

The heart of the Christian message is God's revelation of himself, in time, in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. God's salvation is revealed in the stream of human history. The manger at Bethlehem, the Virgin Mary, the disciples, the cross on Calvary, the empty tomb in the garden, were all "in time," and were transfigured by the eternal presence of God In Christ. Christian faith is rooted in the belief that God has acted in Christ in human history. It was a unique action. Nothing like it, or like the series of remarkable events connected with it, has ever occurred before or since. God chose the time for time and eternity to meet, and time can never be the same again.

The liturgy of the Christian church recognizes this fact and seeks to relate all time to the redemptive purposes of God. The major events of the life of our Lord pass in review perennially in the first half of the church year, keeping the Christian community in perpetual remembrance of "all that our Lord hath done for our sakes." The second half of the church year relates the profound implications of our Lord's incarnation, life, death and resurrection to the life in the time of the Christian and of the Christian community.

In addition, special liturgical services mark the successive stages of the life of the Christian in time: baptism, confirmation, marriage, sickness, death. In them the church seeks the blessing of God at moments of decision which are important not only to the individual Christian, but also the entire community--the church. Such crises have meaning not only in time, but also in eternity. In all of these ways, the church places upon both the ordinary and the extraordinary occasions of life the seal of God. While it is true that God does not disdain the use of time as a means of revealing himself. There are occasions on which certain aspects of his presence are more perceptible than ordinarily.

The four weeks of Advent recall the expectation of the coming of the Messiah on the part of the ancient Hebrews on the one hand, and the second coming of the Savior at the end of time on the other. The voices of the prophets and of John the Baptist unite the Christian with an expectant creation whose God is both its beginning and its end. Christmas and Epiphany call the faithful to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation. The word is made flesh and dwells among us and, for the

moment, heaven and earth are one and both ring with joy. On Good Friday, it is not Jesus of Nazareth only who dies on the cross. It is God himself who, in the sacrifice of his Son, reconciles a creation gone astray through the sin of the first Adam. On Easter, the victorious life of Christ passes beyond the bounds of death and betokens an endless life with God for all whose lives are untied to him by faith in his Son. On Ascension Day, the Son re-enters the glory of the Godhead. On Pentecost, the descent of the Spirit in tongues of fire and inspiration marks the eruption of the eternal in the world of time.

These recurring events also stimulate corresponding spiritual experiences in the hearts of Christian people. The joy of the Christian season is a reflection of the birth of the Savior. In Holy Week, it is his death which casts a pall over Christendom. When, at Easter, the church sings its "alleluias" and evidences its optimism and daring faith amid the distress of the world, it is because Christ is risen and has triumphed over death. And at Pentecost, the feeling of Christian solidarity and of witnessing for Christ is due to hearts touched anew by the Holy Spirit.

But the church's year is more than simply an annual cycle of recurring festivals and fasts. Every day can be an Advent in which Christ comes anew to our hearts, an Epiphany in which he is manifested afresh; a Lent in which he suffers for our sins; an Easter in which he rises again, a Pentecost in which his Spirit is poured out once more. What happened to God in time also happens to his people in time. The experiences of Christ, while unique and totally other because he is God, are also unique and totally ours because he was also man. His birth in our hearts at Christmas will make possible our growth into a measure of his stature. His cross will transfigure human suffering not only during Lent and Holy Week, but every day. His Easter triumph overcomes the injustices of daily life and the fear of death. And otherwise mediocre lives will be lifted up by the breath of the Spirit, as at Pentecost. In Christ, time is transfigured, and it becomes possible for us to live each moment to the greater glory of God.

Ancient religions generally related their worship and its calendar to natural events; the cycles of the sun or the moon, the positions of the planets, the procession of seasons, periodic times of the calving of cattle, of flood and drought,

of seedtime and harvest. The regular recurring rhythm of these natural events was thought to be evidence of the special presence of God. In the Graeco-Roman world, for instance, the days of the week were all named after heavenly bodies: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn. Of these, three--Sunday, Monday and Saturday--remain in English use.

The ancient Hebrews followed a scheme in which their festivals were lunar or seasonal. The new moon is bracketed in importance with the sabbath and appears in some instances to have been an even greater festival. The Passover was originally a moon festival in the spring. Its date was determined, as is the date of Easter--its Christian successor--by the vernal equinox and the full moon.

