

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Liturgy: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

LITURGY: Understanding the Liturgical Year

THEME

Understanding the Church's Liturgical Calendar as an ever-deepening immersion into the mystery of Jesus Christ

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. relate the cycles of the liturgical year to the Christian faith journey.
2. demonstrate how the cycles of the liturgical year enrich catechesis.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

#1163-1173, 1193-1195

FOCUSING THE STUDY

Liturgy and catechesis are intimately linked. In fact, catechesis prepares us for "full and active participation in liturgy and at the same time flows from liturgy," (*Sharing the Light of Faith*, #113). The various seasons of the liturgical year provide a framework within which the faithful may be formed.

INTRODUCTION

When you go to Church, you are usually greeted by a commentator or Church bulletin announcing which Sunday of the year it is: "Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent" or "Today is the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time." Likewise, we are often told that it is a special feast: Epiphany, Christ the King, or Trinity Sunday. How are all of these days, seasons and feasts arranged? Just as in daily life, we follow a calendar that marks time, the Church follows a *Liturgical Calendar* that connects the seasons of the year to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, providing us with a framework to enter more deeply into the Paschal Mystery of our Lord.

A Year Proclaimed

There is an ancient custom in our Church which calls for a special proclamation on the Feast of Epiphany. On this day, the Church proclaims the dates of all the major feasts and solemnities for the coming year. In a solemn fashion, the dates are chanted for the celebration of the Easter Triduum, Ash Wednesday, the Ascension of the Lord and Pentecost. The Proclamation then goes on to announce, "Likewise, the pilgrim church proclaims the Passover of Christ in...the feasts of the apostles and saints and in the commemoration of all the faithful departed." These days of feasts, solemnities and commemorations are the days that make up our Liturgical Calendar - the ordering of our time our seasons and our celebrations.

For us as Christians, these are the days that mark what is important in our lives. These are the days which call to mind and help us remember the people and events that are intimate parts of our faith lives. These are the people and events that have shaped us and formed us into who we are as a people of God. The celebration of these days, Sunday to Sunday, week to week, year to year, is what gives our lives content and context.

The Heart is Christ

Unlike the civic calendar, the Liturgical Calendar isn't governed by dates or months but rather by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The focus of the Liturgical Year is the ever-deepening immersion of ourselves into the mystery of Jesus Christ.

Advent

This journey of immersing ourselves begins with the Incarnation - the act of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. So our Liturgical Year begins with **Advent**, the season that marks a new year of grace and anticipates the coming of Jesus into our lives. On each of the four Sundays of Advent, the Church lights a candle on the Advent wreath to mark the time and signify the light of Christ that dispels the darkness. The *General Norms* tell us that the season of Advent has a twofold character: "It is a time of preparation for Christmas when the first coming of God's Son is recalled. It is also a season when minds are directed by this memorial to Christ's second coming at the end of time. It is thus a season of joyful and spiritual expectation," (#39). At the same time, it is important to remember that, during Advent, we are



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not waiting for the baby Jesus to be born! That wonderful event has already happened through the Incarnation. Rather, we anticipate the many ways that the Lord will be born into our lives in the coming year and, even more so, await his return when he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead...”and his kingdom will have no end!”

Christmas Tide

The Incarnation of Jesus is celebrated at **Christmas**, with the season culminating in the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus (the last Sunday of Christmas). The celebration of the birth of our Lord and his early manifestations is second only to the celebration of Easter in the liturgical calendar.

Since the celebration of the Incarnation is such a profound mystery, the Church teaches us that it takes a whole season to celebrate it. Rather than focusing on one day, the Church gives us Christmas Tide, a period lasting almost 3 weeks.

The whole mystery of Christ, from his Incarnation to the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again, is recalled by the Church during the course of the year.

