Christian History

Special Issue

Fasts and Feasts

A historical guide to the church calendar

A note from the author

Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!
Are there any who are grateful servants?
Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!
—John Chrysostom, Easter sermon, c. 400

Think about how you would tell the story of your own life to someone else—and the story of your life with Christ. Are there events you particularly remember? Are there times of happiness and times of sorrow? What has been the rhythm of your days?

One of the distinctive aspects of the Christian faith is that it is a story rooted in time, based on the story of a Savior who lived at a moment in history that we can pinpoint. Because they were aware of this, Christians began very early to celebrate the life, death, and Resurrection of their Savior by using time. Weekly at first, and then yearly, joyful commemorations and penitential periods developed; over the first few centuries of the church they achieved a rhythm, year in and year out, intended to help believers grow in faith and become closer to their Lord.

DISCOVERING THE "WORK OF THE PEOPLE"

This *Fasts and Feasts* guide is an introduction to this rhythm—to inform you about its history and, perhaps, give you ideas to make it part of your own discipleship or that of your church. A few overall guidelines may help you get the best use out of it:

- Some Christians use the word "liturgy" to exclusively describe worship in churches that is formal, somewhat unvarying, and generally written down. But in fact the word means "the work of the people," and every act of worship has a liturgy. Paying attention to what you and your church already do (or do not do) around these feasts and fasts—and why—will help you better understand the stories about how these observances developed.
- To make things simple, the Gregorian calendar has been used throughout to give dates, even though some of these dates were or are set according to the Hebrew or Julian calendar, or may originally have been identified with the calendar of the Roman Empire. You can find many online resources to help with calendar conversion if that interests you.
- This guide is generally aimed at Western Christians, since that describes most of the readers of *Christian History*. We've done our best to also indicate the basics of the church year in Eastern Orthodoxy, but the overall structure follows Western traditions where the two differ. Our Recommended Resources (pp. 50–51) lists some books to help you understand Eastern Christian worship more deeply.
- Similarly, though we know we have readers from Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions (often called "high church"), we recognize many readers of this guide will be from "low church" traditions—churches that typically do not emphasize ritual and liturgy—but who still want to learn about how the church year guides Christians through a rhythm of fasts and feasts. Therefore we have (we hope!) tried to explain terms and practices that may be unfamiliar.
- Finally, the purpose of liturgical celebration is not to earn our salvation. Jesus already did that! It is to deepen our knowledge of and love for him.

Happy reading, thinking, praying, and celebrating! CH

Jennifer Woodruff Tait
Senior editor, Christian History
Author, Fasts and Feasts Guide

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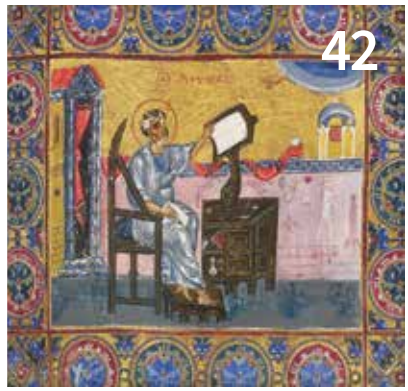
JENNIFER WOODRUFF TAIT—PERSONAL PHOTO

CHRISTIAN HISTORY



Fasts and feasts of the Christian year

Cover: Hugues Levet, *Astronomical clock, 16th century.* Saint Jean Baptiste cathedral, Lyon, France—Photo © Novapix / Bridgeman Images

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Fasts and feasts: FAQs

CH ANSWERS COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

THE SACRED IN THE MUNDANE This 13th-c. English liturgical calendar charts the month of October. It was found in a manuscript about the game of chess! The Christian calendar informed routine life in the Middle Ages.

WHAT IS A "CHRISTIAN" YEAR?

The Christian year, sometimes called the "church year" or the "liturgical year," is a historic calendar of fasts and feasts that has been celebrated in some form since the early church. It is organized around the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

WHY DO CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE FASTS AND FEASTS, ANYWAY?

The Christian faith has always been deeply rooted in time. Christians believe that the Crucifixion and Resurrection really happened in human history, on a certain date and in a certain place. Christianity inherited from its Jewish background a history of celebrating (weekly) a Sabbath and (yearly) the important anniversaries of God's mighty acts; some Christian festivals have a connection to Jewish counterparts (see pp. 4–5). The Bible makes clear in verses such as Isaiah 1:14 and Colossians 2:16 that keeping festivals is not a substitute for a transformed heart, but historically many Christian believers have found the daily, weekly, and yearly marking of time an aid to transforming the hearts of their community.

WHICH FASTS AND FEASTS DEVELOPED FIRST?

The earliest evidence for Christians explicitly marking time in honor of Christ is that they gathered weekly in celebration of the Resurrection. This pause in the week to honor Christ also drew on the history of the Jewish Sabbath. Christians also kept the Jewish practice of marking time by starting each new day at sundown the preceding evening. Christmas Eve and, believe it or not, Halloween are the most common occurrences of this practice today ("Hallowe'en," as it's more properly spelled, comes from "All Hallows' Eve," the day before All Saints' Day, see p. 41); but in fact every feast day is considered to start on its preceding eve.

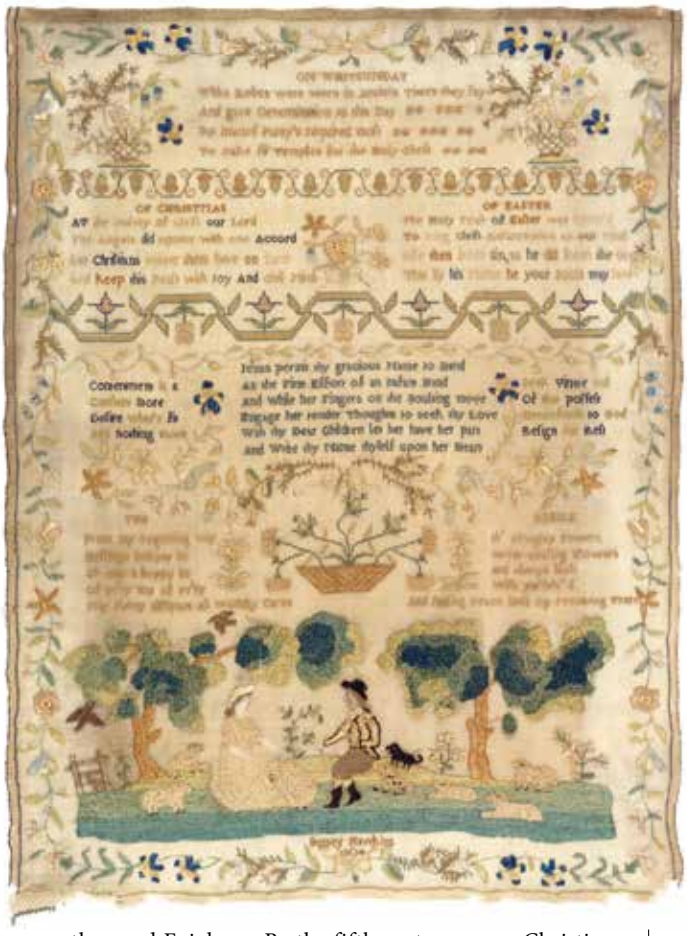
Meeting to worship on the "Lord's Day" is attested in the New Testament itself (1 Cor. 16:2; Acts 20:7, 11; Rev. 1:10), as well as in early Christian writings, such as the early second-century *Didache*, which orders believers: "Every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgression." The *Didache* also commended twice-weekly fasting. The governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, stated around 111 that the Christians he was trying to persecute "were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god."

SO, AFTER THIS WEEKLY RHYTHM DEVELOPED, HOW DID WE GET THE CHRISTIAN *YEAR*?

The Christian year developed backward from its major feasts. First and foremost was Easter, also called Pascha. By the fourth century, the penitential period of Lent and the remembrance of Christ's Passion during Holy Week were added before Easter as preparations for the great Paschal celebration. The next feast most important to the early Christians was Pentecost, 50 days after Easter Day, which took its name from the Jewish feast—on that day the Holy Spirit first fell on the disciples (Acts 2:1–41); it originally commemorated both the descent of the Spirit and Christ's Ascension (Acts 1:1–10) until Ascension moved backward and claimed its own day.

The other major early Christian feast may surprise you; it was not Christmas but Epiphany (January 6). Christians originally honored a number of events on this day: Christ's birth, the visit of the Magi, Christ's baptism, his first miracle, and the general manifestation of his glory to the Gentiles. Around the fourth century in the West, the celebration of Jesus's birth moved backward to December 25, and eventually 12 days of Christmas took shape between

LITURGICAL CALENDAR IN COTTON MS CLEOPATRA B IX, F. 59R. 13TH CENTURY—BRITISH LIBRARY / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA



SAMPLER OF LITURGICAL VERSES, 1804. SILK EMBROIDERY ON WOOL. ENGLISH—PUBLIC DOMAIN. COOPER HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM COLLECTION TEXTILES DEPARTMENT

A VERSE A DAY.... Specific Scripture readings for Sundays and feast days have long-standing historical precedent. This 19th-c. silk embroidery includes verses for Whitsunday (Pentecost), Christmas, and Easter.

then and Epiphany. By the fifth century, some Christians had begun observing a time of Lenten-like preparation before Christmas, which eventually developed into Advent as we know it today.

SO, WHY DOES THE DATE OF EASTER MOVE AROUND IF CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY DON'T?

We'll get into that on page 33.

HOW DO SAINTS FIT INTO THIS?

Everything just mentioned is called the "temporal" cycle—the weekly and yearly remembrance of Christ's mighty acts of salvation. Alongside this runs a "sanctoral" cycle—a yearly cycle of remembering saints. Beginning in the early second century and picking up steam after Christianity became legalized in the fourth, Christians began to remember local heroes, especially martyrs, on the anniversary of their deaths. (The first saint for whom we have a record of this is Polycarp—see *CH* #156.)

The longer Christianity endured, the more heroes and martyrs accumulated to remember, and eventually, by the twelfth century, a process whereby the pope could supervise the naming of saints for the entire Western church was established. (The process in Eastern Orthodoxy remains different and more localized.) Liturgical reformers for over a millennium have complained that the sanctoral cycle is in danger of overwhelming the temporal cycle, and various efforts to prune it back have been attempted. (Read more on pp. 46–49.)

WHEN DOES THE CHRISTIAN YEAR BEGIN?

It took a while for this to be established—at least in some places the early church celebrated the Christian new year on Epiphany—but Advent is now considered the beginning of the Christian year.

ARE THERE SCRIPTURE READINGS ASSOCIATED WITH THESE FASTS AND FEASTS?

Yes—historically, the church set Scripture readings for all Sundays and feast days in the Christian year. The technical term for a list of prescribed Scripture readings is "lectionary." Christians read from the Old Testament and from the books that became the New Testament in worship from the faith's earliest days; we begin to have strong evidence for various schedules of readings from about the fourth century. Today, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox each have their own lectionaries. Many, but by no means all, Protestant denominations use a common schedule called the "Revised Common Lectionary" (RCL). Modern Western lectionaries generally operate on a three-year cycle that moves through most biblical books over the course of those three years.

WHAT ABOUT COLORS?

Over the centuries many colors have been associated with decorations and vestments during certain seasons. In modern Western churches (and in this guide's borders), blue and purple are usually used for Advent, white and gold for Christmas, green for Epiphany, purple for Ash Wednesday and Lent, deep red for Holy Week with black on Good Friday, white and gold for Easter, red for Pentecost, and green for Ordinary Time (for more on Ordinary Time, see pp. 18–19 and 41–43). Some colors are also associated with certain feasts or events throughout the year (white for All Saints' Day and red for ordinations, for example).

WHO CELEBRATES THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, AND WHO DOESN'T?

Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans celebrate the Christian year pretty much the way it is laid out in this guide. (While the overall structure is similar in Eastern Orthodoxy, significant differences have developed in *when* events are observed; see p. 45.) Most Protestant mainline denominations have retained or adopted at least some of the Christian year (especially colors, readings, and major feasts). Nondenominational, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches, except for celebrations of Christmas and Easter, generally do not mark many of these yearly feasts. Many have evolved an alternate structure focused around secular and civic holidays. Most Quakers officially celebrate no sacraments, organized worship, or holy days at all (see *CH* #117 for more). CH

Jewish fasts and feasts

Christian fasts and feasts developed against the background of Jewish practices, and the following Jewish holidays existed at the time of Jesus and the early church. While modern Jews celebrate these holidays, their observances are not monolithic and the holidays have developed in varied and complex ways from the biblical period. Other observances have been added to the Jewish liturgical calendar since the time of Jesus. (To better understand holidays not discussed here and modern customs around these holidays from a Jewish perspective, see My Jewish Learning.)

IN THE TORAH

The most important Jewish holidays are those in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), especially Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. (The dates are all officially set according to the Hebrew calendar, but we will use the Gregorian equivalents here for easier understanding.) Shabbat, the Sabbath, forms the foundation of the whole Jewish liturgical cycle. This weekly celebration is observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday; its observance is repeatedly commanded and ultimately traces back to the creation story in which God rests on the seventh day.

The Jewish New Year begins with the High Holy Days—Rosh Hashanah (which means literally "head of the year" or "new year") and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). While the Torah mentions these observances, the names came later. They are preceded by a period of repentance that

SADDEST DAY OF THE YEAR Tisha B'Av (*above*) **is a fast that marks the major tragedies of Jewish history.**

begins 40 days before Yom Kippur, and the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Ten Days of Repentance. The High Holy Days normally occur in September or October.

The Torah also refers to three pilgrimage festivals: Passover, or Pesach, commemorating the Hebrew people's Exodus from Egypt (March or April); Shavuot, which celebrates the first grain harvest and the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai (May or June); and Sukkot, an autumn festival five days after Yom Kippur that commemorates the wandering in the wilderness (September or October).

Before the Second Temple's destruction in Jerusalem in 70 AD, devout Jews would have gone on pilgrimage there for all three of these feasts. After its destruction home-based observances developed, including Passover seders and the building of a *sukkah*, or hut, for Shavuot. Scholars debate whether the Last Supper was a ritual Passover meal; if it was we do not know how closely it resembled the formal seders that developed later.

OTHER EARLY FEASTS

Two festivals commemorate events in the Second Temple period (lasting from the time of the Jewish return from exile in the sixth century to the destruction of the Second

MAURICE MINKOWSKI, *TISHA B'AV*, 1927. WATERCOLOR ON PAPER—BEN URI GALLERY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

PREPPING FOR PASSOVER This 14th-c. illustration (*left*) shows how Jewish famiies prepared for the seder, including searching for leaven and cleaning out the house.

SABBATH STORY This table cloth (*below*) would have been used for the traditional after-synagogue meal. It pictures Solomon's temple and tombs of prophets, kings, and judges.

PREPARATION FOR THE PASSOVER IN HAGGADAH PESACH, SISTER HAGGADAH, OR. 2884, F.17. CATALONIA, MID 14TH CENTURY—FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY ARCHIVE / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
SABBATH DAY TABLE CLOTH, 19TH CENTURY. THE ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM—© ERICH LESSING / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Temple—the First Temple had been destroyed at the time of the exile in 586 BC.) The first festival, Purim (March), commemorates events described in the book of Esther—how, while the Jews were in exile in Persia, the Jewish Esther became queen of Persia and saved her people from genocide.

The second is Hanukkah (December), which remembers a story from the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees—how Judah the Maccabee led a revolt against King Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire beginning in 167 BC and recaptured and rededicated the temple in Jerusalem in 164. While Hanukkah began as a fairly minor Jewish feast, it has grown in prominence over the years as a celebration and assertion of Jewish identity countering the Christmas season.

FASTING

Yom Kippur is the most famous fast day in the Jewish liturgical calendar, but observant Jews fast at many other times. In Hebrew history spontaneous fasts were often proclaimed to commemorate, pray for, or atone for a particular person or event. Eventually a calendar was developed called the Megillat Ta'anit, or Scroll of Fasts, that listed all the days on which one should *not* fast. The other major fast day in Jewish tradition besides Yom Kippur is Tisha B'Av, a day of communal mourning; it postdates the time of Jesus since it was first observed after the Second Temple's destruction. It commemorates both the First and Second Temple destructions as well as other catastrophes that have beset the Jewish people since 70, such as the Crusades, the Holocaust (Shoah), and more local persecutions and disasters.

THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

Early Christians deeply connected their practices of sacred time to Jewish conceptions. They understood liturgical time as a week punctuated by a Sabbath and a year marked by certain holy days. They observed holidays at sundown the night before and maintained an intentional rhythm of fasting and feasting—including the possibility of both spontaneous fasts and times when fasting was forbidden.

As far as specific holidays, events surrounding Jesus's death and Resurrection are obviously tied to Passover/Pesach. Early Christians seized on symbolic resonances between the story of the Exodus and the freedom bought by Christ. Jerusalem was celebrating Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after Passover) when the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2:1–31; as the Greek word for "fiftieth" is *pentecost*, this was sometimes used in Greek-speaking contexts to denote Shavuot, but it has never been a common Jewish name for the feast. For more on Easter and Pentecost connections to Pesach and Shavuot, see pages 32–39. CH

ALEJANDRO DE LOARTE, SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST, EARLY 17TH CENTURY. OIL ON PANEL—PRADO MUSUEM / PUBLIC DOMAIN. WIKIMEDIA

Awaiting his coming

Today, Christians who observe the church year begin with the season of Advent, a time of preparation that spans the four Sundays before Christmas. However, it was not the first Christian season to develop—its story is deeply rooted in the experience of other fasts and feasts.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Christians very early on marked the birth of the Lord on Epiphany, January 6, and in the fourth century some began to also celebrate Christmas on December 25. The first reference to a preparatory season before celebrating Christ's birth is in 380, when a council at Saragossa declared, "from December 17 until the day of Epiphany which is January 6 no one is permitted to be absent from church."

In 490 Bishop Perpetuus of Tours said that a period of fasting was to be observed during "St. Martin's Lent," already being celebrated between November 11 and January 6. A council held at Tours about 75 years later first mentions the season by name. Just as seekers had prepared during Lent for baptism at Easter since Christianity's earliest days, so now those who were going to be baptized at Epiphany were also encouraged to prepare during Advent.

