

LESSON 26: THE LITURGICAL YEAR & CALENDAR

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 10
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 10
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 15

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned about what the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church is. While this Church awaits the return of her Groom, Jesus Christ, she lives her life on this earth with a focus on Christ Himself. For this reason, the Church goes through various seasons each liturgical year, and each season is centred on a particular aspect of Christ's life on earth. In this lesson, we will learn about the liturgical year and calendar.

Current lesson:

1. Throughout time, the Holy Catholic Church remembers the work that Christ has done to save us. Together with that, we also remember those saints who are now with God, and upon whose intercessions we rely. This remembrance takes place using the liturgical calendar, which is made up of various seasons. An entire year of these various seasons is called the liturgical year.

Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, 1: “Holy Church celebrates the saving work of Christ on prescribed days in the course of the year with sacred remembrance. Each week, on the day called the Lord’s Day, she commemorates the Resurrection of the Lord, which she also celebrates once a year in the great Paschal Solemnity, together with his blessed Passion. In fact, throughout the course of the year the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ and observes the birthdays of the Saints.”

2. The liturgical year consists of a seasonal cycle and a sanctoral cycle, called the *Proper of Time* and the *Proper of Saints*, respectively. Both are organised and published in the liturgical calendar, which is also enriched by various observances proper to local Churches, whether national, diocesan, parish-level, or religious community. The Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ – His suffering, death, and resurrection – is continuously proclaimed and renewed through celebrating the events of His life and in the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. (*Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, 49)
3. The liturgical year is made up of six seasons:
 - A) Advent: four weeks of preparation before the celebration of Jesus’ birth;
 - B) Christmas: recalling the Nativity of Jesus Christ and his manifestation to the peoples of the world;
 - C) Lent: a six-week period of penance before Easter;

- D) Sacred Paschal Triduum: the holiest “Three Days” of the Church’s liturgical year, where the Christian people recall the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus;
 - E) Easter: 50 days of joyful celebration of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead and His sending forth of the Holy Spirit;
 - F) Ordinary Time: divided into two sections (one span of four to eight weeks after Christmas Time, and another lasting about six months after Easter Time), wherein the faithful consider the fullness of Jesus’ teachings and works among his people.
4. The organisation of each liturgical year is governed by the Church and ultimately integrated into a liturgical calendar. There are certain important guidelines that are observed by the Church in determining the liturgical calendar:
- A) The Second Vatican Council brought renewed emphasis to Sunday as a unique liturgical category: “the Lord’s day is the original feast day” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106), and it “must be observed in the universal Church as the primordial holy day of obligation” (*Code of Canon Law*, 1246 §1). Thus, only a limited number of feasts of the Lord or the saints may take the place of the scheduled Sunday celebration.
 - B) Saints and other celebrations are distinguished in accordance with the importance assigned to each one: each is a Solemnity, Feast, or Memorial. Sundays and Solemnities begin their celebration on the evening before, Feasts and Memorials are celebrated over the course of one day, and Memorials are either Obligatory or Optional.
 - C) Finally, holy days of obligation (also known as feasts of precept) are days when the faithful are obliged to participate at Mass and abstain from unnecessary work or other activities which hinder the suitable relaxation of mind and body. Each Sunday is a holy day of obligation, and four Solemnities are also observed as feasts of precept in the region of Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. They are the Solemnities of the Nativity of the Lord (25 December), the Ascension of Our Lord (40th day after Easter Sunday), the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August), and All Saints (1 November).
5. **Advent** (liturgical colour: purple). Beginning the Church’s liturgical year, Advent (from *ad-venire* in Latin, meaning “to come to”) is the season encompassing the four Sundays (and weekdays) leading up to the celebration of Christmas.

The Advent season is a time of preparation that directs our hearts and minds to Christ’s second coming at the end of time and also to the anniversary of the Lord’s birth on Christmas. The final days of Advent, from 17 December to 24 December, focus particularly on our preparation for the celebrations of the Nativity of our Lord (Christmas).

Advent devotions, including the Advent wreath, remind us of the meaning of the season. The advent wreath is constructed using a circle of evergreen branches into which four candles are inserted, representing the four weeks of Advent. Ideally, three candles are purple and one is rose, but white candles can also be used. The purple candles in particular symbolise the prayer, penance, and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, when the clergy also wear rose vestments at Mass. Gaudete Sunday is the Sunday of rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over and they are close to Christmas. The progressive lighting of the candles each week of



Advent symbolises the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of his second coming to judge the living and the dead.

