CATHOLIC IDENTITY
Living the Liturgical Year
By Father Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.

Our Catholic identity is shaped by the way we read the Bible. And we read the Bible in a special way: It—s called
the liturgical year.

The liturgical year— the annual cycle of feasts and seasons—is not primarily about decorations (when to bring out
the poinsettias and when to display the lilies and hydrangeas). Nor is it simply a way to add variety to the Mass so
that it isn—t so repetitive (some days the priest wears green, other days purple). The liturgical year is about much
more Catholic, all-inclusive issues. The liturgical year enables us to celebrate the whole mystery of Christ.

The Bible is our living contact with the mystery of Christ. The way we Catholics officially (liturgically) read
Scripture creates our liturgical year. For example, the day on which the Church reads the Resurrection account
becomes Easter; the day on which we proclaim Christ—s birth becomes Christmas Day.

The original and most important Catholic feast day is Sunday, the Lord—s Day. Jews find identity in Sabbath rest;
Muslims, in Jumuah, the Friday prayer. We Catholics find identity in the Sunday eucharistic assembly. The Bible
emphasizes the bond between the Lord—s Day and the Lord—s Supper. While our contemporary understanding
of Sunday has incorporated elements of Sabbath rest, Sunday retains its primary and original meaning as a day of
assembly. On the Lord—s Day, the day of Christ—s resurrection, we gather with other Catholics and celebrate the
memorial of his paschal victory, the Eucharist.

Rich Biblical Tradition

At Mass on Sundays and holy days, during the course of a three-year cycle the Church proclaims some 500
passages of the Bible, passages from each of the books of both the Old and New Testament. The Church year
enables us to hear from all parts of the Scripture.

There are two ways in which the Church decides which passages of the Bible to proclaim at the liturgy. Imagine
one of your favorite and often-read novels, books of poetry or inspirational essays. You might read the book
beginning to end; or, especially after you are familiar with the book, you might pick out certain passages that
correspond to a situation or mood or need that you are experiencing at any particular moment.

The Church reads the Bible in both of these ways. On some Sundays the Church selects the passages in light of
their theme. This manner of selection creates the liturgical seasons of Easter and Christmas. On the other
Sundays throughout the year the Church reads various books of the Bible from beginning to end in a continuous
(or a semi-continuous) fashion.

The liturgy enables us to pass from our past-present-future time frame to enter into God—s "time of salvation" so
that the grace and mystery proclaimed in the Scripture reading and in the feast are made present. The African-
American spiritual asks, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" Yes, I was there! Or, more accurately,
I am there now! At the Easter Vigil we sing, "This is the night when Jesus Christ rose triumphant from the grave."
We don—t sing, "We remember the night long ago when..." We sing, "This is the night!"

Jesus: Alive Again
We Catholics today do not have to feel disappointed because all the really wonderful events of Christ—s life happened long ago before our lifetime. The liturgical year enables us to be present to those wonderful events now. The liturgical year makes the mysteries of the Lord—s life, death and resurrection present in a mysterious way so that Christians of every generation are enabled to come into contact with them and be enriched by their particular graces.

The mystery of Christ is so rich that no one, single celebration can do it justice. The liturgical year enables us to experience saving events of the Christ event in a more Catholic, all-embracing, universal way so that we can enter into these mysteries and thus be enriched by God—s saving love.

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