Advent began mainly as a time of preparation for celebrating Christ's first coming in the Incarnation, but today we think of it as encompassing a focus on his Second Coming as well. We owe this emphasis to medieval Celtic Christians.

It took a while for the number of Advent weeks before December 25 to be firmly established. For a long time, Western and Eastern Christians both celebrated six. The East preserves a six-week Nativity Fast that begins in mid-November; Advent was shortened to four weeks in the West in most places in the twelfth century, beginning on or near the feast day of the better-known St. Andrew on November 30 (rather than on St. Martin's Day). Over time the emphasis on fasting in the West also decreased.

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL John the Baptist looks to heaven in a painting that communicates messianic longing and personal repentance (*left*).

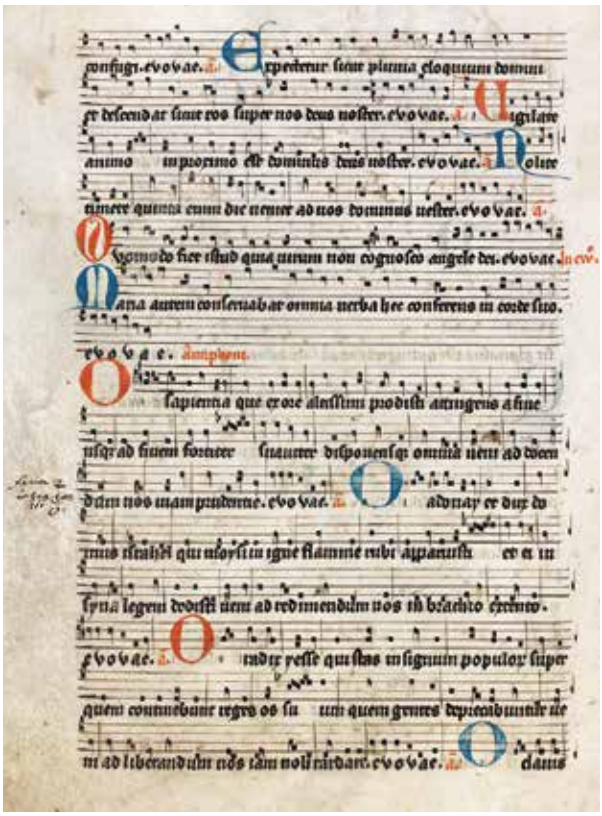
NERI DI BICCI, *THE ADORATION OF CHRIST*, 1470s. TEMPERA ON WOOD—LINDENAU MUSEUM / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
WILLIAM DE BRAILES, *THE FINAL JUDGEMENT*, c. 1250. INK AND PIGMENT ON PARCHMENT—THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM, BALTIMORE

COME THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS This 15th-c. nativity scene depicts Jesus's first coming (*top*). Advent also looks forward to Christ's Second Coming, as this Last Judgment illustration (*above*) imagines.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

In the West, Advent begins on whichever Sunday closest to November 30 allows for four Sundays before Christmas Day. The First Sunday of Advent can be as early as November 27 and as late as December 3; the longest possible Advent is 28 days and the shortest, 22 days, when the Fourth Sunday of Advent falls on Christmas Eve. Most Eastern Christians celebrate a fixed period of 40 days before Christmas (or in the case of Ethiopian and Eritrean

A ROD FROM JESSE'S ROOT Antiphons, or short scriptural refrains, have been sung during Advent since its beginning. This one, "O Root of Jesse" (*below left*), refers to Isaiah 11:1. Messianic imagery, such as this Jesse tree on a Spanish altar (*left*), is found in churches all over the world.



JESSE TREE, ALTARPIECE OF THE CHURCH OF SANTA CLARA DE BRIVIESCA (BURGOS, SPAIN) 16TH CENTURY—TURISMOBRIVIESCA / [CC BY-SA 4.0] WIKIMEDIA
O ANTIPHONS IN EINSIEDELN, ABBEY LIBRARY, CODEX 611(89). REPRODUCED IN P. ODO LANG OSB, CATALOGUE OF MANUSCRIPTS IN THE EINSIEDELN ABBEY LIBRARY, BASEL 2009, PP. 148–149—[CC BY SA 4.0] WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Christians, Epiphany) to correspond with Lent and refer to it as the Nativity Fast. (A variety of calendars are used in the Eastern Orthodox Church; for more on this, see p. 45).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Common themes emphasized in Advent include Christ's birth, his Second Coming, preparation, and repentance. Modern Western celebrations of Advent, as with many of the feasts considered in this issue, are heavily indebted to the ideas of the twentieth-century liturgical movement (which originated in the 1960s among post–Vatican II Roman Catholics and quickly spread to mainline Protestants; see *CH* #138) and to the Revised Common Lectionary (see p. 1).

The RCL prescribes specific emphases for each Sunday; the first Sunday focuses on Christ's Second Coming, the second and third tell the story of John the Baptist calling for repentance, and the final Sunday narrates the events right before the birth of Jesus. (For some the third Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday, and it emphasizes the joy of Christ's coming birth.) In Eastern Christianity the thematic focus during the Nativity Fast is on the saints' days that happen at that time: Matthew, presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple (see below), Andrew, Barbara, Sabbas, Nicholas, the conception of the Theotokos, Spyridon, and Ignatius of Antioch.

COLORS

In the West purple or blue are used. Purple is the more traditional color, but blue gained steam in the twentieth-century liturgical movement and also has historical precedent, especially among Anglicans. In the East red is used.

CUSTOMS

In Western liturgical churches, no Christmas carols are sung during Advent (although sometimes one will sneak in on the Fourth Sunday), and the decoration of the sanctuary is often sparse. The Gloria, an ancient song of praise that forms a regular part of worship, is eliminated, and a more penitential song is substituted. Sometimes a nativity scene is placed in the worship space minus the baby Jesus (who will arrive on the evening of December 24) and the Magi (who will arrive on January 6).

An Advent wreath is usually lit near the beginning of the service. Sometimes extra readings are associated with each candle and specific names given to them—usually Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love—and families in the church are invited to begin the service by lighting the wreath. Advent wreaths began among German Lutherans in the nineteenth century and originally had 24 candles—20 red candles for the weekdays from December 1 to 24, and four white candles for the Sundays. The difficulty (and fire hazard) of dealing with so many candles led to the current practice of using four candles—usually three purple and one pink, for the third Sunday of Advent. Often a large white "Christ candle" in the center is lit on Christmas Eve and Day. Advent wreaths are also used for home worship.

From December 17 through December 24, the "O Antiphons" are sung, traditionally at Evening Prayer before and after the Magnificat/Song of Mary (Luke 1:46–55). (The

KITSCHY CALENDARS Advent calendars (*left*), first appearing in the 1920s, quickly became one of the most recognizable features of the Advent season in broader society.

THE JOY OF ADVENT Pope Francis (*below*) stands at the Basilica's Holy Door for Mass on the Third Sunday of Advent in 2015, also called Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* means "rejoice" in Latin.

Magnificat is recited at Evening Prayer year-round.) These famous antiphons—which you may know today as the lyrics to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"—date back to the eighth century, and each antiphon explores different Old Testament messianic imagery for Christ: Wisdom, Lord (and Lawgiver), Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, King of the Nations, and Emmanuel.

Advent calendars with a door or window to open for each day also originated among German Christians. The first commercial Advent calendars were printed in the 1920s by Gerhard Lang. In the 1950s Cadbury Chocolates made the first Advent calendar with product samples behind the doors, and by the twenty-first century, hundreds of companies with no discernible Christian influence were advertising with Advent calendars. Many Advent Calendars begin on December 1st even when it is not the first Sunday of Advent.

In Eastern churches the chief custom during this time is the Nativity Fast; except for certain feast days during the 40-day period, the Orthodox abstain from red meat, poultry, meat products, eggs, dairy products, fish, oil, and wine. The Orthodox calendar has 12 Great Feasts, some of which have Western equivalents (see p. 45), and one of them, the Presentation of the Theotokos, falls during these 40 days, on November 21. (*Theotokos*, Mother of God, is Mary's most common title in Orthodoxy.)

From December 20 to 24, called the Forefeast of the Nativity, Orthodox worshipers begin to chant Christmas hymns and some churches change their liturgical color to white. On December 24, called Paramony, or preparation, no solid food is eaten until evening, and an all-night vigil is held beginning sometime after sundown. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Use an Advent calendar and/or an Advent wreath. While you don't have to do readings with either of these, many online resources exist that provide readings for each day.
- Celebrate St. Nicholas's Day (December 6); give small gifts to your family, eat pastries, and learn about the real Nicholas of Myra (find out how he turned into Santa Claus on pp. 10–13).
- Make stollen, a traditional European Advent dish (originally made without butter because of fasting rules). Find recipes online.

FEDERICO BAROCCI, *NATIVITY*, 1597. OIL ON CANVAS—PRADO MUSEUM / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA • LIMBOURG BROTHERS, CHRISTMAS MASS ILLUSTRATION IN *TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY*, MS 65, F.158R, 1414. PAINTING OF VELLUM PAPER. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHEL URTADO—© RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NY • JAN VAN DER SPRIET, PORTRAIT OF INCREASE MATHER. ENGRAVING BY ROBERT WHITE, 1725—PUBLIC DOMAIN, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Celebrating Christ's birth

From Advent we move through the year to Christmas—both the day and the season. We'll look first at the day.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

By now you know that the Advent and Christmas seasons developed backward from the celebration of Epiphany. The first reference to Christians celebrating Christ's birth on December 25, rather than January 6, is in the mid-fourth century. Then in a sermon in 386 John Chrysostom (347–407) referred to Christ's Nativity as a feast that "has now been brought to us, not many years ago" and "has developed so quickly and borne such fruit."

The name "Christmas" is a shortening of "Christ's Mass" in Middle English; the history of names for the feast in different languages is complex, but one common earlier name in Latin was the Feast of the Nativity. Many liturgical churches still call the church service on the day itself the Feast of the Nativity to distinguish it from secular/cultural Christmas celebrations.

But why this date, given that no one knows when during the year Jesus was actually born? Sextus Julius Africanus (160–240), an early third-century Christian historian, is among the first to refer to Jesus's conception on March 25 and thus, by simple math, his birth nine months later on December 25. (Why March 25? We'll talk about this again when we get to Holy Week, but many Christian thinkers believed Jesus was conceived on March 25 and died that same day.)

About 30 years after Africanus died, the Roman Empire began celebrating a day in the 270s dedicated to the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun (Sol) on December 25. This new feast came directly after a festival of gift-giving called Saturnalia, which began on December 17 on the Roman calendar; members of the Roman military also celebrated the birthday of the god Mithra on the 25th. It seems likely that some Christian believers were motivated to celebrate the feast of the true God rather than Sol or Mithra on December 25 instead. Christmas Eve, just like other "eve" feasts, grew out of the custom Christians inherited from Jewish practice of beginning the day at sundown (see pp. 2–3).

NEWBORN KING 16th-c. artist Federico Barucci captures the awe of the Incarnation (*left*).

MASS AND MATHER Though the beauty of Christ's Mass can help believers celebrate the Incarnation (*above left*), some Christians, such as Increase Mather (his name is Latinized in the portrait *above*), took issue with the holiday's secularization and banned celebration.

ANTONIO VITE, *INSTITUTION OF THE CRIB*, 14TH CENTURY. CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO, PISTOIA—MONGOLO1984 / [CC BY-SA 4.0] WIKIMEDIA

FRANCIS'S GREAT IDEA This image shows St. Francis performing Christ's Mass with a nativity scene; he is credited with creating the Christmas creche tradition.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Christmas is celebrated on December 25 in most of both Eastern and Western Christianity, but since some Eastern churches use the Julian calendar, their celebration takes place on what the modern Gregorian calendar considers to be January 7.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The major themes of Christmas Eve and Day are, of course, all aspects of the Nativity of Christ. This includes the story of his birth as given in Scripture, especially its humble nature; the miracle of God becoming incarnate as man; and the wonder of Christ being both human and divine. Special emphasis in the Nativity story is often given to Mary's willingness to bear the Son of God (Eastern churches commonly call her *Theotokos*, or Mother of God, which highlights this). Sermons and customs also speak frequently of Joseph's role as Jesus's earthly father and protector, and the fact that Jesus's birth was first revealed to humble shepherds and not to the powerful.

COLORS

Western liturgical churches usually use white and gold on Christmas Day and during Christmastide (see pp. 14–15). Churches of all types, liturgical and not, usually decorate sanctuaries with greenery. Red and green, the colors most often associated in modern culture with Christmas, also play a part in decorations. (Red and green were associated with Christmas historically in the West because they are the colors of holly, but they became solidified as the cultural Christmas colors through a set of Coca-Cola advertisements in 1931—true story!) Gold is the main color in the Eastern church; white is sometimes used on Christmas Day only.

CUSTOMS

It is difficult to disentangle "cultural Christmas" from "liturgical Christmas," even among devout Christians. The battle between Christmas as a largely secular, and often rowdy, celebration with family and friends versus Christmas as the marking of the Incarnation through song and story has been a centuries-old problem, and one that people still complain of today.

Most famously the Puritan movement banned Christmas in the seventeenth century both in England and in the North American colonies, calling celebrations marking the occasion—which included drinking, dancing, and breaking down all kinds of social norms—unscriptural and deeply pagan. Colonial Puritan preacher Increase Mather (1639–1723) once wrote that early Christians did not keep December 25 as a feast because "Christ was born in that month, but because the heathens' Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those pagan holidays metamorphosed into Christian [holidays]." While celebrations of Christmas eventually returned after a restored English monarchy replaced the Puritan movement, Mather speaks for many even today who reject the cultural trappings of Christmas and sometimes do not celebrate the holiday altogether.

Some church-related ceremonies honoring the Nativity include the hanging of greenery; the lighting of a white "Christ candle" in the middle of an Advent wreath; the performance of nativity pageants, a tradition that reaches back into the Middle Ages; services of lessons and carols telling

THOMAS NAST. *SANTA CLAUS WITH TOYS IN HIS ARMS*, 1880. COLOR ENGRAVING—PHOTO © NORTH WIND PICTURES / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

JOLLY OLD ST. NICHOLAS The generosity of Nicholas of Myra (*below*) inspired his December feast day tradition of gift giving in the Middle Ages. Combined later traditions morphed him into the modern conception of Santa Claus, which popular cartoons helped solidify (*left*).

SAINT NICHOLAS AND SCENES FROM HIS LIFE, 12TH CENTURY—BY PERMISSION OF SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY, SINAI, EGYPT. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MICHIGAN-PRINCETON-ALEXANDRIA EXPEDITIONS TO MOUNT SINAI.

the story of salvation history (a custom dating to the late nineteenth century and most closely associated today with King's College, Cambridge); the singing of songs celebrating the birth of Christ after these have been forbidden during Advent; and the placing of a creche (nativity scene) in the sanctuary or placing baby Jesus into an already-present creche. In lower church settings, some or all of these things may occur during Advent instead. Even among churches that don't celebrate the Eucharist frequently, many do so on Christmas Eve (often at 11:00 p.m. so as to end at midnight). More liturgical churches will offer the Eucharist on Christmas Day as well.

Christmas trees frequently form part of sanctuary decorations today. Originally evergreen boughs were used as pagan symbols of the Roman and Norse gods, but Christians began to use trees to depict biblical truth in the Middle Ages. This arose out of the custom of "paradise trees" in nativity plays to represent the Garden of Eden.

After the Reformation and the suppression of outdoor pageants, these trees moved inside people's houses, and this custom became especially popular among Protestants in Northern Europe. Eventually candles and gifts were hung on these trees; while the idea of doing so is popularly credited to Martin Luther, no solid evidence supports this. Today trees in churches are often decorated with "Chrismons," gold and white Christian symbols. The word stands for "Christian monograms," and the custom originated among mid-twentieth-century Lutherans.

Gift-giving flourishes widely among those who have never celebrated Christmas in a church setting, but it is tied most closely to Christian traditions around Christmas through the figure of St. Nicholas (although his feast day, December 6, is actually in Advent). Nicholas was bishop of Myra in the fourth century; most of what is known about him is legendary, including his (plausible) attendance at the Council of Nicaea and (less plausible) punching of the heretic Arius in the face at the council. Nicholas was alleged to be particularly charitable to the poor, and stories tell of him giving dowries to poor girls who otherwise would not have been able to marry and might have had to resort to prostitution.

The custom of giving gifts on his feast day arose in the Middle Ages; his contemporary evolution into Santa Claus happened much later through traditions Dutch immigrants brought to North America. The modern idea of a fat, jolly Santa giving presents on Christmas Eve crystallized, at least in the American imagination, through the 1823 poem called "A Visit from St. Nicholas" by Clement Clarke Moore (1779–1863) and the 1862 drawing of a round and happy St. Nick by cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840–1902). CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Alongside any preexisting home-based traditions, consider attending church on Christmas Day, celebrate the Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6, and choose an element of "cultural Christmas" to forego.
- Incorporate an Advent wreath into your home worship, and light the Christ candle on Christmas Day.

Twelve days of Christmas

PAULINE BAYNES, *WASSAILING THE APPLE TREES, ILLUSTRATING A DEVONSHIRE CUSTOM OF TWELFTH NIGHT*, 1997. WATERCOLOR ON PAPER—© ESTATE OF PAULINE BAYNES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED 2025 / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

HERE WE COME A-WASSAILING Twelfth Night traditions such as wassailing, or singing and drinking around an apple tree, weren't necessarily Christian practices but are associated with the festivities of Christmastide.

You may be familiar with the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Some people sing it as though these 12 days of Christmas end on Christmas Day. As a matter of fact, though, that's historically when Christmas celebrations were supposed to *start*. More than just lending their name to a cryptic holiday song, the "real" 12 days of Christmas give us a way to reflect on what the Incarnation means in our lives.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Moving the date of the Nativity celebration backward from January 6 to December 25 while still celebrating Epiphany on January 6 caused an increased emphasis on the period of Christmas celebrations in between. The Council of Tours in 567 officially named this as a special season of feasting and thus asked people to fast during Advent in preparation for the later celebration.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Most Christians who observe the 12 days count them as beginning on Christmas Day itself and ending on January 5, or the Eve of Epiphany, also known as Twelfth Night (which is indeed where the title of the Shakespeare play comes from; the play touches on some of the themes of the season).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Of course all the themes that center around Christmas Day are still emphasized during Christmastide—the wonder of the Incarnation and the profound mystery of the Word becoming Flesh (John 1:18). In both East and West, specific feasts that occur during this time have become an important part of the observance of the season.

