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The Church Year: A Unifying Story for Christ's Body

By Travis Galle

Our postmodern world makes much of the diverse range of “human experiences” that subjectively shape the masses. Consequently, the contemporary task of the Church is to discern how best to comprehend and apply her proclamation to these varying experiences. Consider the experience of time. Human experience of time is something that is ostensibly common to all, yet cultural customs shape its perception. Some societies construct their calendars based on the cycles of the moon, others on the sun (such as the modern western calendar). Seasonal variations also universally impact all cultures, but to different degrees based on their respective climates. Certain civilizations base their dating systems on important historical events or simply referring to the durations of the reigns of their various monarchs.

Despite these varying ways of measuring time, time itself is an objective, external force that is exerted on all humans equally. One of the most important doctrines that would emerge in the Patristic era is the understanding that God created time yet exists completely outside its effects. This is one of those things that simply makes God God. The Lord is the ruler of the universe and thus presides over space and time. St. Augustine, arguing that time began at creation, noted that God must inhabit a state of timelessness where past, present, and future are simultaneous before Him. Unlike created, mutable objects, God is not at the mercy of its progressive alterations. It is difficult for humans to comprehend this fact, which is why man-centered theology often tries to diminish it.

Yet, God does not leave us in a state of bewilderment before the ever-shifting sands of time. Moses tells us that on the fourth day God created lights in the heavens, to separate day from night; and delineate the seasons. (Gen. 1:14) All creation is subject to change, so God mercifully gave us objects that change constantly so that we may comprehend time in a consistent manner. Cultural subjectivity comes in how we choose to relate these signs

to one another. One may be tempted to see these variations as merely functional; societies will construct frameworks of timekeeping based on climatic factors such as the cycle of the harvest.

The truth of the matter is that the cyclical rhythm of time provides an opportunity for each culture to tell its story. What is the story that our contemporary American culture wishes to tell? One flip through a standard calendar hanging on the wall will show us the plot points of our common societal story. All of these, of course, reflect our highly individualistic and consumeristic tendencies, but I will attempt to avoid a cynical tone as I unpack them.

New Year's Day ushers in the beginning of the year and represents a clean slate for the beleaguered American who feels the pang of disappointment of unfulfilled promises in the previous year. This usually comes with New Year's Resolutions, a new set of personal promises to make up for past failures. When the page flips to February, all eyes turn toward Valentine's Day, when flower and card companies salivate over their sales ascending as men scramble to make their significant others feel as special as possible. The coming of spring usually coincides with a Spring Break of some sort, a time when the hint of warmer weather prompts a cause for leisure for students of all ages. April typically contains the holiday of Easter, a fun stand-in for a spring festival befit with children hunting for eggs and (maybe) going to church.

Then comes summer, which is a time of extended leisure for many; hot weather dictating such activities as beachgoing and sporting. This sacred time for sun-starved Americans contains three festivals which mark the beginning, center, and end of the season; Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day. The first two are patriotic recognitions, the latter a testimony to, once again, leisure. All three of these holidays typically center around the sacred American outdoor culinary custom known as barbecuing, a summer staple.

September usually brings cooler weather and a return to ordinary labors. The build up to Halloween defines most of autumn, culminating in that spooky night of candy and comradeship. In November all eyes are turned toward Thanksgiving, another festival centered around food with civic character. Finally, December is dominated by Christmas, many complaining that its significance has even eclipsed Thanksgiving in the previous month. Arguably the most important of all American holidays, Christmas certainly has a sentimental familial aspect to it despite its commercial trappings. Finally, the modern American year ends triumphantly with New Year's Eve, a time to celebrate the past and prepare for the future, regrettably accompanied by much debauchery. And then the cycle repeats itself again.

Now that we have examined the annual American story, let us reflect on what our collective conception of time tells us about ourselves. Most of our holidays center around the interplay of work with leisure, weather, or national considerations. Family and romance also are featured. There are only two explicitly religious holidays that are on the calendar; Christmas and Easter (Valentine's Day and Halloween have religious origins but are scarcely understood as such today). Yet neither of these holidays are exclusively, or even primarily, religious. Attending church on these high feasts is optional, and doing so only on these dates underlies the lack of religious observance as a whole throughout the civil year.

The story we in the modern American landscape tell with time is not irredeemably bad, but it is insufficient for full spiritual edification. A yearly rhythm dictated only by the ebbs and flows of work and play and even familial concerns does not build up the Body of Christ. This borderline nihilistic narrative our culture inhabits presents a perfect opportunity for the Church to witness to a story much more grounded in Christ and His mission.