6. **Christmas** (liturgical colour: white). Christmas is one of the most important days of the Church year, second only to Easter. It is the feast of the incarnation, the feast of God becoming flesh (the Latin *in carne* means "enfleshment"). It is a uniquely Christian teaching, the Divine choosing to become one of us. Because of this belief, God is not only transcendent, but also wholly immanent, Emmanuel ("God-with-us"). While remaining transcendent (meaning we must rise above our present condition to reach Him), He is at the same time immanent (meaning He is with us as we rise toward Him). Every Eucharist is like Christmas where the bread and wine are transformed into His flesh, His Body and Blood, and, in a sense, He is "born anew" on the altar.

The liturgical season of Christmas begins with the vigil Masses on Christmas Eve and concludes on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. During this season, we celebrate the birth of Christ into our world and into our hearts, and reflect on the gift of salvation that is born with Him, including the fact that He was born to die for us.

The Christmas tree and the Nativity scene are popular symbols of the season and a tradition in many Christian homes. It is also traditional to exchange Christmas gifts with family and friends as a way to honour God the Father's gift of His only Son to the world. Having received the gift of Christ, we naturally want to pass that gift along to our loved ones.

7. **Lent** (liturgical colour: purple). During Lent, we are asked to devote ourselves to seeking the Lord in prayer and reading Scripture, to service by giving alms, and to practice self-control through fasting. Many know of the tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent, but we are also called to practise self-discipline and fast in other ways throughout the season.

In addition, the giving of alms is one way to share God's gifts – not only through the distribution of money, but through the sharing of our time and talents. As St John Chrysostom reminds us: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs...The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity" (CCC 2446).

In Lent, the baptised are called to renew their baptismal commitment as others prepare to be baptised through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, a period of learning and discernment for individuals who have declared their desire to become Catholics. The key to fruitful observance of these practices is to recognise their link to baptismal renewal. We are called not just to abstain from sin during Lent, but to true conversion of our hearts and minds as followers of Christ. We recall those waters in which we were baptised into Christ's death, died to sin and evil, and began new life in Christ.

Catholics are highly encouraged to make going to confession a significant part of their spiritual lives during Lent (although this practice should not be exclusively devoted to the Lenten season). Dioceses often make the sacrament especially available during Lent.

8. **Easter** (liturgical colour: white). The summit of the Liturgical Year is the Easter Triduum – from the evening of Holy Thursday to the vigil of Easter Sunday. Although they are chronologically three days, they are liturgically considered to be one day unfolding for us the unity of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. The single celebration of the Triduum marks the end of the Lenten season, and leads to the Mass of the Resurrection of the Lord at the Easter Vigil. The liturgical services that take place during the Triduum are: the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, Good Friday of the Lord’s Passion, and the Mass of the Resurrection of the Lord.

The Easter Vigil is the “Mother of All Vigils”. Easter Sunday, then, is the greatest of all Sundays, and Easter Time is the most important of all liturgical times. Easter is the celebration of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead, culminating in his Ascension to the Father and sending of the Holy Spirit upon the Church. There are 50 days of Easter from the first Sunday to Pentecost. It is characterised, above all, by the joy of glorified life and the victory over death, expressed most fully in the great resounding cry of the Christian: Alleluia! All faith flows from faith in the resurrection: “...if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

The Octave of Easter comprises the eight days which stretch from the first to the second Sunday. It is a way of prolonging the joy of the initial day. In a sense, every day of the Octave is like a little Easter Sunday.

The word “Easter” comes from Old English, meaning simply the “East”. The sun which rises in the East, bringing light, warmth, and hope, is a symbol for the Christians of the risen Christ, who is the true Light of the world. The Paschal Candle is a central symbol of this divine light, which is Christ. It is kept near the ambo throughout Easter Time, and lit for all liturgical celebrations.

9. **Ordinary Time** (liturgical colour: green). Christmas Time and Easter Time highlight the central mysteries of the Paschal Mystery, namely, the incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Sundays and weeks of Ordinary Time, on the other hand, take us through the life of Christ. This is the time of conversion. This is living the life of Christ.

Ordinary Time is a time for growth and maturation, a time in which the mystery of Christ is called to penetrate ever more deeply into history until all things are finally caught up in Christ. The goal, toward which all of history is directed, is represented by the final Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

(Points 1 to 9 are adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ writeup on the Liturgical Calendar.)

10. The liturgical vestments of Catholic clergy during religious celebrations and the many sacred vestments used by them differs according to a range of colours that have a precise symbolic meaning. The colours of those liturgical vestments refer to the liturgical season or the current festive occasion. There are four liturgical colours used that were coded by Pope Saint Paul VI in the Roman rite in 1969: white, green, red, and purple. In



addition to these, there are other colours, such as rose and gold used in liturgical vestments only on some special occasions or as an alternative to canonical colours (in some parts of the world, there are also black and light blue).

