

*Handbook of
Christian Feasts
and Customs*



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Christmas Book

The Easter Book

The Holyday Book

Religious Customs in the Family

FRANCIS X. WEISER

*Handbook of
Christian Feasts
and Customs*

*The Year of the Lord
in Liturgy and Folklore*



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TO MY TEACHER

JOSEPH A. JUNGSMANN, S.J.

Preface

THOSE WHO wish to grow in knowledge and love of the Christian life will surely welcome Father Weiser's *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*. For the casual reader, this new work presents an easy, convenient, genuinely entertaining approach to the thrilling story of Christian life in the liturgical calendar. For the discerning student, there is a wealth of reference material in the scholarly and exhaustive development of the ecclesiastical celebrations and of the folklore inspired by the liturgical feasts.

Each "Year of the Lord," with its feasts and celebrations, is the living voice of our Christian faith. There is no facet of Divine Revelation which is not somehow reflected in the Church calendar. Indeed, the passing seasons unfold a colorful tapestry in which are woven the strands of Church history, of Christian cult, of moral and dogmatic theology. And there is always fresh drama as each feast or season tells the ageless story of the life of Christ, or recalls the "fulness of Christ" in Mary and in other saints. All this, Father Weiser has captured for his readers in a truly remarkable work.

The faith of a people is eloquently expressed in folklore and in national customs and traditions. Nowhere will we find a more effective or more concise development of this theme than in this book. Present-day observances of the great Christian feasts have their roots in many lands. Father Weiser presents a fascinating study of this subject as he explores the origin and explains the significance of the popular customs and celebrations by which the central mysteries of the faith are brought close to the lives of millions.

The *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* is destined to become a classic in its field. May it be for many the key to a devout and meaningful observance of the Year of the Lord.

✠ JOHN WRIGHT
Bishop of Worcester

March 31, 1958.

Foreword

THIS BOOK was written to explain the origin, history, development, and observance of our Christian feasts throughout the "Year of the Lord." In addition to the liturgical aspect of these feasts, their celebration in folklore is also presented. The radiation of liturgy has created many symbols, customs, and traditions that have enriched the observance of festive days and seasons in home and community, and remnants of pre-Christian lore have, in most cases, assumed new meanings and motivations through the influence of liturgical thought and celebration.

Classified within the vast field of knowledge, this book presents a compendium of heortology, the historical science that explains the origin and meaning of feasts. The word "heortology" is derived from the Greek *heorte* (feast) and *logos* (discourse). This work, then, is primarily intended as a historical explanation of general interest and as a source book of information.

The feasts of saints were selected on the basis of their celebration as holydays or holidays and because their folklore traditions are still alive in large groups of the population. Some purely liturgical feasts of recent date (Sacred Heart, Christ the King, Holy Name, Holy Family), which have not yet developed an established pattern of popular observance in homes or communities, have been omitted.

Writings on the liturgical year often employ, under the term "cycles," the twofold division that the Roman Missal and Breviary use in the arrangement of liturgical texts—the "temporal" cycle and the "sanctoral" cycle. This division of the official texts is based on the necessity of separating dated celebrations from those that are not held on the same calendar date. Actually, as Godfrey Diekmann, O.S.B., has pointed out, "there is only *one*

cycle in the liturgical year, the cycle of Christ's redemptive work. Because of artificial divisions of terminology we are apt to consider the saints independently instead of being aware in every case that the Saint's Day is really a reflection and minor realization of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ."

The division into "cycles" is not used in this book. Its three parts represent merely external aspects in the observance of the one, and only, cycle of the liturgical year. The parts are: the celebrations based on natural time units and seasons of the year, the celebrations based on the commemoration of Christ's redemptive work, and the celebrations based on the result and fruit of the Lord's redemption in and through His saints.

The book combines material of three previously published works (*The Christmas Book*, *The Easter Book*, and *The Holyday Book*), augmented by a number of chapters and individual passages. The first part is almost entirely new. In most of the other chapters the passages on history and liturgy were enlarged by additional details, and the subject matter was rearranged to fit the purpose of a reference work. Popular items of restricted interest contained in the three books mentioned above, such as recipes, music, and poems, were omitted. Only those poems were retained that serve as examples for particular customs or liturgical celebrations.

Many details of religious and nonreligious folklore are given without reference to printed source material. This information the author has accumulated in the course of years through personal contact with experts on the folklore of various national groups. Much material was also collected through personal observation and study in central Europe, Italy, Ireland, and in the countries of the Near East.

A book like this must of necessity, and repeatedly, employ certain terms that are quite familiar to some readers and not so to others. For the convenience of the latter an alphabetical dictionary of terms may be found at the end of the volume. Reference notes will be found at the end of each chapter. The reader will also find occasional repetition of information or definition. This has been done to obviate the need for cross references and, therefore, to make the book easier to use as a reference work.

The author is gratefully indebted to His Excellency, Bishop John Wright of Worcester, Massachusetts, for the preface to the book. Acknowledgment for valuable help in the research on national folklore is due especially to Rev. Gregory Tom (Ukrainians), Rev. Claude Klarkowski (Poland), Rev. Vicente Beneyto, S.J. (Spain), Gediminas Kijauskas, S.J. (Lithuania), Sr. Marie Margarita, S.N.D. (France), Mrs. Hannah J. Ford (Ireland), Joaquin Herrero, S.J. (South America), Rev. Zeno Vendler, S.J., and Lajos A. Szathmáry (Hungary), Mr. and Mrs. Michael Topjian (Armenia), Stanley Marrow, S.J. (Near East), Rev. James L. Monks, S.J. (Eastern Churches), Rev. Richard Brackett, S.J., and Lars Lund (Scandinavia), Rev. John Correia-Afonso, S.J. (India). Acknowledgment is also due to Edward C. Currie and Rev. Martin F. McCarthy, S.J., for assistance in research on music, to Miss Anne Ford and Miss Margaret O'Loughlin for help in preparing the manuscript.

This book is dedicated, as a belated but sincere token of gratitude, to my former professor at the University of Innsbruck (Austria), the Rev. Joseph A. Jungmann, S.J. The lasting influence of his personality and example no less than his masterful teaching inspired me, as it did many others of his former students, to attempt a modest contribution to the great task of making the treasures of holy liturgy better known and appreciated. May this handbook not only be useful to anyone seeking information and understanding of our feasts and folklore, but also help toward a joyful and fruitful celebration in our churches, hearts and homes.

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List of Abbreviations

Books and articles not listed here are quoted in full in the reference notes.

The notes, referred to by number throughout the text, are to be found at the end of each chapter.

- AER *American Ecclesiastical Review*, 1889 ff. (Vol. 1-113: *The Ecclesiastical Review*). New York, Philadelphia, Washington.
- AP *The Assisi Papers*. Proceedings of the first International Congress of Pastoral Liturgy. Collegeville, Minn., 1957.
- Balt. *Acta et Decreta Concilii Plenarii Baltimorensis Tertii*, ed. J. Cardinal Gibbons. Baltimore, 1886.
- Barnett J. H. Barnett, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture*. New York, 1954.
- Benet S. Benet, *Song, Dance and Customs of Peasant Poland*. New York, s.a.
- BR *Breviarium Romanum* (The Roman Breviary). Official book of the Divine Office (daily prayer-worship in liturgy).
- CB D. B. Wyndham Lewis and G. C. Heseltine, *A Christmas Book*. London, 1928.
- Celano T. de Celano, *Sancti Francisci Assisiensis Vita et Miracula*. Critical edition, revised by P. E. d'Alencon. Rome, 1906. (Quotations from this, Latin, edition translated by the author.)
- Chambers E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols. Oxford, 1925.
- CIC *Codex Juris Canonici*. Official codex of Canon Law.

- CICI *Corpus Juris Canonici*. Official collection of Canon Law before the present codex, ed. A. L. Richter, 2 vols. Leipzig, 1833-39.
- Crippen T. G. Crippen, *Christmas and Christmas Lore*. London, 1923.
- CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Vindobonae, 1866 ff.
- CTD *Carols for the Twelve Days of Christmas*, ed. P. M. Young. New York, s.a.
- CwP *Christmas with the Poets*, ed. Ward, Lock, and Tyler. London, 1869.
- DACL *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq. Paris, 1924-53.
- Dawson W. P. Dawson, *Christmas: Its Origins and Associations*. London, 1902.
- Dur. G. Durandus (Duranti), *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, ed. Lyon. 1592.
- EC *Enciclopedia Cattolica*. Vatican City, 1948 ff.
- EI *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 35 vols. Roma, 1929-46.
- ES E. and M. A. Radford, *Encyclopedia of Superstitions*. New York, 1949.
- EW *Elsässische Weihnacht*, ed. J. Lefftz and A. Pfleger. Kolmar, 1941.
- Franz A. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, 2 vols. Freiburg, 1909.
- Frazer J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York, 1923.
- Funk F. X. Funk (ed.), *Patres Apostolici*, 2 vols. Tübingen, 1901.
- Gaster T. H. Gaster (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English Translation*. Garden City, 1956.
- Gelas. *The Gelasian Sacramentary (Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae)*, ed. H. A. Wilson. Oxford, 1894.
- GH *Der Grosse Herder. Nachschlagewerk für Wissen und Leben*, 12 vols. Freiburg, 1931-35.
- Gugitz G. Gugitz, *Das Jahr und seine Feste*, 2 vols. Wien, 1949-50.

- Hackwood F. W. Hackwood, *Good Cheer. The Romance of Food and Feasting*. New York, 1911.
- HPEC *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States 1940*. New York, 1943.
- HRL J. Connelly, *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy*. London, 1957.
- Jgn GK J. A. Jungmann, *Der Gottesdienst der Kirche*. Innsbruck, 1955.
- Jgn MS J. A. Jungmann, *Missarum Sollemnia. Eine genetische Erklärung der Römischen Messe*, 2 vols. Wien, 1949.
- Kellner K. A. H. Kellner, *Heortology. A History of the Christian Festivals from Their Origin to the Present Day*. London, 1908.
- LE J. Lechner and L. Eisenhofer, *Liturgik des Römischen Ritus*. Freiburg, 1953.
- Linton R. and A. Linton, *We Gather Together. The Story of Thanksgiving*. New York, 1949.
- LJ *Liturgisches Jahrbuch*. Münster, 1951 ff.
- LP *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, 2 vols. Paris, 1886, 1892.
- LThK *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. M. Buchberger, 10 vols. Freiburg, 1930-38.
- Mansi J. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 31 vols. Florence and Venice, 1757-98.
- MR *Missale Romanum* (The Mass Book of the Roman Church).
- Nilles N. Nilles, *Kalendarium Manuale Utriusque Ecclesiae, Orientalis et Occidentalis*, 2 vols. Oeniponte (Innsbruck), 1896.
- OF *Orate Fratres. A Liturgical Review*. Collegeville, Minn., 1928-51. (Continued as *Worship*—see WOR.)
- OiT *Ostern in Tirol*, ed. N. Grass. Innsbruck, 1957.
- PG J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, 166 vols. Paris, 1857-66.
- PL J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, 217 vols. Paris, 1844-55.
- PW Pauly—G. Wissowa (and W. Kroll), *Realenzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften*. Leipzig and Stuttgart, 1893 ff.

