

# A Faith Journey Through the Liturgical Year

## CHAPTER 23



### Joyfully Praising God

Liturgy praises God with jubilation. That liturgical spirit animated the life of Sister Thea Bowman. Born into an African American family in Mississippi in 1937, Thea was the granddaughter of a slave and the daughter of a physician and a teacher. Her Methodist parents permitted her to become a Catholic at age nine. She joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, obtained a doctorate in English literature from Catholic University of America, and spent 15 years as a teacher.

The Bishop of Jackson invited her to be a consultant for intercultural awareness. Thus began her long love affair with overcoming cultural barriers, traveling America, and conducting lively gatherings of song, gospel preaching, prayer, and story telling.

In 1984, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, but that did not stop her ministry. She kept spreading the praises of God and intercultural understanding from her wheelchair. Her presentation to the meeting of the American bishops ended with them standing and singing, "We Shall Overcome." She was the first African American woman to receive an honorary doctorate in theology from Boston College. The citation said: *Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, charismatic evangelist calling black Catholics to their rightful place and to the expression of their culture within the Church.* Sr. Thea died in 1990.

#### 1. What is the liturgical year?

The liturgical year is the Church's annual reliving of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is divided into the two major seasons of Advent/ Christmas and Lent/Easter, with Ordinary Time the remaining weeks before and after these seasons. Each season has a time of preparation and a time of celebration.

### From the Catechism of the Catholic Church...

#### Year of the Lord's Favor

##### A. What does the liturgical year accomplish?

In the liturgical year the various aspects of the one Paschal mystery unfold. This is also the case with the cycle of feasts surrounding the mystery of the incarnation (Annunciation, Christmas, Epiphany). They commemorate the beginning of our salvation and communicate to us the first fruits of the Paschal mystery. (*Catechism*, 1171)

##### B. What is the central event of the liturgical year?

Beginning with the Easter Triduum as its source of light, the new age of the Resurrection fills the whole liturgical year with its brilliance. Gradually, on either side of this source, the year is transfigured by the liturgy. It really is a "year of the Lord's favor."<sup>1</sup> The economy of salvation is at work within the framework of time, but since its fulfillment in the Passover of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the culmination of history is anticipated "as a foretaste," and the kingdom of God enters into our time. (*Catechism*, 1168)

##### C. Why are the feast days of Mary and the saints important?

By keeping the memorials of the saints—first of all the holy Mother of God, then the apostles, the martyrs and other saints—on fixed days of the liturgical year, the Church on earth shows that she is united with the liturgy of heaven. She gives glory to Christ for having accomplished his salvation in his glorified members; their example encourages her on her way to the Father. (*Catechism*, 1195)

<sup>1</sup> Lk 4:19.





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## 2. What is the meaning behind the liturgical year?

The feasts of Jesus are arranged in historical sequence, giving us an opportunity to relive the major events of his life in a prayerful and meditative manner. Jesus is *Savior* from the moment of his incarnation. Therefore, we celebrate and experience his saving power in each of the events of the church year put before us.

By including the events within a liturgical celebration, the Church helps make Christ's saving power *sacramentally* available to us. What Jesus once did in his historical ministry, he now—as risen Lord, through the Spirit—does in the mysteries of the liturgy.

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## 3. What are the highlights of the Christmas season?

The preparation time for Christmas is *Advent*, which extends through the four Sundays before Christmas Day. During Advent we remember the people and events through which God prepared the world for the Messiah's coming. The spirit of Advent is one of anticipating Jesus, and our prayer is *Maranatha*, "Come, Lord Jesus." It is also a time for personal moral and spiritual conversion.

Our Christmas celebration begins on December 25th, when we commemorate the birth of Jesus. It continues through four other feasts, namely the Feast of the Holy Family on the Sunday after Christmas; the Feast of Mary the Mother of God on January 1; the Epiphany on January 6 (or the Sunday after Jan. 1); and the Feast of Jesus' Baptism at the Jordan River, celebrated the following Sunday.

