

# The Liturgical Seasons of the Catholic Church

by [Scott P. Richert](#)

The liturgy, or public worship, of all Christian churches is governed by a yearly calendar that commemorates the main events in salvation history. In the Catholic Church, this cycle of public celebrations, prayers, and readings is divided into six seasons, each emphasizing a portion of the life of Jesus Christ. These six seasons are described in the "General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar," published by the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship in 1969 (after the revision of the liturgical calendar at the time of the promulgation of the *Novus Ordo*). As the General Norms note, "By means of the yearly cycle the Church celebrates the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation until the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again."

## Advent: Prepare the Way of the Lord



In the Catholic Church, [Advent is a period of preparation](#), extending over four Sundays, before [Christmas](#). The word *Advent* comes from the Latin *advenio*, "to come to," and refers to the coming of Christ. This refers, first of all, to our celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas; but second, to the coming of Christ in our lives through grace and the [Sacrament of Holy Communion](#); and finally, to His second coming at the end of time.

Our preparations, therefore, should have all three comings in mind. We need to prepare our souls to receive Christ worthily.

## First We Fast, Then We Feast

That's why Advent has traditionally been known as a "little Lent." As in [Lent](#), Advent should be marked by increased [prayer](#), [fasting](#), and good works. While the Western Church no longer has a set requirement for fasting during Advent, the Eastern Church (both Catholic and Orthodox) continues to observe what is known as [Philip's Fast](#), from November 15 until [Christmas](#).

Traditionally, all great feasts have been preceded by a time of fasting, which makes the feast itself more joyful. Sadly, Advent today has supplanted by "the Christmas shopping season," so that by Christmas Day, many people no longer enjoy the feast.

## The Symbols of Advent

In its symbolism, the Church continues to stress the penitential and preparatory nature of Advent. As during Lent, [priests wear purple vestments](#), and the Gloria ("Glory to God") is omitted during Mass. The only exception is on the Third Sunday of Advent, known as [Gaudete Sunday](#) when priests can wear rose-colored vestments. As on [Laetare Sunday](#) during Lent, this exception is designed to encourage us to continue our prayer and fasting, because we can see that Advent is more than halfway over.

## The Advent Wreath

Perhaps the best-known of all Advent symbols is the [Advent wreath](#), a custom which originated among German Lutherans but was soon adopted by Catholics. [Consisting of four candles](#) (three purple and one pink) arranged in a circle with evergreen boughs (and often a fifth, white candle in the center), the Advent wreath corresponds to the four Sundays of Advent. The purple candles represent the penitential nature of the season, while the pink candle calls to mind the respite of Gaudete Sunday. (The white candle, when used, represents Christmas.)

## Celebrating Advent

We can better enjoy Christmas—[all 12 days of it](#), from Christmas Day to [Epiphany](#)—if we revive Advent as a period of preparation. [Abstaining](#) from meat on Fridays, or not eating at all between meals, is a good way to revive the Advent fast. (Not eating Christmas cookies or listening to Christmas music before Christmas is another.) We can incorporate such customs as the Advent wreath, the [Saint Andrew Christmas Novena](#), and the [Jesse Tree](#) into our daily ritual, and we can set some time aside for special [scripture readings for Advent](#), which remind us of the threefold coming of Christ.

Holding off on [putting up the Christmas tree](#) and other decorations is another way to remind ourselves that the feast is not here yet. Traditionally, such decorations were put up on Christmas Eve, but they [would not be taken down](#) until after Epiphany, in order to celebrate the Christmas season to its fullest.

## Christmas: Christ Is Born!



The word *Christmas* derives from the combination of *Christ* and *Mass*; it is the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Second in the liturgical calendar only to [Easter](#), Christmas is celebrated by many as if it were the most important of Christian feasts.

### Quick Facts

- **Date:** December 25
- **Type of Feast:** Solemnity; [Holy Day of Obligation](#)
- **Readings:** Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18 ([full text here](#))
- **Prayers:** [Prayer for the Feast of Christmas](#); [Prayer to Jesus in the Manger](#)
- **Other Names for the Feast:** The Nativity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

## Why Do Christians Celebrate Christmas?

People are often surprised to find that Christmas was not celebrated by the earliest Christians. The custom was to celebrate a [saint's](#) birth into eternal life—in other words, his death. Thus [Good Friday](#) (Christ's death) and [Easter Sunday](#) (His Resurrection) took center stage.