- Raccolta *The Raccolta*. Official list of approved and indulgenced prayers and devotions, English edition. New York, 1943.
- Rahner H. Rahner, *Griechische Mythen in Christlicher Deutung*. Zürich, 1945.
- RCF F. X. Weiser, *Religious Customs in the Family*. Collegeville, Minn., 1956.
- RR *Rituale Romanum* (The Roman Book of Rites).
- Schuster I. Schuster, *The Sacramentary (Liber Sacramentorum)*, 3 vols. New York, 1925.
- Spamer A. Spamer, *Weihnachten in alter und neuer Zeit*. Jena, 1937.
- SRC *Sacra Rituum Congregatio* (The Sacred Congregation of Rites).
- SSP P. Geysler (ed.), *S. Silviae, quae fertur, Peregrinatio ad loca sancta*, in CSEL 39 (1898), 38-101.
- StML *Stimmen aus Maria Laach. Katholische Blätter*. Freiburg, 1871-1915. (Continued as *Stimmen der Zeit*—see StZ.)
- StZ *Stimmen der Zeit. Monatschrift für das Geistesleben der Gegenwart*. Freiburg, 1915 ff. (Formerly *Stimmen aus Maria Laach*—see StML.)
- TCS *A Treasury of Christmas Songs and Carols*, ed. H. W. Simon. Boston, 1955.
- TE V. Thalhofer and L. Eisenhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik*, 2 vols. Freiburg, 1912.
- TFB *The Trapp Family Book of Christmas Songs*, ed. F. Wasner. New York, 1950.
- Thurston H. Thurston, *Lent and Holy Week*. London, 1904.
- Trapp M. A. Trapp, *Around the Year with the Trapp Family*. New York, 1955.
- VdM F. Van der Meer, *Augustinus als Seelsorger*. Köln, 1951.
- VH H. Schauerte, *Die Volkstümliche Heiligenverehrung*. Münster, 1939.
- VL L. A. Veit and L. Lenhart, *Kirche und Volksfrömmigkeit im Zeitalter des Barock*. Freiburg, 1956.
- WC F. X. Weiser, *The Christmas Book*. New York, 1952.
- WE F. X. Weiser, *The Easter Book*. New York, 1954.
- WH F. X. Weiser, *The Holyday Book*. New York, 1956.

- Wimmer O. Wimmer, *Handbuch der Namen und Heiligen*. Innsbruck, 1953.
- WOR *Worship*. Collegeville, Minn., 1951 ff. (Formerly *Orate Fratres*—see OF.)
- Young K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. Oxford, 1933.
- ZKTh *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*. Innsbruck, 1877 ff.

PART I

I

Sundays

HISTORY

OLD TESTAMENT · The system of dividing the moon month (twenty-eight days) into four parts and of keeping a day of rest in each period of seven days is of very ancient origin. At the time of Abraham it was generally observed among the Hebrews and other Semitic nations. The Bible reports the creation as taking place within six days; and the subsequent “resting” of the Lord on the seventh day reveals the Sabbath as instituted and sanctified by God (Genesis 2, 3). Consequently, the Sabbath rest was enjoined by the Law of Moses under severe sanctions. Daily labor for providing the necessities of life was to be laid aside. Travel and business transactions were not allowed, and no work could be done on farm or in garden or house. Even the food for the Sabbath meals had to be prepared on the preceding day. For this reason Friday came to be called “paraskeue” or day of preparation.¹

Although additional acts of worship were not prescribed for the Sabbath, the custom developed in the later centuries of the Old Testament of doubling the official daily sacrifice in the temple on the Sabbath. People who lived outside Jerusalem attended the synagogues (meetinghouses) for religious instruction and common prayer.²

NEW TESTAMENT · In the New Testament there is no evidence that Christ or the Apostles immediately abolished the Sabbath. In fact, the Apostles for some years observed it along with other practices of the Old Testament (see Acts 18, 4), while at the same time they celebrated Sunday as the new Christian day of worship because it was the day of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 20, 7). Saint Paul declared that the keeping of the Sabbath was not binding on the gentile Christians (Colossians 2, 16). It seems, however, that the converts from Judaism continued to observe

the Sabbath for quite some time. This custom prompted various local churches of the Orient to keep both Saturday and Sunday as holydays, until the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century forbade this double observance.³ The Greek Church preserves a special distinction for Saturday even today: like Sunday, it is always exempt from the law of fast or abstinence.⁴

MASS - In apostolic times the supreme act of Sunday worship, the Sacrifice of the Mass, was held within the frame of a ritual meal (the "Lord's Supper"). Imitating the example of Christ as closely as they could, the Apostles seem to have followed the structure of the traditional Sabbath meal of the Jews, with its prayers of praise and thanksgiving and its religious-symbolic rite of distributing bread and wine to all present. As Christ had done, they blessed the bread and wine and consecrated them by pronouncing the words of the institution of the Holy Eucharist. (This is still done at every Mass.) The meal was held on Saturday night after sunset, when the "Day of the Lord" had started (1 Corinthians 11, 20).⁵

Soon after the close of the first century, the Eucharistic celebration was separated from the meal in many places, transferred to the early-morning hours of Sunday, and made part of a service according to the Jewish custom of worshipping on the Day of the Lord. This service was held in the form of a "vigil" (night watch) before dawn on Sunday, and usually consisted of a sermon, prayers, singing of psalms, and readings from Holy Scripture.⁶ (This rite is still preserved in the prayers and readings of the first part of the Holy Sacrifice, the "Mass of the Catechumens.") Then followed, in the early morning, the main act of worship, the Sacrifice itself (*Oblatio*).⁷

The earliest testimony concerning this Christian Sunday celebration comes from the pen of a famous pagan official and poet, Pliny the Younger (113), who served as governor of Bithynia under Emperor Trajan. In one of his letters to the emperor he reported on the Christians in his province and, among other things, in a description of their Sunday service said "that they used to meet on a certain fixed day before dawn, and to recite in alternating verses a hymn to Christ as to a god."⁸

A detailed description of the Sunday Mass may be found in

the *Apologia* of Saint Justine, the philosopher and martyr, a layman, born in Palestine and later living in Rome, who died for the faith about A.D. 165. He wrote his book (*The First Apology*) to defend the Christian faith against the calumnies and false judgments of his pagan fellow citizens in the Roman Empire. He says of Sunday:

On the so-called "Day of the Sun" all of us [Christians], both from the city and from the farms, come together in one place, and the memories of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as time will permit. (*Service of Reading*)

Then, when the reader has ceased, the one who presides speaks to us, admonishing and exhorting us to imitate the great things we have heard. (*Sermon*)

Afterwards we all rise and pray together. . . . When our prayer is finished, bread and wine and water are brought. (*Offertory*)

And he who presides offers prayers and thanksgivings [*eucharistias*] as best he can, and the people give their assent by saying "Amen." (*Canon*)

And a distribution and sharing of the Eucharistic oblations is made to each one; and to the absent ones a portion is sent through the deacons. (*Communion*)

Those who are well to do give voluntarily what they wish; and what has been collected is handed over to him who presides, and he will use it to help the orphans and widows, and those who are in need because of sickness or any other reason . . . in one word, he assumes the care of all who are in want. (*Charity Collection*)⁹

In the same work Saint Justine further explains some important aspects of the Christian Sunday service, two of which deserve special mention:

Choice of the Day: We meet on Sunday because it is the first day, on which God created the world . . . [Gen. 1, 1-5], and because our Savior, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead on the same day.

Nature of the Eucharistic Oblations: This food is called by us the *Eucharist*. Nobody is allowed to receive it except who sincerely believes the truth of our doctrine and who was cleansed by the washing unto the remission of sins [baptism], and obtained the rebirth of life, as Christ has taught us. . . . Not as ordinary bread and drink do we receive this food; but as our Savior Jesus Christ was made flesh through the Word of God . . . so have we been taught *that this food is the flesh and blood of that same incarnate Jesus*.¹⁰

It is not difficult to recognize in this earliest document (from the second century) the essential structure and main parts of the Christian Sunday celebration through Mass and Communion. By the fourth century this morning celebration on Sunday had replaced in all Christian communities the original Saturday night meal and Mass.¹¹

Despite the constant dangers in the times of persecution in those early centuries, the attendance at the Eucharistic Sacrifice was regarded as a duty of honor for all adult Christians. The Synod of Elvira in Spain, which was held during the great persecution at the beginning of the fourth century, expressed this duty for the first time by a formal law, imposing public penance on those who lived in the city and did not attend Mass for three successive Sundays.¹²

After the Church obtained her freedom under Emperor Constantine in 313 the hour of Sunday Mass was soon changed from dawn to nine o'clock in the morning. This was the time the Romans customarily assigned for "important business." It remained a general rule up to the late Middle Ages for Christians conscientiously to attend this official Sunday Mass of their own parish community. It was not until the fourteenth century that the ancient regulations were gradually loosened toward the present custom of allowing the faithful lawfully to attend Mass at other times and in other places.¹³ In many countries, however, the official parish Mass is still distinguished from other Sunday Masses; it is a High Mass, often celebrated by the pastor himself, and canonical announcements (such as banns of marriage) are made. The liturgical rites assigned to certain feasts (such as blessings, processions) are also usually performed at this Mass.

NAMES

ANCIENT TERMS · Sunday in Jewish usage was "the first day after the Sabbath" (*prima Sabbati*), and is so designated in the Gospel reports of the Resurrection (Matthew 28, 1). Very soon the early Christians named it the "Day of the Lord" (*Kyriake, Dominica*) as may be seen in the Apocalypse of Saint John (1, 10). According to official Roman usage, the day was called "Sun Day" (*Dies Solis*), for the Romans had accepted the Egyptian custom of

naming the seven days of the week after the sun, the moon, and the gods of the planets. Later, during the migrations, the Germanic nations substituted their own gods for those of the Romans, and thus came about our modern names of the weekdays: Sunday (sun), Monday (moon), Tuesday (Thiu), Wednesday (Woden), Thursday (Thor), Friday (Frija). Only Saturday retained its Latin name (Day of Saturn).¹⁴

It should be noted that in early Christianity *Kyriake* (Day of the Lord) meant primarily the day belonging to Jesus, "whom God has made both Lord [*Kyrios*] and Christ" (Acts 2, 36). The corresponding adjective (*kyriakos*) in those days was used by the Romans exclusively to denote the divine character of royal and imperial dignity. *Kyriake*, therefore, represented to the early Christians the day on which they gave solemn and joyful worship to Christ in the royal-divine glory of His resurrection.¹⁵ The Christians also retained the use of the Roman popular term Sun Day. They did this to express the thought mentioned by many early Church Fathers that Christ is the true "Sun of Salvation."¹⁶ Thus, the rising sun became a symbol of the Lord rising from His tomb.¹⁷ The liturgical prayers in church were said for centuries in an "oriented" position, that is, clergy and people turned toward the rising sun, the east, as a symbol of the Risen Lord.¹⁸

LATER TERMS · The Latin nations kept the form "Day of the Lord" (*Dominica* in Italian and Portuguese, *Dimanche* in French, *Domingo* in Spanish, *Domineca* in Rumanian). The other form, "Day of the Sun," is used by the Germanic and Slavic nations (*Sunday* in English, *Sonntag* in German, *Sondag* in Scandinavian, *Nedelja* in Slavonic).

The Greek Church and its people still use the ancient term *Kyriake* (Day of the Lord). Another name for Sunday in the Greek liturgy is "Resurrection" (*Anastasis* in Greek, *Voskresenje* in Russian and Ukrainian).¹⁹ The Arabic-speaking Christians retained the ancient Oriental custom, calling Sunday "the first day" (*Yom el-ahad*). Some nations of eastern Europe, having accepted Christianity at a later date, named the days of the week by numerals starting with Monday. Thus the Lithuanians call Sunday *Sekmadienis* (the seventh day).

“EIGHTH DAY” · In early medieval times the term “eighth day” was often used for Sunday and may be found in the writings of the Fathers quite frequently. The thought behind this expression is that Sunday commemorates not only a beginning (first day of creation, beginning of Christ’s risen life), but also an end and consummation (redemption and eternal glory).²⁰ Thus Sunday was considered both as the first and last day of the week. The popular custom still used in some European countries of calling a week “eight days” derives from this tradition.²¹

“SABBATH” · At the end of the sixteenth century the Puritans (Presbyterians and other groups) originated the somewhat confusing practice of calling Sunday “Sabbath,” a custom still prevalent in the literature and sermons of some Protestant denominations.