After the Babylonian captivity, however, the religious leaders of the Jews began to display a new awareness of the hand of God in human history. The ancient Hebrew calendar was reinterpreted and its festivals were associated with the great historical events of past ages. The Passover then became significant as the anniversary of the deliverance of the Hebrews from the bondage of Egypt. It became a commemoration of an historical event, and had contemporary meaning for all presently in bondage either to others, or to sin. The Feast of the Weeks (Pentecost), once a spring festival marking the end of the barley harvest, became the anniversary of the delivery of the Law to Moses on Sinai, and a perpetual reminder of the importance of God's will and of human obedience to it. Since the events which were commemorated were part of the continuous stream of history, they had meaning not only for their generation, but also for all who went before and who followed after. Every devout Hebrew was, therefore, a participant.

The primitive Christian church adopted the later Jewish idea of the periodic commemoration of historical events in the same sense, as well as the Jewish festivals of the Passover and Pentecost and the Sabbath. The death of Jesus at the time of the Passover was quickly interpreted as the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb for the deliverance of all men from the bondage of sin. Possibly, our Lord chose the time and place of his Passion with this in mind, and the Gospel of John, in particular,

draws the parallel. The outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples were "all with one accord in one place" was understood as the day of the founding of the Christian church, superseding the Jewish Church founded by the delivery of the Law on Sinai. The Hebrew idea of one day in seven reserved as a day of rest and for the worship of God was continued in the Christian community though the day became the first day of the week because of the resurrection, rather than the seventh day. In this way, the chief Jewish festivals became the basis of the Christian year. Yet the Hebrew festivals were in no sense carried over, but served only as the type, of which the Christian observance was believed to be the fulfilment.

For the Christian church, moreover, its festivals are more than simply commemorations of past events. They were and are present and living realities. Easter is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead with all of its implications, just as truly as it is a commemoration of the dawn in the garden when Mary Magdalene found the empty tomb, and just as truly as it is the foreshadowing of the final hope both of the Christian and of the Christian community. Easter is a revelation in time of which the Christian people are the actual witnesses.

In this way, the Christian church takes the time which God has created and offers it to God through Christ who has redeemed it. The daily and annual cycles of feast and fast constitute the means by which the church, inspired through the ages by the Holy Spirit, does this. It is the church's way of "redeeming the time."

HOW THE CHURCH YEAR CAME TO BE

At its beginning, the church had no year, just as it had no bishops, no canon law, no New Testament as such, and no creeds. Until the fourth century the church was proscribed in the Roman Empire. While it enjoyed varying degrees of freedom from time to time and from place to place, it always occupied officially the status of an underground movement. Its members met in secret. Outside of face-to-face encounters, Christian communications were often in symbols. Written letters were often apocalyptic like the

Book of Revelation. Prospective members were examined carefully by a prolonged series of scrutinings. The church could take no chance of admitting a fifth columnist. It did not dare erect its own buildings. All of its activities had to be not only unobtrusive, but clandestine. The whole political atmosphere was inhospitable to the development of a church year.

Yet the beginnings of the church year--the distinct manner in which the church measures time--lie back of the year 313 when, by the Edict of Toleration, the Emperor Constantine accorded Christianity legal status into the Roman empire. The resurrection of our Lord on Easter day, the event in which everything else in the church is rooted, is the source of the church year. It was the first, and has always been the greatest, of all festivals and events in the life of the church. Not only was its annual recurrence marked with high thanksgiving, but, because our Lord rose from the dead on the first day of the week, every Sunday became a celebration of the resurrection and the day of all days when Christians met together. In the earliest times there seems to have been no separation of the passion from the resurrection, and the single celebration of the Pascha at Easter commemorated both.

Second only to Easter, both in date of origin and in early importance, was Pentecost. It, too, had fallen on a Sunday, seven weeks after the resurrection. It was while the disciples were gathered together on the first day of the week in Jerusalem that the Holy Ghost was outpoured upon them and the Christian church came into being. A few years later, St. Paul summoned the Ephesian elders to come to meet him at Miletus because "he hastened...to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost."

The period bounded by these two festivals, Easter and Pentecost, was the first liturgical season of the church. It was the Quinquagesima of Great Fifty Days and the only season which the church knew during the first three centuries of its existence. As the Hebrews had observed the seven weeks between Passover and Pentecost as the Omer Days, so the early church maintained throughout the entire fifty days the note of joy and triumph of which Easter was the symbol par excellence. Each of the Sundays was a major festival. There was no fasting during these weeks, and kneeling was forbidden at all services.

