

NOTES ON THE LITURGY

Office of Divine Worship - Archdiocese of Newark

Decoding the Calendar

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The world of fiction often includes the Church in secret plots and activities involving obscure codes and symbols. It makes for intriguing bestsellers, but often it is more fiction than fact. However, this does not mean that some of the Church's logic is not difficult to follow. This would certainly be true of the liturgical calendar.

Over the centuries, the Church, like Christ himself, has made use of time as a means of teaching people about God and forming them in faith. One can hardly imagine being a Christian without making special recognition of Sunday as a day of worship. Just think of the feelings and associations you experience when you hear the names of days and seasons like "Christmas" or "Ash Wednesday" or even "St. Patrick's Day." If these names stir something in you, then you have been "formed" by the Church year.

Keeping track of the seasons and the feasts of the liturgical year is no easy task. Sooner or later we all open the *Sacramentary* or the *Lectionary for Mass*, look at the options and think "Huh? Now what do I do?" This is quite understandable since there are many variations of occurrence and concurrence which need to be applied to the calendar each year. Some of these affect the whole Church, some particular dioceses and still others pertain only to individual parishes.

Although this can be a little confusing at times, it truly shows the genius behind the reform of the liturgical calendar. By providing for options and variations, it offers flexibility in particular situations for local churches throughout the world. However, this does not mean that everything is up for grabs! When we adhere to the liturgical times and seasons of the Church's calendar, we allow ourselves and the people we serve to be shaped through sacred time into the Body of Christ.

Below are several of the most frequently asked questions about the liturgical year. Although the questions are specific, the answers are actually helpful for a wide variety of calendar questions.

1. Today is December 6, the optional memorial of St. Nicholas; what prayers can I use at Mass?

Even though it is officially listed as an optional memorial, once it is decided that St. Nicholas' memorial will be celebrated, all of the rules of an obligatory memorial apply.

On the optional memorial of St. Nicholas, all of the presidential prayers for the Mass of St. Nicholas may be used from the proper of saints and the common of pastors as found in the *Sacramentary*. Since this memorial occurs during Advent, the preface of pastors or of Advent may be used. The preface of the season may always be used on a memorial during the seasons of Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. Either the readings of the day or the readings for St. Nicholas found in the *Lectionary* under the proper or common of saints may be used, but the weekday readings should always be given priority.

Of course, being an optional memorial, it may be decided not to celebrate St. Nicholas' memorial in which case the prayers and readings of the day for Advent would be used.

Celebrating Saints in Advent and Lent

The answer to the question about the Optional Memorial of St. Nicholas seems simple, so why is it frequently asked? The reason is because this memorial occurs during the season of Advent. In some ways, Advent is similar to Lent, but the rules for celebrating a saint's memorial are different. During Lent, when celebrating a memorial (or an optional memorial) of a saint, you may only use the opening prayer for the saint. All other prayers, including the preface, must be from the Lenten weekday. The color of the vestments worn – even on St. Patrick's Day – is violet.

The first part of Advent is more flexible than Lent when celebrating memorials. If there is an obligatory memorial or an optional memorial is chosen, it may be celebrated in its fullness; that is, with all of the proper prayers, prefaces and even readings if so desired. (It is preferred to use the readings of the day and the preface of the season). However, in the last days of Advent, stricter rules apply. From December 17 until December 23 (time of the "O Antiphons"), the Advent calendar takes precedence, and if any saint's memorial occurs during this time, only the opening prayer may be used as in Lent. During this time, all other prayers, readings and the color of the vestments are determined by the weekday of Advent.

Sanctoral and Seasonal

The liturgical year really combines two calendars: the seasonal calendar which includes Advent & Christmas and Lent & Easter and the sanctoral calendar which marks the celebrations of the saints and other specific feast days. These two calendars are not parallel. Rather, they coexist in a relatively complimentary relationship, but for the most part, the seasonal calendar takes precedence over the sanctoral. This is definitely true of the Sundays during the major seasons.