SUNDAY REST

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE · Concerning Sunday rest, the early Church did not transfer the obligation of the Sabbath law to Sunday. It was generally understood, of course, that all work that would make attendance at divine worship impossible had to be discontinued. Beyond this necessary demand, however, no abstinence from any particular external occupation was required. The expression “to abstain from servile work” is found in the Old Testament with regard to Jewish feasts. Early Christian saints and writers often used this phrase, but only in a spiritual and allegorical sense. The *opus servile* (servile work) according to them is the “slavery of sin” from which Christians had to abstain not only on Sundays but every day. They expressly denied a strict obligation of resting from external work in the sense of the ancient Sabbath law.²²

The Sunday rest of the early Christians was an *otium cordis* (rest of the heart), by which they meant the peace and joy of divine grace and of a good conscience. Saint Augustine (431) expressed this in one of his letters:

God prescribes a Sabbath rest for us. What kind of a rest? . . . It is internal. Our Sabbath is in the heart. There are many who idle, but

their conscience is in turmoil. No sinful man can have Sabbath rest. Whoever has a good conscience is truly at peace; and it is this very tranquility in which consists the Sabbath of the heart.²³

On the other hand, the solemn atmosphere of the Lord's day, the joyful participation in long church services (usually twice a day, morning and afternoon), and the practice of spiritual recollection naturally led to a general custom of abstaining more and more from strenuous and protracted occupations on Sunday. This trend was encouraged by civil legislation long before the Church authorities issued laws of their own in this matter. As early as 321, Emperor Constantine proclaimed a law of Sunday rest, which, however, did not include rural and agricultural work. About forty years later, the Council of Laodicea recommended some form of Sunday rest "as far as possible."²⁴

The duty of complete Sunday rest, including rest from farm work, was not imposed until 650, when the Council of Rouen enjoined it for the Merovingian Church (France).²⁵ It is interesting to note that the words "servile work" in Canon 15 of this council are used, for the first time, with their Old Testament meaning: for laborious work such as was usually performed by slaves and servants. During the subsequent centuries this prohibition of servile work on Sunday was gradually adopted by the other European nations, and was finally incorporated into the body of Church law as a serious and general obligation for all Catholics.²⁶

The practice of relieving slaves from work so they could attend worship and instruction, both in the morning and afternoon, had become universal among Christian Romans long before the laws of rest were issued; for it was not the aspect of rest as such but that of "freedom for worship" that inspired this practice. As early as the fourth century, many masters anticipated our modern weekend custom, for slaves were free even on Saturday, at least for the afternoon, in preparation for Sunday.²⁷

In the High Middle Ages the obligation of resting from work began Saturday evening and was announced by the solemn ringing of church bells. Pope Alexander III (1181) declared that the time for Sunday rest could lawfully be reckoned from midnight to midnight.²⁸

CIVIC OBSERVANCE · The first Christian emperor, Constantine, initiated the custom, which has continued through the centuries to the present day, of honoring Sunday as the Day of the Lord by state laws and regulations. In this he was not motivated by Church law (which did not yet exist), but by the desire of giving the Christian day of worship the same civic honors and privileges that were traditionally accorded to the pagan feasts. In 321 he forbade the sitting of courts and any legal action on Sunday.²⁹ He also allowed all Christian soldiers to be excused from duty in order to attend Sunday service, while the pagan soldiers had to assemble in camp, without arms, and offer a prayer which he himself had composed.³⁰

The emperors Theodosius (in 386) and Valentinian II (in 425) suppressed circus games and all theatrical shows on Sundays. In 400, Honorius (for West Rome) and Arcadius (for East Rome) forbade horse races on Sunday because they kept people from attending divine service. Emperor Leo I (474) of East Rome went so far as to forbid musical performances, both private and public. This prohibition, though, was soon dropped from the lawbooks.³¹

In later times the rulers of all European nations continued the Roman practice of regulating Sunday observance. In 596, the Merovingian King Childebert of the Franks issued a strict code of Sunday laws for the population of his realm. So did King Ine of Wessex (726) and King Wiltred of Kent (725) in England. In Germany the prescriptions of Sunday rest were incorporated in the Frankish, Bajuvarian, and Salian collections of law, in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Prior to the Reformation, sports and popular amusements were allowed on Sundays in England and Germany. Similarly, the duty of attendance at Sunday services was not under the sanction of the civil law but its enforcement was left to the spiritual authority of the Church. After the Reformation, however, when the power over the Church was vested in parliament and rulers, attendance at Sunday worship came to be enforced by the state. In England, the first act of this kind was passed under Edward VI, in 1551. Under Queen Elizabeth I (1603) every adult citizen had to go to church on Sunday by order of the state or be fined a penalty

of tweldepence. This law was not officially repealed until as late as 1846.³²

The obligation of Sunday rest is still upheld by state law in all Christian countries. The legal tradition of England, which was also the basis for early American legislation, tended toward greater severity than the observance of other nations.

MODERN CHURCH LAW

MASS · The present demands of the Church regarding Sunday observance contain the grave obligation of attending Mass for all the faithful over seven years of age who are not excused by ill health or other sufficient reasons.³³

REST · The law of Sunday rest imposes the obligation of abstaining from servile work (nonessential labor in household, farm, trade, industry). Professional people, merchants, and civic officials are also required to abstain from their regular work. There are, however, many exemptions from the law because of present-day necessities, such as the duties of soldiers, policemen, firemen, doctors, nurses, officials, and workers in public utilities, communication, transportation, and similar occupations.³⁴

The law does not apply to the so-called "liberal works" like study and writing, arts, music, sports, recreational activities, entertainment, nonlaborious hobbies, and similar pursuits.

Apart from these technical details of ecclesiastical law, the Church has always stressed the positive ideal of Sunday observance. The Day of the Lord, after the public worship, should be spent in works of piety and charity, in peaceful relaxation, in the happy union of family life.³⁵

LITURGY

SUNDAY AND CYCLES · Sunday, together with Easter, forms the most ancient festive celebration in Christianity.³⁶ All other feasts came later. And as they were gradually introduced, Sunday acquired new aspects of its liturgical character through organic connection with the festive seasons and periods.³⁷

Sunday is the keystone and foundation of all the Christian

festivals, for it constitutes the great day of worship recurring every week and thus fulfilling, with its sacred liturgy and other religious observance, the third commandment of the divine Decalogue. In this aspect it continues the celebration of the ancient Sabbath, but exceeds it in spiritual significance through the infinite nobility of its sacrificial worship.

This pre-eminence of Sunday within the temporal unit of the week was even more pronounced in the beginning of the Christian era, when Mass was not regularly celebrated on weekdays. Most likely it was also this aspect of Sunday, as a weekly holyday, that prompted the Apostles to adopt as part of its Christian celebration the structure and even, partially, the contents of the Jewish Sabbath service in temple and synagogue.³⁸

In addition, Sunday is a solemn memorial of Christ's resurrection, a "little Easter" occurring every week. As such it commemorates the Lord's resurrection as well as all other mysteries of His life and redemption, and becomes in the fullest sense a "Day of the Lord" (Christ). Accordingly, every Sunday is a high-ranking feast of our Lord, a holyday of peace, consolation, and joy. The Church has always safeguarded this jubilant note in its Sunday liturgy.³⁹ The solemn Credo is recited on all Sundays, no fast is held, and people used to pray standing (instead of kneeling) on all Sundays just as they did at Easter time.⁴⁰ The Sundays outside the penitential seasons ring with the joyful song of the Gloria. The Sundays of Advent and Christmas season, of pre-Lent, Lent, and Easter season, also reflect in their Mass texts and other liturgical arrangements the particular character of each period.⁴¹

The direct association of Sundays with the feasts of saints often passes unnoticed. It does exist, however, in the form that the Mass texts of some Sundays are influenced by the proximity of certain saints' feasts.⁴² Thus, the fourth Sunday after Pentecost has the Gospel of Saint Peter's miraculous catch (Luke 5, 1-11) because the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul usually occurs close by. The eighth Sunday after Pentecost contains the Gospel of the steward (Luke 16, 1-9) in honor of Saint Lawrence (August 10) who "made friends for himself in heaven" by distributing the Church goods to the poor. On the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost the Gospel tells us of the cure of the paralytic (Matthew

9, 1-8) in honor of the two holy physicians and martyrs Cosmas and Damian (Sept. 27), who were highly venerated in Rome.⁴³

An indirect connection of Sundays with festivals of saints occurs whenever a high feast of saints (Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Apostles, and Evangelists) falls on a Sunday. In such cases the Day of the Lord also assumes the character of a saint's feast both in Mass and Divine Office. It retains, however, its own liturgical commemoration.

There are, finally, a few Sundays, in addition to Easter and Pentecost, that have a special feast assigned: the Sunday between New Year's and Epiphany (Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus), the Sunday after Epiphany (Feast of the Holy Family), the Sunday after Pentecost (Feast of the Holy Trinity), and the last Sunday in October (Feast of Christ the King).

In various countries certain feasts falling on a weekday are celebrated again with public solemnity on the following Sunday, such as Corpus Christi (second Sunday after Pentecost), the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (third Sunday after Pentecost), the Feast of the Holy Rosary (first Sunday in October), and the feasts of local or national patron saints.⁴⁴

The Greek Church celebrates a number of Sunday festivals, most of which are unfamiliar to Christians of the West, such as the Feast of the Second Coming of the Lord, the Feast of the Holy Fathers of the Ecumenic Councils, the Feast of the Holy Patriarchs, and the Feast of All the Ancestors of Christ.⁴⁵

LITURGICAL TEXTS · In the calendar of the Western Church each Sunday has its own Mass formula. The oldest Masses are those of the Easter season, from the first Sunday of Lent to Pentecost. They are found in Sacramentaries (liturgical books) of the seventh century, and probably are of earlier origin. In subsequent centuries were added the Mass texts for the Sundays after Epiphany and the Sundays of Advent and pre-Lent. The twenty-four Sundays after Pentecost were first introduced in smaller groups (four after Pentecost, five after Peter and Paul, five after Lawrence, and six after Michael). The Ember Sundays, which had no Mass of their own (because the vigil Mass was celebrated before dawn on Sunday), acquired special texts when

the vigil began to be anticipated on Saturday evening (in the sixth century).⁴⁶

The Mass texts of the Sundays after Pentecost do not reflect any unified plan or central thought of liturgical commemoration. The Gospels are taken at random from the Synoptics. The Epistles, however, are selected in the order of the Biblical canon, starting with the letters of John and Peter (which in those days preceded the writings of Saint Paul), and followed by excerpts of Saint Paul's letters, from Romans to Colossians. The only exception is the eighteenth (Ember) Sunday, which received its Mass text independently, like all Ember Sundays.⁴⁷

The *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, which was used as a hymn in the Oriental Church as early as the fourth century, was very sparingly employed in the celebrations of the ancient Roman liturgy. Bishops alone had the privilege of inserting it in their Masses on Sundays and feast days; priests were allowed to intone it only on Easter Sunday. In the Frankish Church, however, it soon came to be recited by priests, too, on every Sunday outside of Lent and Advent. This custom was accepted by Rome in the tenth century, and subsequently became an established rule for the whole Western Church.⁴⁸

The Credo recited every Sunday is called *Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum*, after the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), because it incorporates some important dogmatic formulations of these councils. It was originally used, in the Eastern Church, for the profession of faith in the rite of baptism; hence it is still recited in the singular. In the sixth century it was used in the Byzantine province on the eastern coast of Spain, and from there it spread through the whole of Spain. In later centuries it was introduced into Ireland and England. Abbot Alcuin (804) took it from England to the court of Charlemagne and inserted it into the liturgical books of the Carolingian Church.⁴⁹ Pope Benedict VIII (1024) finally adopted it for the Roman liturgy and prescribed it to be recited after the Gospel on all Sundays and on certain other feasts.⁵⁰

It was a familiar thought in medieval times that Sunday commemorates in a special way the mystery of the Holy Trinity (the day on which God created Heaven and Earth, Christ rose from the dead, and the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles).

This thought prompted the introduction of the ancient "Preface of the Trinity" into the Sunday Mass—a custom that originated in the thirteenth century. Pope Clement XIII (1769) finally made it a law for all Sundays, except in Lent and those connected with great feasts.⁵¹ The last Sunday of October (Feast of Christ the King) was given its own preface in 1925.