White symbolises joy and purity resulting from faith. It is one of the most common colours in liturgical vestments that are used every day by priests, regardless of the current liturgical season or celebration. It is particularly related to the worship of Jesus, commemorations of Mary, as well as for Easter and Christmas. It also symbolises the resurrection of Christ.

Green is a symbol of hope, perseverance, and continued listening. It accompanies the daily path of the faithful as they learn from the life of Christ.

Purple is linked to penance, waiting, and mourning. It is particularly used during Advent and Lent. Purple liturgical vestments characterise Mass for the dead, and in some places in the world is replaced by black vestments.

Red symbolises the passion of Christ and the blood spilled in martyrdom by Him and the saints. Red also symbolises the Holy Spirit. This liturgical colour is therefore used for Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Pentecost, in the celebrations dedicated to the Passion of the Lord, in the feasts of the Apostles, the Evangelists and all the Holy Martyrs.

As for *non-codified colours*, blue is used especially for celebrations in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary (mostly in countries of Spanish or Portuguese culture). Pink is used for the Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday) and the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Laetare Sunday) because it indicates joy and solemnity. Gold symbolises royalty and festivity, and can replace all colours at every opportunity, although usually is only used in certain very important Solemnities.

11. As Catholics, it is important that we strive to live a liturgical life. The idea of living a liturgical life is not novel; many saints have talked about this subject. Living a liturgical life means placing one's spiritual life in sync with the liturgical seasons and feasts of the Church's liturgical year. It means journeying with the Church on a daily basis throughout her liturgical year. Clearly the Mass is paramount in this. But at the same time, living a liturgical life is more than just attending Mass frequently. It requires an appreciation of every liturgical season and feast of the Church's liturgical calendar on a daily basis.
12. In joining our own spiritual life to the liturgical seasons and feasts of the Church we are embarking on a profound meditation on the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of the saints who successfully emulated Him, and ultimately upon the Divine Truths and Sacred Mysteries which God has bestowed upon us. To draw ourselves deeply into this is to bring ourselves into intimate contact with the revelation of the Triune God and the Church He established. This can only help us in our spiritual growth. The public liturgical life of the Catholic Church has been guided by the Holy Spirit down the centuries; it has produced many saints. It is by far our most sure, solid, and comprehensive guide in the spiritual life.
13. The most important practice in the liturgical life is to participate in the Mass on all days of obligation. If at all possible, it would be wonderful to attend daily Mass.

Following closely is the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office. The Liturgy of the Hours can be particularly effective in drawing the liturgy of the Church into our lives outside of the parish Church. It helps to fill our days, from mornings to nights, with the liturgical feasts and seasons of the Church. While most of us will not be able to devote as much time to it as those in monasteries to pray the Liturgy of the Hours so regularly, nonetheless we can probably find at least some time to do it. Both the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours form a part of the formal liturgy of the Church and as such should be given the highest priority in a Catholic's spiritual life.

(This lesson will not teach you how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, but should you wish to do so, the texts for the Liturgy of the Hours are available in mobile apps such as Universalis/Catholic Calendar and iBreviary. Later on, in the course of this curriculum, there will be a lesson particularly devoted to teaching you how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours.)

14. There are of course also other ways to unite ourselves to the liturgical life of the Church. One can pick devotions or spiritual readings in tune with the liturgical season. One could also pray the chaplet of Divine Mercy to meditate on the Passion of Our Lord, or the Rosary to meditate on the various mysteries in the life of Christ. We might also read on the life of the saint of the day.
15. We live an incarnational faith; one filled with symbols and ritual. There is therefore much of this that we can draw into our own homes. We should practise the custom of having a home altar. This could be a shelf, a mantle, or a small table set aside solely for this use. On this might be a statue, an icon or a crucifix, along with candles and incense that can be lit during times of prayer. If you have particular holy images for particular saints or feast days, you might give them prominence here during those days and seasons. You can even consider adorning it with flowers on solemnities or patron saints days. These holy reminders put before us continually a sense of the sacred. In this way also, the life of the Church becomes something incarnated in our day to day life, so that in living our secular lives, we do not forget that we continue to be a part of the life of the Holy Catholic Church.

(Points 11 to 15 are adapted from "Living a Liturgical Life"
by Shawn Tribe, published in *The Catholic Response* in Summer 2005.)



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