The third great early festival, which may go back as far as the end of the first century, was the Epiphany on January 6. It was originally a festival which commemorated the Incarnation--both the birth and the baptism of Christ. Like Pascha (Easter) and Pentecost, Epiphany took its date from a pre-Christian festival, this time of pagan origin. An ancient festival in Egypt, Arabia, and parts of Palestine celebrated on January 6 the birth of Aeon. This the church replaced with the commemoration of the manifestation of God in Jesus' birth and baptism, since the precise date of both events was not known.

The next items on the Christian calendar were the anniversaries of local martyrs. These were marked by the churches of which they had been members. Almost every congregation in the first four centuries had its own roll of those who had suffered and died for the faith. It was only natural that the dates of their sacrifice should be commemorated in their churches. The calendar of the church in Alexandria would have its own list. The martyrology of the church in Rome or Carthage would be quite different. Their names were read at the services and commemorative services on their 'days' were sometimes held in the cemeteries or catacombs beside their graves. Some of them attained more than local fame (such as Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred in 156) and their days became fixed in more than one calendar. Others, especially if they happened to belong to less prominent churches, remained parochial martyrs. Some were, with the passage of time and the increasing numbers of martyrs, crowded off the lists of forgotten even in their own churches. Others, like Anastasia who died on December 25, had their day overshadowed later by a festival of greater importance, and thus passed into relative oblivion. The days of the martyrs, however, antedate the days of the apostles, and in the earliest calendars, the title "martyr" far outnumbers the title "saint".

In addition to the yearly observances, the early church also had a weekly cycle. Every Sunday was the Lord's Day and was a celebration of the resurrection. That is why, to this day, Sundays are never fast days, not even during Lent. Every Friday was a fast day in remembrance of the crucifixion, and there are traces of an early Wednesday fast in memory of our Lord's betrayal.

The calendar of the primitive church exhibits considerable Hebrew influence, though the Christian observances retained none of the Jewish meaning. This is not surprising since the disciples were Jews. The dates of Easter and Good Friday--the Pascha--were determined by the date of the Jewish Passover. Jesus went up to Jerusalem to eat the Passover with his disciples and it was while he was there that he was arrested and crucified. His body was hastily removed from the cross at sundown on Good Friday so that it might not hang there on the Great, or Paschal, Sabbath which began at six o'clock in the evening. His resurrection occurred on the first day of the week "when the sabbath was past." The date of Pentecost was seven weeks later at the time of the Jewish Feast of the Weeks which was, in our Lord's time, a spring harvest festival.

For the early Christians, too, as for the Jews, the day began at evening. The days in the creation story had been counted "evening and morning." The sabbath was to be celebrated from "even unto even." This practice persisted in the church for seven centuries and continues in the Roman Catholic church in the vigils which precede the major festivals. An early service of this sort is described in Acts 20:7-12, where the "first day" begins at sundown and St. Paul preaches until midnight and the sermon is followed by the breaking of bread. The service ended at daybreak.

The seven-day week is another Jewish contribution. In the ancient world weeks were of varying lengths. The Greeks divided their months into three ten-day periods. The Roman week had eight days. The seven-day week, which the Christian Church carried all over the world, was of West Asian origin and was little known in Jesus' day except among the Jews and Jewish colonies. Within this week, Tuesday and Thursday were kept by pious Jews as fast days, Saturday was kept as the holy day. The Christians fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays and kept Sunday as the holy day. The use of different days and the special significance attached to them emphasized for Jewish converts the complete change that was necessary in embracing the new faith. For a time, a Judaizing party (Ebionites) within the church tried to maintain the Sabbath side by side with Sunday, but the effort failed.

At the beginning of the fourth century, the church year included the Pascha, commemorative of both the passion and

resurrection, Pentecost, commemorative of the descent of the Holy Spirit; Epiphany, commemorative of the manifestation of Christ in his birth and baptism, the days of local martyrs, Sundays as commemorations of the resurrection, fasting on Fridays and perhaps Wednesdays, the seven-day week with the days beginning at sundown.