2. Can I celebrate a funeral Mass on December 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception?

The short answer is no, you cannot celebrate a funeral Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. However, the funeral ritual does contain a liturgy for just such occasions: Funeral Liturgy outside Mass (see *Order of Christian Funerals*, 177). Whenever this is used, however, it is good pastoral practice to celebrate a memorial Mass for the deceased at a later date.

The reason that you cannot have a funeral Mass on the Immaculate Conception is not because of its ranking as a solemnity, but because of its status as a holy day of obligation. Even if it falls on a Saturday or Monday, it is a holy day of obligation, and no funeral Mass is permitted. To keep it simple, remember that as a rule, a funeral Mass may not be celebrated on any holy day of obligation. Keep in mind, though, that holy days such as the Solemnity of Mary (January 1), the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15) and All Saints (November 1) are not obligatory if they fall on a Saturday or Monday, and therefore on those days a funeral Mass would be permitted.

Funeral Masses on Holy Days of Obligation

The 2002 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 380, sums up quite clearly the norms for funeral Masses on holy days of obligation:

Among the Masses for the Dead, the Funeral Mass holds first place. It may be celebrated on any day except for solemnities that are holy days of obligation, Holy Thursday, the Easter Triduum, and the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter, with due regard also for all the other requirements of the law.

While funeral Masses may be celebrated on Sundays of Ordinary Time, it is not customary to do so at a parish Mass in the United States.

3. I have a wedding on Palm Sunday; can I say a nuptial Mass?

On holy days of obligation and on the Sundays of Advent & Christmas and Lent & Easter, the Mass of the day must be celebrated; it cannot be replaced with a ritual Mass. Therefore, you cannot celebrate a nuptial Mass on Palm Sunday.

It is extremely important when booking weddings to look carefully at the date which the couple is choosing, not only to see if it is “free” in the *parish* calendar, but also to consider what may or may not be permitted in the *liturgical* calendar. So if, for example, a wedding is requested on a day such as Palm Sunday or a Sunday during Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter, you need to explain to the couple before you even mark the calendar that on those days you will not be able to celebrate a nuptial Mass. If, however, it is necessary to have a Mass, it must be explained that it has to be the *Mass of the day*. They may be better off opting for the celebration of marriage outside Mass or better yet, choosing a different day.

Weddings on Sundays

The only exception to this would be the Sundays of Ordinary Time on which it is permissible to celebrate a ritual Mass if it is not a regularly scheduled parish Mass. So for example, on the 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, it is permissible to celebrate a nuptial Mass with all of the prayers and readings taken from the wedding options, as long as it is done at a time other than the regularly scheduled parish Masses.

It is permissible to celebrate a wedding at a parish Mass on a Sunday of Ordinary Time, but the prayers and readings of the day must be used with the following two exceptions:

1. One of the readings, usually the second reading, may be replaced with a reading from the marriage options
2. the nuptial blessing may follow the Lord’s Prayer.

Of course, the rite of marriage takes place after the homily.

4. We are dedicating our new church on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. Which prayers do we use?

The dedicating of a church is an extraordinary day in the life of a parish. The day of the dedication is always a solemnity in that church. Because the day of dedication is a solemnity, the prayers and readings from the *Rite of the Dedication of a Church* are to be used.

There are, however, days when it is not permitted to celebrate the dedication of a church as the rite itself states: “A day should be chosen for the dedication of the new church when the people can be present in large numbers, especially a Sunday. Since the theme of the dedication pervades this entire rite, the dedication of a new church may not take place on days on which it is altogether improper to disregard the mystery then being commemorated: the Easter triduum, Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Pentecost, Ash Wednesday, the weekdays of Holy Week, and All Souls.” (*Rite of Dedication of a Church*, 7)

The anniversary of the dedication of a church is always a solemnity in that church and should be celebrated accordingly.