LITURGICAL COLORS · The use of liturgical colors for Sunday and other feasts developed gradually, from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. It originated in the desire to express the mood of various celebrations by the display of symbolic colors that would inspire the faithful with that same appropriate spirit and mood. Of all the colors used in those centuries, Pope Innocent III (1216) mentioned only five: white, red, green, black, and purple. Obviously his list has helped to establish our present canon of colors. Blue and yellow, so generally favored in medieval times, have disappeared, but only after they were expressly forbidden by Rome. The exclusive and official use of the five colors dates from the time of Pius V (1572). The Eastern Churches have no established rules concerning liturgical colors.⁵²

Green is the temporal color for Sunday as the weekly Day of Worship. All other colors proclaim a connection with special feasts and seasons of the liturgical year: white at Christmas and Easter, red at Pentecost, purple in Advent, pre-Lent, and Lent.

THE ASPERGES · The words of Saint Paul that through baptism we rise with Christ into the newness of life (Romans 6, 4-6) point to a special relation between the weekly memorial of the Resurrection and our own baptism. In the ninth century this thought seems to have prompted some bishops of the Frankish realm to introduce the custom of sprinkling holy water upon the faithful before Mass, to remind them of the grace of baptism. A century later the same practice was prescribed by Bishop RATHERIUS (974) at Verona in Italy; and soon afterward it was accepted by Rome. Thus the rite of the Asperges became a part of the solemn service on Sunday. In many places during the Middle Ages a procession around the church was held, and holy water was sprinkled upon the graves of the faithful.⁵³

SUNDAY VESPERS · In medieval times the general practice prevailed in most countries of people attending the solemn Vespers on Sunday afternoon. The recitation of the Divine Office, performed by the clergy, was followed by the singing of the Magnificat, while the altar was incensed. During the past few centuries this ancient custom has been gradually replaced in many sections by some popular devotion (prayers, hymns) followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. In many places of Europe, however, even these substitute devotions are still called "Vespers," and the light repast in the evening bears the name of "vesper meal" or simply "vesper" to this day.⁵⁴

FOLKLORE

RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS · A custom still practiced in many Catholic sections of Europe is the "praying around the church" on Sunday after the Mass. People go through the churchyard sprinkling the graves with holy water and saying prayers for the souls of the departed. This is a private and nonliturgical substitute for the ancient Asperges procession.

Another interesting Sunday custom prevalent in many countries is the "hearing" of the children at breakfast or dinner. During the meal the father gravely listens while the children repeat, as best they can, what the priest has preached in the Sunday sermon and what he has announced. If any corrections or explanations are in order, the mother usually provides them. Thus the parents make sure that the children have paid attention to the word of God and understand what was preached.

Finally, there is the widespread practice of wearing new clothes or shoes for the first time to Mass on Sunday, out of reverence for the Day of the Lord and to express due gratitude to God for granting us all good things. For a similar reason new loaves of bread are usually served on Sunday morning and the sign of the cross is made three times upon the loaf before it is cut.⁵⁵

LEGENDS AND SUPERSTITIONS · In the folklore and tradition of most Christian nations Sunday is a day of good luck and special blessing. From early centuries the faithful considered it particu-

larly consecrated to the Holy Trinity, and in many places they still light a lamp or candle in their homes before the picture of the Trinity every Sunday. Children born on Sunday are said to be gifted with a cheerful and happy disposition and followed by good fortune throughout their lives. Superstitions ascribe all kinds of unusual powers to them, such as seeing angels and other spirits, great power of persuasion, finding hidden treasures, and freedom from accidents.⁵⁶

On the other hand, people who violated the sanctity of Sunday were considered deserving of special punishment. Many legends of medieval times record such unusual happenings—Sunday violators being turned into stone, being frightened by a vision of the Devil, or being condemned to continue doing forever in the beyond what they had done while breaking the Sunday rest.

¹ H. Dumaine, *Les origines du Dimanche*, DACL, 4.1 (1920), 886 ff.
² Kellner, 7. ³ Canon 24; Mansi, 2, 570. ⁴ Nilles, II, 87. ⁵ F. Cabrol, *Eucharistie*, DACL, 5.1 (1922), 656 ff. ⁶ SSP, 73 ff.; Schuster, 26 ff.; DACL, 15.2 (1953), 3108 ff. (*Vigiles*). ⁷ H. Leclercq, *Messe*, DACL, 11.1 (1933), 513 ff. ⁸ *Epistolae*, X, 96. ⁹ *Apologia Prima*, 66; PG, 6, 427. ¹⁰ Same, 67; PG, 6, 432. ¹¹ H. Leclercq, *Agape*, DACL, 1.1 (1920), 775 ff. ¹² Can. 21; Mansi, 2, 9. ¹³ CIC, 1249. ¹⁴ H. Dumaine, *Les noms de Dimanche*, DACL, 4.1 (1920), 858 ff. ¹⁵ Jgn GK, 258 ff. ¹⁶ H. Dumaine, *Le jour du soleil*, DACL, 4.1 (1920), 870 ff. ¹⁷ Rahner, 141 ff. (*Der Sonntag*). ¹⁸ H. Leclercq, *Orientalion des fidèles*, DACL, 12.2 (1936), 266 ff. ¹⁹ S. Pétridès, *Anastasi-mos*, DACL, 1.2 (1924), 1926 ff. ²⁰ J. A. Jungmann, *Beginnt die christliche Woche mit Sonntag?*, ZKTh, 55 (1931), 605 ff. ²¹ H. Dumaine, *Le huitieme jour*, DACL, 4.1 (1920), 879 ff. ²² F. Pet-tirsch, *Das Verbot der Opera Servilia*, ZKTh, 69 (1947), 257 ff., 417 ff. ²³ *Epist.* 50, 10, 18; PL, 33, 212. ²⁴ Can. 29; Mansi, 2, 570. ²⁵ Can. 15; Mansi, 10, 1203. ²⁶ See DACL, 15.1 (1950), 217 ff. (*Sabbatum*). ²⁷ H. Leclercq, *Eslaves*, DACL, 5.1 (1922), 387 ff. ²⁸ Kell-ner, 12. ²⁹ T. Zahn, *Geschichte des Sonntags, vornehmlich in der alten Kirche*, Erlangen, 1894, 196 ff. ³⁰ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4, 19; PG, 20, 1166 (Greek and Latin text of the prayer). ³¹ Kellner, 10. ³² W. Latey, "Sunday," *Enc. Brit.*, 21 (1929), 565. ³³ CIC, 1247, 1249. ³⁴ CIC, 1248. ³⁵ Balt., 58 (*De Observantia Diei Domi-nicae*). ³⁶ Kellner, 37. ³⁷ H. A. Reinhold, *How Many Cycles Has*

the Liturgical Year?, OF, 17 (1943), 102 ff. ³⁸ Jgn MS, I, 27 ff. ³⁹ H. Dumaine, *Le jour de la résurrection*, DACL, 4.1 (1920), 884 ff. ⁴⁰ "On Sunday we consider it wrong to fast or to pray with bended knees": Tertullian, *De corona militis*, PL, 2, 99. ⁴¹ See Schuster, I, 319 ff., II, 30 ff. ⁴² A. Vogel, *Der Einfluss von Heiligenfesten auf die Perikopenwahl an den Sonntagen nach Pfingsten*, ZKTh, 69 (1947), 100 ff. ⁴³ Jgn MS, II, 214. ⁴⁴ CIC, 1247, 2. ⁴⁵ Nilles, II, *passim*. ⁴⁶ LE, 167, 173. ⁴⁷ Jgn GK, 239 f. ⁴⁸ LE, 214; Jgn MS, I, 429. ⁴⁹ F. Cabrol, *Le Sacramentaire d'Alcuin*, DACL, 1.1 (1924), 1078 ff. ⁵⁰ LE, 224 ff. ⁵¹ H. Leclercq, *Préface*, DACL, 14.2 (1948), 1704 ff.; Jgn MS, II, 140 ff. ⁵² TE, I, 496 ff. ⁵³ Franz, I, 86 ff., 220 ff. ⁵⁴ GH, 12 (1935), 298 (*Vesper*). ⁵⁵ K. Hofmann, *Der Sonntag im religiösen Brauchtum und Volksglauben*, LThK, 9 (1937), 669 f. ⁵⁶ ES, 231; VL, 137 ff.

CHAPTER

2

Weekdays

DAILY WORSHIP OF PRAYER

Christian prayer is the breathing of the Mystical Body of Christ, the primary and most spontaneous manifestation of the supernatural life in the Church. God is adored and honored not only through the Holy Sacrifice (which is itself imbedded in an exalted ritual of prayer), but also through the private prayers of the faithful and the official performance of the Divine Office by priests and religious. This prayer life, by its very nature, is a daily task, a duty of honor for all the faithful. The recital or chanting of the Divine Office, moreover, binds those who are obliged to perform it, under serious obligation each day.¹

ORIGIN · In the Old Testament it was a custom among pious Jews to pray three times a day: in the morning, in the afternoon at

three o'clock, and at night. This practice is mentioned in the Bible, which tells us that the prophet Daniel (sixth century B.C.) prayed three times every day "as he had been accustomed to do" (Daniel 6, 10).

A similar testimony has come to light in one of the famous Dead Sea scrolls. In the Hymn Book of the Qumran community (first century B.C.), the author mentions the daily exercise of prayer in the morning, about noon, and in the evening. In addition, he speaks of three additional prayer times during the night.² The Apostles seem to have kept this tradition even after Pentecost, for Peter and John are reported going into the temple "at the ninth hour of prayer" (Acts 3, 1).

The early Christians in the Roman Empire continued the ancient practice in the form of saying the Our Father three times a day, as the so-called *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Didache)*, a book from the beginning of the second century, prescribed.³ Soon, however, three more prayer times were added. Thus, at the end of the second century, we find the following hours of daily private prayer:

Midnight	(<i>Vigilia</i> : night watch)
Morning	(<i>Matutinum</i> : morning prayer)
Nine o'clock	(<i>Tertia</i> : prayer of the third hour)
Noon	(<i>Sexta</i> : prayer of the sixth hour)
Three o'clock	(<i>Nona</i> : prayer of the ninth hour)
Evening	(<i>Lucernarium</i> , from <i>lucerna</i> , lamp: the prayer at the time the lamps were lit) ⁴

In the Christian empire in the fourth century two of these exercises began to be held in church. They consisted of readings from the Bible and chanting of psalms and other prayers: the *Matutinum* (our present Lauds) and the *Lucernarium* (our present Vespers). Thus the Church took over in the form of a liturgical service what up to then had merely been a private practice of the faithful; clergy and people, united in the house of God, performed these prayers together according to rules established by the ecclesiastical authorities.⁵ The faithful were not strictly obliged to attend, but from ancient reports we know that they thronged the churches in good numbers for these daily morning and evening services.⁶

Saint Augustine reported that his mother (Saint Monica) most faithfully attended the daily *Matutinum* and *Lucernarium* in her church.⁷ A noble Roman lady from southern Gaul, a nun by the name of Aetheria (Sylvia) who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about 395, vividly described these two services as they were held in Jerusalem at the end of the fourth century in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Anastasis), and how the many children present spontaneously cried "Kyrie eleison" in answer to the deacon's reading of commemorations.⁸

THE DIVINE OFFICE · From the beginnings of monastic life, the daily hours were kept by the monks in common, the psalms and many other prayers being chanted or recited in alternating groups (choir). Thus the basis was laid for the liturgical performance of the Divine Office. About the year 500 there appeared in the monasteries two additional prayer hours: the Prime (first hour, six o'clock in the morning) and the Compline (*completa*: finished, before retiring at midnight).⁹

For some centuries the *Opus Divinum* (Divine Work), as the Office used to be called, remained almost exclusively a task of monks, while the secular clergy continued to perform the two traditional public services (*Matutinum* and *Lucernarium*) together with their congregations in church.¹⁰ From the eighth century, however, the recital of the whole Divine Office in common was also introduced among the secular clergy, who had started to live a community life in most places and were called *Canonici* (canons), from the canonical rules they followed.¹¹

In the thirteenth century, when the secular clergy for the greater part had ceased to live in community, the *private* recitation of the Divine Office was enjoined as a daily duty on each clergyman, starting with the order of the subdeaconate. This law is still in force. The private recital is not necessarily bound to the official hours, but the whole Office must be performed every day.¹² In the monasteries the Office is still chanted in common, as of old, and at appointed hours.¹³ Some changes and reforms have been made in the breviary (Book of the Divine Office) by various popes in the past centuries, with the purpose of removing less appropriate additions of later times and of adapting it to the conditions of priestly life in the modern age.

