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THE LITURGICAL YEAR

HOW CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE TIME

BY SANDRA DEGIDIO, OSM

The Church's liturgical calendar shows us how our time fits into God's time.



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PHOTOXPRESS/GINO SANTA MARIA

We Catholics mark, name, and celebrate special feasts and seasons with gusto and color, and we need to be even more conscious of the wonderful calendar we have.

The Church year or liturgical calendar gives us a glimpse of the way God's time breaks into our time. It is the way we Christians add a religious or spiritual dimension to the natural seasons, months, weeks, and days.

THE LITURGICAL YEAR'S SHAPE

The liturgical year we now know and celebrate developed over several centuries and went through many changes. The reform of the liturgical calendar initiated by the Second Vatican Council included much ecumenical scholarship. As a result, there is wide ecumenical concurrence on its outline and major features.

The year that begins at Advent is really Easter-based.

Christian Churches mark the beginning of the liturgical year on the First Sunday of Advent. Although Advent and Christmas may suggest a historical and Christmas-based approach to marking time, the liturgical calendar is actually a resurrection-based calendar.

The liturgical calendar commemorates the story of our redemption. What we hear in the gospel stories and tell in the course of the liturgical year is the story of God with us in the redeeming work of Christ: Christ was born; Christ taught; Christ was crucified and raised up; the Spirit was poured out on us.

The feasts make Christ present NOW! It is important to realize that the festive liturgies we celebrate throughout the liturgical year are not reenactments of these historical dramas of the past but contemporary encounters with Christ. Liturgy does not reproduce history. For example, our Advent and Christmas liturgies do not duplicate past events. They help us rejoice in the present reality of the anticipation, birth, and rebirth of the Messiah in our lives.

Think cycles. The shape of the liturgical year is cyclic, with two recurring cycles of *extraordinary* time—Lent/Easter and Advent/Christmas—framed by cycles of ordinary time. Each cycle of extraordinary time begins with a period of preparation and anticipation and culminates in a season of celebration.

THE CHRISTMAS CYCLE

The Christmas season is preceded by Advent as a time of preparation. Advent, however, is far more than preparing to commemorate the first coming of Christ. Advent also focuses on the Second Coming of Christ.

ADVENT: WAITING FOR THE ONE WHO HAS ALREADY COME

With its many emotional overtones, Advent ushers in the most popular season of the year. Advent is a season of desire, passion, and hope. Purple vestments and environmental decor clash with the red, green, and sparkling silver and gold everywhere around us.

Christ's Second Coming. The tension of Advent places us between memory and hope. In Advent, the beginning and end times meet. We live between the first and Second Coming of Christ. We expectantly wait for the One who has already come. The Advent Scriptures abound with the poetry, prophecy, and challenge of preparing for this reign of God—and indeed for that Second Coming of Christ that brings all to fulfillment.

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