To this day, the Church celebrates only three birthdays: Christmas; the [Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary](#); and the Birth of John the Baptist. The common thread in the celebrations is that [all three were born without Original Sin](#): Christ, because He was the Son of God; Mary, because she was sanctified by God in the [Immaculate Conception](#); and John the Baptist, because his leap in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, at the [Visitation](#) is seen as a type of [Baptism](#) (and thus, even though John was conceived with Original Sin, he was cleansed of that sin before birth).

## The History of Christmas

It took a while, though, for the Church to develop the feast of Christmas. While it may have been celebrated in Egypt as early as the third century, it did not spread throughout the Christian world until the middle of the fourth century. It was first celebrated along with [Epiphany](#), on January 6; but slowly Christmas was separated out into its own feast, on [December 25](#).

Many of the early Church Fathers regarded this as the actual date of Christ's birth, though it does coincide with the Roman festival of Natalis Invicti (the winter solstice, which the Romans celebrated on December 25), and the Catholic Encyclopedia does not reject the possibility that the date was chosen as "a deliberate and legitimate 'baptism' of a pagan feast."

By the middle of the sixth century, Christians had begun to observe [Advent](#), the season of preparation for Christmas, with [fasting](#) and [abstinence](#); and the [Twelve Days of Christmas](#), from Christmas Day to Epiphany, had become established.

## Ordinary Time: Walking With Christ



Because the term *ordinary* in English most often means something that's not special or distinctive, many people think that Ordinary Time refers to parts of the calendar of the Catholic Church that are unimportant. Even though the season of Ordinary Time makes up most of [the liturgical year in the Catholic Church](#), the fact that Ordinary Time refers to those periods that fall outside of the major liturgical seasons reinforces this impression. Yet Ordinary Time is far from unimportant or uninteresting.

### Why Is Ordinary Time Called Ordinary?

Ordinary Time is called "ordinary" not because it is common but simply because the weeks of Ordinary Time are numbered. The Latin word *ordinalis*, which refers to numbers in a series, stems from the Latin word *ordo*, from which we get the English word *order*. Thus, the numbered weeks of Ordinary Time, in fact, represent the ordered life of the Church—the period in which we live our lives neither in feasting (as in the Christmas and Easter seasons) or in more severe penance (as in Advent and Lent), but in watchfulness and expectation of the Second Coming of Christ.

It's appropriate, therefore, that the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (which is actually the first Sunday celebrated in Ordinary Time) always features either John the Baptist's acknowledgment of Christ as the Lamb of God or Christ's first miracle—the transformation of water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

Thus for Catholics, Ordinary Time is the part of the year in which Christ, the Lamb of God, walks among us and transforms our lives. There's nothing "ordinary" about that!

## Why Is Green the Color of Ordinary Time?

Likewise, the normal liturgical color for Ordinary Time—for those days when there is no special feast—is green. Green vestments and altar cloths have traditionally been associated with the time after Pentecost, the period in which the Church founded by the risen Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit began to grow and to spread the Gospel to all nations.

## When Is Ordinary Time?

Ordinary Time refers to all of those parts of the Catholic Church's liturgical year that aren't included in the major seasons of [Advent](#), [Christmas](#), [Lent](#), and [Easter](#). Ordinary Time thus encompasses two different periods in the Church's calendar, since the Christmas season immediately follows Advent, and the Easter season immediately follows Lent.

The Church year begins with Advent, followed immediately by the Christmas season. Ordinary Time begins on the Monday after the first Sunday after January 6, the traditional date of the Feast of the [Epiphany](#) and the end of the liturgical season of Christmas. This first period of Ordinary Time runs until [Ash Wednesday](#) when the liturgical season of Lent begins. Both Lent and the Easter season fall outside of Ordinary Time, which resumes again on the Monday after [Pentecost Sunday](#), the end of the Easter season. This second period of Ordinary Time runs until the [First Sunday of Advent](#) when the liturgical year begins again.

## Why Is There No First Sunday in Ordinary Time?

In most years, the Sunday after January 6 is the Feast of the [Baptism of the Lord](#). In countries such as the United States, however, where the celebration of [Epiphany](#) is transferred to Sunday if that Sunday is January 7 or 8, Epiphany is celebrated instead. As feasts of our Lord, both the Baptism of the Lord and Epiphany displace a Sunday in Ordinary Time. Thus the first Sunday in the period of Ordinary Time is the Sunday that falls after the first week of Ordinary Time, which makes it the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time.