Fortunately, the Church already has a historic narrative cycle already ready to be implemented: the Church Year. And due to the liturgical reforms of the past century, most liturgically minded denominations tell a similar story. Yet even though these churches use this calendar on paper, it rarely seems to impact much in the way of spiritual formation in the lives of the laity. We tend to think in terms of the "church calendar" on the one hand and the "civil calendar" on the other, the latter of which has much more meaning to the average church goer. Congregations will even accommodate the civil calendar in order to be more relevant to the greater public (Mother's and Father's Day sermons, Thanksgiving Eve services, etc.) It is almost as if the Church is slightly embarrassed to have a sense of time different from the surrounding culture, and at times wishes she could shake off such a difference.

But when we compare the Church's relationship with her story and that of the world's, we see the reverse. Prior to modernity, the Church's sense of time largely shaped the society around her. It has often been retorted that the average medieval peasant had significantly more days off compared to the modern worker due to all the feast days observed. Specific elements of certain holidays shaped practices that straddled class divisions, such as the king washing the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday. Lenten fasts actually affected the economy, for better or for worse. Holidays like Michaelmas and Whitsun were once close to if not on par with Christmas and Easter in the esteem of Christendom. People used to take the Church's unique cyclical story seriously, and that narrative embedded itself in the vocational

life of the people.

At the dawn of the Reformation, certain reformers were cynical of the fact that almost every day on the calendar had an observance for one saint or another. When everyday becomes a special festival, it certainly diminishes the uniqueness of any given portion of the larger story. Unfortunately, some of the more radical reformers would throw the baby out with the proverbial bathwater, essentially abolishing the Church Year. Why maintain a manmade tradition when other superstitions are being cast aside?

Thankfully, the Lutheran Reformation was more conservative. The founding confessional document states that Lutherans, “teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church, as particular holy days, festivals, and the like.” (AC, XV, i) Though not overly specific, this article is testament to the historical fact that Lutheran congregations maintained observance of the Church Year and the historic lectionary as an edifying element for the Body of Christ. Of course, the very next line quickly dispels any suggestion that such observances merit salvation. This is where the notion of *adiaphora* comes in, which much like with the liturgy itself is invoked as a license to set aside any tradition deemed unnecessary to the modern context. Even minute alterations such as moving weekday festivals like Ascension and Epiphany to the nearest Sunday are done in the name of contemporary convenience, undercutting the significance of such feasts.

Voicing concern over such proceedings is usually met with a quote from St. Paul, the *sedes doctrinae* for liturgical flexibility of any kind, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord... while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.” (Rom. 14:5-6) Paul is expressing that such value ascribed to certain days should not be a matter of conscience, yet many in the modern Church take this to mean any use or disuse of any element of the Church Year is purely a matter of context. Doing so implicitly subordinates the unified, self-confessing story for Christ’s body to that of the story which belongs to the broader, secular culture.

Lutherans have always wisely emphasized pure doctrine over pure practice, yet even the most experimental practitioner must admit that *lex orandi lex credendi* (how one worships is how one believes) generally holds true. In this age of subjectivity, the Church alternative confession is best made when we have a universally accepted story to tell about ourselves. The Church Year that we have received accomplishes this in spades. It is up to us to treasure this annual cycle, teach it to its full effect, and encourage

our people to embody it in their daily lives. No embarrassment. No fear of inconveniencing those who are running on another schedule, but a full embrace of the time-honored rhythm of our collective salvation history. We are always going to have some story at some level; some cyclical system to which we adhere, governing our witness and shaping our people. Jesus Himself did not shirk from participation in His own nation's story. He celebrated Passover with His disciples (Matt. 26:18-19), and He was in Jerusalem to observe both the Feast of the Tabernacles (John 7:2-10) and the Dedication (John 10:22-23). Indeed, our Lord willingly kept to the regular cycle of time known to His people according to the flesh, more strongly communicating His fulfillment of that story, inviting us to inhabit the story He has for His bride the Church.

One way to make the rhythm of the Church Year more “real” for our people is to lean into the poetic structure already present therein. The liturgical calendar has two “pillars” signifying the two most important doctrines of the Christian faith: the incarnation and the redemption, Christmas and Easter, respectively. Both of these doctrinal pillars can be divided into three seasons each centered around three liturgical activities for the people of God: reflection, celebration, and meditation. For example, the Time of Christmas begins with Advent; a four-week season which many have forgotten to be a time of penitence. Although it is a preparation in celebrating our Lord's Nativity, it often becomes merely a countdown to Christmas.- Communicated rightly, Advent is a serious time of reflection on how our God comes to us; in the past, present, and future. The three-year lectionary captures this well. The first Sunday of Advent contains readings about the Last Day (future), the second concerns the law-focused preaching of John the Baptist (present), and the fourth centers around the prediction of Jesus' birth (past). This season of reflection is then relieved by a twelve-day period of celebration of the glorious mystery that God was born for us, the infinite becoming like us in every way. We then meditate upon that mystery for five to eight weeks in Epiphanytide, where we contemplate the revelation of the divine Son to all the world.

