The Liturgical Year
An Introduction

“Let me look at the calendar,” is the answer to quite a number of our questions: “What date is it?” “When are we going on vacation?” “When’s my doctor’s appointment?” And it's not only things in the future: when I replace my calendar at the new year, I always look back and am reminded of the things that happened in past year: the family visit I enjoyed, or maybe the hospital visit I didn’t enjoy. How would we plan our lives without a calendar? How would we know where we are in time or where we’re headed?

Even before written calendars, our ancestors tried to make sense of the natural world using the movements of the sun across the sky and the phases of the moon. These natural events marked important times for people such as the planting and harvesting of crops. These critical moments were also to influence religious celebrations. In more recent times, the sun and the moon have been replaced by the digital watch and the atomic clock, but there is no doubt that the measurement of times and seasons is still necessary for us to make sense of the world around it. This is no less true of our attempts in the here and now to make sense of the God who created us.

Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Today and Forever
The Church has always taught that the Son of God who came to save the world is also a human being. As one like us, Jesus made use of the material world to reveal God to us. In fact, God’s use of the material universe continues today every time water, oil, bread, wine and other physical elements are used to celebrate the sacraments.

Obviously, Christ did not only enter our space, but our time as well. By becoming one with us Christ sanctified all creation, and by entering human history he sanctified all time: past, present and future. Therefore we are able to look for God’s presence not only in the world around us but in the changes which occur over time in our environment. The Church draws on the passage of times and seasons to serve as constant reminders of Christ’s own great cycle of life, death and resurrection. “Grant...that through these sacred mysteries there will be accomplished in the body of the whole Church what has come to pass in Christ her Head” (Roman Missal, Prayer after Communion, 7th Sunday of Easter)

The Liturgical Calendar is a record of God’s thorough use of our time as an instrument of Christ’s sacred presence to us. We are reminded that God uses all time to be with us, not just sporadic moments throughout salvation history. When, for example, the Jewish people gather for Passover, they remember an historic reality: that they were once slaves in Egypt and that they escaped with God’s help. They remember this event by transforming it into symbols such as special foods, bitter and sweet, as well as through the use of ritual, song and prayer which represent the Passover event so that they can enter the covenant now. They can do this because although the covenant was first made on Mt. Sinai thousands of years ago, it still continues to exist today. The covenant lasts forever and therefore can still be entered into.

The reality of the Word becoming flesh and the resurrection of Christ are not bound by the chains of time either, but are eternal. They are as accessible to us today as they were two thousand years ago. In fact, it is not the
Anniversary of a long ago event that we celebrate on Christmas or Easter morning, but instead it is the knowledge that these events are present to us now that is the cause of our rejoicing. “It is true that the Word was made flesh in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4); but it is also true that, in virtue of the mystery of his identity as the eternal Son of the Father, he is the origin and end of the universe.” (Dies Domini, 8)

Unpacking the Mystery

Sometimes we take our belief in Jesus as the Son of God for granted, but when we take time to reflect on our faith in Christ, we realize there is much to consider. This is where the Liturgical Year is of most help to the Church. The Liturgical Year unpacks for us the mysteries of Christ in a more readable, digestible form. By breaking down the life of Christ into parts we can enter more deeply into all that Jesus has done for us. This is not only important for the spirituality of the individual but indeed, for the entire Church which enters communally into each season of the Liturgical Year and focuses as a people on the various aspects of the Paschal Mystery.

The Liturgical Year begins with the season of Advent which brings us back to a time of waiting for the first coming of the Messiah and at the same time turns us forward as we wait in hope for the second coming of our Savior. Then our hearts and minds delve deeper into the mystery of the incarnation. Mary’s “yes” to God allowed the good news of salvation to be experienced by us through her Son. We call it the Christmas Season which includes not only Christ’s birth but also such solemnities as the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord. Still, it was not enough that he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness,” but now we must ponder a deeper mystery, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7-8). Lent is upon us, a season of penance and charity, of truth and right worship when the Church speaks most especially with actions and signs of God’s great sacrificial love for the world.

Finally, we receive the ultimate gift. We are carried safely over the flood waters; we pass through the Red Sea unharmed; we are liberated from sin and are guided through the darkness by a pillar of light; we rise from the dead. The mystery of Easter is that because of Christ, we do not die, but now we live forever. It is the final word in this great story of our salvation told through the Liturgical Year.

Although the seasons of the Liturgical Year repeat themselves over and over again, they are not unlike T.S. Eliot’s famous quote: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Each year we learn something new when we celebrate the seasons of the Liturgical Year because each year we move deeper into the mysteries of Christ.

Reflection Questions:

• How does the Liturgical Year help people to understand the central events of Christ, namely his coming as one of us and his death and resurrection?
• Which season of the Liturgical Year helps you most to grow in your faith?