In the West the main feast days that occur during the 12 days of Christmas are St. Stephen (December 26), St. John the Evangelist (December 27), the Holy Innocents from Matthew 2:16 (December 28), and New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Roman Catholics also observe feast days for St. Thomas Becket (December 29) and the Holy Family (December 30).

You may have heard December 26 described as "Boxing Day" from the custom of boxing up donations for the poor on this day; the most famous seasonal carol about this, of course, is "Good King Wenceslaus," which features the titular king (actually, a duke of Bohemia) choosing to help a poor peasant on this day. January 1, eight days after the birth of Christ, is observed in various churches as the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, the Feast of the Circumcision, or the Feast of the Holy Name—all titles relating to the naming and circumcision of Jesus on this day. (The time from December 25 to January 1 is often called the "Octave" of Christmas to emphasize that it lasts eight days. We'll encounter this term again when we get to the Easter season.)

In the East the Feast of the Nativity is understood to last for three days and to encompass the birth itself on the 25th, a feast dedicated to the role of the Virgin

FEASTS OF CHRISTMASTIDE During the 12 days of Christmas, a number of feasts take place, including the feast of St. Thomas Becket on December 29, which commemorates his martyrdom (reliquary casket with martyrdom scenes, *below right*), and the Feast of the Circumcision, commemorated on the eighth day after the Nativity of Christ (*right*).

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *THE CIRCUMCISION*, 1661. OIL ON CANVAS—NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON D.C., WIDENER COLLECTION / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA

Mary in the Incarnation on the 26th, and St. Stephen on the 27th. The Eastern church remembers the Holy Innocents on December 29. The "afterfeast" of Christmas lasts until December 31; the Feast of the Circumcision is celebrated on January 1 (as is the feast day of St. Basil the Great), and the "forefeast" of Epiphany begins on January 2.

COLORS

The same colors used for Christmas Day are used during this time—white and gold in the West and gold in the East.

CUSTOMS

Historically some of the merrymaking that caused the suppression of Christmas took place during Christmastide, with various celebrations of the topsy-turvy and the unruly. In medieval Europe, a "Lord of Misrule" was often elected at Christmas and ruled the festivities until Epiphany. A schoolboy, traditionally chosen as bishop on December 6 (the Feast of St. Nicholas), filled all the functions of a bishop until Holy Innocents' Day. The Christmas season sometimes saw the "Feast of the Ass," commemorating the donkey traditionally present at the manger, and some people celebrated the "Feast of Fools" on or around January 1.

Today the period is still seen as one of celebration—in liturgical churches, elaborate sanctuary decorations and the singing of Christmas carols and hymns continue. In the East fasting is forbidden during this time until January 5. Many Western churches have some form of a "watchnight" on New Years' Eve—a service, often multiple hours long, where people gather to pray, repent of the past year's sins, commit themselves anew to Christ, and take Holy Communion (or a simple meal of bread and water). Among the most famous forms the watchnight has taken historically are the Moravian lovefeasts and the covenant service that John Wesley developed for Methodists thanks to Moravian influence. CH

RELIQUARY CASKET WITH SCENES FROM THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. THOMAS BECKET. c. 1173 TO 1180. GILDED SILVER OVER TINTED FOIL—GIFT OF J. PIERPONT MORGAN, 1917, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Consider continuing to celebrate Christmas traditions that you might previously have limited to Christmas Day: spread out gift-giving, continue lighting the Advent wreath including the Christ candle, leave up Christmas decorations, send out cards, prepare and eat festive foods.
- On Saint Stephen's Day/Boxing Day, do something to aid those in need.
- If you cannot attend a watchnight service, take stock of your year on December 31 in a personal or family context.
- Learn about all the feast days celebrated during this period. Tell their stories and make traditional foods related to them.

(*This section incorporates text from "The Real Twelve Days of Christmas" by Edwin and Jennifer Woodruff Tait in* CH *#103.*)

JOHANNINUS DE JANUA, HISTORIATED INITIAL IN ANTIPHONARY, 14TH CENTURY—ALFREDO DAGLI ORTI / ART RESOURCE, NY
MASTER OF THE ORLÉANS TRIPTYCH, TRIPTYCH: CIRCUMCISION, EPIPHANY, NATIVITY, c. 1490. ENAMEL AND COPPER, FRANCE—INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
EPIPHANY, 16TH CENTURY, FOUND IN THE COLLECTION OF THE DIONYSIOU MONASTERY, MOUNT ATHOS—HIP / ART RESOURCE, NY
FOUR GOSPELS IN ARMENIAN, F.5V-6R. 1434 TO 1435. TEMPERA AND GOLD ON PAPER; STAMPED LEATHER BINDING—PUBLIC DOMAIN, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

When God appears

Epiphany (called more often "Theophany" in the Eastern tradition, which means "manifestation of God") is one of the oldest feast days in the Christian tradition and the oldest part of the church's temporal cycle (see p. 2) that is not explicitly part of the Lent-Easter cycle. The Sundays between the Feast of the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday continue the emphases of the feast itself.

DIVINE MANIFESTATIONS Epiphany celebrates God's most visible appearances to us, including Jesus's revelation to the Magi (*above left*), baptism (*middle*), and Transfiguration (*right*). Epiphany depictions from around the world, from Armenia to Italy (on p. 16) attest to the far reach and endurance of this early feast.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

No one is entirely sure, but we know Christians were celebrating this day as a unified feast—focusing on Christ's birth, visitation by the Magi, baptism, and the first miracle at Cana—by the fourth century. It probably originated among Egyptian Christians. Clement of Alexandria (150–c. 215) made the earliest reference c. 200 to some kind of commemoration of Christ's baptism around this time of year, and Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (330–c. 395) made the first written mention of the day in 361.

The settling of the date on January 6 may be due to an old tradition that Christ both was conceived and died on April 6 (we've already run into the way that this belief about another date, March 25, solidified the date of Christmas). For some time and in some places the church considered Epiphany the beginning of the church year.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Since its first celebration, Epiphany has always been on January 6. The number of Sundays after Epiphany (sometimes known in the West as Epiphanytide) varies depending on when Ash Wednesday occurs. The fewest possible number of Sundays is four and the most is nine.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In the East the observance of Theophany retains more of the unified character that the feast had at the beginning. It focuses chiefly on Jesus's manifestation as divine through his baptism and the miracle at Cana, and only secondarily on the Magi. One congregation speaks of the feast this way: "Theophany in the Eastern churches is associated with spiritual enlightenment, renewal of all creation, and most importantly, the sanctification of the Jordan water."

The West focuses mainly on the Magi on January 6, while the baptism of the Lord and the wedding at Cana are celebrated on subsequent Sundays during the season. What all these stories have in common is the glory of the incarnate Christ becoming manifest to the world—as a light to the Gentiles (as represented by the definitely non-Jewish Magi), through the descent of the Spirit at his baptism, and in the course of his very first miracle.

The readings for the Sundays after Epiphany normally focus on the mighty signs and acts of Jesus throughout the gospel story and emphasize the proclamation of the gospel message. In some churches, these weeks will be referred to as "Ordinary Time"—we'll talk more about that concept later when we get to the Sundays after Pentecost, but it is not meant to imply that these Sundays are any less spectacular than other Sundays. The term comes from the word "ordinal," which has to do with the idea of counting—in this case,

A CHALKY TRADITION (*above*) **One way some commemorate Epiphany is the use of consecrated chalk to bless homes. This custom is called "chalking the door."**

counting the Sundays between the day of Epiphany and Ash Wednesday.

In many Protestant liturgical churches, the Feast of the Transfiguration—one of the most dramatic manifestations of Jesus's glory—is celebrated on the final Sunday of Epiphanytide. (Roman Catholics and Orthodox celebrate the Transfiguration on its older date of August 6.) A famous hymn for the Transfiguration by Thomas Troeger (1945–2022), "Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory," makes the connection between that event and the upcoming Lenten season and the path to the cross:

> Glimpsed and gone the revelation,
> They [i.e., Peter, James, and John] shall gain and keep its truth,
> Not by building on the mountain
> Any shrine or sacred booth,
> But by following the Savior
> Through the valley to the cross
> And by testing faith's resilience
> Through betrayal, pain, and loss.

As the Christmas season's endpoint, Epiphany sends us into the world to live out the Incarnation, to witness to the light of Christ in the darkness. Following Jesus we have been baptized into his death and Resurrection. Whether we are called to martyrdom, or to prophetic witness, or simply to faithful living in the joys and sorrows of our daily lives, we live all our days in the knowledge of our dignity, redeemed through Christ and united to God.

COLORS

In Western churches white is used for the Feast of the Epiphany itself and, for those churches that celebrate the last Sunday of the season as the Transfiguration, for that feast as well. Green, the color for Ordinary Time, is used for the other Sundays. In the East, gold is used throughout (the Orthodox tradition normally uses gold when no other color is specified—the equivalent of Ordinary Time in the West).

CUSTOMS

Epiphany customs vary from country to country and, like Christmas customs, many have become deeply embedded as cultural as well as spiritual practices. In the West one common custom is "chalking the door"; families use chalk, often blessed by a priest, to write the traditional initials of the Magi and the current year on their house door (for Epiphany 2026, this would be written 20 ✝ C ✝ M ✝ B ✝ 26). Many liturgical Western Christians perform baptisms chiefly on four feast days during the year, one of which is the Sunday honoring the baptism of the Lord.

Another practice that frequently takes places in homes or at church gatherings on Epiphany, and then again on the last day of the season, is eating a "king cake"—a sweet pastry covered with icing and containing a plastic baby. Whoever gets the baby may win a prize and be considered king or queen for the day. Although it has older roots in the "Lord of Misrule" customs (pp. 14–15), as currently practiced, this custom mainly dates from the nineteenth century. In church on the day of Epiphany or on the Sunday immediately following, hymns honoring the Magi are sung and, if there is a creche, figures of the three kings are added.

Shrove Tuesday is the final day of the Epiphany season in the West, and it often features—in addition to more king cakes—pancake suppers where rich food, particularly meat and dairy products, are consumed, theoretically to use them up in preparation for the Lenten fast. The word "shrove" is the past tense of "shrive," which means to forgive someone after hearing their confession; from about the year 1000 on, we hear of people making a thorough confession of their sins during the week before Ash Wednesday. Some churches ring bells on this day and burn palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday to make the ashes for Ash Wednesday. The day is also called Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras (which is "Fat Tuesday" in French), and in some

CAKES AND CARNIVALS People have historically celebrated the last day of Epiphany with king cakes (*right*) and other rich foods. Merrymaking before Lent (*top*) is a sometimes notorious cultural custom in many places in the West.

BATHING IN BLESSED WATERS In Aksum, Ethiopian believers bathe in a priest-blessed reservoir (*bottom left*) during Epiphany. A similar practice takes place in a frozen Russian river (*below*). Both church traditions are meant to mark Jesus's baptism.

FRANS HALS, *MERRYMAKERS AT SHROVETIDE*, c. 1616. OIL ON CANVAS—PUBLIC DOMAIN, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
VITALIY ANKOV, *EPIPHANY CELEBRATION IN MARITIME TERRITORY*, 2010—RIA NOVOSTI ARCHIVE, IMAGE #550903 / [CC-BY-SA 3.0] WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
TIMKET EPIPHANY CEREMONY, THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY MARY OF ZION, AXSUM, ETHIOPIA. 2008—GILAD FLESCH / ALAMY
KING CAKE FROM BYWATER BAKERY, NEW ORLEANS, FOR 2017 CARNIVAL SEASON—CHRISTOPHER PORCHÉ WEST, PDM-OWNER, WIKIMEDIA

places—most famously New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro—it has become an immense cultural carnival.

In Eastern churches Jesus's baptism tends to be the primary theme of the day and, to some extent, the season. On the day itself, a Great Blessing of the Water takes place and the story of Jesus's baptism is told. The priest also blesses the congregation, who are invited to take the blessed water home and consume it reverently; they may use it to bless their own homes or invite the priest to bless the home. In Bucharest children leading lambs walk through the subway trains to commemorate the Lamb of God to whom John pointed.

Nowhere is Epiphany celebrated more joyously than in Ethiopia. Pilgrims from all over the country converge on the ancient city of Aksum, where they bathe in a great reservoir whose waters have been blessed by a priest. Eastern churches do not celebrate Ash Wednesday, but end their Epiphany seasons on whatever Sunday is seven weeks before the date of Easter. CH

SOME THINGS TO DO AT HOME

- Chalk your door and eat a king cake on the day of Epiphany and again on Shrove Tuesday! (If baking is not your thing, you can find king cakes in many grocery stores.) Pancakes are a traditional food for Shrove Tuesday.
- Epiphany is also a great day and season for house blessings, for the many reasons mentioned.

(*This section incorporates text from* CH *#103, "The Real Twelve Days of Christmas" by Edwin and Jennifer Woodruff Tait.*)

IVAN KRAMSKOI, *CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS*, 1872. OIL ON CANVAS—TRETYAKOV GALLERY / PUBLIC DOMAIN. WIKIMEDIA • VINCENT DE BEAUVAIS, *COMPUTING THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR* FROM *LE MIROIR DE LA NATURE*, 13TH CENTURY. VELLUM. FRENCH. BIBLIOTHEQUE MUNICIPALE, LAON, FRANCE—BRIDGEMAN IMAGES • ASH WEDNESDAY MASS, SAINT PETER THE YOUNGER, STRASBOURG, MARCH 5, 2014—© CLAUDE TRUONG-NGOC / (CC BY-SA 3.0) WIKIMEDIA • A VENEZUELAN WOMAN PRAYS DURING ASH WEDNESDAY IN CARACAS, 2003—REUTERS/JORGE SILVA / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Ash Wednesday

From the feasting of Epiphany and the Sundays afterward, we move into the season of Lent. In the West this season begins on Ash Wednesday (46 days before Easter). In the East it begins on Clean Monday (48 days before Easter).

THE FAST BEFORE THE FEAST **Christians identify the 40 days of Lent with Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness (*p. 20*). Easter's date is based on Ash Wednesday's date (a man computes the calendar in this illumination, *above left*).**

YOU ARE DUST **On Ash Wednesday ministers impose ashes on believers' foreheads to signify their mortality and repentance (*top*). Usually today this is done in the form of a cross (*bottom*).**

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

By now you're familiar with the idea of liturgical observances developing backward; Easter came first and then came the idea of a period of fasting, penitence, and preparation before it; Lent itself is first referred to as a current practice in documents from the Council of Nicaea. Some Christians had continued the Jewish practice of imposing ashes as a general sign of repentance, and during the Middle Ages Western Christians began to do this at the start of Lent for those who had committed particularly grave sins. By the eleventh century, the Western church commended this practice for all believers. Eastern Christians do not celebrate Ash Wednesday; however, over time, the Eastern church has developed the idea of observing the first day (Clean Monday) and indeed the whole first week (Clean Week) of Lent as a special time of fasting and repentance.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Lent's beginning depends on the date of Easter, which is decided in a complex fashion that we'll discuss on page 33. Because Easter can occur on different dates in the Eastern and Western traditions, Ash Wednesday and Clean Monday usually do not occur in the same week, unless Eastern and Western Easters coincide; in years when they do, Clean Monday would be two days before Ash Wednesday.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In both East and West, believers are commanded to observe the beginning of Lent with repentance and prayer. The Western emphasis on ashes is coupled with a consideration of our own mortality and the fact that we will return to dust. In the East the day and week also strongly emphasize forgiveness and, frequently, actual spring cleaning.

COLORS

In both East and West, the first day of Lent is no different from the rest of the season. In the West, this means the color is purple. In the East, purple is usually used on Lenten weekends and black on weekdays.

CUSTOMS

The primary Ash Wednesday custom in the West among

FASTING AND MOURNING Practices on Ash Wednesday include services (*below left*) with penitent songs and most visibly, the imposition of ashes (*left* and *above*).

Catholics and more liturgical Protestants is to attend church sometime during the day. There, a priest or minister imposes ashes, usually with the words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" or "Repent, and believe in the gospel" or similar phrases. Frequently one of the Scripture readings in the service will be all or part of Joel 2:1–17, which famously instructs:

"Even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and
mourning."…
Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly. (2:12, 15)

While originally the ashes were sometimes strewn on the head, today, almost universally, they are imposed in the form of a cross on the forehead. Many believers fast on this day, and if they have taken on some kind of Lenten observance (more on that in the next article) it begins on this day. Often, the ashes used come from the Palm Sunday palms of the previous year—saved, burned, and then blessed during the Ash Wednesday service. In the twenty-first century, a custom called "Ashes to Go" has developed where clergy go to a public place and offer ashes to passersby.

In the Eastern church, a special Vespers service called "Forgiveness Vespers" is held the evening before Clean Monday. During this service each member of the congregation, including the priest, asks forgiveness from each congregant, to which the other replies, "God forgives." A midweek eucharistic service also takes place during Clean Week; this is the first of what are called the "Presanctified Liturgies" of the Lenten season.

These liturgies continue every Wednesday during Lent. Eastern Christians participate in a Lenten fast from all meat and dairy, as well as a stricter fast from Clean Monday through Clean Wednesday until they receive the Eucharist at the Presanctified Liturgy. The Eastern church encourages believers to go to confession during Clean Week. Also, at services during the week, portions of the "Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete," a famous prayer of penitence, are sung. Finally, Christians may use the week to clean their houses and donate to the poor. Among some churches it is common to spend much of Clean Monday outside. CH

SOME WAYS YOU CAN PARTICIPATE

- Pray, fast if your health allows, and consider whether you will take on a Lenten observance.
- Do a spring cleaning.
- Donate time, money, or possessions to the poor.
- Attend a church service (outside the home).

