorials of saints during this time, as well.

The last Sunday of Ordinary Time is the feast of Christ the King. As this day gets closer, the readings at Mass remind us that we are looking forward to the coming of Jesus and we live in this world always looking forward to the next.

We end the year with this feast that reminds us that all things belong to Christ, and he came to lead us all into his kingdom. Of course, Jesus is not like a regular King. His reign is one of love. He tells us in the gospel that he "came not to be served, but to serve."

