

What's ordinary about 'Ordinary Time'?

By Christopher Guntz

As far as retailers are concerned, Christmas is over. Decorations in the stores now prepare us for Valentine's Day. (Does anyone in retail remember that Valentine was a saint? I doubt it.)

But for Catholic Christians, we still have one more feast as part of the Christmas season: the Baptism of the Lord (Jan. 11 this year), the Sunday after Epiphany. That's the end of the liturgical Christmas season, although some folks celebrate Candlemas (Feb. 2) as the final, really-there's-nothing-else end of Christmas.

Traditionally in my home growing up, we waited at least until the Epiphany to take down the Christmas tree. Sometimes, if the poor tree dried up too quickly, by the time the Three Kings arrived the tree had no more needles. In those cases, we kept the lights off to minimize the fire hazard but kept the tree up as long as possible.

It is always a little hard to shift gears out of Christmas; with the spot where the tree stood now bare, and the lights and decorations put away for another 11 months, a little sense of emptiness creeps in.

It's also a little hard to transition back into "Ordinary Time," the liturgical season between Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter and following Pentecost. The carols of Christmas are so lively and lovely, and the Stations of the Cross of Lent's penitential weeks help us examine our soul. But in between, what is there?

Ordinary music, ordinary readings, ordinary blah.

It's important to note, however, that "ordinary" in this sense doesn't mean plain or "not extraordinary." It is, in essence, a reference to the ordinal numbers - one, two, three, and so on - that we use in counting, in this case, the weeks of the liturgical year. According to the Universal Norms of the church, "Besides the times of the year that have their own distinctive character, there remains in the yearly cycle 33 or 34 weeks in which no particular aspect of the mystery of Christ is celebrated, but rather the mystery of Christ itself is honored in its fullness, especially on Sundays. This period is known as Ordinary Time."

If Ordinary Time is about celebrating the fullness of the mystery of Christ, there can be nothing ordinary about it.

With the new year just beginning, you can easily commit to making a connection to the Gospel message and the mystery of Christ on a regular basis. You could bookmark the daily readings on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website at

uscbb.org/bible/readings. There are also numerous apps that provide the daily readings and other prayers (search your favorite app store for “Catholic readings”). Email services will deliver a portion of the Gospels each day to your mailbox, with the goal of completing the Gospels in a year. Other services offer the whole Bible in bite-size daily missives so you can read the whole Bible in a year.

Go on a retreat. Make time for the sacrament of reconciliation. Find a spiritual director. Attend Mass not just at Christmas and Easter, but all year long. Ordinary Time doesn’t have to be ordinary. With your personal investment in your spiritual life, you can make these weeks extraordinary.

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