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## 4. Is December 25th really Jesus' birthday?

No one knows the exact day Jesus was born. Early Christians, however, wanted to celebrate the event, so they chose a day to remember and praise God for Jesus' birth.

December 25th was chosen because it is very close to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. In the early days of the Church, there was a feast celebrated by pagans to honor the "rebirth of the sun" as the days grew longer, gradually warming the earth. So, too, Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus, "the son" who gives life, light, and warmth to our lives.

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## 5. What are the highlights of the Easter season?

The Easter season begins with the preparation period of *Lent*, which is approximately forty days long. It begins on Ash Wednesday, followed by the first Sunday of Lent, which occurs six weeks before Easter. The last week of Lent, known as *Holy Week*, begins with Passion Sunday.

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## 6. What is the central event of the church year?

The central event of the church year is the *Sacred Triduum*. That is the culmination of Lent and the beginning of the Easter celebration. These three days—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil—lead us through the events of our salvation, beginning with evening Mass on Holy Thursday, through the Last Supper, the prayer and betrayal in the garden, and the arrest and eventual death of Jesus.

During this time, we face the *reality* of Christ's saving death, which leads us to our celebration of Jesus' resurrection at the Easter Vigil. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil are "*one day, liturgically speaking*," because they constitute the one saving act of Jesus' dying and rising.

The Lenten/Easter season should be thought of as one continuous celebration of the one Paschal mystery—the dying and rising of Christ and our sharing in his death and resurrection. Our celebration continues and culminates on Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Easter. We also celebrate the feast of our Lord's Ascension, ten days before Pentecost.

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## 7. How does the Church determine when Easter will be celebrated?

Easter is determined by the moon's cycle, falling on the Sunday after the first full moon of the spring equinox. This was agreed upon at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Because of different ways of calculating this full moon, the date of Easter in the Western and Eastern Churches is not always the same. The various Churches have agreed to resolve this difference so that they can celebrate Easter on the same date (cf. *Catechism*, 1170).





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### 8. What is the significance of Ordinary Time?

Ordinary Time is the remaining time outside the seasons of Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. Here, we are challenged to live out the events we have prepared for and to celebrate the Eucharist with other community members.

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### 9. What are the Church's practices for liturgical seasons?

During Advent and Lent we are challenged to spend time in deep prayer and reflection on spiritual and moral matters and to fast and abstain. The purpose of this is moral and spiritual conversion. Christmas and Easter raise our hearts in jubilant praise for the saving events of the Incarnation and Resurrection.

The changing focus of the liturgical year can also be seen in the decor and vestments used in churches. Colors change from somber tones of violet to joyful colors such as gold or white, and then rest with ordinary colors like green. Each reflects the liturgical season. Even the flowers, banners, and candles displayed in church signal to the community either a penitential or joyous mood.

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### 10. How does the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults celebrate the Church's liturgical year?

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults leads catechumens—and the entire church community—through a conversion process that is celebrated in the seasons of the church year. Adult initiation becomes a major experience of resurrection and new life for the Church each year at the Easter Vigil.

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### 11. How can we celebrate the liturgical seasons in our homes?

It is possible to bring the spirit of the seasons into our family activities. During Advent, families make Advent wreaths or Jesse Trees, and prepare a Christmas crib. In addition, studying the religious significance of Christmas trees, lights, candles, and gift-giving helps bring the true meaning of Christmas to life for many families.

To make Lent feel different from Ordinary Time, families can find ways to “fast” together. For example, they can give up a favorite TV program or snack or going to movies or drinking alcohol during the entire season.

Projects to help the poor as a family are also an appropriate form of almsgiving. The significance of Easter eggs, new clothes, and an appreciation of spring as a sign of new life should be pointed out.

During both seasons it is good practice to discuss the daily readings and to use the official church prayers for the day.

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### 12. Are there other cycles in the church year?

There are several other ongoing cycles. They are the cycle of the saints, the daily cycle in the Prayer of Christians, lectionary cycles, weekly cycles, and the cycle for holy years.