ISABELLA BREVIARY ILLUSTRATOR: *ASH WEDNESDAY IN MASTER OF THE DRESDEN PRAYER BOOK*, ADD. 18851, F.69V. 1490 TO 1497, S. NETHERLANDS—FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY ARCHIVE / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
ASH WEDNESDAY, PARIS, FRANCE—GODONG / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
ASH WEDNESDAY CELEBRATION IN NOTRE DAME DE PARIS CATHEDRAL, PARIS, FRANCE—GODONG / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Forty days in the desert

In both East and West, Lent is a time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus's Resurrection and the Easter feast. Perhaps nowhere else is the church's rhythm between fast and feast more evident than in this season.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

The ultimate scriptural basis for Lent is the 40 days that the Gospels tell us Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness. While we don't know exactly when the observance of a period of fasting before Easter began among Christians, it seems to have started very early. This observance was connected to fasting in preparation for baptism—in the early church, baptism normally occurred at Easter—and possibly with a fast kept by Egyptian Christians for 40 days after Epiphany (which, as you will recall, celebrates the Lord's baptism). The canons of Nicaea refer to a set period of 40 days of fasting before Easter, and a Lenten fast is also referred to in the writings of Athanasius (c. 293–373) and affirmed by Augustine (354–430) and John Chrysostom (d. 407). The word "Lent" is actually derived from an Old English word for spring, *lencten*; the Latin term was *Quadragesima* for "fortieth." A number of languages use a term based on this for the season, while others call it some variation of a term meaning "great fast."

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

The easy part of this is that the dates of Lent depend on the date of Easter. Here's the more complicated part.

If you were paying close attention in the previous section, you may have noticed that both Clean Monday and Ash Wednesday are more than 40 calendar days before Easter. In the West the 40 days of Lent run from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, excluding Sundays, as each Sunday is considered to be a "little Easter." Holy Week technically falls within this period, but in Western practice it is treated almost as a separate season. In the East the 40 days include Sundays and run from Clean Monday through the Saturday before Palm Sunday, known as Lazarus Saturday; Holy Week is *explicitly* a separate season. (We'll talk more about this on pages 28–31.)

The Eastern church observes three weeks of "Pre-Lent" in preparation for Lent. Starting on the tenth Sunday (70 days) before Easter is a fast-free week; after the eighth Sunday (56 days) before Easter, Orthodox believers cease to eat meat, but they may still eat dairy products until the seventh Sunday before Easter, which is right before Clean Monday.

The Western church historically observed a similar period of preparation, beginning some Lenten customs on the ninth Sunday before Easter; the ninth, eighth, and seventh Sundays before Easter were called *Septuagesima*, *Sexagesima*, and *Quinquagesima* (from the Latin for seventieth, sixtieth, and fiftieth). This system largely fell out of use in the West during the twentieth century, especially after

A TIME OF PREPARATION This Dutch Book of Hours shows nuns fasting and praying in church. In most church traditions, Lent includes 40 days of penitence.

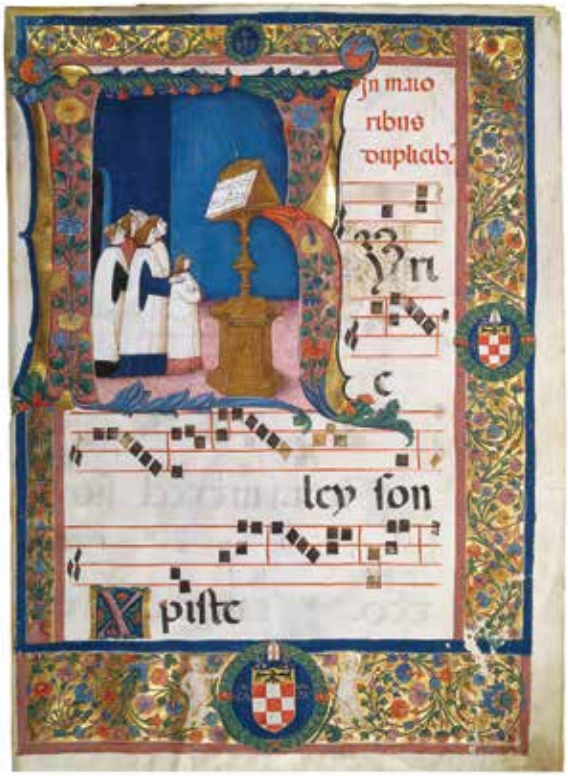
Vatican II eliminated those names from the Roman Catholic calendar (learn more in our upcoming issue #157).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Among low church Protestants who do observe Lent, the entire season is often seen as a time to contemplate the Passion and death of Christ. In more liturgical churches (whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox), an emphasis on the Passion is reserved for Holy Week, and the Sundays in Lent focus on events in salvation history and in the life of Jesus that point us toward repentance and faith in Christ alone.

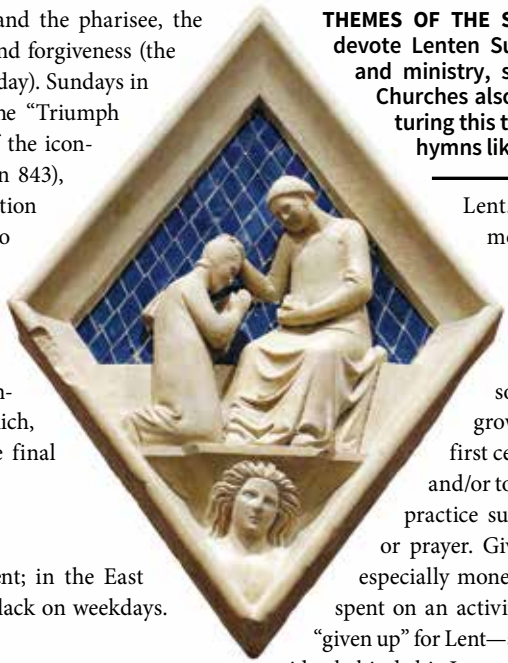
In the West the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday is always devoted to Jesus's temptation in the wilderness; other Sundays across the three-year lectionary discuss themes of covenant and promise, faith and grace, life in the Spirit, the new creation, and the actions that Jesus took as he approached Holy Week. In the East the Sundays of Pre-Lent

FASTING AND PRAYING IN CHURCH, ILLUSTRATION FROM *A BOOK OF HOURS*, ADD. 25698, F.9. c.1492. INK & COLOUR ON VELLUM, NETHERLANDISH—FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY ARCHIVE / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



THEMES OF THE SEASON Many church traditions devote Lenten Sundays to events in Jesus's life and ministry, such as his temptation (*above*). Churches also focus on repentance (relief picturing this theme at *left*) and sing penitential hymns like the "Kyrie eleison" (*above left*).

discuss Zaccheaus, the publican and the pharisee, the prodigal son, the last judgment, and forgiveness (the Sunday directly before Clean Monday). Sundays in Lent focus on commemorating the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" (the final defeat of the iconoclasts in the Byzantine Empire in 843), St. Gregory Palamas, the Veneration of the Cross (which occurs over two Sundays; during the first a large wooden cross is venerated in the church), and St. Mary of Egypt. In the East the final day of Lent is Lazarus Saturday, and it honors Jesus's raising of Lazarus—which, once every three years, is also the final Lenten reading in the West.



COLORS

In the West purple is used in Lent; in the East purple is used on weekends and black on weekdays.

CUSTOMS

Many Lenten customs exist around the world, and they vary widely by country and denomination. However, one of the most common practices of Lent across both East and West is fasting and/or abstinence from food. In the East believers normally abstain from meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, wine, and oil. Some of these fasting rules are relaxed on certain days, but no meat or dairy is consumed during the whole of Lent. In the West the most common and traditional act of fasting is to abstain entirely from food on Ash Wednesday (and, during Holy Week, on Good Friday) and to abstain from meat for the duration of Lent. Other foods and beverages commonly avoided include alcohol, caffeine, chocolate, and sweet things in general.

A common nonfood abstinence custom is to "give up" some activity that is interfering with growth in discipleship (in the twenty-first century, many give up social media!) and/or to "take on" an additional devotional practice such as increased Scripture reading or prayer. Giving to the poor is emphasized—especially money that would have otherwise been spent on an activity or entertainment that you have "given up" for Lent—as is performing acts of charity. The idea behind this Lenten abstinence and increased dedication to discipleship is not to earn favor, but to "clear space" for Christ to work in our lives; to grow closer to him; and, through fasting, prayer, and service, to prepare to greet his Resurrection with joy.

In both East and West, increased church attendance is advocated during Lent. We mentioned midweek Presanctified Liturgies for the Orthodox in the last section; many Western churches also hold a midweek prayer or Eucharist service, or a Bible study coupled with a simple supper.

In the West sanctuary decorations become much simpler and sparser. Brass candlesticks may be switched

MONKS SINGING FROM A CHOIR BOOK, IN AN INITIAL K (KYRIE ELEISON), MS. M.685, F.1. 15TH CENTURY. KYRIALE, ITALY (MILAN)—THE MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM / ART RESOURCE, NY
CHRIST'S TEMPTATION, LATE 12TH TO MID 13TH CENTURY. MOSAIC, MONREALE CATHEDRAL, SICILY—SIBEASTER / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
MASO DI BANCO, CONFESSION RELIEF FROM GIOTTO'S BELLTOWER, c. 1343 TO 1360—SAILKO / (CC BY 3.0) WIKIMEDIA

RAISING LAZARUS A catacomb painting depicts the raising of Lazarus (*above right*); Rembrandt also famously painted the biblical event around 1630 (*above*). In Eastern churches the final day of Lent is Lazarus Saturday, which commemorates Jesus's miracle and foreshadows his own victory over the grave on Easter.

out for wooden ones, and elaborate flower arrangements replaced with plain greenery. The word "alleluia" is not used in the liturgy or in any liturgical music—some churches lead children in "burying the alleluias" (written on pieces of paper) on Shrove Tuesday, to be unearthed again at Easter. Music for services changes too. The "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (a common liturgical song based on the hymn of the shepherds in Luke 2:14) is replaced with penitential music, often the singing of "Kyrie eleison" (Lord have mercy), and the amount of music in the service is reduced or simplified. In some places any crosses in the sanctuary are veiled (though some churches only do this during Holy Week).

In the East "alleluias" are retained and even increased to emphasize the joyous aspects of fasting and prayer. Daily and Sunday services gradually change throughout the season to incorporate more resources from a Lenten liturgical book called the *Lenten Tridion*. In addition, the amount of Scripture read in services increases, more opportunities exist to prostrate oneself (i.e., pray lying flat on one's face), and certain Saturdays are devoted to remembering and praying for the departed. The faithful are encouraged to begin or increase devotional readings from Scripture and from the writings of the church fathers.

Fixed feast days that occur during Eastern Lent involve some relaxing of solemnity and fasting rules—by far the most important of these that may fall during Lent is the

FAST-BREAKING FEAST Sometimes fixed feast days take place during Lent, such as the Feast of the Annunciation (*bottom*). Fasting rules are often relaxed when this happens.

Annunciation to the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26–33) on March 25. Western Christians also observe the Annunciation (which frequently also falls during Western Lent) as a feast and relax fasting rules on that day. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Commit to one of the spiritual practices mentioned above—prayer, abstinence from food or entertainment, or giving to the poor.

REMBRANDT, *THE RAISING OF LAZARUS*, c. 1630 TO 1632. OIL ON OAK WOOD—LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
THE RAISING OF LAZARUS, EARLY CHRISTIAN FRESCO WITH OPEN TOMB. IPOGEO DI VIA LATINA, ROME, ITALY—SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY
THE ANNUNCIATION, 12TH CENTURY. TEMPERA ON PANEL. BYZANTINE SCHOOL—© NPL– DEA PICTURE LIBRARY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The Christian year

The colors and terms on this diagram represent a Western Protestant version of the Christian year; differences in Orthodox and Catholic calendars are presented below.

The Roman Catholic Church observes the same seasons and, with one exception, colors. There are some small differences. For instance, Catholics celebrate the Transfiguration on August 6 rather than on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Catholic churches also generally use purple instead of blue for Advent. (Some Protestants do too.)

Some important Catholic feasts, referred to as "solemnities," do not appear on this calendar. Many of the feast days you do see are solemnities (excluding Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, the Transfiguration, and the first Sunday of Advent), but Catholics would add those in honor of the Virgin Mary on January 1, St. Joseph on March 19, the Annunciation on March 25, Corpus Christi on the Thursday after Trinity, the Sacred Heart eight days after Corpus Christi, the nativity of St. John the Baptist on June 24, Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29, the Assumption of Mary on August 15, and the Immaculate Conception on December 8.

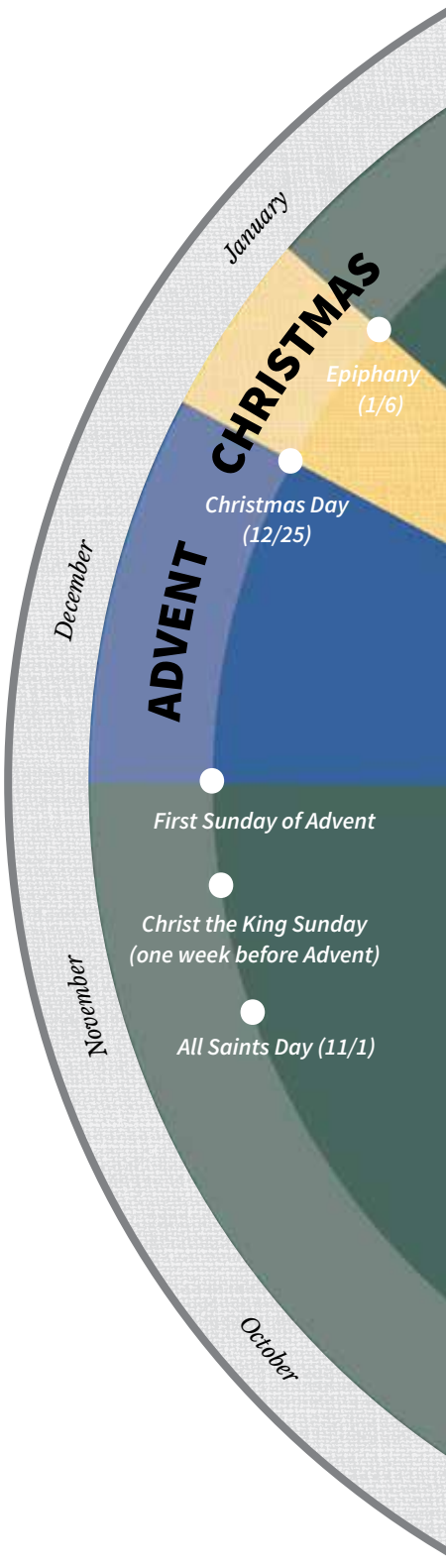
The Eastern Orthodox church differs from this diagram in greater ways, though the basic shape of the liturgical seasons remains the same. Here's how the Christian year in Orthodoxy diverges from this calendar:

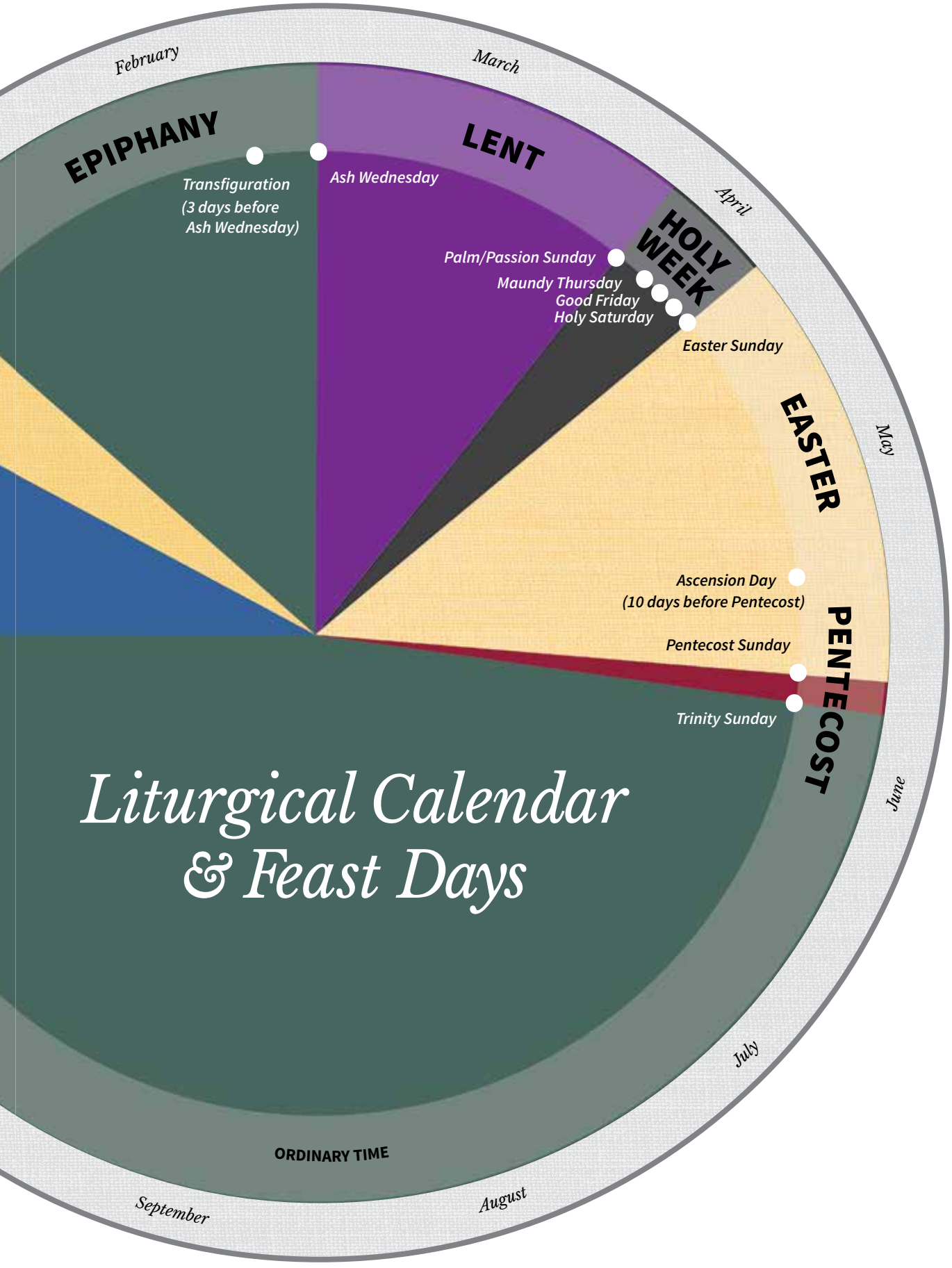
The liturgical calendar begins on September 1 (rather than, as in the West, the first Sunday of Advent). A different method is used in the East to set the date of Easter, so it and the feasts depending on it often occur at different times than their Western counterparts. Similar to Catholic solemnities, there are 12 Great Feasts that shape the church year (see p. 45). Some have Western equivalents.