This same threefold pattern is observed on a larger scale during the Time of Easter. Ash Wednesday begins the six-week Lenten fast, which our modern churches rightly understand already as a time of personal reflection upon our sin. Much like Christmas, the great Resurrection feast triumphantly ends the fast with the joy of the defeat of that same sin, a celebration which also lasts seven weeks. The still longer period of meditation follows, the so-called “green season” which spans from Pentecost to the end of the Church Year, many weeks later. This period is the toughest liturgical nut to crack, as it tends to be glossed over as a time for generic teaching about nothing in particular. The *lectio-continua* featured in the epistle and

Holy Gospel readings in the three-year lectionary does not help dispel this notion that the Season after Pentecost is void of theme. More can be done to emphasize certain aspects of what living as God's redeemed people entails. The progression from Pentecost to Advent should not be full of nondescript Sundays, but cohere with what Herman Sasse wrote, "as every Sunday is celebrated as 'The Lord's Day' anticipates the Parousia."

Fortunately, we do have historical precedents for adding flavor to the stagnancy. Informal as these divisions may be, Anglican and Lutheran traditions of the historic lectionary have emphasized various movements within the "green" season. We have Johntide, centered around the Nativity of John the Baptist on June 24. A thematic unity across all lectionary cycles can be construed around the prophetic preaching and teaching of the Word (many of the gospel texts concern the sending of the disciples for example). Around the end of Summer comes Marytide, derived from the August 15th feast of Jesus' mother. This movement's emphasis shifts from the going out of the Word to the community shaped by the Word itself, the Church and her composition of living stones. Themes of discipleship and Christian brotherhood are strong here. As the days grow darker and fall comes upon us, Michaeltide centers the Christian life on the Church Militant, the ever-present struggle against the power of Satan and His kingdom. This fits nicely within Lutheranism, as this period-concludes on October 31, the Feast of the Reformation where false teaching is displaced once and for all. Finally, the month of November is dominated by themes of the End Times. All Saints Tide is the best attested of these subseasons as the Church Triumphant is boldly proclaimed through an emphasis on the glorious day to come for believers everywhere. Finally, the promise of eternal rest punctuates the long year.

This all sounds great on paper, but how do we make this story a reality for God's people not only on Sunday but in their lives as well? This author does not suggest that we compel our people to ignore the civil calendar completely, but we should strive to make this ecclesiastical rhythm a reality in all aspects of their lives. There are still too many blank stares and too much abject disinterest by the members of the body when we present them with the "twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost." Intentionally making meaningful connections for our people helps us cultivate a common language for the Church that transcends cultural and civil barriers.

Teaching is the foundation of this. Cutely telling the congregation "Happy New Year" on the First Sunday of Advent or reminding people that it is still Christmas on January 5 is only the beginning of letting people know we have a Church calendar. It continues with drawing broader liturgical connections in the pulpit across the readings and the greater context

of the season so inhabited. This is not to say we should move away from a textual approach to preaching, but we ought to concern proclamation with the aforementioned activity of the given season (reflection for Lent, celebration for Christmas etc.) The given portion of our salvation story will come to fuller life in this thematic attention. Furthermore, Sunday morning Bible class is an opportunity to teach the laity about the chapter which that particular Lord's Day inhabits. What makes this day special and how does it communicate to us the Church's divinely penned narrative? Monthly newsletters are also a terrific means of providing fuller analysis and devotional material explaining the liturgical situation occurring at that time.

Most significantly, conversation is key to forming a people who share a common story. How we speak about time with our parishioners will no doubt shape their temporal thinking. It could be a simple adjustment from saying "I'll have that done sometime in January" to "I'll have that done sometime this Epiphany." If the pastor's sense of time is not governed by Christ's story, why should the laity bother? Subtle changes like this form a shared dialect.

This is not a call to radically remove the Church's connection to the secular calendar. Instead, it's a positive proposal to immerse the living stones of God's temple into the cornerstone's foundational narrative. Reverently reflect upon human sin when the time is right. Rejoice with fellow believers in what Christ has accomplished. Live in that new reality in intentional and unique ways as the circumstance warrants. Human experience craves this sort of rhythmic variety in reference to the temporal signs God gave us. Give thanks for what has been handed down to us. We pray with Moses to the Lord of time, "teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom." (Ps. 90:12)