

Catholic

UPDATE

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SIMPLE FACTS, DEEP TRUTHS

THE LITURGICAL YEAR



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CNS/LAWRENCE CHATAGNIER

By Fr. Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.

You can probably get to heaven without knowing all the ins and outs of the Church's liturgical year! But Sunday Eucharist will be more meaningful and fruitful for you if you have some understanding of the purpose and structure of the liturgical year.

Sunday Mass is not something that we merely “watch” or “go to.” It is something that we do; we are active participants in the celebration. And as with anything that we do, the more that we understand what we are doing, the more meaningful and enjoyable the action becomes. In this *Update*, we'll take a closer look.

To understand the liturgical year, it is helpful to distinguish between simple statements of fact and statements that express a deep truth. “Ann is 45 years old” is a statement of fact; it is either true or false, and it is easy to verify. “Ann is destined for eternal life” is the statement of a deep truth; it is known

only by faith and its meaning and implications are understood little by little, through years of prayer and reflection. With regard to Mass: “I celebrated Mass at 8:00 A.M.” is a simple fact, easily verifiable. “The Eucharist transforms me into Christ's Body” is a deep truth, verifiable only by prayer and faith.

To understand the liturgical year it is helpful to know a few simple facts, for example: What is the liturgical year? How is it organized? But to really appreciate the meaning and purpose of the liturgical year requires an ongoing meditation on several “deep truths.”

The liturgical year is the arrangement of the Church's celebrations of the various events in the life of Christ and the mysteries of our faith throughout the year. From the time of the Apostles, Christians have gathered together on the first day of the week, the day of the Resurrection, the Lord's Day, to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the course of time, these weeks

were organized into two “seasons”: Lent/Easter and Advent/Christmas. Between the seasons of Lent/Easter and Advent/Christmas we have two periods of non-seasonal time, “Ordinary Time,” so named for the Latin *ordo*, “the order of things.” This sequence of Sundays and seasons is punctuated by celebrations of various feasts of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints.

In 1963, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council called for some revisions in this sequence of celebrations and stated the general principles that were to guide this work. The revision was accomplished in 1969 with the publication of the *Calendarium Romanum* (the Roman Calendar).

These are the basic facts about the liturgical year. But what do they mean?

THE DEEPER MEANING

The key to understanding the meaning of the liturgical year lies in the notion of “presence.” We believe that Christ is truly

present in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine. We believe Christ “is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church” (Constitution on the Liturgy, 7). And we believe that Christ is present in a special, mysterious way when we celebrate the liturgical year.

“Recalling the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord’s powers and merits, so that these are in some way *made present* in every age in order that the faithful may lay hold on them and be filled with saving grace” (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, 102, emphasis added).

The liturgy is very different from, for example, going to see a movie about World War II. Through the sights and sounds of the film, we can picture real or imaginary events that took place at that time. But when we celebrate the mysteries of Christ during the course of the liturgical year, we do not merely recall *past* events. The liturgy enables us to pass from our chronological time (past/present/future) and to enter into God’s “time of salvation” so that we, through grace and mystery, become *present* to the event.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms: “We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus’ life and his mysteries...For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries” (#521, quoting St. John Eudes).

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