The term "Advent" is not used. The Nativity Fast runs from November 15 to December 25. The color is red. As in the West, white and gold are used for Christmastide, and the season ends with Epiphany on January 6 (more often referred to as Theophany in the Eastern church). The Sundays after Theophany run until Lent, and gold is used.

Lent begins on Clean Monday following three weeks of Pre-Lent; in addition to purple, the Orthodox also use black in Lent. Holy Week is explicitly a separate season not counted in the Lenten 40 days. The color is green for Palm Sunday and red or black for the rest of the week.

Orthodox Eastertide (Pascha), like Western Eastertide, runs for 50 days, celebrates the Ascension on the 40th day, and uses white. Pentecost Sunday in the East also celebrates the Trinity, and no separate Trinity Sunday is observed. Pentecost's colors are green for the day and gold for the whole season of Sundays afterward. (Ordinary Time is a Western concept.) The Eastern church celebrates All Saints' Day the Sunday after Pentecost. Christ the King, a Western feast, is not celebrated. CH





Liturgical Calendar & Feast Days

FRANCISCO GOYA, *THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN*, 1819, OIL ON WOOD, FOUND IN THE COLLECTION OF ESCUELAS P'AS DE SAN ANT—N, MADRID—HIP / ART RESOURCE, NY
TENEBRAE CANDELABRA, CHOIR OF THE MONASTERY CHURCH OF THE REAL MONASTERIO DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE GUADALUPE, SPAIN—GCANTILEVER BRACKET / (CC BY-SA 3.0) WIKIMEDIA
MONREALE CATHEDRAL, *JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM AND THE LAST SUPPER*, DUOMO DI MONREALE, 12TH TO 13TH CENTURY; MOSAIC, PALERMO, SICILY—MANUEL COHEN / ART RESOURCE, NY

The holiest week of the year

The week between Palm Sunday and Easter has traditionally been considered the holiest week of the church year. This especially applies to the three days stretching from sundown on Maundy Thursday through sundown on Holy Saturday, called the Triduum; in our earliest evidence of Holy Week celebrations, these days were celebrated as one long worship service. In the West the normal term is Holy Week (sometimes Passion Week or Passiontide, although Passiontide can be a longer subsection of Lent). Orthodox Christians call it Great Week.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

The development of Holy Week is intimately connected to the development of both Lent and Easter. Our earliest testimonies to the celebration of events connected with the Passion of Christ on certain corresponding days come from Jerusalem in the fourth century. These testimonies are very detailed because they come from the famous diary of Egeria, a woman probably from Spain who visited Jerusalem on pilgrimage, c. 381–384, and wrote down almost everything she saw and did for her "sisters" back home (most scholars think she was probably a nun). These Jerusalem observances eventually spread throughout the entire Roman Empire and remain influential on how liturgical churches currently observe Holy Week in both West and East.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Holy Week is always the week immediately preceding Easter Day. (For the different relationships between the 40 days of Lent and Holy Week in both Western and Eastern Christianity, see pages 23–25; for the computation of the date of Easter, see page 33.) In the West, Palm Sunday is considered the start of Holy Week, while in Eastern Christianity, Palm Sunday stands outside of both Great Lent and Great Week.

MAN OF SORROWS Holy Week retraces Jesus's journey to the cross. A medieval mosaic (*above right*) starts with Palm Sunday and moves to the Last Supper. Francisco Goya captures Jesus's agony in the garden that night (*left*), while a Tenebrae candelabrum pictures the events of Good Friday (*above left*).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In the West

Palm Sunday is often now called, at least among liturgical Protestants, "Palm/Passion Sunday" to emphasize the connection of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the suffering Jesus will undergo during the week.

Monday and Tuesday in Holy Week are associated with traditional readings based on the actions that are believed to have occurred on these days in the Gospels. Wednesday in Holy Week, traditionally called Spy Wednesday, remembers Judas's betrayal of Jesus.

Maundy Thursday remembers Jesus's final time together with his disciples—the institution of the Lord's Supper, the washing of the disciples' feet, the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), this meal with the disciples is said to occur on the same day as Passover; Jesus's commands to the disciples about eating and drinking take place in the context of a Passover meal and resonate with Passover imagery. In John the meal takes place the day before Passover; other than Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, no particular customs are described. The word "maundy" comes from *mandatum*, the Latin word for "command," as used by Jesus in John 13:34.

Good Friday commemorates the Crucifixion and its surrounding events. ("Good" refers to the day's holiness and the good that it did us.) John aligns the Crucifixion with Passover lambs being slaughtered (John 19:14, 31–32).

Holy Saturday commemorates Jesus in the tomb. Traditionally the day also remembers the "Harrowing of Hell"—Jesus descending into hell to rescue those, from Adam and Eve on, who were held captive by sin and death.

At sundown on Holy Saturday, the Easter Vigil is celebrated as the first explosion of joy celebrating Christ's Resurrection. Fully describing the Easter Vigil belongs to

GREAT AND HOLY THURSDAY In both the East and the West, Thursday of Holy Week focuses on Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet (*left*) and the Last Supper (*below*). The Western church often calls this day "Maundy Thursday"; the Eastern church calls it "Great and Holy Thursday."

WASHING OF THE APOSTLES' FEET, DETAIL OF THE INNER NARTHEX MOSAIC, NEA MONI, 11TH CENTURY, CHIOS, GREECE—NONIMUS / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
THE LAST SUPPER AND CHRIST WASHING THE APOSTLES' FEET, CLM 4452, FOL. 105V, PERICOPES BOOK OF HENRY II, c. 1007 TO 1012, MADE IN REICHENAU, GERMANY—BPK BILDAGENTUR / BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK, MUNICH, GERMANY / ART RESOURCE, NY

the next section, but the community of Maundy Thursday, the grief of Good Friday, and the quiet prayerful rest of Holy Saturday are all preparations for it.

In the East

Eastern Christians normally call all the days of Holy Week, or Great Week, "Great and Holy [day]."

On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, as in the West, specific Gospels are read and themes emphasized according to the events that occurred on those days during the first Holy Week. In addition, Joseph son of Jacob is emphasized on Monday, the 10 virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) on Tuesday, and the woman who anointed Jesus, along with Judas's betrayal, on Wednesday. Christ as the bridegroom of the church is emphasized on all three days.

Great and Holy Thursday focuses mainly on the institution of the Lord's Supper and the command for footwashing. Great and Holy Friday honors the Crucifixion, and as in the West, Great and Holy Saturday remembers both Jesus's repose in the tomb and his Harrowing of Hell. The Paschal Vigil, as it is usually termed in Orthodoxy, begins at 11:00 p.m. on Great and Holy Saturday.

COLORS

In the West

Palm/Passion Sunday is red or sometimes purple. Maundy Thursday is always red. Because the altar is stripped in many Western churches on Maundy Thursday, color will be minimal on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, but if there is color, Good Friday is usually black, and Holy Saturday is black for any daytime service before sundown.

In the East

Green is used for Palm Sunday, red and black for Great and Holy Thursday, and black on Great and Holy Friday and Saturday.

CUSTOMS

Each day of Holy Week has developed separate customs, though all of them work to help believers experience the Passion's events anew and prepare for the joy of Easter.

In the West

Palm/Passion Sunday begins with the blessing of palms, usually accompanied by the reading of a Gospel passage describing Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and a procession around the church. In the latter part of the service, the entire account of the Passion from one of the synoptic Gospels is read (often by a group of readers who take the parts of different people in the narrative). Various contemplative services occur on Monday through Wednesday. A service of Tenebrae, meaning "darkness," may occur on any of these days (it originally occurred during the Triduum, but in modern observance is scooted backward); it consists of the reading of psalms while candles are gradually extinguished, ending with a loud noise in complete darkness symbolizing Christ's death on the cross.

Maundy or Holy Thursday is observed with a celebration of the Eucharist—even among churches that do not normally have a weekly Eucharist—and in many cases with footwashing. Sometimes the priest or pastor washes the feet of all who desire it; more frequently parishioners wash each other's feet. At the end of the liturgy, the worship space is stripped of all decorations, and the service ends in silence and darkness. In denominations that keep the reserved sacrament (consecrated bread and wine left over from the Eucharist), even this is removed from the tabernacle (a small cabinet near the altar) and taken to some other part of the church, where parishioners often keep a prayer vigil

O SACRED HEAD, NOW WOUNDED Jesus wears a crown of thorns *after* his Resurrection in this famous painting by Sandro Botticelli (*left*).

BENEATH THE CROSS OF JESUS Good Friday scenes continue to capture the Christian imagination, as shown in this woodcut (*bottom*) and image from a tripytch (*below*), both from the 19th c.

SANDRO BOTTICELLI, *THE RESURRECTED CHRIST*, c. 1480. PAINT ON WOOD PANEL—© DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
JULIUS EXTER, *GOOD FRIDAY, ADORATION OF THE CROSS*, SELECTION FROM TRYPTICH, 1895. TEMPERA ON SACKCLOTH. SAMMLUNG MODERNE KUNST, PINAKOTHEK DER MODERNE, BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN, MUNICH / ART RESOURCE, NY
ÉMILE BERNARD, *CRUCIFIXION*, 1894. WOODCUT — ROGERS FUND, 1922 / PUBLIC DOMAIN, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

during Thursday evening and Friday morning in memory of Jesus's time in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Good Friday is a simple service with little music. The entire story of the Passion is read from the Gospel of John. Prayers are said for the whole church and the whole world, and a wooden cross is often brought into the sanctuary to be venerated. If people receive the Eucharist, they do so from the reserved sacrament. While the Stations of the Cross—a procession with prayer and readings through 14 representations of events of the Passion—may be done devotionally at any time of the year, a church service observing the stations often happens on Good Friday. If a service is held on Holy Saturday, it will be a simple one of Scripture and prayer.

In the East

Great Week in the East moves the Vespers (evening) liturgy, normally celebrated at sundown, earlier to enable increased attendance. Thus Great and Holy Monday begins with a Vespers service in the middle of the afternoon on Palm Sunday. Believers are encouraged to fast more strenuously during Holy Week than during the rest of Lent. Vespers services are celebrated on each day of Holy Week. On Wednesday evening, in addition to the Presanctified Liturgy that normally occurs every Wednesday of Lent, believers are anointed with oil in memory of Christ's anointing and in preparation for the rest of the week.

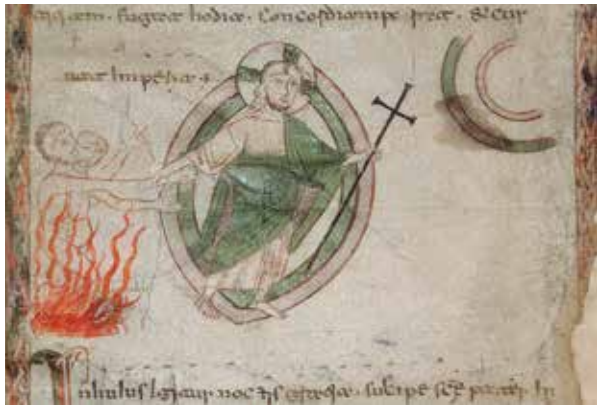
Great and Holy Thursday services are held in the morning. Orthodox Christians are allowed to eat a cooked meal (without meat and dairy) during the day when the service is over. The Vespers of Great and Holy Friday is moved forward to Thursday evening and involves (as the Good Friday service often does in the West) the veneration of a large wooden cross. On Friday morning a service is observed that remembers Jesus being taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. On Friday evening the Vespers of Holy Saturday is celebrated, which involves prayer and lamentation over Jesus's tomb. Finally, on Holy Saturday, a liturgy focused on the Harrowing of Hell will be celebrated, and during this service the liturgical colors will be changed from Lenten to Easter ones, a foretaste of the joy to come. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO IN CHURCH

- The best way to experience Holy Week is in church. Commit to attending as many services as you can. Raise joyous shouts, face your own culpability in Christ's death, pledge yourself to him again in the Eucharist, sorrow with the disciples, feel the tragedy, kneel at the foot of the cross, sit in darkness, and stand on the very edge of the Easter Vigil to peer from the darkness of sin and death into the light of the coming glorious morning.

MATTHIAS GRÜNEWALD, *RESURRECTION* FROM ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE, c. 1515. OIL ON PANEL—UNTERLINDEN MUSEUM / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA

Celebrating the risen Savior



HARROWING HELL The Easter Vigil begins with the "Exsultet," a song that proclaims Jesus's victory over death and hell, which this 11th-c. scroll shows (*above*). In ancient Christian traditions, Jesus descended into hell and liberated some of those imprisoned there (*left*).

If you are in a low church context, you might think of Easter as only a single day. However, it has historically been celebrated as a season, the most glorious and joyful season in the entire church year.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

In a sense all other Christian festivals radiate out from this one. Jesus's Resurrection, seen quite rightly as the event on which everything else about the Christian faith depends, was celebrated weekly from the earliest days of the church on Sunday, "the Lord's day." Our earliest evidence for the marking of this feast *yearly* as well as weekly is from the second century, in a homily attributed to Melito of Sardis (c. 100–180). While Easter and Pentecost are not simply adaptations of the Jewish celebrations of Pesach (Passover) and Shavuot, their earliest occurrences resonate against the background of those feasts, since the observance of them was the reason for people's presence in Jerusalem during the story of Jesus's Passion, death, and Resurrection and, later, when the Holy Spirit came on the disciples.

The English name for the feast has been a subject of contention. In the eighth century, the Venerable Bede (c. 672–735) claimed the name came from Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess; the persistence of this view down to the present day has led some Protestants to prefer to call the day "Resurrection Sunday." The more likely source is the Latin phrase *in albis* (in white), *eostarum* in Old English, because of the custom of people wearing white garments for the first week after their baptism at the Easter Vigil. Some languages use terms drawn from the word "Pascha," the Greek form of "Pesach" (see pp. 5–6), which gives us the adjective "paschal" for the day and season.

HE IS RISEN INDEED! This surreal Resurrection painting (*left*) might look like a 1970s album cover, but it's actually by Matthias Grünewald, a 16th-c. German artist.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Originally the date of Easter depended very directly on the date of Passover. A conflict broke out in the early church over exactly how, though. An Eastern tradition developed that Good Friday should be observed unvaryingly on the same day as Passover, 14 Nisan, the 14th day of the first full moon of spring; thus Easter would always be on 16 Nisan, whatever day of the week that fell. Meanwhile Western Christians argued that Easter should always be celebrated on a Sunday and thus should be the first Sunday after 14 Nisan.

Eventually this view triumphed. The Council of Nicaea ruled that Easter would always fall on the Sunday following the first full moon following the spring equinox (March 21). This date is arrived at by a calculation called the *computus*, which takes all the complicated factors of using a lunisolar year into account. (If you want to get more deeply into how the computus works and has changed over the centuries, many Internet resources spell this out.)

In the West this means Easter can occur any time between March 22 and April 25. Eastern Christians figure Easter's occurrence according to the Julian calendar and also prohibit it from occurring before Passover. Thus Orthodox Easter—and, by extension, all the dates that depend on it—often comes later in the year than the Catholic and Protestant celebration. Orthodox Easter can occur anytime between April 4 and May 8 according to the Gregorian calendar.

"THIS FAIR AND RADIANT TRIUMPHAL FEAST" During the Easter celebration, congregants process into the sanctuary singing and bless the paschal candle, a long-standing practice in the West (*above left*). In the East the priest reads John Chrysostom's famous Easter sermon (*above*).

The Easter season in the West lasts for 50 days including Easter Day, concluding on Pentecost Sunday; this is referred to as the Great Fifty Days. In the East, Easter is considered to last for 40 days—until the Feast of the Ascension—and the period between Ascension and Pentecost is considered an "afterfeast" of Ascension. Either way this timeline comes directly from the biblical accounts of Ascension and Pentecost. (We've given those days their own sections in this guide; see pp. 36–37 and pp. 38–39.)

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In one sense the theological focus of this season is very simple: the glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet this theological truth is also deep and complex. Celebrating the Resurrection over a multiweek season allows believers to explore all aspects of Christ's triumph over sin, death, and the grave.

In the West the week from Easter Day to the next Sunday, called the "Octave of Easter," is particularly joyful. Historically when converts were baptized and received Holy Communion for the first time at Easter, this was the week when they were taught about the mystery and theology of the sacraments (the 10-dollar phrase for this is "mystagogical catechesis"). Subsequent Sundays focus on Christ's post-Resurrection appearances, especially to Thomas and the travelers to Emmaus; on his role as the Good Shepherd; on his commandment that we should love one another; and on his preparation of the disciples for the coming of the Spirit.

In Eastern Christianity this season is referred to as Pascha far more often than in the West. The Eastern church also observes the first week of the season as particularly holy, calling it "Bright Week." As in the West, subsequent Sundays emphasize aspects of Jesus's Resurrection power, though most of the specific stories are different: Thomas, the myrrh-bearing women who came to the tomb, the healing of the paralytic man (John 5), the woman at the well (John 4), and the healing of the man blind from birth (John 9). A feast in the middle of the fourth week, called "Mid-Pentecost," celebrates Christ as our teacher and his giving of the living water that will never fail.

Traditionally in both East and West, passages from the book of Acts serve as one of the Scripture readings during the Easter season to tell the story of the early church.