## Why Is There No Ordinary Time in the Traditional Calendar?

Ordinary Time is a feature of the current (post-Vatican II) liturgical calendar. In the traditional Catholic calendar used before 1970 and still used in the celebration of the [Traditional Latin Mass](#), as well as in the calendars of the Eastern Catholic Churches, the Sundays of Ordinary Time are referred to as the Sundays After Epiphany and the Sundays After Pentecost.

How Many Sundays Are There in Ordinary Time?

In any given year, there are either 33 or 34 Sundays in Ordinary Time. Because Easter is a moveable feast, and thus the Lent and Easter seasons "float" from year to year, the number of Sundays in each period of Ordinary Time vary from the other period as well as from year to year.

## Lent: Dying to Self



by [Mary Fairchild](#)

Lent is the Christian season of preparation before Easter. The Lenten season is a time when many Christians observe a period of [fasting](#), [repentance](#), moderation, self-denial and spiritual discipline. The purpose is to set aside time for reflection on [Jesus Christ](#) - his suffering and his sacrifice, his life, [death](#), burial, and resurrection.

During the six weeks of self-examination and reflection, Christians who observe Lent typically make a commitment to fast, or to give up something—a habit, such as smoking, watching TV, or swearing, or a food or drink, such as sweets, chocolate or coffee. Some Christians also take on a Lenten discipline, such as reading the Bible and spending more time in prayer to draw nearer to God.

Strict observers do not eat meat on Fridays, having fish instead. The goal is to strengthen the faith and spiritual disciplines of the observer and develop a closer relationship with God.

## Lent in Western Christianity

In Western Christianity, [Ash Wednesday](#) marks the first day, or the start of the season of Lent, which begins [40 days](#) prior to [Easter](#) (Technically 46, as Sundays are not included in the count). The [exact date changes every year](#) because Easter and its surrounding holidays are movable feasts.

The significance of the 40-day period of Lent is based on two episodes of spiritual testing in the Bible: the 40 years of wilderness wandering by the Israelites and the [Temptation of Jesus](#) after he spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness.

## Lent in Eastern Christianity

In [Eastern Orthodoxy](#), the spiritual preparations begin with Great Lent, a 40-day period of self-examination and [fasting](#) (including Sundays), which starts on Clean Monday and culminates on Lazarus Saturday.

Clean Monday falls seven weeks before Easter Sunday. The term "Clean Monday" refers to a cleansing from sinful attitudes through the [Lenten fast](#). Lazarus Saturday occurs eight days before Easter Sunday and signifies the end of Great Lent.

## Do All Christian Observe Lent?

Not all Christian churches observe Lent. Lent is mostly observed by the [Lutheran](#), [Methodist](#), [Presbyterian](#) and [Anglican](#) denominations, and also by [Roman Catholics](#). [Eastern Orthodox](#) churches observe Lent or Great Lent, during the 6 weeks or 40 days preceding [Palm Sunday](#) with fasting continuing during the [Holy Week](#) of [Orthodox Easter](#). Lent for Eastern Orthodox churches begins on Monday (called Clean Monday) and Ash Wednesday is not observed.

The Bible does not mention the custom of Lent, however, the practice of repentance and mourning in ashes is found in 2 Samuel 13:19; [Esther](#) 4:1; Job 2:8; Daniel 9:3; and Matthew 11:21.

Likewise, the word "Easter" does not appear in the Bible and no early church celebrations of Christ's resurrection are mentioned in Scripture. Easter, like Christmas, is a tradition that developed later in church history.

The account of Jesus' death on the cross, or crucifixion, his burial and his [resurrection](#), or raising from the dead, can be found in the following passages of Scripture: Matthew 27:27-28:8; Mark 15:16-16:19; Luke 23:26-24:35; and John 19:16-20:30.

## What Is Shrove Tuesday?

Many churches that observe Lent, celebrate [Shrove Tuesday](#). Traditionally, pancakes are eaten on Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday) to use up rich foods like eggs

and dairy in anticipation of the 40-day fasting season of Lent. Shrove Tuesday is also called [Fat Tuesday](#) or [Mardi Gras](#), which is French for Fat Tuesday.