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### 13. What is the cycle of the saints?

Each year we celebrate feast days and holy days in honor of Mary and the saints that recall the examples of these holy people. The holy days celebrated in the United States are the Assumption of Mary (August 15), All Saints Day (November 1), and the Immaculate Conception (December 8). These days are holy days of obligation, along with Christmas (December 25), the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1), and the Ascension of the Lord (during the Easter season).

Other important feasts include the feasts of St. Joseph (March 19, May 1), the Annunciation (March 25), and the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29). Days honoring saints of local significance such as parish, country, or professional patrons also are celebrated.

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### 14. What is the Liturgy of the Hours?

In addition to sacramental celebrations, the Church engages in the custom of official communal prayer, of praising God in psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, and in morning, noon, and night readings from Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the saints.

This is the Liturgy of the Hours, which symbolically extends the central celebration of Eucharist throughout the day. The Liturgy of the Hours flows from the altar and back to the altar, providing the Church with a way of fulfilling the command of Scripture to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Thus, the major segments of each





day are made holy by the praise of God. This is the daily prayer of the Body of Christ, a sacrifice of praise offered around the world.

Communal prayer is an essential feature of most monasteries and convents. The Morning Praise and Evening Song (to which are added communal praise at other times) are considered to be the joyful responsibility of the Church.

### 15. Do lay people say the Prayer of Christians?

The Prayer of Christians is the Morning Praise and Evening Song sections of the Liturgy of the Hours. Yes, many lay people participate in this prayer of the Church. Often people who live near monasteries and convents are invited to join those communities in prayer. Many parishes invite interested members to gather for this prayer. Lay people also pray the Prayer of Christians in private, joining themselves in spirit with the Body of Christ around the world.

### 16. What are the lectionary cycles?

There are two lectionary cycles, one for Sundays and major feasts and the other for the daily cycle. Both cycles give the Scripture readings used in Catholic liturgies for specific days. With the three-year Sunday cycle (named A, B, and C), and the two-year daily cycle (Years 1 and 2), Catholics hear major portions of Scripture as part of their regular worship. Further study and reflection on the Sunday and daily readings provides an excellent way to increase our awareness of Scripture.

### 17. What is the importance of Sunday?

Sunday is supposed to be like a “little Easter” as we gather to celebrate the Lord’s resurrection. Even in penitential seasons, Sunday is never a *fast* day but a *feast* day. Moreover, Sunday also recalls God’s “day of rest,” after the work of creation. We are called to rest, relax, and think about God and spiritual goals. Our Sunday worship is an essential part of the rhythm of our Christian life.

### 18. How does the natural cycle affect the church year?

Nature’s cycle affects the language of prayers, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere where the Church originated. Winter, snow, short days, and the winter solstice provide strong images for the Advent/Christmas cycle. Spring flowers and talk of sunshine permeate the Easter language. Harvest images appear in the last judgment themes near the end of the church year.

Unfortunately, Catholics living in the Southern Hemisphere cannot identify with this because of the reversal of seasons. For them, there is no correspondence with their natural cycle and the church year.

### LIVING THIS MESSAGE

The celebration of the Eucharist brings us to the summit and source of the Christian life. As the center of the liturgical act, the Eucharist is the most powerful prayer of the Church because it makes present the very reason for Christ’s incarnation, namely, to save us from sin and give us divine life. Liturgy is meant to flow over into life.

The dismissal at the end of Mass is not a good-bye. It is a challenge to fulfill our call to holiness, to spread the Gospel to the world, and to do what we can to improve the social conditions of people who are in need. We leave Mass resolved to love and serve the Lord and one another.

### DISCUSS THIS MESSAGE

How can we make the Mass more relevant to our daily lives?

### READ MORE ABOUT THIS MESSAGE

*Catechism for Adults*: Chapter 27, “The Third Commandment: Love the Lord’s Day,” pages 361 – 371.