COLORS

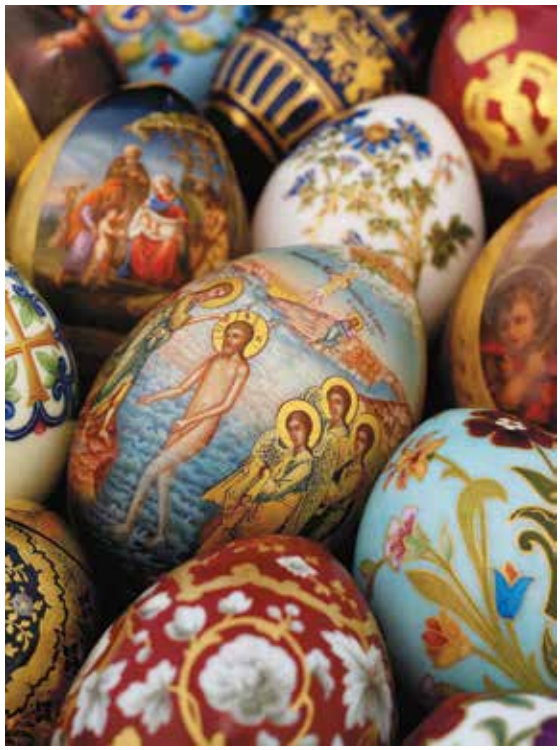
In the West white and gold are used for Easter Day and all Sundays of Easter, as well as Ascension if a service is held on that day. The East also uses white, always for the day and usually for the season; in some places red is used.

CUSTOMS

The chief liturgical service ushering in the season is the Great Vigil of Easter, which sits right at the intersection between Holy Week and Eastertide—in fact, in many ways, the dividing line runs right down the middle of the service. While details differ in East and West, common actions include lighting candles in darkness as the first light of the Easter season; listening to a proclamation that Easter has arrived; hearing a series of Old Testament readings that tell the story of salvation history (12 readings originally and still in the East; anywhere from two to nine in the West, depending on denomination); conducting baptisms; and celebrating a joyful Eucharist.

In the West this all takes place in one continuous service, which always starts after sundown (ideally, close to midnight). In the East the Old Testament readings are read and the baptisms conducted at Vespers, which occurs Saturday morning or early afternoon (remember, Holy Week services scoot backward in Orthodoxy); the Vigil proper begins at midnight. Vestments are changed from Lenten to Easter colors in the middle of the Vespers liturgy. In the West, after stripping the altar earlier in the week, the church is arrayed in Easter beauty before the service begins. Lengthy Old Testament readings take place in some location other than the sanctuary, and believers process into the

BLESSING THE PASCHAL CANDLE FROM THE PULPIT ON EXSULTET ROLL, ADD. 30337, c. 1072. ITALY (ABBEY OF MONTECASSINO)—FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY ARCHIVE / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
BISHOP NIKOLAI READING ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S PASCHAL SERMON, 2024—EIREALEXANDER / (CC BY-SA 4.0) WIKIMEDIA



PASCHAL FEASTS AND PAINTED EGGS Easter banquets (*left*) and egg-dyeing are two traditions that connect church Easter and cultural Easter. Christians celebrate the feast remembering Jesus as the Passover Lamb (*below left*). Normally in the East, eggs are dyed red to represent his blood, but these porcelain eggs from Russia (*below*) depict more intricate designs.

ALESSANDRO BONVICINO MORETTO, *BANQUET WITH EASTER LAMB*, 16TH CENTURY, OIL ON CANVAS—LUISA RICCIARINI / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
PAINTED PORCELAIN EASTER EGGS, *IMPERIAL PORCELAIN FACTORY, c.* 1850 TO 1870. PAINTED PORCELAIN, GILT—CHRISTIE'S IMAGES / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
NIKO PIROSMANI, *A PASCHAL LAMB AND EASTER TABLE WITH FLYING ANGELS*, 1900S. OIL ON OILCLOTH. GEORGIAN STATE ART MUSEUM, TBILISI, GEORGIA—© FINE ART IMAGES / BRIDGEMAN IMA

beautifully decorated sanctuary halfway through the service, singing "Alleluia."

Some famous liturgical texts are particularly associated with the Vigil. In the West the Vigil always begins with the "Exsultet," a praise song for Christ's victory that dates to the fifth century. The Eastern Vigil traditionally ends with the famous Easter sermon by John Chrysostom, which concludes:

> O Death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory? Christ is Risen and thou art overthrown. Christ is risen and the demons have fallen. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and there is none dead in the tomb.

Both Eastern and Western Christians then celebrate a festive Eucharistic service sometime during Easter morning. More low church Protestants often have a sunrise service instead of a Vigil and do not celebrate the Eucharist at the main Easter Day service. At some point, though, they are still almost guaranteed to say in some form one part of the Easter liturgy common among nearly all Christians: "Christ is risen"/"He is risen indeed, Alleluia."

Several liturgical practices differentiate Eastertide/Pascha from other seasons. The West burns a paschal candle (a large candle originally lit at the Vigil) in the sanctuary from Easter until Pentecost, changes to festive service music with plenty of alleluias, and eliminates the confession of sin from the liturgy. The East includes much festive liturgical music and breaks the Lenten fast with great celebration. No fasting is observed during this period.

As with Christmas many cultural Easter celebrations have become disconnected from their original church sources. Two parts of "cultural Easter" worth mentioning as connected to "church Easter" are the idea of feasting—ultimately rooted in the feast of the Eucharist—and the focus on eggs. Feasting together has formed part of Christianity as long as there have been Christians, as we know from the New Testament. Today many countries and cultures consume special foods during the Easter season—rich dishes containing meat, dairy, wine, oil, and other things that may have been forbidden during Lent. As for eggs, people seem to have begun decorating them in about the thirteenth century, though arguably the tradition is far older. The earliest custom includes dyeing them red to represent the blood of Christ; this is still the usual practice in Eastern Christianity, and the eggs and other "feasting" foods are usually blessed by a priest on Easter Day. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Emphasize cultural Easter traditions with church connections, such as dyeing eggs.
- Feast! Cookbooks and the Internet abound with recipes for festive foods from many cultures.
- Celebrate smaller feasts that occur during this season.

FRANCISCO CAMILO, *ASCENSION*, 1651. OIL ON CANVAS—MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA

ASCENSION IN MS 91 F.96. BIBLIOTECA MEDICEA-LAURENZIANA, FLORENCE, ITALY. OTTONIAN, 10TH CENTURY. VELLUM—ALINARI / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
ASCENSION FROM ETHIOPIAN GOSPEL BOOK, 16TH CENTURY. INK AND PIGMENTS ON HEAVY, THICK PARCHMENT—MUSEUM PURCHASE WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE W. ALTON JONES FOUNDATION ACQUISITION FUND, 1998 / PUBLIC DOMAIN, THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM, BALTIMORE
THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST FROM HAFIZ I ABRU, ZUBDAT AL TAVARIKH, T414 F.102 V. AFTER 1583. VELLUM—© CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Ascension

While Ascension Day may not be the best-known Christian feast today, it is important as part of the story of the Easter season and the journey toward the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. After all, a whole article of the Apostles' Creed is devoted to it: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty."

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

In a move that will not surprise you at all, Ascension Day is a separate feast that split off backward from Pentecost. The Bible is clear that the Ascension happened 40 days after the Resurrection (Acts 1:3). It does not say how long the disciples waited after that for the descent of the Holy Spirit, and some early Christians thought that the descent must have happened on the same day. But since the descent of the Holy Spirit happened when the disciples were gathered for Shavuot, 50 days after Pesach (Passover), and the Crucifixion and Resurrection happened on or around Pesach, a 10-day gap between the two events seems sensible. The celebration of the Ascension began as a separate feast 10 days before Pentecost around the fourth century.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Ascension is always 40 days after Easter Sunday in both East and West (as with other feasts dependent on the date of Easter, the Orthodox celebration normally occurs later in the year than the Western one).

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Ascension commemorates Christ's glorification at the right hand of the Father, the completion of his saving work, the bringing of his fully human experience into the life of the Godhead, and his ability to be with us always and everywhere. As one verse of an Easter hymn by Brian Wren (1936–) puts it, "Christ is alive! No longer bound / To distant years in Palestine, / He comes to claim the here and now / And conquer every place and time." It seems clear from Jesus's conversations with his disciples that his going away was in some way necessary for the coming of the Holy Spirit, though exactly how remains a mystery (see for example John 14:25–29).

ASCENSION THROUGH THE AGES **This crucial aspect of Christian theology has captured the church's imagination for centuries, as seen in depictions from (*above left to right*) the Ottonian (Saxon) church, the Ethiopians, the Ottoman Empire, and 17th-c. Spain (p. 36).**

COLORS

The colors for the day are normally those of the Easter season, usually white in both East and West.

CUSTOMS

In the West, Ascension is celebrated as a single day with a festive Eucharist. While many larger churches hold a service on this day, many churches do not; in that case, the readings for Ascension are sometimes used on the following Sunday to replace those for the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

In the East, Ascension is celebrated with a festive Eucharistic service. The days between it and Pentecost are considered an "afterfeast" (this is common with Great Feasts in Orthodoxy—for more on Great Feasts, see p. 45) with special hymns and readings. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Read the story of the Ascension in Luke 24:46–53 and Acts 1:1–11.
- Eat a bird such as poultry, quail, or duck (really—medieval Christians did this because Christ had "flown" to heaven).
- Contemplate art or icons of the Ascension, which often show only the feet of Christ.

WELCOMING WHITSUNDAY Pentecost decorations adorn the altar of a church in Busbach, Germany.

JACQUES BLANCHARD, *THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY GHOST*, 1634—© PASCAL LEMAÎTRE / CMN DIST. ART RESOURCE, NY
ALTAR IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN BUSBACH WITH PENTECOST DECORATIONS, 2021—REINHOLD MÖLLER / [CC BY-SA 4.0] WIKIMEDIA

Pentecost

The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit and concludes the Easter season.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Our first reference to Pentecost as a separate feast focusing on the events of Acts 2 comes from the second century. The term "Pentecost" early on referred to the entire Great Fifty Days (as "Pentecostarion" still does in the Eastern church). The name comes from the Greek for "50." While this is the word used in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) and in Acts to translate the festival of Shavuot (see pp. 5–6), and while the first Pentecost occurred when the disciples were assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot (Acts 2:1), "Pentecost" is not the normal modern Jewish name for the feast, and the celebrations are very different.

You may (especially if you're a fan of British literature and television) have heard Pentecost referred to as Whitsunday. Meaning "white Sunday," this refers to the common practice in England of holding baptisms on Pentecost; those baptized were dressed in white garments. The term was first used officially in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England and remains particularly associated with Anglicanism.

EMBERS TO A FLAME This French painting (*left*) imagines the day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. Here the Holy Spirit descends as ethereal sparks.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Pentecost is always celebrated in both East and West 50 days after Easter (though the dates normally will not match up between East and West). In the West it will fall between May 10 and June 13 and in the East, May 23 and June 26.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The major theme of Pentecost is, of course, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in Acts 2 and the sermon they preached that was understood by all and brought nearly 3,000 people into the company of followers of the Way (Acts 2:41). For this reason Western Christians sometimes refer to it as the "birthday of the church." The Sundays after Pentecost are, strictly speaking, considered to be "Ordinary Time" (see pp. 17 and 42–44), but the day also looks toward how the Christian community, animated by the Spirit, moved outward into the world.

COLORS

Pentecost is celebrated with red in the West and green in the East.

CUSTOMS

In the West, Pentecost is normally the last day for some of the special liturgical practices of the Easter season—Easter canticles, the paschal candle, the absence of confession. It is also a key day for baptisms. Sanctuary decorations feature flowers, greenery, doves, and lots of red; often the congregation is encouraged to wear red as well! While confirmation services occur year-round, Pentecost is a particularly appropriate day for them. The hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus" or one of its English translations is often sung, and Acts 2:1–11 is sometimes read in multiple languages. Although less common now, sometimes live doves are released in churches.

In the East, Pentecost Sunday also incorporates a celebration of the Holy Trinity (in the West this is a separate Sunday, which we'll talk about in the next section). The feast is considered to last for three days—Pentecost or Trinity Sunday, Spirit Monday, and the Third Day of the Trinity. (These days have also sometimes been observed as liturgical or public holidays in the West.) CH

SOME THINGS TO DO AT HOME

- Read and discuss the Scripture passage about the coming of Pentecost and the birth of the early church in Acts 2.
- Study art that depicts the Feast of Pentecost (many artworks explore that theme).
- Eat a festive meal, preferably something incorporating white, for Whitsunday, and red for the tongues of fire.

ANTONIO MARINONI, ALTARPIECE OF OGNISSANTI, 1545. CHURCH OF SAINT JAMES AND SAINT VINCENT, GROMO SAN MARINO, LOMBARDY, ITALY—© NPL – DEA PICTURE LIBRARY / V. GIANNELLA / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Trinity, All Saints, Christ the King

Once we pass Pentecost, we are in Ordinary Time (see the next section). However, the first and last Sundays of Ordinary Time, as well as All Saints' Day within it, have historically been considered special.

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

Trinity Sunday, celebrated as the first Sunday after Pentecost, is a Western feast; Eastern Orthodoxy acknowledges and celebrates the Trinity as part of the church's celebrations of Pentecost. While special prayers and offices devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity date back as far as the fourth-century Arian controversy, the Sunday was not set as a feast in the West until the fourteenth century.

The West celebrates All Saints' Day on November 1; the East celebrates it on the Sunday after Pentecost. Some kind of remembrance of saints on their death days began as early as the second century, and by the fourth century, a general celebration of Christian martyrs was being held sometime in or near the Easter season. In the ninth century, the Catholic church moved the Western celebration to November 1.

Christ the King Sunday, like Trinity Sunday, is only celebrated in the West, and is a much newer feast. The Roman Catholic church officially added the Feast of Christ the King to its liturgical calendar in 1925, to be celebrated on the last Sunday of October; Catholics moved the feast to the last Sunday before Advent in 1970, after Vatican II. It has been adopted in this form by many liturgical Protestant churches. (We'll discuss Kingdomtide, a related season among some Protestants, in the next section.)

HOW ARE THEIR DATES DETERMINED?

Trinity Sunday's date is determined by the dates of Easter and Pentecost and will fall between May 17 and June 20. All Saints' Day in the West is always on November 1, although it is sometimes celebrated on the following Sunday; in the East it is the Sunday after Pentecost. Christ the King is always the fifth Sunday before Christmas Day. It can fall anywhere between November 20 and 26.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

For Trinity Sunday the theme is obviously the doctrine of the Trinity in all its depth and mystery.

Observances of All Saints often honor and remember the lives and witness of all deceased Christians; technically, November 1 commemorates named saints and November 2, All Souls, commemorates all the faithful departed.

Christ the King speaks to us of how Christ is Lord over all of creation and all earthly powers.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE TRINITY IN DUKE ALBRECHT'S *TABLE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH* (WINTER PART), WALTERS MS. W.171, F.2R. 1400 TO 1404. UTRECHT, NETHERLANDS. PARCHMENT—PUBLIC DOMAIN. THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM, BALTIMORE

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY This Italian altarpiece (*left*) pictures Christ as King with saints on heaven and earth adoring him. Many "Christ the King" images include trinitarian allusions; the medieval Trinity symbol (*above right*) purposefully diagrams this great mystery.

COLORS

Although green is normally used for the rest of Ordinary Time, white is used for these feasts in the West. Gold is used in the East for All Saints.

CUSTOMS

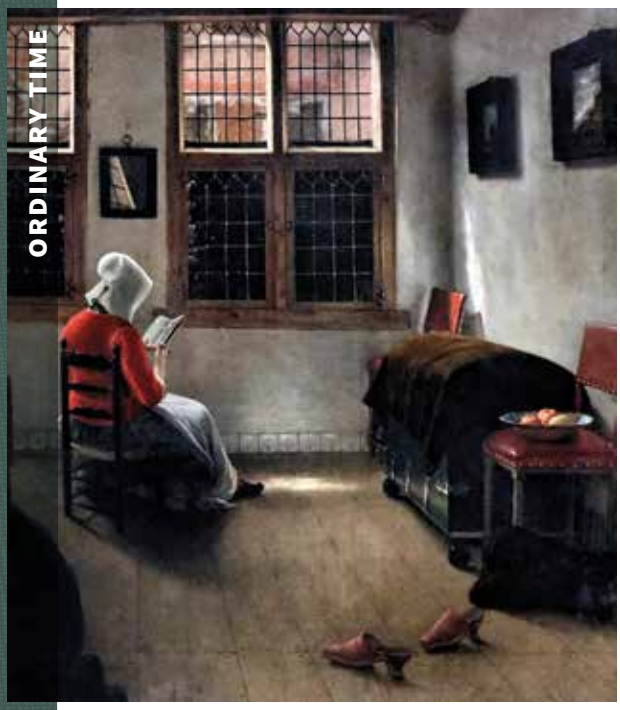
Trinity and Christ the King have no particular customs other than the use of a creed on Trinity and the celebration of the Eucharist on both (most liturgical churches will already be doing this every Sunday anyway).

All Saints' Day is also celebrated with a Eucharist in both East and West and is considered to be an especially appropriate day for baptisms. In the West, almost invariably, names of congregation members who have died during the last year are read during the service; in the East services focus more on official saints and martyrs, named and unnamed. (The saints local to an Orthodox parish are often celebrated on the Sunday after All Saints.)

Halloween's history is complex, but as its full name (All Hallows' Eve) indicates, it partially developed out of the vigil services held for All Saints' Day, and some (definitely not all!) Halloween customs around the world have Christian roots. CH

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- Read Scriptures connected to the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ. (The Trinity is, of course, not mentioned in the Bible by name, but many passages speak of the Triune God acting.)
- Whatever your feelings about participating in secular Halloween activities, you can make time to talk about Halloween's origins as the eve of All Saints and to use it as an occasion to remember that Christ has defeated death. Some people who dress up do so as heroes from the Bible, from literature, and from historical events.
- On All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, remember those people from church history or your own family history who have been models of Christ-likeness to you. (Some Protestants celebrate October 31 as Reformation Day due to that being the day Luther first promoted his *95 Theses*.)



PIETER JANSSENS ELINGA, *WOMAN READING*, 17TH CENTURY. OIL ON CANVAS—ALTE PINAKOTHEK, MUNICH / PUBLIC DOMAIN; WIKIMEDIA
JAHARIS BYZANTINE LECTIONARY, 12TH CENTURY. TEMPERA, GOLD, AND INK ON PARCHMENT; LEATHER BINDING—METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART / [CC0] WIKIMEDIA

Ordinary Time, especially Sundays after Pentecost

What about the times in the church year when no special feast cycle is happening?