## The Easter Triduum: From Death Into Life



For Roman Catholic Christians as well as many Protestant denominations, the Easter [Triduum](#) (sometimes also referred to as the Paschal Triduum or simply, the Triduum) is the proper name for the three-day season that concludes [Lent](#) and introduces Easter. Technically speaking, a triduum refers simply to any three-day period of prayer. *Triduum* comes from Latin meaning "three days."

### Easter Triduum

The three 24-hour periods of the triduum include the major feasts for all four days at the heart of the Easter celebration: the evening feast of Holy Thursday (also called Maundy Thursday), Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. The Easter Triduum memorializes the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In Anglican and Protestant denominations, like the Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, the Easter Triduum is not considered a separate season, but rather one that includes portions of Lent and the Easter festival. For Roman Catholics since 1955, the Easter Triduum is formally considered a separate season.

## Holy Thursday

Starting with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on the evening of [Holy Thursday](#), continuing through the [Good Friday](#) service and [Holy Saturday](#), and concluding with vespers (evening prayer) on [Easter Sunday](#), the Easter Triduum marks the most significant events of [Holy Week](#) (also known as [Passiontide](#)).

On Holy Thursday, the Triduum begins for Catholics with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, during which bells are rung and the organ played. The bells and organ will then remain silent until the Easter Vigil Mass. The Mass of the Lord's Supper includes a ritual washing of feet in most Catholic congregations. The altars are stripped of ornamentation, leaving only the cross and candlesticks.

For Protestant denominations that celebrate the Triduum, it begins with a simple evening worship service on Holy Thursday.

## Good Friday

For Catholics and many Protestants, the Good Friday church ceremony is marked by a ritual unveiling of the main cross near the altar. This is the day that marks the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Catholic worship service does not include Communion on this day. Catholics may ritually kiss the feet of the Jesus figure upon the cross; for some Protestants, a similar devotion has them simply touching the cross.

## Holy Saturday

After nightfall on Holy Saturday, Catholics hold an Easter vigil service, which represents the faithful awaiting the resurrection of Jesus Christ after his burial. In some congregations, this vigil service is held before dawn on Easter Sunday. This service includes a ceremony of light and darkness, in which a paschal candle is lit to represent the resurrection of Christ; members of the congregation form a solemn procession to the altar.

The Easter Vigil is considered the pinnacle of the Easter Triduum, especially for Catholics, and is usually celebrated with a devotion equal to that bestowed on Easter itself.

## Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday marks the end of the Triduum and the beginning of the seven-week Easter season that will end with Pentecost Sunday. Easter Sunday church services for Catholics as well as Protestants is a joyous celebration of resurrection

and rebirth of Jesus and mankind. Popular Easter symbolism includes many images of rebirth as found in the world of nature and from religious traditions through history, including fragrant lilies, newborn animals, and spring plant growth.

## Easter: Christ Is Risen!



Easter is the greatest feast in the Christian calendar. On [Easter Sunday](#), Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. For Catholics, Easter Sunday comes at the end of 40 days of [prayer](#), [fasting](#), and almsgiving known as [Lent](#). Through spiritual struggle and self-denial, we have prepared ourselves to die spiritually with Christ on [Good Friday](#), the day of His Crucifixion, so that we can rise again with Him in new life on Easter.

### A Day of Celebration

In Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches on Easter, Christians greet each other with cries of "Christ is risen!" and respond "Indeed He is risen!" Over and over, they sing a hymn of celebration:

*Christ is risen from the dead  
By death He conquered death  
And to those in the graves  
He granted life!*

In Roman Catholic churches, the [Alleluia](#) is sung for the first time since the beginning of Lent. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us in his famous [Easter Homily](#), our fast is over; now is the time for celebration.

### The Fulfillment of Our Faith

Easter is a day of celebration because it represents the fulfillment of our faith as Christians. Saint Paul wrote that, unless Christ rose from the dead, our faith is in vain ([1 Corinthians 15:17](#)). Through his death, Christ saved mankind from bondage to sin, and He destroyed the hold that death has on all of us; but it is His Resurrection that gives us the promise of new life, both in this world and the next.

### The Coming of the Kingdom

That new life began on Easter Sunday. In the Our Father, we pray that "Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in Heaven." And Christ told His disciples that some of them would not die until they saw the Kingdom of God "coming in power" ([Mark 9:1](#)). The early Christian Fathers saw Easter as the fulfillment of that promise.