THE LAY PSALTER · During the seventh and eighth centuries the liturgical services of the *Matutinum* and *Lucernarium* gradually disappeared. The *Matutinum* was replaced by the introduction of daily Mass in the morning, and the *Lucernarium* was dropped because the faithful, especially in the northern countries, did not know Latin and were unable to take part. There was, however, a great desire on the part of the people to keep the official prayer hours with appropriate private devotions of their own. This desire, encouraged by the authorities of the Church, gave rise to a wealth of *horaria* (hour books, “prymers,” *Stundenbücher*), which were in use all through the Middle Ages. They contained psalms, selections from the liturgical texts, and many other prayers of private origin.¹⁴

As the original “hours” in the ancient Church had usually been connected with particular commemorations of the mysteries of Christ’s life and especially of His Passion, these medieval hour books also devoted each part of their daily reading to a certain event of the Saviour’s life and Passion.¹⁵ Great indulgences were granted by the popes for this pious exercise of daily hours in honor of the redemptive suffering of Christ. However, the books could serve only people who mastered the art of reading, and they were a minority in those days.

People who could not read, and among them especially the lay brothers in the monasteries, substituted for the written texts a certain number of familiar prayer formulas which they knew by heart. Thus, for instance, one hundred and fifty Ave Marias were substituted for the one hundred and fifty psalms, and the mysteries of Christ’s life (taken from ancient responsories) were inserted in the Hail Marys. It was in this way that the rosary gradually developed during the High Middle Ages.¹⁶ Saint Dominic (1221) is credited with the spreading of this particular exercise among the lay population of Italy.

At various times and in various centuries many such psalters were in use among pious lay people. In some places the Stations of the Cross were held within the frame of the ancient hour service. Finally, in the nineteenth century, an ancient custom was revived, of saying a short prayer every hour when the clock strikes and of accompanying this prayer with the sign of the cross in honor of the Lord’s Passion.¹⁷

Protestant congregations kept the use of traditional hour books (with ancient liturgical texts) alive for quite some time. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, both among Catholics and Protestants, a new kind of prayer book, containing instruction, meditation, litanies, prayers for "special occasions" like confession, communion, morning, and evening, gradually supplanted the psalters and hour books; thus the ancient devotion of daily hours became lost and forgotten in the minds of most modern Christians.¹⁸

Of late the Liturgical Movement in all parts of the world has endeavored to bring lay people back to the performance of "hours" through daily recital (in the vernacular) of liturgical hours from the Roman breviary. Whether this endeavor will be successful or not, and whether the practice will spread among the majority of the faithful, or merely remain a devotion of certain groups, only the future can tell.¹⁹

SIGNIFICANCE · Through the daily prayer of the Divine Office and the daily performance of the Holy Sacrifice, each weekday is sanctified and raised to the status of a true religious festival. Thus there is no "common" day in the whole Christian year, for the liturgical worship of the Mystical Body turns even the humblest day into a feast of great religious import. Although there was no Mass on weekdays in the early Christian centuries, perhaps a similar motivation (like the "newness of life" with the Risen Christ) prompted the Church from the beginning to call each weekday not simply *dies* (day), but *feria* (feast); for the word *feria* signified a religious feast among the ancient Romans.²⁰ Some scholars contend that the early Christians did not simply accept the Roman meaning but used the word *feria* as a translation for the Jewish "Sabbath" (Day of Rest).²¹ Whichever the explanation, the significance remains the same; in the kingdom of Christ on earth every day of the year is a *feria* (holyday), a spiritual Sabbath.

MEMORIAL OF THE PASSION

There is clear proof from the earliest centuries of the Christian era that the second half of every week, from Wednesday to

Saturday, was devoted to a special commemoration of the Passion of Christ. Just as Sunday was the weekly memorial day of the Resurrection, so the preceding days quite naturally served to recall the Lord's sufferings by which He accomplished our redemption. In the first three centuries, however, it was not the Eucharistic Sacrifice, but the practice of fasting and prayer that expressed this commemoration.

FAST · The *Didache* (*Teaching*), written at the beginning of the second century, already mentioned Wednesday and Friday as weekly fast days.²² The number of days was suggested by the ancient Jewish custom of fasting two days each week (Monday and Thursday). The Christian fast was put on Friday, as the day of Christ's death, and on Wednesday (from the third century on) because Judas made his contract of betrayal on that day (Luke 14, 1, 2, 10, 11). Thus the historical events of the redemption relived by the faithful every week formed a spiritual drama that comprised not only the Passion itself but also the decisions and actions of Christ's enemies that immediately led up to it.²³

This Christian weekly fast was called "half fast" (*Semiieiunium*) because people were expected to fast only until three o'clock in the afternoon. Another name for it was "Station" (*statio*: standing), probably because the fast was concluded with prayer (in the church) performed standing. In later centuries, when Mass was usually celebrated on Station days, the word *statio* came to mean the *place* of the celebration on any day. (See the "Stations" in the Roman Missal.)²⁴

The Station fast was accepted by newly converted nations and became so widespread in many countries that in Ireland, for instance, Thursday used to be called the "Day between the Fasts."²⁵ Even to this day the custom of voluntarily fasting or abstaining from certain foods on Wednesday is still alive; its motivation, however, has changed, for this pious practice is now usually held in honor of Saint Joseph.

In the fourth century, Saturday was added in Rome as one of the weekly fast days. This is explained as an extension of the Friday fast.²⁶ Pope Innocent I (417) motivated the Saturday fasting by the thought that on that day Christ had rested, a victim of death, in the tomb and that the Apostles had spent the day

in sadness and fasting.²⁷ While this superimposed Saturday fast spread through the whole Latin Church, the Orientals never accepted it and have kept Saturdays free from any law of fasting. In the Western Church the original practice of fasting three days a week was later prescribed by law, but only for Ember weeks (apart from the special regulations for Lenten fast). For the rest of the year only Friday is still kept as a weekly day of prescribed abstinence, though not of fasting.

PRAYER AND MASS · On the weekly Station days the time of fasting (morning to early afternoon) was also devoted to private prayer, as far as possible. The author of *The Pastor of Hermas*, written at the beginning of the second century, described his own observance:

I sat on some hill, fasting and *saying prayers of thanksgiving* to God for all the things He had done for me, when I suddenly saw the Pastor sitting at my side. He said: "Why did you come here so early in the morning?" I answered: "Because I am keeping the stations, Sir." "What is a 'station'?" he asked. "It means that I am fasting, Sir," I said.²⁸

In many places the Station was originally concluded with a liturgical service in church, consisting of readings and prayers. Gradually, however, the Eucharistic Sacrifice began to be celebrated. By the second half of the fourth century this was an established custom in various parts of the Roman Empire (northern Italy, Africa, Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia).²⁹ In Rome, too, the Mass seems to have been customary, at least on Wednesday, after the fourth century.³⁰ For a long time, though, no Mass was held on Saturdays in the Latin Church, while the Eastern Churches celebrated it every Saturday from the fourth century on.³¹

MODERN OBSERVANCE · In medieval times the dramatic unity of this ancient observance from Wednesday (the betrayal of Judas) to Sunday (the Resurrection) was broken in favor of separate exercises in honor of the Passion. Saturday, now the weekly "Day of Mary," lost its memorial character of the Lord's rest in death. The conscious observance of Sunday as the weekly me-

morial of Christ's resurrection has also dwindled from the minds and hearts of most Christians in the West. However, the redemption is still honored by special weekly exercises, though in different setting and manner, mostly on Fridays, with Holy Hour, Stations of the Cross, ringing of bells at the "ninth hour," or various other forms of private or public devotions in honor of the Passion.

At the end of the eighth century, Friday began to be observed liturgically by various votive Masses, which priests were allowed to use in honor of the Passion of Christ whenever no higher feast occurred. Pope Pius V (1572), in his reform of the Roman Missal, suppressed most of these votive Masses, retaining only two for special use on Friday: the Mass of the Holy Cross and the Mass of the Passion. Both these Mass texts are still listed among the weekly votive Masses.³²

FOLKLORE · The remembrance of the Lord's Passion by fasting, prayer, and other pious exercises made Friday a sacred and serious day in the minds of ancient and medieval Christians. Quite naturally it became a practice to avoid worldly pursuits and gainful enterprises as much as possible. Amusements and travel for pleasure were shunned. Whoever disregarded these restrictions imposed by popular piety was threatened with ill success and misfortune, as a punishment for his irreverent attitude. Thus originated our modern superstition of Friday, which still clings to its ancient objective (business pursuits, travel, and activities outside the home), being an "unlucky" day.³³

OTHER WEEKLY COMMEMORATIONS

ORIGIN · It was customary from the early centuries for priests to say private Masses that did not constitute an official service for the community. In the beginning this was done only for the purpose of obtaining, through the Holy Sacrifice, God's mercy upon the souls of departed faithful. From the fourth century on, we also hear of private Masses celebrated for various reasons, either for the intention of the priest himself or of individuals and groups among the congregation. Because these Masses were offered ac-

ording to wish and request (*votum*), they were later called votive Masses.³⁴

The Church of the Carolingian Empire not only accepted the ancient Roman texts of votive Masses, but Alcuin (704) also wrote a new collection of such texts, which he called *Liber Sacramentorum*.³⁵ In it there appeared for the first time certain Mass texts for every day of the week. Thus the custom was started of devoting individual weekdays to the commemoration of religious mysteries and sacred persons by means of the liturgical Mass texts. As time went on, the number of such votive Masses grew enormously. Pope Pius V (1572) reduced them to nine (for the whole week). Their number has since been increased to eleven. These votive Masses are allowed to be said whenever the respective weekday is "vacant," that is, when no other liturgical celebration is prescribed by the rubrics. Their choice was inspired mostly by great popular devotions of medieval times, and has, in turn, preserved and deepened these devotions.

HOLY TRINITY · At the beginning of the second millennium Sunday came to be considered in a special way as the "Day of the Holy Trinity," not only in liturgical observance (through the preface of the Trinity and the Trinitarian "*Symbolum* of Saint Athanasius" in the Divine Office), but also in popular piety.³⁶ Following the trend of this devotion, the custom originated of honoring each Divine Person separately on particular weekdays. Sunday was kept mainly as the "Day of the Father," while Monday became the "Day of the Son," with a votive Mass in honor of the Divine Wisdom (the second Person of the Trinity). Tuesday, also with a special Mass text, was celebrated as the "Day of the Holy Ghost."

This manner of honoring each Divine Person by a separate liturgical commemoration was declared inappropriate by many theologians. The popes, too, did not formally approve it. Finally, Pius V deleted the practice and provided only a votive Mass in honor of the Holy Trinity, assigning it to Monday (where it is still listed in the Missal). The Mass of the Holy Spirit he retained (for Thursday) because it emphasizes not so much a separate worship of the Third Divine Person but of His indwelling in the

Mystical Body. (The Mass prayers are not addressed to the Holy Ghost, but to the Father.)³⁷

HOLY SOULS · In the early Middle Ages the common people and many theologians held the opinion that the souls in purgatory enjoyed a relief from their painful punishment every week from Saturday night until Monday morning, in honor of the Lord's Day.³⁸ It was not until Saint Thomas Aquinas (1274) treated the problem in his masterful way, and disproved such opinions, that this claim was finally abandoned.³⁹ While it lasted, however, popular piety inclined to help the holy souls in a special manner on Monday, since they were thought to return then from joy to suffering and, therefore, to need consolation and assistance more than at any other time. Without approving the popular belief, the Church facilitated this practice of prayer for the holy souls; hence the ancient rule that priests had to add a liturgical oration for the departed ones in their Masses on all "vacant" Mondays. This regulation was observed for many centuries, until the provisional reform of the rubrics (1955) under Pius XII discontinued it. The same reform, however, makes it possible now for priests to say Requiem Masses oftener than before.