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING One thing believers do during Ordinary Time is read through the Bible (*above left*). Churches have historically used lectionaries (*above* and *on p. 43*) to guide Scripture readings and worship throughout the year.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

The term "Ordinary Time" is actually quite recent—it resulted from Vatican II's liturgical changes as a new way to describe the Sundays after Epiphany (i.e., between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday) and the Sundays after Pentecost (i.e., between Pentecost and the First Sunday of Advent). The Latin term used by the Catholic church is *tempus per annum*, which literally means "time of the year." This is an exclusively Western term—in the Eastern church, Sundays during this whole time (including, usually, the ones between Epiphany/Theophany and Lent) are simply called "Sundays after Pentecost."

Despite the newness of the term, the occurrence of these two periods is quite ancient; the marking of these Sundays dates all the way back to when the basic shape of the church year came to be, which mostly happened by the fourth century.

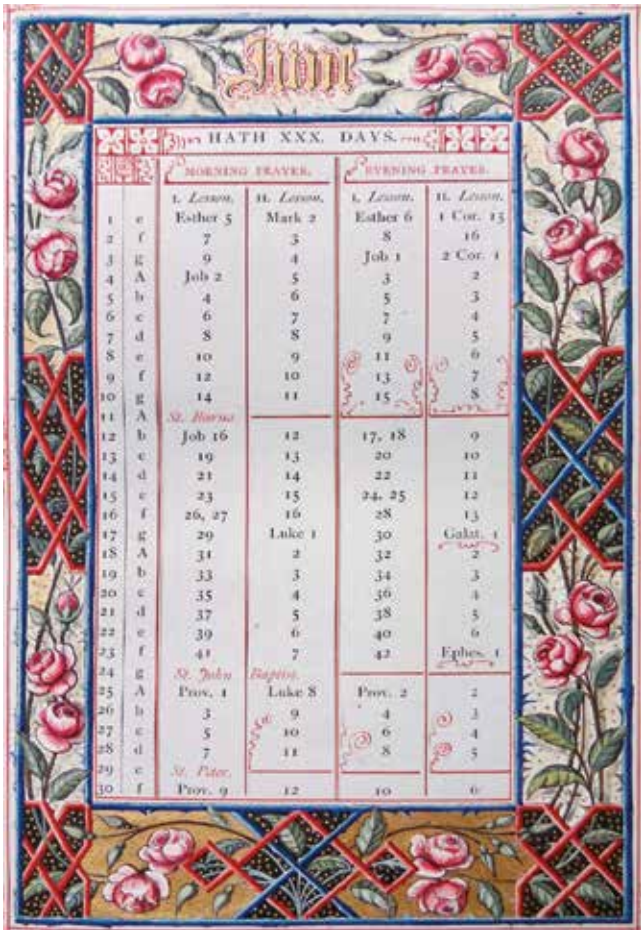
The term "ordinary" officially refers to the ordinal numbers used in counting Sundays (First, Second, Third, etc.). The term perpetually gets understood, or misunderstood, as being ordinary in the sense that nothing special is happening. It is true that some originators of the term wanted people to focus simply on every Sunday's celebration of the Resurrection without relating it to a particular cycle of feasts.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Ordinary Time varies in length because it depends on the dates of some of the church year's movable feasts. The date of Easter controls the length of the period between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. (We've already discussed some emphases during this time when talking about Epiphany on pp. 17–19.) The length of the period between Pentecost and the First Sunday of Advent is controlled both by the date of Easter (which determines the date of Pentecost) and the Sunday on which Advent starts, which may be either the last Sunday of November or the first Sunday of December (see pp. 8–9).

Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic church considers both "pieces" of Ordinary Time to be one long season, skipping over the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle in the middle. The Sundays are numbered consecutively and the lectionary readings are unified (more on this below). This season in total is normally 33 weeks long.

Among Protestants who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, the Sundays after Epiphany, while they may be referred to as Ordinary Time, have much more of an Epiphany "flavor" and are usually called Sundays after Epiphany.



ILLUMINATED BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, ORNAMENTED BY OWEN CARTER JONES, 1863. OCTAVO—PUBLIC DOMAIN. WIKIMEDIA
MASO DI BANCO, EUCHARIST RELIEF FROM GIOTTO'S BELLTOWER, c. 1343 TO 1360—SAILKO / (CC BY 3.0) WIKIMEDIA

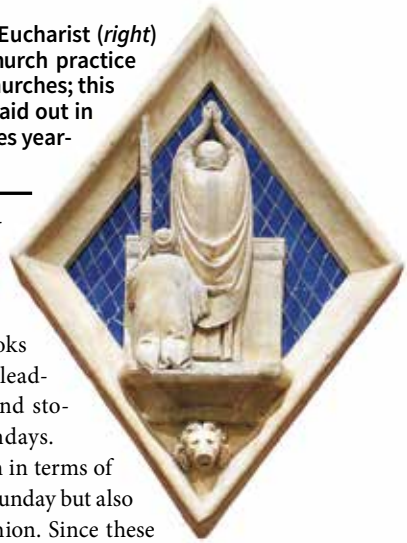
Many Protestants will think mostly of the Sundays after Pentecost as truly Ordinary Time. As many as 26 weeks of this Ordinary Time occur during the calendar year.

For about 60 years—from the late 1930s to the early 1990s—United Methodists and some Presbyterians adopted the name "Kingdomtide" for the second half of the time between Pentecost and Advent to emphasize Christian social concern. They began Kingdomtide sometime in August. Shortly after this observance had essentially died out among its originators, Anglicans in Britain began observing a "Kingdom Season" between All Saints' Day and the First Sunday of Advent. A number of Roman Catholics and liturgical Protestants observe the month of September during Ordinary Time as the "Season of Creation," with a focus on caring for God's creation.

The Eastern church, as already mentioned, generally thinks of the time between Pentecost and the Nativity Fast and the time between Theophany and Clean Monday simply as Sundays after Pentecost. Thirty-seven weeks normally make up this period for the Eastern church.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In the West, while many churches don't currently observe an explicitly named "Kingdom Season" during this time, the general focus of the entire season could be said to be the Kingdom of God—spreading through the world, shown in deeds of mercy and care for each other and for creation, and coming into its fullness at the end of time. Themes vary by Sunday, but since lectionary Scripture readings often flow continuously through a book or books of the Bible, preachers and worship leaders can focus on different themes and stories from the Bible over multiple Sundays.



ORDINARY GRACES Celebrating the Eucharist (*right*) or Holy Communion is a regular church practice during Ordinary Time in liturgical churches; this along with the rhythm of readings laid out in lectionary calendars (*left*) encourages year-round participation and reflection.

The East takes a similar approach in terms of readings; they vary according to the Sunday but also proceed in a broadly continuous fashion. Since these Gospel readings often tell the story of Jesus's miracles and parables, worship implicitly focuses on the new life of the Kingdom, but it is not called out in the way that became common in the twentieth-century West.

COLORS

In the West green is used; in the East, gold. Denominations that observed Kingdomtide when it was in vogue would sometimes use red from Pentecost until Kingdomtide began and then switch to green. Churches that observe Kingdom Season now often do the opposite—green for most of the season and red in November. The Season of Creation has no special colors.

CUSTOMS

No particular customs are associated with Ordinary Time other than the regular Sunday celebration of the Eucharist and the honoring of the various saints' days that might fall within it (see pp. 46–49). The most noticeable thing about this season is probably the opportunity to move continuously through the Bible at length from Sunday to Sunday. All of the three major branches of Christianity do this, but they each do it differently. (Some of this gets pretty technical, but if you are ever worshiping in a church that uses this system, it may be helpful to know where the readings come from.)

To understand how this system works, it's helpful to know the liturgical term "propers." Propers are service elements that change from week to week in denominations that use a set formal liturgy. The propers are called this because they are "proper" for a certain day, and they normally include all the Scripture readings and some prayers. It also helps to know that both Protestants and Roman Catholics use a three-year cycle of propers (calling them Years A, B, and C); the Orthodox use a one-year cycle and repeat the same readings every year.

As noted, Ordinary Time begins the Monday after the First Sunday after Epiphany **for Roman Catholics**. Sundays in Ordinary Time begin with the Second Sunday after Epiphany, skip the Lent-Easter cycle, resume

PIETER AERTSEN, *CHRISTIAN WORKS OF MERCY*, 1575. OIL ON PANEL—NATIONAL MUSEUM, WARSAW / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA

BEING HIS HANDS AND FEET This 16th-c. painting shows Christians engaged in deeds of mercy. Helping those in need is a common church focus during Ordinary Time.

after Pentecost, and are numbered 2–33. The Sundays are often referred to by the number of their propers, at least when planning worship (so someone planning worship for the Second Sunday after Epiphany would be doing so for Proper 2).

In each year a different Gospel is read through semi-continuously during this time: in Year A, Matthew; in Year B, Mark (and, because Mark is so short, parts of John); in Year C, Luke. The Epistle lessons are also read semi-continuously; over the three years, believers will hear most of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Philemon, Hebrews, James, and a little of Revelation. Old Testament readings for each week are chosen to amplify the themes of the Gospel readings.

Among **Protestants who use the Revised Common Lectionary**, while the Sundays after Epiphany are "technically" Ordinary Time, they are not part of the numbering system. Ordinary Time as most Protestants conceive of it begins on the Monday after Pentecost, and the Sundays in Ordinary Time begin with Trinity Sunday, which is also the Second Sunday after Pentecost. The rest of the Sundays are numbered from 3 through 29. The same system is used for the Gospel and Epistle readings as in Roman Catholicism, but Protestants can choose between using the Catholic system for the Old Testament readings or reading semi-continuously through a part of the Old Testament—Genesis and Exodus in Year A, the historical books in Year B, and the prophets in Year C.

In years when Easter is later and Ordinary Time is shorter, both Protestants and Catholics skip the readings for *earlier* propers, so that the concluding sets of readings—which in all three years speak about Christ's Second Coming and prepare believers for Advent—are always heard.

Orthodox numbering of the season after Pentecost starts on the Sunday after Pentecost (calling it the First Sunday after Pentecost), skips the Nativity-Theophany cycle, and resumes after Theophany. (For more on special observances on the last four Sundays before Great Lent, see pp. 23–25.) The Sundays are numbered from 1 through 37, and the Epistle and Gospel readings move semi-continuously through multiple books of the Bible in a single year. The Old Testament is not normally read at an Orthodox Eucharistic service, but it is normally read at Vespers. CH

SOME THINGS TO DO AT HOME

- Ordinary Time is a great time to start a Bible study—especially of the Scriptures used in the lectionary.
- Think about ways you can spread the message of God's Kingdom.
- Look for ways in which you can help care for creation.

Distinctives of the East

Throughout this guide we have made references to differences between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox liturgy. Here's a handy guide to some distinctive aspects of Eastern versus Western liturgy.

DIFFERENT NAMES

The weekly celebration of the Eucharist in the West goes most often by the names "Mass" (in Roman Catholicism), or "Holy Eucharist," and "Holy Communion" (among Protestants). In the East it is called the "Divine Liturgy." Matins and Vespers in the East align with Morning and Evening Prayer in the West; however, they play a much larger role in most Orthodox congregational worship than the corresponding Western services do. Also, fasts and feasts often have different names and emphases. Sometimes they share an almost exact equivalence—as between Epiphany and Theophany or Easter and Pascha—and sometimes, a greater difference is apparent (the Nativity Fast is longer than Advent, Ash Wednesday and Clean Monday mean different things and are observed differently, etc.)

DIFFERENT SCHEDULES

While the church year in Orthodoxy follows a similar basic shape, it differs in a few important ways. One is that the liturgical year is traditionally considered to begin in September. A second is that the Julian calendar is used to set some important liturgical dates, which means that equivalent feasts to Western ones may not occur on the same day, Easter/Pascha being the most widely known.

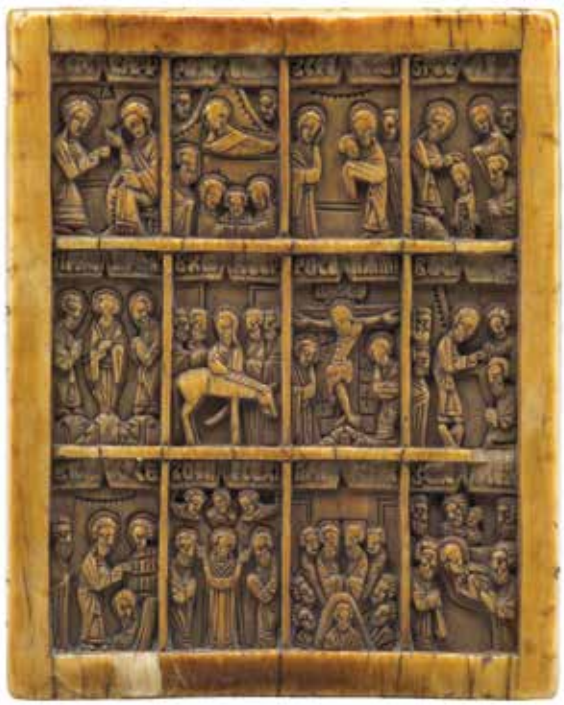
Finally, Orthodox worship revolves around the church's Great Feasts in a way that has no exact equivalent in the West. East and West share a commitment to Easter/Pascha as the most important and supreme feast, but after that, Orthodox worship focuses on 12 Great Feasts in particular:

- January 6: Epiphany/Theophany
- February 2: The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
- March 25: The Annunciation
- Palm Sunday
- The Ascension of Christ
- Holy Pentecost
- August 6: The Transfiguration of Christ
- August 15: The Dormition (falling-asleep, i.e., death) of the Theotokos (Mary)
- September 8: The Nativity of the Theotokos
- September 14: The Exaltation of the Cross
- November 21: The Entrance into the Temple of the Theotokos
- December 25: The Nativity of Christ

Most of these feasts have a day or two of preparation called a "forefeast," and all of them have at least half a day of celebration afterward, called an "afterfeast." Some feasts are also followed by a saint's day connected with the feast; this is called a *Synaxis*. (For example, the Synaxis of the Forerunner, John the Baptist, is celebrated the day after Epiphany.) Five other feasts are also a part of the Great Feasts but not numbered among the 12:

- January 1: The Circumcision of Christ
- June 24: The Nativity of St. John the Baptist
- June 29: The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul
- August 29: The Beheading of St. John the Baptist
- October 1: The Intercession of the Theotokos

Turn the page for more on saints' days in East and West.



BLESSING AND FEASTING Polish priests perform the Blessing of the Waters (*top*), an Orthodox tradition associated with Theophany. Orthodox worship focuses on the 12 Great Feasts, as pictured in this ivory carving (*above*).

GREAT BLESSING OF THE WATER, SANOK, POLAND. 2013—SILVER / (CC BY-SA 3.0) WIKIMEDIA
CALENDAR OF THE TWELVE GREAT FEASTS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH, 11TH OR 12TH CENTURY. IVORY. BYZANTINE, ROMAN—DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS, CITY OF DETROIT PURCHASE, 25.176

GIUSTO DE' MENABUOI, PARADISE, 1375–1378. FRESCO, CUPPOLA, BAPTISTRY OF ST JOHN, PADUA, VENETO, ITALY—© NPL - DEA PICTURE LIBRARY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

ST. POLYCARP, DETAIL FROM THE SAINTS PROCESSION, MOSAIC, SOUTH WALL, LOWER LEVEL, BASILICA OF SANT'APOLLINARE NUOVO, RAVENNA, ITALY, 6TH CENTURY—© A. DAGLI ORTI / © NPL – DEA PICTURE LIBRARY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
ABRAHAM VAN DIEPENBEECK, *THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT CATHERINE*, c. 1640. OIL ON OAK PANEL—NATIONAL MUSEUM, WARSAW / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA
SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI. FRESCO. SACRO SPECO-MONASTERY OF ST. BENEDICT, SUBIACO, ITALY—SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY

Celebrating the saints: the sanctoral cycle

As we mentioned in the FAQs (pp. 2–3), two cycles of time run concurrently in the church year. The yearly cycle of feasts that we have discussed for most of this guide is called the "temporal" cycle, and the cycle of remembrances of specific saints is called the "sanctoral" cycle—"sanctoral" means "of a saint." While Christians of all denominations often use the word "saint" to denote any person who lived a holy life and presumably now enjoys the presence of the Lord, some groups have also come up with formal lists of official saints to be more broadly recognized.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Sometime around the year 155 (or possibly 167), Polycarp, aged bishop of Smyrna and former disciple of John the Evangelist, died as a martyr at the hands of the Roman government. His martyrdom account, one of the earliest we have, states that his own disciples took his bones and placed them in "a fitting place"; there, they added, "the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps."

CLOUD OF WITNESSES (*left*) This masterful 14th-c. fresco found in the Padua Baptistry in Italy imagines numerous saints surrounding Jesus the Almighty.

REMEMBERING THE FAITHFUL Veneration of saints may have begun with the disciples of Polycarp (*above left*) after he was martyred. Other honored martyrs include Catherine of Alexandria (*middle*), who was executed for her faith. Many saints, such as Francis of Assisi (*right*), are not martyrs, but are remembered for their extraordinary Christian witnesses.

This is the earliest reference to honoring both the death date and the earthly remains of someone who had died for Christ. What began with Polycarp's disciples meeting for prayer at his grave, grew, after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, into a much more systematic engagement with the memory of saints.

HOW IS THE DATE DETERMINED?

Saints are normally honored on the anniversary of their death (this idea dates all the way back to the time when most of those honored in this way were martyrs, as we see with Polycarp). Feast days throughout the church year also celebrate events (such as the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary) or doctrines (such as Trinity Sunday); these dates have been solidified through the centuries in various ways, and we've mentioned some of the most famous ones throughout this guide. Guidebooks and calendars of saints, both print and online, offer helpful lists—some are mentioned in the "Recommended Resources" (pp. 50–51). Roman Catholicism distinguishes between solemnities (which normally

BERNAT MARTORELL, *SAINT GEORGE KILLING THE DRAGON*, 1434–1435. TEMPERA ON PANEL—ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO / PUBLIC DOMAIN. WIKIMEDIA

KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR St. George, the patron saint of England, is best known as a legendary dragon slayer. The *real* George was probably a high-ranking Roman soldier who was martyred for his faith in Palestine (c. 303).

celebrate major doctrines or events from the life of Jesus or the Virgin Mary), other lesser feasts, and memorials. Orthodoxy differentiates between Great Feasts (see p. 45), which are mostly related to the life of Jesus or the life of the Virgin Mary, and other celebrations.