With the resurrection of Christ, God's Kingdom is established on earth, in the form of the Church.

### New Life in Christ

That is why people who are converting to Catholicism traditionally are baptized at the Easter Vigil service, which takes place on [Holy Saturday](#) (the day before Easter), starting sometime after sunset. They have usually undergone a long process of study and preparation known as the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA). Their [baptism](#) parallels Christ's own Death and Resurrection, as they die to sin and rise to new life in the Kingdom of God.

- [The Sacrament of Baptism](#)

### Communion: Our Easter Duty

Because of the central importance of [Easter to the Christian faith](#), the [Catholic Church](#) requires that all Catholics who have made their [First Communion](#) receive the Holy [Eucharist](#) sometime during the [Easter season](#), which lasts through [Pentecost](#), 50 days after Easter. (The Church also urges us to take part in the [Sacrament of Confession](#) before receiving this Easter communion.) This reception of the Eucharist is a visible sign of our faith and our participation in the Kingdom of God. Of course, we should receive [Communion](#) as frequently as

possible; this "Easter Duty" is simply the minimum requirement set by the Church.

Christ Is Risen!

Easter isn't a spiritual event that happened just once, long ago; we don't say "Christ has risen" but "Christ *is* risen," because He rose, body and soul, and is still alive and with us today. That is the true meaning of Easter.

*Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!*

## Rogation and Ember Days: Petition and Thanksgiving



Circa 1950: The vicar and Sunday school children go out into the fields to bless the crops. The little boy is carrying a symbolic tree of plenty. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Rogation Days, like their distant cousins the [Ember Days](#), are days set aside to observe a change in the seasons. Rogation Days are tied to the spring planting. There are four Rogation Days: the Major Rogation, which falls on April 25, and three Minor Rogations, which are celebrated on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday immediately before [Ascension Thursday](#).

## For an Abundant Harvest

As the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, Rogation Days are "Days of prayer, and formerly also of [fasting](#), instituted by the Church to appease God's anger at man's transgressions, to ask protection in calamities, and to obtain a good and bountiful harvest."

## Origin of the Word

*Rogation* is simply an English form of the Latin *rogatio*, which comes from the verb *rogare*, which means "to ask." The primary purpose of the Rogation Days is to ask God to bless the fields and the parish (the geographic area) that they fall in. The Major Rogation likely replaced the Roman feast of Robigalia, on which (the Catholic Encyclopedia notes) "the heathens held processions and supplications to their gods." While the Romans directed their prayers for good weather and an abundant harvest to a variety of gods, the Christians made the tradition their own, by replacing Roman polytheism with monotheism, and directing their prayers to God. By the time of Pope St. Gregory the Great (540-604), the Christianized Rogation Days were already considered an ancient custom.

## The Litany, Procession, and Mass

The Rogation Days were marked by the recitation of the [Litany of the Saints](#), which would normally begin in or at a church. After Saint Mary was invoked, the congregation would proceed to walk the boundaries of the parish, while reciting the rest of the litany (and repeating it as necessary or supplementing it with some of the penitential or gradual Psalms). Thus, the entire parish would be blessed, and the boundaries of the parish would be marked. The procession would end with a Rogation Mass, in which all in the parish were expected to take part.

## Optional Today

Like the Ember Days, Rogation Days were removed from the liturgical calendar when it was revised in 1969, coinciding with the introduction of the Mass of Paul VI (the *Novus Ordo*). Parishes can still celebrate them, though very few in the United States do; but in portions of Europe, the Major Rogation is still celebrated with a procession. As the Western world has become more industrialized, Rogation Days and Ember Days, focused as they are on agriculture and the changes of the seasons, have seemed less "relevant." Still, they are good ways to keep us in touch with nature and to remind us that the Church's liturgical calendar is tied to the changing seasons.

## Celebrating the Rogation Days

If your parish does not celebrate the Rogation Days, there's nothing to stop you from celebrating them yourself. You can mark the days by reciting the Litany of the Saints. And, while many modern parishes, especially in the United States, have boundaries that are too extensive to walk, you could learn where those boundaries are and walk a portion of them, getting to know your surroundings, and maybe your neighbors, in the process. Finish it all off by attending daily Mass and praying for good weather and a fruitful harvest.