

The Calendar that Guides Us

Let's take a look at how the calendar guides our lives.

Consider our secular, public calendar. It is based on the seasons. New Year's Day starts the year with the winter days getting noticeably longer after the winter solstice. Our next guidepost is the politically correct "Spring Break" for our children in March or April. This is followed by Memorial Day signaling the start of the summer vacation season, the highlight of which is the Fourth of July with its barbecues and fireworks. Labor Day in September ends this season and leads us to Fall, the highlight of which is Thanksgiving which, in turn, starts a shopping spree which ends with Christmas gift giving. The year also contains various holidays which are occasions for long weekends.

We can summarize the secular calendar by noting that it more about the day to day routine activities in our lives than it is about the meaning of those activities.

Our Church's calendar is very different. It is based on our two most important holy days, Easter and Christmas. Each of these is preceded by a lengthy period of preparation during which the Church reminds us of the meaning of these celebrations.

Our Church Year begins with the first of four Advent Sundays. The Prophets promise of the coming Messiah is proclaimed during Advent and the celebration of the Incarnation of our Lord continues for two weeks after Christmas.

Similarly, the Forty Days of Lent which precede Holy Week prepare us to recognize the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for our sins. It is a period of meditation and repentance. Holy Week recounts the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem followed by his arrest, trial, Crucifixion and ultimately, his joyous Resurrection. This is celebrated and the birth of the Church is recounted during the next fifty days that culminate in the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In between these two liturgical periods, the Church nurtures us with the Sundays and the Holy Days of "Ordinary Time", which is anything but "ordinary." During this period we celebrate the lives of saints and martyrs with the Feast Days of the Holy Mother, including the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, and the Feast Days of Saints Joseph, Francis, Patrick, Theresa, John the Baptist and others. In the Middle Ages people remembered events by the Feast Days on which they occurred more often than a calendar date.

Today, with the reforms of Vatican II, the Church systematically presents Sacred Scripture during Ordinary Time in repeating yearly cycles. Sundays have three cycles: Year A which focuses on the Gospel of St. Matthew, followed by Year B for St. Mark and Year C for St. Luke. Weekdays have two cycles, Year 1 and Year 2, which present different selections from the Old and New Testaments as well as the same readings from each of the three Synoptic Gospels.

In summary, our Church's calendar guides our lives by continually reminding us of our faith and its meaning for our lives. Take time to focus on our Church calendar. It is an opportunity to grow in faith by making it a daily part of our lives.

S. Csontos, 13 January 2015.

Church Calendar Facts:

Christmas is a fixed feast, celebrated on December 25th. We start Advent four Sundays before Christmas. Because Christmas can fall on any day of the week, this means that the start of Advent can vary depending on where Christmas falls during the week of the fourth Sunday. Advent can start as early as November 27th and as late as December 3rd.

The date of Christmas has no Scriptural basis. The Church in Rome began using December 25th during the early 4th century, possibly to counter an earlier pagan celebration of the "rebirth of the sun" (the noticeable increase in daylight after the winter solstice) held at the same time.

The date of Easter was always associated with Passover which occurs in early spring on a specific date in the Jewish lunar calendar. Two problems faced the early Christians: 1. the Gospels differ slightly on the exact relationship to Passover and, 2. the Church uses a solar calendar. The Council of Nicaea, in 325 AD, established the following formula for calculating Easter, accepted in Western Church: Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Easter can be as early as March 22 and as late as April 25th.

Liturgical Reading Cycles:

The Sunday readings of Ordinary Time follow a three year cycle: A, B, and C.
The Daily readings follow a two year cycle: 1, and 2.

The cycles going forward are as follows:

2015: B, 1
2016: C, 2
2017: A, 1
2018: B, 2
2019: C, 1, etc.

The readings for each day can be found in our Missalette, in the Daily Roman Missal, or on the Bishops' website: <http://uscgb.org/bible/readings/011315.cfm>

S. Csontos, 13 January 2015.