In Roman Catholicism bishops and other local leaders originally held the responsibility for recognizing (canonizing) local saints as worthy of remembrance—especially on the date of their death. In 993 Pope John XV became the first pope to canonize a saint who was not local to Rome. Local canonizations initially continued, but in 1170 Pope Alexander III released a decree that canonization was the pope's sole prerogative. This continues to be the case for Catholics. In Catholicism today the process generally begins with research on a deceased holy person at a local or diocesan level, then moves to the general church level. Candidates for canonization are usually declared "venerable" and then "blessed" as intermediate steps on the road; after it is believed that at least two miracles can be attributed to the saint's intercession after his or her death, the pope officially canonizes the person.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, while the process (more frequently referred to as "glorification") is similar, it is more decentralized. As in Catholicism it begins with research and a case being made on the local/diocesan level, which is then referred to a committee that formally studies the matter and issues a report to the Holy Synod, the governing body of an individual branch of the Orthodox church. Each branch (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.) glorifies its own saints, though they will then inform other Orthodox churches that they have done so, and many famous saints are celebrated on multiple Orthodox calendars.

No formal process for canonizing a saint currently exists in any Protestant denomination. In denominations that regularly remember a set list of saints, the chief liturgical governing body of the church often makes that determination, publishes a calendar of saints, and provides worship resources around saints' days. Protestant sanctoral calendars generally remember some of the most famous apostles, prophets, and martyrs celebrated in Catholicism and Orthodoxy, as well as famous holy people particular to their own denominational heritage.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

At its best the remembrance of saints has served as a way to lift up the lives of faithful Christians from the past as models for us to emulate and as those urging us on from the nearer presence of Christ. Some of the traditional categories with which saints have been labeled in the West include apostles, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, doctors of the church, virgins, and matrons (holy women who were not virgins). Traditional categories in the East include apostles, prophets, martyrs, evangelists, fathers and hierarchs of the church, monastics/ascetics, and "the just" (those who lived a faithful life in the world rather than as clerics, nuns, or monks). Other categories sometimes used today include missionaries, reformers, teachers, pastors, ecumenists, apologists, and renewers of society. Sometimes "job titles" such as abbot, abbess, bishop, archbishop, priest, or deacon are also used in referring to a saint.

In both Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the church formally believes that saints may be venerated—that is, that some kind of honor may be given to them, and to relics of their bodies or possessions, which is *different* from the worship reserved for God alone. Since they are alive in Christ and in his nearer presence, people may ask for their intercessions, requesting them to ask Christ about certain situations or problems, just as one might request the prayers of a living holy person. Corruptions of these practices, especially when combined with belief in some sort of purgatorial state after death, have been a target of reformers for centuries and were part of what Protestants in particular were protesting about.

In general, Protestant denominations today that recognize saints do not have formal doctrines around veneration, intercessions, relics, and purgatory, just as they do not have official canonization processes. The official Protestant emphasis is on how the memory of these holy people exerts a moral influence on and gives an example for the living. Article XXI of the (Lutheran) *Book of Concord* gives one classic statement of this view:

THE CANONIZATION OF SAINT JOHN XXIII AND SAINT JOHN PAUL II, 2014—JEFFREY BRUNO / (CC BY-SA 2.0) WIKIMEDIA
THE FORTY MARTYRS OF SEBASTE FROM TRIPTYCH, 10TH CENTURY, IVORY, CONSTANTINOPLE—BPK BILDAGENTUR / SCULPTURE COLLECTION AND MUSEUM OF BYZANTINE ART, BERLIN / ANTJE VOIGT / ART RESOURCE, NY

For here a threefold honor is to be approved. The first is thanksgiving. For we ought to give thanks to God because He has shown examples of mercy; because He has shown that He wishes to save [people]; because He has given teachers or other gifts to the church. And these gifts, as they are the greatest, should be amplified, and the saints themselves should be praised, who have faithfully used these gifts. . . . The second service is the strengthening of our faith. . . . The third honor is the imitation, first, of faith, then of the other virtues, which everyone should imitate according to [his or her] calling.

COLORS

Churches that follow a sanctoral calendar distinguish between martyrs—for whom the liturgical color is universally red for blood—and nonmartyrs—for whom the color is white in the West and green in the East. In the East feast days related to the life of Christ are celebrated in gold and those related to the Theotokos in blue; in the West the normal color for both of these is white.

In both East and West, only a very select number of feasts (and their colors) are allowed to override what would otherwise be normal for Sunday worship, so in most cases the colors mentioned here will be used for weekday celebrations of saints.

CUSTOMS

Individual saints and their days have developed many associations and celebrations over the years, and today some saints are recognized as patron saints of (as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* helpfully summarizes) "a person, a society, a church, an occupation, or a place." This practice is thought to have initially arisen from the building of churches and associating them with saints and martyrs when Christianity was first legalized. If you are interested in learning more about practices historically or currently connected to a particular saint, plenty of online and print resources share these. Usually Scripture readings and prayers associated with observing a particular saint's day are used in formal worship. Observances may also include special food, clothes, or events (parades, processions, etc.) connected to a saint's celebration. Saints' days, even those that remember martyrdoms, definitely emphasize the feast rather than the fast side of the church calendar.

THE ROAD TO CANONIZATION In Roman Catholicism the pope canonizes new saints (*left*). The process looks different across denominations, but honoring heroes of the faith, such as the 40 martyrs of Sebaste (*below*), often includes an official recognition and a feast day.

Saints who have at one time or another been formally recognized number in the tens of thousands; liturgical reformers down through the centuries have frequently complained that days devoted to the saints are so numerous that they tend to take our focus away from the temporal cycle of the church year and its emphasis on Christ's birth, life, death, and Resurrection. Thus the church has seen countless efforts to cut back or eliminate some saints' celebrations entirely. This remains an ongoing debate. CH

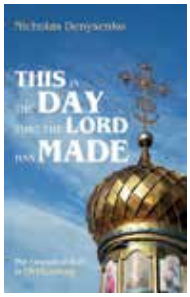
SOME THINGS TO DO AT HOME

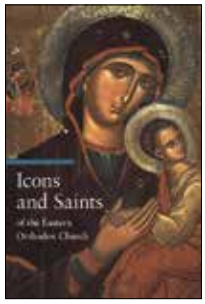
- Most officially recognized saints have customs and food associated with their day and are the patron saint of something. Find saints with some connection to your story. Do you share a saint's name? Were you born on a saint's feast day? Does your region or your occupation have a patron saint? Learn more about the saints you discover, and perhaps eat their traditional food or practice a custom linked to them. For example Martin of Tours (November 11) is associated with lantern processions and eating goose; Saint Barbara (December 4) is associated with bringing branches into the house to bloom in wintertime and with eating boiled wheat.

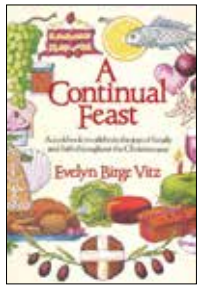
This article incorporates text from "Memory and preparation" in CH *#156.*

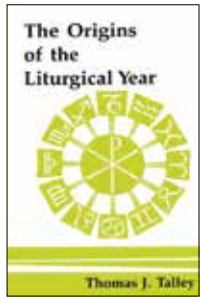
Recommended resources

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, AND GET IDEAS FOR INCORPORATING CELEBRATIONS INTO YOUR OWN LIFE.









BOOKS

If you want to learn more about the **theology** behind the Christian year, start with Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (1991); Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (1996); Bobby Gross, *Living the Christian Year* (2009); James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (4th ed. 2023); and Steven Brooks, *Seasons of Worship* (2024).

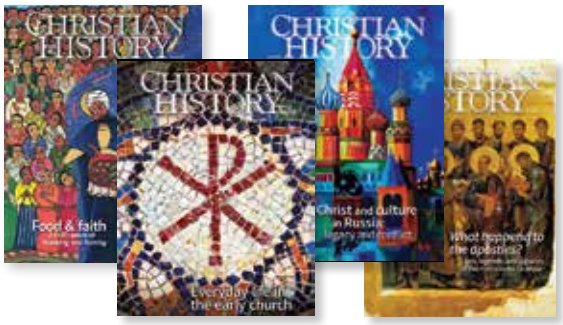
Books that introduce liturgical theology and liturgical history in general often have resources on the Christian year; a classic here is *The Study of Liturgy,* ed. Cheslyn Jones et al. (rev. ed. 1992); one from a more evangelical perspective is *Ever Ancient, Ever New* by Winfield Bevins (2019); and the most comprehensive is Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (2005).

Some practical resources for **incorporating the church year** into your own congregation's or family's life include Peter Bower, *Handbook for the Common Lectionary* (1987); Evelyn Birge Vitz, *A Continual Feast* (1991); Hoyt Hickman et al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (2nd ed. 1992); Robert Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year* (1994); Peter Mazar, *To Crown the Year* (2007); Malcom Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Poetry for the Christian Year* (2012); Christine E. Curley, *The Church Year at Home* (2021); and Kendall Vanderslice, *Bake and Pray* (2024). One guide for a specifically Roman Catholic audience is Greg Dues, *Catholic Customs and Traditions* (rev. ed. 2009), and one Orthodox guide is John Kosmas Skinas, *Heaven Meets Earth: Celebrating Pascha and the Twelve Feasts* (2015).

Choose from a number of devotional books with **readings** to enrich your experience of the seasons; a small selection includes the *Sourcebooks* for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Triduum, and Easter from Liturgy Training Publications (1988–1996); *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource* from United Church Press (1994–1996); *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (2001) and *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (2003) from Plough; and CHI's very own *The Grand Miracle* for Advent (2019) and *Walk Through the Wilderness* for Lent (2022). Your own denomination may also have online or print resources published on a recurring basis. To start thinking about the whole of the Christian life as a rhythm of fasting and feasting, the *Every Moment Holy* books from Rabbit Room Press are a great introduction (2017–present).

Classic introductions to **Orthodox worship and theology** include Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (3rd ed. 2015) and *The Orthodox Way* (new ed. 2019); and Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (1997). Other resources include Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith* (1981/2016); Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Worship and Liturgical Life of the Orthodox Church* (2017); and Nicholas Denysenko, *This Is the Day That the Lord Has Made: The Liturgical Year in Orthodoxy* (2023).

Countless books offer **saint stories and resources** for celebrating saints at home or in church. Here are a few selected ones—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox: James Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints* (1986); Joseph Tylenda, *Saints and Feasts of the Liturgical Year* (2003); Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (2004); Sisters of Notre Dame Chardon Ohio, *Saints and Feast Days* (2006); Philip H. Pfatteicher, *The New Book of Festivals and Commemorations* (2008); Heather Josselyn-Cranson, ed., *For All the Saints* (2013); William Weedon, *Celebrating the Saints* (2016); Enzo Lodi, *Saints of the Roman Calendar* (2017); The Episcopal Church, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (2018 and previous editions); and Sarah Wright and Alexandra Schmalzbach, *101 Orthodox Saints* (2021).

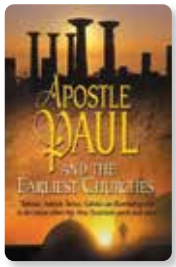


CHRISTIAN HISTORY ISSUES

These past issues of *Christian History* relate to this issue. Read online or purchase hard copies when available:

37: *Worship in the Early Church*
49: *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*
54: *Eastern Orthodoxy*
57: *Converting the Empire*
83: *Mary in the Imagination of the Church*
103: *Christmas*
125: *Food and Faith*
129: *Recovery from Modern Amnesia*
133: *Christianity and Judaism*
146: *Christ and Culture in Russia*
147: *Everyday Life in the Early Church*
156: *What Happened to the Apostles?*
Guide: *Worship from Constantine to the Reformation*

VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO



Videos on this issue's theme include the six-part series *A History of Christian Worship* as well as *Augustine: A Voice for All Generations*; *Apostle Paul and the Earliest Churches*; *Blessing Europe: Legacy of the Celtic Saints*; *Charting Christmas; The History of Orthodox Christianity*; *In the Footsteps of Saint Peter*; *The Passion of Christ According to St. Francis*; *Patrick*; *Paul the Apostle*; *Perpetua: Early Church Martyr*; *Pioneers of the Spirit*; *Polycarp*; *Saint Nicholas*; *Saint Patrick*; *To the Ends of the Earth*; and many other lives of famous Christians including our Torchlighters series for children. Some of these titles are available for purchase as DVDs; you can access all of them on our streaming platform, Redeem TV.

WEBSITES

You'll find some primary sources devoted to this topic at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (Egeria's diary is there, for example) and at the Fordham Sourcebooks (particularly the Medieval one).

If your church celebrates the liturgical year, it probably has a website or portion of a website devoted to explaining the church calendar. Here are some denominational resources to get you started, focused on the United States and Britain:

- Anglican Church in North America (also provides links to worldwide Anglican resources)
- Catholic Church in England and Wales
- Church of England
- Episcopal Church (see also The Lectionary Page)
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (see also its page about Feasts of the Church)
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- Orthodox Church in America
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- US Conference of Catholic Bishops
- United Church of Canada
- United Methodist Church

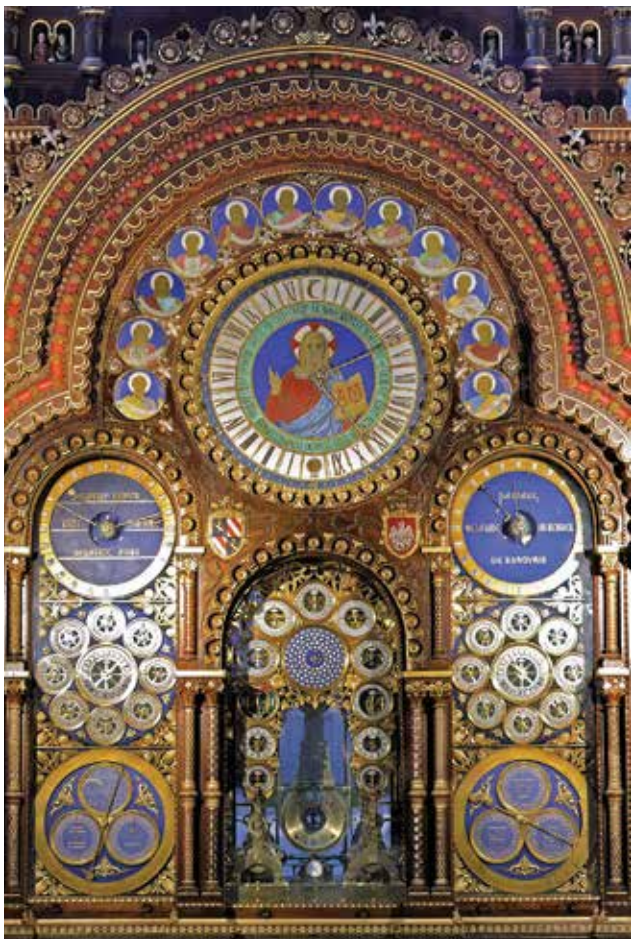
The most famous site devoted to worship resources organized around the Revised Common Lectionary is probably the Vanderbilt Library site; the library also maintains a partner site, Art in the Christian Tradition. The Text This Week incorporates multiple lectionaries and is specifically geared for preachers, and The Hymn Site provides hymn selections. A few other good resources include Art and Theology, the Consultation on Common Texts (which developed the RCL), and Satucket Lectionary.

Many sites provide resources about saints. The Cult of Saints attempts to be a comprehensive history of saints from the earliest days of the church to 700 AD. The Vatican publishes a Saint of the Day page according to the Roman Catholic calendar (several other Catholic websites do too including Catholic.org and Franciscan Media), and the Orthodox Church in America does the same from the Orthodox perspective, as does Ancient Faith Ministries. For Protestant lists (with an Anglican flavor), you can start with "James Kiefer's BIOs" and Satucket. Our own Today in Christian History often refers to saints, and our blog covers topics concerning the church calendar.

Finally, My Jewish Learning is a good site to understand Jewish fasts and feasts on their own terms from a Jewish perspective. CH

Questions for reflection

Fasts and feasts of the church



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Whether you are new to the tradition of sacred time or already steeped in liturgical rhythms, use these questions to help you ponder the church year.

1. Before this guide, what did you know about the Christian year? What questions did you have about it in general? Which seasons or aspects were you the most curious about? Why?

2. What parts of the Christian year (if any) does your church celebrate?

3. Are there aspects of the Christian year you observe in your home? Which ones? Why? How do you observe them?

4. For each of the days or seasons mentioned in this guide:
   a. Name one theological theme that this day or season illustrates.
   b. Identify one Scripture related to this theme.

5. What ideas about worship did Christianity carry over from its Jewish roots?

6. Why do you think Christians developed a weekly cycle of worship before they began to mark events related to the life of Christ throughout the year?

7. Which are the oldest Christian feasts? Why did those develop first?

8. Which are the most recently developed feasts mentioned in this guide? Why were they added to the liturgical calendar?

9. Why do you think many Christian seasons developed *backward* from feast days?

10. Liturgists often talk about the "Advent-Christmas-Epiphany" cycle and the "Lent-Easter-Pentecost" cycle. How are these two cycles similar? How are they different? How does the concept of Ordinary Time relate to these cycles?

11. Are there saints whose lives intrigue you? If so, which ones might you remember as part of the liturgical rhythm of your home or church?

12. Name a few significant differences between the liturgical calendars of Eastern and Western Christianity. How would you characterize some of the different emphases of the church year in East and West?

13. Why does the Christian year traditionally not contain civic holidays? Are there civic holidays that your church celebrates? Why? How are they referenced in worship?

14. Which (if any) customs talked about in this guide intrigue you enough to celebrate in your family or church settings going forward?

15. Which (if any) aspects of the church year do you still find puzzling? CH

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