(#17, General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar)

Lent

The passion and resurrection of Christ is recalled and celebrated during the seasons of **Lent, Triduum** (meaning “the three days,” i.e. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday) **and Easter**. The beginning of **Lent** is signaled by Ash Wednesday and beginning with the First Sunday of Lent, the Church prepares to celebrate the Paschal mystery of Jesus for forty days by practicing prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The liturgies of Lent prepare the catechumens (those preparing for Baptism) for the celebration of the Paschal mystery of Christ while at the same time preparing the faithful to renew their baptism in preparation for Easter. Lent is also marked by the absence of the *Alleluia* which reappears at the Easter Vigil to signal the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. The Sundays of Lent are referred to as the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays while the sixth Sunday which ushers in Holy Week is referred to as Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday).



Triduum

The Easter **Triduum** (three days) is the “culmination of the liturgical year. What Sunday is to the week, the solemnity of Easter is to the liturgical year.” (*General Norms, the Sacramentary, #18*). The Triduum is truly one celebration over a three-day period and begins with the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper when we recall the institution of the Eucharist in reference to the Exodus/Passover event. The celebration of the Lord’s Passion takes place on Good Friday during the afternoon. The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday begins in darkness and triumphantly proclaims that “Christ, our light” has risen from the dead and dispels the darkness of death.

Easter Tide

Unlike Christmas, **Easter** is a moveable feast, occurring on the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring (coinciding with the timing of the Jewish celebration of Passover). Easter is the centerpiece of the liturgical calendar. Like Christmas, Easter is simply “too big” to be celebrated in one day. As a result, the celebration of Easter spans a season of *fifty* days including the celebration of the Ascension forty days after Easter) and the coming of Christ’s Spirit at Pentecost (fifty days after Easter).

Ordinary Time - The Days In Between

Outside the major seasons of Advent, Christmas and Lent/Triduum/Easter, the Liturgical Year marks and celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Christ as it has been lived out in the lives of his Holy Ones - the saints. It is the Church’s faith which says that Christ’s Paschal Mystery is seen and celebrated in those people whose lives have mirrored Christ’s in some unique and wondrous way. These are the feasts and solemnities of **Ordinary Time** - Winter Ordinary Time (after Advent/Christmas and before Lent) and Summer-Autumn Ordinary Time (after Easter and before Advent of the next liturgical year).

These days are called *Ordinary* not in the sense of “common” or “routine” but rather in the sense of “Ordered” or “numbered” or “counted”. Remember, because of the Incarnation, no time is “ordinary” - all time, all seasons, all ages are charged with the grandeur and glory of God. All time is holy and all seasons are sacred because of the coming of our God in Christ. All told, there are 33 or 34 weeks in ordinary time which celebrate no particular aspect of the mystery of Jesus but instead “the mystery of Christ in all its fullness is celebrated,” (*The General Norms, #43*). Closing the Liturgical cycle in November, we celebrate Christ reigning over all creation in glory - **Christ the King**, the last Sunday of the Liturgical year.

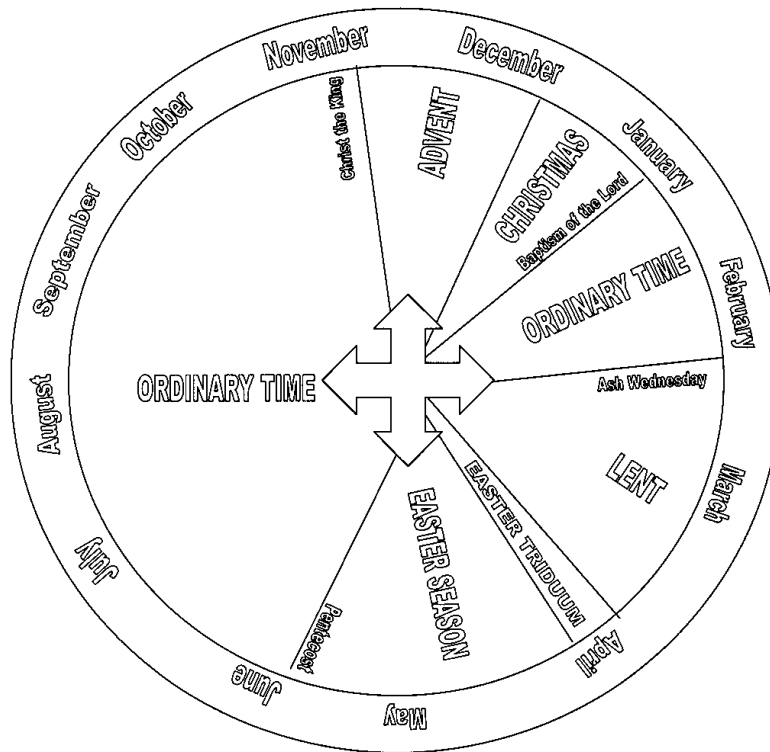
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The "Sanctoral Cycle" is the pattern of celebrating these feasts and commemorations of the Apostles, Saints and Martyrs, and it gives us many opportunities to recognize and celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Christ's life through death. By calling to mind the faith of these "heroes", our faith is strengthened and in them we see a model for our own lives of love and service to one another.