The Edict of Toleration in 313, however, resulted in profound changes in the nature and character of the church. Now for the first time, it was able to operate openly and without fear of persecution. It could build churches and basilicas, relax the rigorous examination and scrutiny of catechumens, hold public services and processions, and attempt to recover its historic places. It was this last effort, very prominent in the fourth century, that was most important in stimulating the further development of the church year. Pilgrimages to holy places--the site of the crucifixion, of the sepulchre, of the last supper, of the ascension, of the nativity--and the erection of basilicas on many of these historic spots gave rise to special services in special places on special days. The various processions and services held in Jerusalem in the fourth century are described in detail by a Christian woman from Gallicia who had made a pilgrimage there. It was only natural that she and other Christians should return home and encourage the adaptation and imitation of these ceremonies. This was especially true in Rome. Here the bishop and his clergy were soon proceeding to the Church of St. Mary Major at midnight on Christmas Eve to say mass beside a reproduction of the creche in Bethlehem. In addition to these replicas, Rome had, as did other Christian centers, its own holy places with their own apostolic traditions, real or legendary.

Relics also played a part in the development of the church year. Churches and shrines in places far removed from the Holy Land attained an increased, if second hand, importance by the translation of relics to their altars. Helen, mother of the Emperor Constantine, believed that she had found the true cross. She brought part of it to Rome and converted her Sessorian Palace into the Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. It became at once the site of the Good Friday devotions of the Roman Catholic church. Other relics gave special significance to other churches, and different services and calendars developed. Some of these became general and found their way into the church year. In this process, the practice of the church of Rome, for the same reasons that gave it predominance in the West in other areas of church life, became in the course of time the accepted practice of Western Christianity.

A further development in the fourth century was the division of each of the three great ancient festivals. Before the century was over the Pascha had been divided into Easter and Good Friday; Epiphany had given birth to Christmas, and Pentecost to Ascension Day. The development of Good Friday took place in Jerusalem and was directly connected with the Holy Week ceremonies which repeated the drama of the Passion at the historic places.

The Epiphany, always an important festival in the Eastern church, was observed in Gaul and in Spain in the fourth century, but apparently never at Rome as a festival of the birth and baptism of our Lord. Instead, at some time before 336, December 25 was established as the festival of Jesus' birth. The date was chosen to sublimate the great pagan Roman festival of the Unconquered Sun (Natalis Solis invicti) which took place at the winter solstice. Since the day, the month, even the year of the birth of Christ were not known, what more appropriate than to replace the Unconquered Sun with the birth of Jesus, Sun of Righteousness, at the time when the days began to lengthen again? Eventually both December 25 and January 6 were kept by both the Eastern and Western churches--the former, as the birth of our Lord; the latter as the baptism of Christ in the East, and as the festival of the Magi (Three Kings) in the West.

Ascension Day was not separated from Pentecost until late in the fourth century in Asia Minor. Strangely, since it was the type of occasion that would have been ideal for liturgical re-enactment, Etheria is silent about any Ascension Day celebration which was separated from Pentecost. She mentions a service forty days after Easter, but it was in Bethlehem and was in commemoration of the Holy Innocents. The end of the century, however, found the two festivals separated in Antioch and Constantinople.

As the festivals were divided, so also the seasons of the church year developed. The only season already in existence before the fourth century was the Easter season of seven weeks. By the end of the fourth century Lent was firmly established. It developed in two directions. There was in the primitive church a fast preceding the Pascha. It was not, however, a Good Friday fast since Good Friday was not celebrated, though some Christians began their fast on Friday. Most of the faith fasted on Saturday, and the fast was not broken until the Eucharist, celebrated at about 3 A.M. Easter morning. Gradually this fast was extended, first to the forty hours our Lord spent in the tomb

then to six days by the early third century. This part of Lent, which we know as Holy Week, seems to have developed as a preparation for Easter. The rest of Lent derives from the ancient practice of preparing catechumens for baptism at Easter. There was a series of lectures and scrutinies or examinations which began about six weeks before Easter. All candidates were further expected to fast the forty days preceding the Pascha, as our Lord had fasted before beginning his ministry. The penitents (those under discipline) also fasted in preparation for their reconciliation at Eastertime. After the edict of Toleration in 313 the severity of these exercises began to be relaxed, and the period of fasting was transformed to all the faithful.