ANGELS · In medieval times another votive Mass was provided for Monday: that of the Holy Angels. Some writers claim that Monday was chosen because the angels were the first fruit of divine creation, and thus should be venerated at the beginning of the week.⁴⁰ The actual reason, though, seems to be that the angels were considered to be the particular consolers and companions of the holy souls, and thus they were especially invoked and venerated on the "Day of Souls" (Monday).⁴¹ The reform of the Missal under Pius V changed the assignment of this votive Mass from Monday to Tuesday, where it has remained up to now.

APOSTLES · Of all the votive Masses used in the Middle Ages to honor various saints, Pius V retained only two and assigned them to Wednesday: the Mass of Peter and Paul, and the Mass of the Apostles.

In the lore of the Germanic nations many traits that in pagan

times had been ascribed to the god Woden (such as guardian of Heaven, protector of the harvest, and weather maker) were in Christian times transferred to Saint Peter in the form of popular legends. Thus, Peter acquired a particular connection with "Woden's Day," on which he was especially invoked and venerated in past centuries.⁴² This popular veneration seems to explain the choice of Wednesday for the votive Mass of Saints Peter and Paul and of the other Apostles.

SAINTE JOSEPH · When the devotion to Saint Joseph spread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Wednesday became associated with this great saint.⁴³ The reason for the choice seems to be twofold. First, Wednesday was the only weekday dedicated by the Church (in the votive Masses) to saints other than the Blessed Virgin. Therefore, Saint Joseph obviously "belonged" on Wednesday.⁴⁴ Second, in the popular mind ancient Station days were considered of higher distinction and rank than the other weekdays. This distinction was not based on any later practice or ruling of the Church, but on the liturgical tradition that from early times had actually singled out those three days for special and solemn observance. Now, since Saturday was already devoted to the Blessed Virgin, and Friday to the Passion of Christ, the only day left on which to honor Saint Joseph in a special way was Wednesday.

Whatever the reason, the custom was approved and confirmed by the Church. Pope Pius X (1914), in 1913, put the Feast of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph (now abrogated) on the third Wednesday after Easter, and also assigned a Mass text in honor of the saint for Wednesday among the weekly votive Masses of the Roman Missal. Pope Benedict XV, in 1921, granted special indulgences to all faithful who perform some devout exercise in honor of Saint Joseph on the first Wednesday of a month.⁴⁵

BLESSED SACRAMENT · The weekly memory of the Last Supper, with its institution of the Holy Eucharist, prompted the faithful to accord special honors and veneration to the Blessed Sacrament on Thursdays.⁴⁶ This custom, originating in the early centuries of the second millennium, was accepted and approved in the reform

of Pius V, who inserted the Mass of the Most Blessed Sacrament among the weekly votive Masses. In many places it was customary (and still is today in sections of central Europe) to celebrate this votive Mass whenever possible as a High Mass, which was attended by a large number of people (at least one member from every family of the parish).⁴⁷ The practice of holding a Holy Hour in honor of the Lord's agony on Thursday nights has spread of late in many countries.

Since 1937 a papal indult allows the celebration of a solemn votive Mass of "Christ, the eternal High Priest" on every first Thursday of the month. Its text was also put among the weekly votive Masses by Pius XI.

SACRED HEART OF JESUS · As a result of the revelations granted to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1690), the practice developed from the seventeenth century on of devoting the first Friday of every month in a special way to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Since 1889 a Roman indult has given this custom a liturgical expression through the "Mass of the Sacred Heart" which, under certain conditions, may be celebrated as a solemn votive Mass. Other liturgical devotions, too, have been provided for "First Friday"; they may be held in churches with the approval of the bishop and according to his regulations.

Through the pious exercises of the "Nine Fridays" and the "First Fridays," the custom grew in many places of performing on *every* Friday some devotion in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, partly in church (by attendance at Mass, Communion, evening devotions), partly at home (by family prayer, burning of vigil lights before the Sacred Heart statue).⁴⁸

BLESSED VIRGIN MARY · In the ninth century originated the popular veneration of Mary on Saturdays. This practice appears to have grown out of the ancient weekly memorial of Christ's Passion. The books of that time motivate it by the thought that while the Lord's body rested in death Mary alone did not doubt or despair, but firmly adhered to the faith in her Divine Son.⁴⁹ She was thus believed to deserve more devotion and honor on Saturday than on other weekdays. The authorities of the Church not only provided a votive Mass (which now has five different texts

according to the seasons of the ecclesiastical year), but also a special Office in honor of Mary, to be recited on "free" Saturdays (*Officium sanctae Mariae in Sabbato*).

¹ H. Leclercq, *Jours de la Semaine*, DACL, 7.2 (1927), 2736 ff.
² Gaster, Hymn 11, 182. ³ Didache, 8, 2; Funk, I, 19. ⁴ F. Cabrol, *Liturgical Prayer: Its History and Spirit*, London, 1925. ⁵ Schuster, I, 26 ff. (*Ecclesiastical Prayer in the Early Church*); J. Stadlhuber, *Das Stundengebet der Laien im christlichen Altertum*, ZKTh, 71 (1949), 129 ff. ⁶ Tertullian, *De Oratone*, 28; PL, 2, 1304. ⁷ *Confess.*, 5, 9; PL, 32, 714. ⁸ SSP, 71 ff. ⁹ F. X. Pleithner, *Älteste Geschichte des Breviergebetes*, Kempten, 1887, 15 ff. ¹⁰ SSP, 75. ¹¹ R. Capel, *Canons Regular and the Breviary*, OF, 23 (1949), 246 ff. ¹² CIC, 135. ¹³ CIC, 610. ¹⁴ H. Leclercq, *Livres d'heurs*, DACL, 9.2 (1930), 1836 ff.; W. Busch, *The Origin of the Hour Prayers*, OF, 1 (1927), 327 ff. ¹⁵ J. Stadlhuber, *Das Laienstundengebet vom Leiden Christi*, ZKTh, 72 (1950), 282 ff. ¹⁶ M. Gorce, *Le Rosaire et ses antécédents historiques*, Paris, 1931, 11 ff. ¹⁷ P. Singer, *Geistliche Betrachtungsuhr*, Salzburg, 1889, 18 ff. ¹⁸ See note 15, 320; Balt., 120 ff. (*De Libris Precum*). ¹⁹ L. C. Sheppard, *Divine Office and the Laity*, OF, 11 (1936-7), 107, 169, 214, 263, and ff. ²⁰ F. Cabrol, *Fêtes Chrétiennes: Feria*, DACL, 5.1 (1922), 1403 ff. ²¹ LE, 134. ²² Didache, 8,9; Funk, 21. ²³ Jgn GK, 261. J. Cortes Quirant claims that the early Christians fasted on Wednesday because Christ started His Passion on that day: *La Nueva Fecha de la Ultima Cena*, in *Estudios Biblicos*, XVII, Madrid, 1958, III and IV. ²⁴ H. Leclercq, *Stations liturgiques*, DACL, 15.2 (1953), 1653 ff. ²⁵ Jgn GK, 260 f. ²⁶ Theodore Balsamon, *Comment. in can. 55 Conc. Trull*; PL, 137, 707 ff. ²⁷ *Epistola* 25, 4; PL, 20, 556. ²⁸ *Hermae Pastor*, sim. 5, 1; Funk, 529. ²⁹ LE, 134. ³⁰ Innoc. I, *Epist.* 25; PL, 20, 555. ³¹ SSP, 71-101, *passim*. ³² MR, *Missae Votivae, Feria Sexta*. ³³ ES, 126 (*Friday*); VL, 142. ³⁴ LE, 188. ³⁵ F. Cabrol, *Le Sacramentaire d'Alcuin*, DACL, 1.1 (1924), 1078 ff. ³⁶ Jgn MS, II, 151 (note 51). ³⁷ Jgn GK, 262. ³⁸ VL, 138. ³⁹ *Comment. in Libr. Sent.*, D. XLV, Qu. II, a. 2, qu. 1. ⁴⁰ Dur., IV, 1, 28. ⁴¹ Jgn GK, 263. ⁴² Gugitz, II, 3 ff. ⁴³ J. Kreuter, *St. Joseph in Literature and Devotion*, OF, 6 (1932), 255 ff.; F. L. Filas, *Joseph Most Just*, Milwaukee, 1956. ⁴⁴ VL, 141. ⁴⁵ *Raccolta*, 337. ⁴⁶ VL, 142. ⁴⁷ Jgn GK, 263. ⁴⁸ J. Stierli, *Die Entfaltung der kirchlichen Herz-Jesu-Verehrung in der Neuzeit*, in *Cor Salvatoris*, Freiburg, 1954, 137 ff. ⁴⁹ Jgn GK, 263; VL, 142.

CHAPTER

3

Ember Days

ORIGIN AND HISTORY

EARLY CENTURIES · The Romans, originally an agricultural people, had many nature gods and a goodly number of pagan religious nature festivals. Outstanding among them was the threefold seasonal observance of prayer and sacrifices to obtain the favor of the gods upon sowing and harvest. The first of these seasonal celebrations occurred at various dates between the middle of November and the winter solstice. It was a time of prayer for successful sowing (*Feriae Sementivae*: Feast of Sowing). The second festival was held in June or July for the grain harvest (*Feriae Messis*: Harvest Feast).¹ The third one came before the autumnal equinox (September) and was motivated by the wine harvest (*Vinalia*: Feast of Wine).²

The early Christians in the Roman Empire could not, of course, partake in such pagan celebrations in any way. On the other hand, the thought of prayer to God for His blessing upon sowing and harvest appealed as much, and even more so, to the Christians as it did to the pagans. Moreover, the Scriptures of the Old Testament mention “the fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth” (Zechariah 8, 19). The Dead Sea scrolls, too, contain a clear reference to special prayer times at the beginning of the annual seasons.³

It is not surprising, then, that the Christians in Rome introduced such prayer seasons of their own at the time the empire was still pagan (third century). These prayer periods, although coinciding roughly with the pagan dates of celebration (because

of their natural background), did not imitate the heathen observance. Instead of the pagan feasting, the Christians fasted. They offered the Eucharistic Sacrifice after having fasted the whole of Saturday and having performed a long vigil service of prayers and readings. The first regulations concerning this festival of the "Three Seasons" are ascribed to Pope Callistus (222).⁴

Very early, probably during the fourth century, the Church added a fourth prayer period (in March). This change seems to have been motivated by the fact that the year contains four natural seasons, and also by the mention of four fasting periods in the Book of the prophet Zechariah. At about the same time, each period was extended over the three traditional Station days (Wednesday, Friday, Saturday). While the Station fast at other times was expected but not strictly prescribed, this seasonal observance imposed fasting by obligation. The vigil service from Saturday to Sunday was retained as a full vigil, lasting the greater part of the night.⁵

Pope Leo the Great (461) mentions these prayer periods, or Ember Days, as an ancient traditional celebration of the Roman Church. He even claims that they are of apostolic origin (which may well be correct as far as the Jewish custom of seasonal prayer times is concerned). He preached a number of sermons on the occasion, stressing both the duty of imploring God's blessing and of thanking Him for the harvest by the tribute of a joyful fast before consuming the gifts of His bounty.⁶ In subsequent centuries, however, the Ember celebration lost a great deal of its joyous and festive character, and the motive of penance was stressed more and more.