An Ever-Deepening Circle

On the surface, our Liturgical Calendar might seem like a repetitive cycle that we go through "every year". We enter a particular season the same way we entered the same season last year. The season is the same, only now we're just a year older, that all's: "This Christmas is like last Christmas," we say.



The Liturgical Calendar

This is exactly what our liturgical year is *not* to be. Every year is meant to draw us deeper and deeper into Christ, deeper and deeper into the Mystery of God. Every year we enter it differently from the year before. We are not the same people we were last year. God has been active in our lives since then, in ways that God has never been before. Our God is waiting to meet us in the present liturgical year in ways we have never experienced. God's "eternal now" is always beckoning us to experience God in different and wondrous ways. For this reason, the liturgical calendar follows a three-year cycle of Sunday Scripture readings:

Year A (Matthew) Year B (Mark) Year C (Luke).

By means of devotional exercises, instruction, prayer and works of penance and mercy, the Church...completes the formation of the faithful during the various seasons of the liturgical year.

(General Norms, #1)

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The Gospel of John is not ignored in this cycle but is interspersed throughout, especially during the Easter season and in year B because of the brevity of Mark's Gospel.

Conclusion

The liturgical year provides catechists with a framework for inviting learners into the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Through the various prayers, rites and Scripture readings of the liturgical year and its feasts and seasons, disciples of Christ are formed and re-formed. One of the primary responsibilities of catechesis is to invite people more deeply into the communion with Christ. This cannot be done without immersion into the liturgical life of the Church. This year, as you are led (and lead others!) through the time that makes up our liturgical year - the time that orders our celebrations and our prayer - strive for a certain openness: an openness that allows you to meet God in a way, in a space, in a season, in a time like you have never met God before. This year, enter into each of our grace-filled liturgical seasons again, for the very first time!

REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

Review Questions

1. What is the purpose of the liturgical calendar? If not governed by dates, weeks and months, what is it governed by?
2. What are the major seasons of the Liturgical Calendar? What aspect of the Paschal Mystery of Christ do each of these seasons recall and celebrate?
3. How is Advent more than simply preparation for the celebration of Christmas?
4. How is the period of Lent related to the *catechumens* of the Church?
5. What does the word *Triduum* mean and what does the Triduum celebrate?
6. How is the date of Easter determined?
7. What does the term *ordinary* mean when referring to certain periods of the liturgical year as Ordinary Time?
8. How are the Sunday scripture readings arranged? Which Gospel is proclaimed in which year?

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. How can you as a catechist bring the liturgical year into your learning environment and lessons?
2. How would you respond to someone who comments on the liturgical cycle by saying, "We're just doing the same old thing every year?"
3. What is the importance of the *liturgical calendar* for catechesis and forming one's faith?
4. What does the phrase "What Sunday is to the week, the solemnity of Easter is to the year" mean to you? What does this say about the focus of catechesis?
5. What season of the liturgical year speaks to you most? Why?
6. Why is it important to mark particular days and seasons of the liturgical year? What customs and traditions do you pass on to others to teach them about the liturgical year?

About the author: *D. Todd Williamson, M.T.S., is the Director of the Office for Divine Worship in the Archdiocese of Chicago and is a graduate of the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago.*