The length of Lent varied, too. At first the fast seems to have begun on the Monday of the sixth week before Easter. This Quadragesima is referred to in the fifth canon of the Council of Nicaea in 325. By the end of the fourth century it had been extended to seven weeks in Egypt. In Jerusalem, Etheria found an eight-week Lent with all Saturdays except Saturday in Holy week, and all Sundays, excepted from the fast. The exception of Sundays spread as Lent became more widely observed, and, to bring the total number of days in the fast back to forty, the days from Ash Wednesday on in the seventh week before Easter were added. The tendency to extend Lent still farther is evidenced by the three pre-Lenten Sundays (Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima) which, in the modern Roman Catholic church, are hardly distinguishable from Lent. Caesarius of Arles prescribed a pre-Lent fast for months in the sixth century, and there were other parts of the church in which a preparatory season was customary.

As Lent eventually developed into a period of preparation before Easter, so Advent developed into a period of preparation before Christmas. In Spain, where the Epiphany was observed in the fourth century, it was preceded by a three-week period of fasting and daily church attendance beginning on Dec. 17. It spread to Gaul and Italy and was transferred to Christmas. As with Lent, so the length of Advent varied. In Gaul, it began as early as St. Martin's Day. (November 11) and lasted six weeks. In Spain and Italy, it included five weeks. Advent was finally settled at four weeks in Rome, though the lesson for the last Sunday after Trinity in both Lutheran

and Anglican use are reminiscent of the centuries when Advent was a longer season.

Around Christmas there clustered certain holy days which depend literally upon Christmas for their dates. The Circumcision of our Lord was eight days later on January 1. The Presentation of Our Lord (Also called Candlemas, or the Purification of the Virgin Mary) was forty days after Christmas, February 2. The Annunciation nine months earlier, was March 25. The Nativity of John the Baptist, who was six months older than Jesus, was set at June 24. The wisdom of the conflation of a literal principle with a liturgical one is open to question. Certainly both the annunciation and the nativity of John the Baptist are more at home during Advent from a liturgical point of view.

With the acceptance of the new festivals, and the completion of Lent and Advent, the church followed for half of each year a cycle which recalled the life of Christ, his advent, nativity, manifestation, suffering, crucifixion, death, resurrection and ascension, and the descent of the holy Spirit on Pentecost. The cycle was not entirely complete, but it was, and is still the high semester of the church year, including the major festivals and repeating perennially for the Christian the principal events in God's scheme of redemption.

The word "events" deserves emphasis. Festivals commemorating doctrines of the church and those of the Virgin Mary are of later origin. Trinity Sunday, for instance, after which many north European missals numbered the Sundays in the Second half of the year, was not officially accepted until the fourteenth century, although it had been a popular festival in many places for several centuries previous. After 1570, when the Roman Missal received its final form under Pius V, the Sundays in the latter half of the church year were numbered as they had been numbered at Rome-- after Pentecost. This second half of the year was devoted to the Christian life, and the application to it of the lessons of the life and teaching of our Lord and the Apostles.

This church year has evolved slowly over many centuries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Within its framework it provides for the annual review of the great events of God's work in time in the person of his Son, and of the meaning of those events of God's people. The church has always impoverished itself when it has abandoned the church year, or attempted to reconstruct it. In the sixteenth century the conservative reformers

were aware of this fact and retained the church year, eliminating only those festivals which were felt to be unwarranted on the basis of the teachings of Christ. The more radical reformers discarded the historic year. In Puritan England and Calvinistic Scotland, from which many of the early American settlers came, the church year was regarded with suspicion as "popery". The result has been that Protestant America, excepting the liturgical churches, has had an impoverished background. Attempts have been made to supply the want by such "festivals" as Rally Day, World Peace Sunday, Race Relations Sunday, Brotherhood Sunday, Festival of the Christian Home (Mother's Day), Rural Life Sunday, Children's Day, Labor Sunday, etc. Were these related to the historic church year, some of them could be acceptable, but their dates bear little or no reference to the church year and fall on different Sundays in different years. The date of World Peace Sunday is determined by Armistice Day (November 11); Race Relations Sunday by Lincoln's Birthday (February 12); Brotherhood Sunday by Washington's Birthday (February 22); the Christian Home (second Sunday in May); Rural Life Sunday (third Sunday in May) although Rogate, on which it sometimes falls, would be more acceptable. A glance at most of these titles will indicate the difference in orientation between the historic church year and its festivals and attempts to manufacture a substitute. The attempt to relate the problems of the day to the message of God is not irrelevant, but it is not the same thing as relating the redemptive process of God to the problems of the day.