Another historical event helped to overshadow the original purpose and mood of Embertides. In 494 Pope Gelasius I prescribed that the sacrament of Holy Orders (deaconate, priesthood) be conferred on Ember Saturdays. Thus the prayer and fasting of Ember week acquired added importance, for apostolic tradition demanded that ordinations be preceded by fast and prayer (Acts 13, 3). Not only the candidates fasted and prayed for a few days in preparation for Holy Orders, but the whole clergy and people joined them to obtain God's grace and blessing upon their calling. It seemed natural, then, to put the ordinations

at the end of those weeks that already were established times of prayer and fasting.⁷

Thus the regulation of Pope Gelasius turned the Embertides into a general performance of spiritual exercises for all, similar in thought and purpose to our modern retreats and missions. The Holy Orders were then conferred before the Mass of Saturday, after the lessons which closed with the hymn "*Benedictus*" of the Old Testament (see Daniel 3, 52).⁸

The Embertides have remained official times of ordination ever since.⁹ Candidates are still obliged to perform spiritual exercises in preparation;¹⁰ however, these are now made privately, and not in union with the whole congregation, as was the case in ancient days. On the other hand, the Ember weeks have been stressed in recent centuries as a time of special prayer on the part of the faithful for vocations to priesthood and for the sanctification of priests.

MEDIEVAL TIMES · At the beginning of the sixth century the Ember Day celebration was well established at Rome in all its essential features. The only point that remained undetermined for a long time was the date of the Ember weeks in Advent and Lent. The ancient regulations only prescribed the "third week in December" and the "first week in March" without saying what should be done when the month started on a Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday.¹¹ This question was finally settled by Pope Gregory VII (1085), who decided on the following arrangement (which is still kept today): Embertides are to be celebrated in the weeks after the third Sunday of Advent, after the first Sunday of Lent, during Pentecost week, and in the week following the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14).¹²

The Embertides spread slowly at first, and not without some popular resistance outside of Rome, for they were a typically local celebration of the city of Rome. The Diocese of Milan, for instance, did not introduce them for a thousand years, until the thirteenth century. They went to Spain through the acceptance of the Roman Missal in the eleventh century. Long before that, however, the Anglo-Saxons had adopted them in the eighth century by taking over the Roman rites as a whole at their conversion. In the Frankish kingdoms (France and Germany) they

seem to have been introduced by Saint Boniface (754), but did not become established until Charlemagne prescribed them for the whole Frankish realm in 769. Their observance, though, had to be repeatedly enjoined by synods in France and Germany during the ninth century, until they finally became a universal and popular feature of ecclesiastical celebration.¹³ The Eastern Churches do not observe Embertides, but have other periods of penance and fast besides Lent.¹⁴

NAMES · In the earliest liturgical books the Ember Days are simply called “the fast of the first, fourth, seventh and tenth month” (that is, March, June, September, December)—an interesting example of how the ancient practice of starting the year on March first, which had been officially abrogated by Julius Caesar, was still in vogue among the population of Rome centuries later.¹⁵ During the sixth century the term *Quatuor Tempora* (Four Times or Seasons) was introduced, and has remained ever since as the official ecclesiastical name for the Embertides.¹⁶

From the Latin word most European nations coined their popular terms: *Quatretemps* in French, *Quattro Tempora* in Italian, *Las Temporas* in Spanish, *Quatember* in German, *Kvatrni posti* among the southern Slavs, *Kántor böjtök* in Hungarian. The northern Slavs of the Latin Rite call the Embertides *Suche dni* (“Dry days”) from the ancient custom of eating uncooked food during fasts. The English term Ember seems to derive from the Anglo-Saxon *ymbren* (season, period).

LITURGY

COMMON FEATURES · In early medieval days it was customary in Rome to hold a penitential procession which proceeded from the place of gathering (*collecta*) to the Station church for the services on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays of Ember weeks. The night from Saturday to Sunday was a major vigil. As at the Easter vigil, passages from the Bible were read in twelve long lessons, the last one always being the story of the three young men in the furnace (Daniel 3). Today there are only six lessons—considerably shortened—but closing, as of old, with the miracle

of the furnace and the hymn of the three men (Daniel 3, 47-56).¹⁷ The call *Flectamus Genua* (Let us bend our knees) has also been retained from the rite of major vigils in ancient times.

The Mass following the prayer service of the vigil stood for the Sunday Mass. Thus many old liturgical books carry the remark *Dominica vacat* ("the Sunday is vacant"), that is, it has no Mass text of its own. Only after the sixth century, when the vigil service and its Mass were anticipated on Saturday evening (and later on Saturday morning), did the Sundays receive texts of their own in the Missal.¹⁸

Besides some traces (in the lessons) of the original purpose, the Mass formulas of Ember Days mostly express the thoughts of the liturgical seasons in which they fall: expectation of the Lord in Advent; penance and prayer in Lent; the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Masses of the Embertide in September seem to have preserved features of the original celebration, since the lessons and prayers reflect the joy of a harvest festival.

It is an interesting fact that most of the Gospel passages on Ember Days (with the exception of those in Advent) relate or mention the expulsion of demons. This has been interpreted as an indication of how the Church consciously condemned and supplanted the pagan celebration of the seasonal *feriae*, which was not a service of the true God but a slavery of false gods whom the early Christians considered and called "demons."¹⁹

EMBERTIDE OF PENTECOST · This Embertide has assumed a special character which distinguishes it from all the others. Coinciding with the octave of Pentecost, it displays an interesting combination of penitential motives (in some of its Mass prayers) with the celebration of the great feast (Gloria, Credo, Alleluia, Sequence, Pentecostal orations, red vestments, omission of *Flectamus Genua*). Because of this joyful note it used to be called *Ieiunium Exultationis* (the Fast of Exultation) in the Middle Ages. Abbot Rupert of Deutz (1130) wrote about it as follows:

It is not a fast to make us sad or to darken our hearts, but it rather brightens the solemnity of the Holy Spirit's arrival; for the sweetness of the Spirit of God makes the faithful loathe the pleasures of earthly food.²⁰

Saint Isidore of Spain (636), Doctor of the Church, relates that for a time in the earliest centuries this fast was held right after the Feast of the Ascension, in imitation of the Apostles' prayerful retreat (Acts 1, 14). It was soon transferred to Pentecost week, however, because the practice of the Church did not allow for fasting or penitential exercises between Easter and Pentecost.²¹

FOLKLORE

RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS · Up to the late Middle Ages the Ember Days were generally kept as holydays of obligation, with attendance at Mass and rest from work, and as weeks of penance and fervent prayer. They were favored dates for the reception of Holy Communion, a custom still alive in many Catholic sections of Europe.

The practice of spiritual and temporal works of charity and mercy, which had always been stressed by the Church in connection with Embertide fasting, produced the custom of devoting the Ember Days to special prayer for the suffering souls in purgatory, and of having Masses said for them during the Embertides. This tradition, too, is still frequently found in European countries. Alms and food were given to the poor on Ember Days, and warm baths provided for them (a popular work of Christian charity in bygone centuries).

Since people in centuries past were more keenly aware of the connection between Embertides and prayer for God's blessing upon the functions and fruits of nature, they also included in their petitions, and in a special way, the successful and happy birth of their children. Thus the Ember Days became particular occasions of prayer by and for pregnant mothers. Children born during Embertides were considered as unusually blessed by God. Popular superstition ascribed to them "good luck" for their whole life, excellent health, and many favors of body and soul.

Finally, there is the ancient legend that many poor souls are allowed to leave purgatory for a few moments every Embertide, to appear in visible shape to those relatives and friends who fervently pray for the departed ones, in order to thank them and to beg for continued prayerful help for themselves and for those

holy souls who have nobody on earth to remember them. The laudable custom observed by many faithful in modern times of praying and having Masses offered for the "forgotten" souls in purgatory seems to be a happy relic of this medieval popular legend.²²

QUARTER TERMS · From ancient Germanic usage the Ember weeks took over the character of "quarter terms," that is, the four seasonal periods of the year during which burdensome civic obligations had to be carried out, like the paying of debts, tithes, and taxes. From this practice the Ember weeks were called by the Persian-Latin term *Angariae* (Requisitions). The German word *Frohnfasten* is often explained as meaning the same as *Angariae*—the payment of what is owed to temporal lords. Actually, however, it means the "Fast of the Lord God," that is, a solemn, general, and holy fast in the service of God.²³

¹ PW, 6.2, 2211 (*Feriae*); 2A.2, 1346 ff. (*Sementivae*). ² Pliny the Younger, *Epist.*, 8, 21. ³ Gaster, Hymn 11, 182. ⁴ LP, I, 141. ⁵ LE, 135 f. ⁶ See the sermons of Saint Leo in PL, 54, *passim* (1-3, 12, 13, 16-19, 51, 84, 87-94). ⁷ H. Leclercq, *Quatre-Temps*, DACL, 14.2 (1948), 2014 ff. ⁸ The ordinations are now conferred in separate rites after the various lessons of Ember Saturday. ⁹ CIC, 1006, 2. ¹⁰ CIC, 1001, 1. ¹¹ See the treatise by Abbot Berno of Reichenau (1048): *Qualiter quatuor temporum jejunia sint observanda*; PL, 142, 1087. ¹² *Micrologus*, 24 ff.; PL, 151, 978. ¹³ DACL, 14.2 (1948), 2016. ¹⁴ K. Holl, *Die Entstehung der vier Fastenzeiten in der griechischen Kirche*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Tübingen, 1928, II, 155 ff. ¹⁵ Kellner, 185. ¹⁶ Nilles, II, 510 ff. ¹⁷ MR, *passim* (*Sabbato Quatuor Temporum*). ¹⁸ Jgn GK, 253. ¹⁹ TE, I, 592. ²⁰ *De divin. officiis*, 10, 26; PL, 170, 289. ²¹ *De eccles. officiis*, I, 1; PL, 38, 733. ²² L. Eisenhofer, *Quatember*, LThK, 8 (1936), 581. ²³ Nilles, II, 512 ff.

CHAPTER

4

Rogation Days

ORIGIN AND HISTORY

LITANIES · The Jews in the Old Testament had a form of public prayer in which one or more persons would pronounce invocations of God which all those present answered by repeating (after every invocation) a certain prayer call, like "His mercy endures forever" (Psalm 135) or "Praise and exalt Him above all forever" (Daniel 3, 57-87).

In the New Testament the Church retained this practice. The early Christians called such common, public, and alternating prayers "litany," from the Greek *litaneia* (*lité*), meaning "a humble and fervent appeal."¹ What they prayed for is indicated in a short summary by Saint Paul in his first letter to Timothy (2, 1-2).

The common and typical structure of the litany in the Latin Church developed gradually, from the third century on, from short invocations as they were used in early Church services. It consisted of four main types, which were recited either separately or joined together. First, invocations of the Divine Persons and of Christ, with the response *Miserere nobis* (Have mercy on us). Second, invocations of Mary, the Apostles, and groups of saints, response: *Ora pro nobis* (Pray for us). Third, prayers to God for protection from evils of body and soul, response: *Libera nos, Domine* (Deliver us, O Lord). Finally, prayers for needed favors, response: *Te rogamus, audi nos* (We beseech Thee, hear us).²

Many invocations of individual saints and special petitions were added everywhere in later centuries, and popular devotion increased their numbers to such an extent that Pope Clement

VIII, in 1601, determined the official text of the litany (called "Litany of All Saints") and prohibited the public use of any other litanies unless expressly approved by Rome.³

The invocation *Kyrie eleison* came from the Orient to Rome in the fifth century. It soon acquired such popularity that it joined (and even supplanted) the older form of litany in the Mass of the Catechumens.⁴ Up to this day the *Kyrie eleison* and *Christe eleison* in the Mass remain as relics of the responses that the people gave to petitions recited by the deacon (before the readings) and by the celebrant (after the Gospel). Outside of the Holy Sacrifice, the *Kyrie eleison* was also added to the other types of litany prayers; it may still be found at the beginning and end of every litany. The Greek Rite still uses a number of actual litanies (*Ektenai*) in its liturgy (the Holy Sacrifice).⁵

Many and varied are the occasions on which litanies were in use among early Christians. Besides being a part of the Mass liturgy, a litany was recited before solemn baptism (as it is today in the liturgy of the Easter vigil) and in the prayers for the dying (where it is also still prescribed). Even more frequent, however, was the use of litanies during processions, because the short invocations and exclamatory answers provided a convenient form of common prayer for a multitude in motion.⁶ This connection between litany and procession soon brought about the custom of calling both by the same term. From the sixth century on, *litania* was used with the meaning of "procession." The first Council of Orléans (511) incorporated this usage into the official terminology of the Church.⁷

Since the ancient Roman Church had many and divers kinds of processions, the litanies must have been a most familiar feature of ecclesiastical life. Litanies (processions) were held on Station days, every day in Lent, on many feasts, on Ember Days and vigils, and on special occasions (calamities and dangers of a usual or unusual kind) when God's mercy and protection was implored with particular fervor.⁸ These latter occasions had already been observed in pagan Rome with processions to the shrines of gods at certain times of the year. Their natural features (dates, routes, motives) were part of the traditional community life. These features the Church retained in certain cases, filling

them with the significance and spiritual power of Christian worship.