Dedicating an altar

Regarding proper days for dedicating an altar, the rite says this: “A day should be chosen for the dedication of a new altar when the people can be present in large numbers, especially a Sunday, unless pastoral considerations suggest otherwise. However, the rite of the dedication of an altar may not be celebrated during the Easter triduum, on Ash Wednesday, the weekdays of Holy Week, and All Souls. The celebration of the Eucharist is inseparably bound up with the rite of the dedication of an altar. The Mass is the Mass for the dedication of an altar. On Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Pentecost, and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter season, the Mass is the Mass of the day, with the exception of the prayer over the gifts and the preface, which are closely interwoven with the rite itself.” (*Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, 14-15) There is no liturgical observance for the anniversary of the dedication of an altar.

5. Our parish is named after St. Agnes, but this year her feast day falls on a Tuesday. Can we move it to Sunday?

Many people are surprised to learn that the answer to this question is yes, but with certain restrictions. It was noted above that the anniversary of the dedication of a church is a solemnity in that particular church. This also applies to the celebration of titular saints of particular churches. In this example, the church named for St. Agnes celebrates January 21 as a solemnity, not merely an obligatory memorial as is its designation in the universal calendar.

Additionally, during Ordinary Time, a church may celebrate the Mass of its titular saint on the Sunday closest to the saint's feast day. This may be done as an "external solemnity" *at one Mass only*. If the titular saint's feast falls on a Sunday of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week or the Octave of Easter, it is not observed on that day, but it is transferred to the next available weekday.

What would happen to the day (January 21) of the actual memorial of St. Agnes if the church has an external celebration on Sunday? It is still celebrated since that is the actual day of the feast in the universal calendar.

Conclusion

Even in this simplified fashion, the Church calendar is still not easy to decode. Two extremely helpful secondary sources are *The Ordo* published by Paulist Press and the *Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons* published by Liturgical Training Publications. What is important to remember is that the calendar of the Church shapes us in ways both subtle and profound. The more we respect it and adhere to it, the more we build up the kingdom of God, not only in this place, but at this time.

Bibliography

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Particular Solemnities

Both the titular feast and the anniversary of a church's dedication are solemnities in that particular church. They take precedence over the Sundays of Ordinary Time. If they fall on any other Sunday, they are transferred to the next available weekday.

Calendar Rankings

Solemnity – This is the highest ranking holy day of the Church. Solemnities contain their own prayers and prefaces; several are holy days of obligation. If they fall on a Sunday of Ordinary Time, they are still observed. If they fall on a Sunday of Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter, they are transferred to the next available weekday.

Feast – Feasts rank lower than solemnities but higher than memorials. They have prayers of their own, and the preface for the feast is always used. Feasts of the Lord (e.g. Triumph of the Cross) take precedence over Sundays of Ordinary Time, but all others (e.g. James the Apostle) do not.

Obligatory Memorial – An obligatory memorial of a saint is always observed, but the weekday readings are ordinarily used. The opening prayer of the saint must be used; the prayer over the gifts and the prayer after communion may be taken from the saint, from the common or from the seasonal prayers. The preface is of the saint or of the season. On Lenten Weekdays and Dec 17-24, only the opening prayer of the saint is used.

Optional Memorial – As its name implies, an optional memorial may or may not be celebrated. Ordinarily the presider decides. If it is chosen, then all is as in the obligatory memorial. (If there is more than one saint to choose from on a given day, only one may be observed).

Seasonal Weekday – Some seasonal weekdays carry more weight than others. Lenten weekdays, the last week of Advent (Dec 17-24), Holy Week and the octaves of Christmas and Easter all take precedence over the saints in varying degrees.

Octaves

An octave is a period of eight holy days which follow both Christmas and Easter. Each day of the octave of Easter carries the rank of a solemnity! Memorials and feasts which occur during the Easter Octave are not observed. Any other solemnities which fall during the Easter octave are transferred to the first available weekday. The Christmas octave does allow for the traditional feasts of Christmas week to be retained.

Archdiocesan Celebrations

The Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark was dedicated on October 19, 1954. In the cathedral church, its anniversary is observed as a solemnity. In the churches of the Archdiocese of Newark, the anniversary is observed as a feast.