THE MAJOR LITANIES · The pagan Romans had two kinds of religious parades: the *amburbalia* (around the city) and *ambarvalia* (around the fields).⁹ The most important one of the rural processions every year (on April 25) walked along the Via Claudia to a place four miles outside the city. Its purpose was to obtain protection against frost and blight for the field fruits, especially grains. The Roman god responsible for this harvest was a bisexual divinity invoked either as male or female (Robigus, Robigo). He (or she) had the power to send blight upon the grains; and the procession was made to avert his "evil eye" from the fruits of human toil.¹⁰ At the fifth milestone, beyond the Milvian Bridge, was a grove which served as a shrine of Robigus. There the parade stopped, and the *Flamen* (pagan priest) sacrificed a sheep and a rust-colored dog, offering the entrails of these animals to the god. After the "service," young and old celebrated a kind of picnic with games, races, and amusements (some of which were not overly decent). In honor of the god the whole celebration was called *Robigalia*.¹¹

Christianity had no quarrel with the motive of such a procession (prayer for protection of the harvest) or with its traditional date and route. Thus, when the empire turned Christian in the fourth century and the pagan celebrations died a natural death, the Church took over this traditional observance, as a Christian rite, to pray for God's protection and blessing upon the fields. The pope with his clergy and a great crowd of people marched in solemn procession along the same route. They chanted the litany and repeated every invocation. After crossing the Milvian Bridge they did not, however, proceed to the place where the shrine of Robigus had been, but turned back and wended their way along the Tiber to the church of St. Peter at the Vatican. There the pope offered the Holy Sacrifice, and the multitude attended.¹²

When and how, after the pagan observance had stopped, the Church started this annual procession is not known. The first definite information is given in a sermon of Pope Gregory the Great (604), who called it a *Litania Major* (Greater Litany); and

he speaks of the "return of this annual solemnity," which proves that it already was a traditional feature in his day.¹³

The name *litanía major* was originally given to a number of solemn processions in Rome (such as those on April 25 and Ember Fridays).¹⁴ Only later was it applied exclusively to the procession of April 25, and this term has remained in the liturgy ever since. There is no connection between the Major Litany and the Feast of Saint Mark the Evangelist, which is celebrated on the same day. The litany is of much earlier date, for the Feast of Saint Mark was not introduced until the ninth century.¹⁵

Shortly after the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Major Litany was adopted by other parts of the ancient empire, but not everywhere on the same date. It was only during the ninth and tenth centuries that the Roman date and ritual became those usually accepted. For the Frankish empire the observance in the Roman manner was prescribed by the Council of Aachen, in 836.¹⁶ Today the liturgical books use the plural form in all cases, both for the prayers and the processions.¹⁷

THE MINOR LITANIES · In 470, during a time of unusual calamities (storms, floods, earthquakes), Bishop Mamertus of Vienne in Gaul originated an annual observance of penitential exercises for the three days before the Feast of the Ascension. With the cooperation of the civil authorities he decreed that the faithful abstain from servile work and that this triduum be held as a time of penance, with prayer and fasting. He also prescribed penitential processions (litanies) for each one of the three days. Thus the name "litanies" was given to the whole celebration.¹⁸

Very soon the other bishops of Gaul adopted the new observance. At the beginning of the sixth century it started spreading into neighboring countries. In 511 the Council of Orléans prescribed it for the Frankish (Merovingian) part of France.¹⁹ The Diocese of Milan accepted the litanies, but held them in the week before Pentecost.²⁰ In Spain they were observed in the sixth century during the week after Pentecost.²¹ The Council of Mainz (813) introduced them to the German part of the Frankish empire.²²

Meanwhile, Rome had declined for centuries to adopt this custom because its liturgical character did not agree with the

ancient practice of the Roman Church which excluded penitential rites on all days between Easter and Pentecost. Charlemagne and the Frankish bishops, however, urged Pope Leo III (816) to incorporate these litanies into the Roman liturgy.²³ The pope finally consented to a compromise: the observance of the fast was rescinded, but the penitential procession was approved. As Mass text, the formula of the Major Litany from the Roman liturgical books was taken. This approval was originally made only as an exception, for the litanies were not intended by Leo III as an established annual rite.²⁴ In return for the concession, the Frankish Church decreed, at the Council of Aachen (836), that these "minor litanies" should be held according to the Roman decision (without fast).²⁵

During the subsequent centuries, however, the custom of holding these litanies became definitely established, even at Rome, as an annual feature of the liturgical year; it has remained so ever since in the whole Latin Church, and is now celebrated everywhere on the three days before the Feast of the Ascension. A memorable exception has been made recently: Pope Pius XII granted to some Catholic missions in the Pacific Islands the permission to celebrate both the major and minor litanies in October or November.²⁶

NAMES · The litanies held on each one of the three days before the Feast of the Ascension are called "minor" because, in the Roman liturgy, they are of younger date than the Major Litany on April 25. In the early centuries they were also called "Gallican Litanies," because of their origin in Gaul.²⁷ The Major Litany was named "Roman" or "Gregorian" (after Gregory the Great, who first mentioned it). The popular term "Rogation Days" originated in the High Middle Ages. Another popular name, mostly used in central Europe, is "Cross Days" (from the crucifix that is carried in front of the procession).²⁸

LITURGY

LATIN RITE · The Rogation Days are unique through their penitential nature (purple vestments, no Gloria) within the jubilant Easter season. Even the Major Litany, which in ancient times

was a festive observance of joyful petition and confidence, became assimilated after the beginning of the tenth century, acquiring this note of mourning and penance.²⁹

In the chanting of the litanies each invocation is repeated twice, first by the cantors, then by the people (choir). Some scholars explain this custom as a relic of the *Litania Septiformis* (Procession in Seven Columns) from the time of Pope Gregory the Great, who initiated this particular type of litany.³⁰ Another feature of the ancient Major Litany was the antiphons, which the cantors sang at the start of the procession. They unfortunately were discontinued centuries ago, so they are no longer found in our liturgical books.³¹

The litany used to lead directly into the Mass (as it still does on the vigil of Easter). The Rogation Mass, therefore, had neither Introit nor Kyrie of its own, but the priest concluded the litany by singing a Collect which also served as oration (prayer) of the Mass. The ten Collects used now in the litany are of later date, when the procession was severed from the Mass and held as a separate and isolated rite.³²

There is no obligation now to conduct a procession. However, the rubrics of the Divine Office prescribe that on Rogation Days all those who are obliged to say the breviary must recite the Litanies of All Saints (with the psalm and prayers following it) whenever they have missed them before Mass.³³

The Rogations must be commemorated in other Masses on Rogation Days (for instance, in the Mass of Saint Mark the Evangelist). If April 25 should happen to be Easter Sunday, the litanies are transferred to Tuesday in Easter week; apart from this exception, they are always to be held on their liturgical dates even if some other great feast should fall on one of their days.³⁴

ORIENTAL RITES · Most of the Oriental Churches keep a triduum of fast and penitential prayer, comparable to the Rogations, shortly before the beginning of Lent. In the Greek Rite it is called the "Fast of Adam" in honor of the first law of abstinence which God gave to Adam and Eve in Paradise (Genesis 2, 17), and in preparation for the coming strict fast of Lent. About the same time of the year, the Syrians, Chaldeans, and Copts cele-

brate a three days' penitential season of prayer and fasting which they call the "Fast of Indiction" (because God indicts man, and punishes him through natural calamities) or "Fast of the Ninevites" (because the people of Nineveh averted God's punishment through prayer and fasting; see Jonas 3, 5-10). The Armenians term it *Aratshavor-atz*, which means "precursor" (a fast coming before Lent).³⁵

FOLKLORE

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE · In the rural sections of Catholic countries the Rogations are still held in their full and original significance with many features of external solemnity. The church bells ring while the procession slowly wends its way through the town and out into the open. Religious banners are carried, the litanies are chanted by choir and people, and the priest sprinkles the fields, gardens, and orchards with holy water. After returning to the church, a sermon is preached and the High Mass of the Rogations is celebrated. Later in the day some time is spent by many farmers with private little prayer processions around their own homestead. Reciting traditional prayers, the whole family asks for God's blessing upon house, barns, stables, and fields.³⁶

In some places the Rogations are held in a way that is strongly reminiscent of the *Litania Septiformis* of ancient times. The inhabitants of villages surrounding some city or town will proceed from their own churches in separate processions and converge toward the big church of the city for the sermon and High Mass. Afterward a market or fair is ready to serve their temporal needs and interests.

The purpose and liturgy of the Rogations has for many centuries, up to our time, inspired a great number of semiliturgical imitations and repetitions of its rite in the manifold smaller processions which are held all through the summer months in countless places of Europe. These prayer processions are customary whenever the harvest is in danger from frost, floods, hail, drought, or the like.³⁷ Other such processions are steady features of religious observance, and their main purpose is to pray for the right kind of weather—a most important item on the prayer list of agricultural populations.³⁸ In many sections of Europe a

"weather procession" is held around the church on every Sunday. Usually the priest sings the prologue of Saint John's Gospel (1, 1-14), which from the High Middle Ages has been considered as conferring a powerful blessing against all harmful trends of nature.³⁹

PRE-CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS · The pre-Christian lore of averting harm from fields and homes by the magic power of "walking around" them (*circumambulatio*, *ambitus* in Latin and *umbigang* in old Germanic) still survives in many superstitious customs among the rural populations of Europe.⁴⁰ At the seasons of the year when the demons roam (before the winter solstice, on Walpurgis Night, around the middle of June, at Halloween), girls or young men must circle the fields and orchards, sometimes during the night and in a rhythmic dance step. Before Christmas the farmer goes around his buildings with incense and holy water. He must be careful to complete the round walk; otherwise "the blessing would not take hold." Here also belongs the superstition held in many places that visitors should leave the home by the same door through which they came (to "close the circle") in order to avoid misfortune and harm.⁴¹

¹ F. Cabrol, *Litanies*, DACL, 9.2 (1930), 1540 ff. ² Schuster, II, 359. ³ CIC, 1259, 2. ⁴ Jgn MS, I, 412 ff. ⁵ Nilles, I, LXIII (*Ektenés*). ⁶ J. A. Jungmann, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Gebetsliturgie*, VII, ZKTh, 73 (1951), 347 ff. ⁷ Can. 27; Mansi, 8, 355. ⁸ Kellner, 189 ff. ⁹ PW, I, 1796 (*Ambarvalia*), 1816 (*Amburbium*). ¹⁰ M. T. Varro, *Antiquitates, De Rust.*, I, 1, 6. ¹¹ PW, IA.1, 949 ff. ¹² TE, I, 660. ¹³ Letter without address; PL, 27, 1327. ¹⁴ H. Grisar, *Das Römische Sacramentar*, ZKTh, 9 (1885), 585 ff. ¹⁵ Kellner, 300. ¹⁶ Cap. II, Can. 10; Mansi, 14, 678. ¹⁷ H. Leclercq, *Procession de Saint Marc*, DACL, 10.2 (1932), 1740 ff. ¹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2, 34; PL, 71, 231 ff.; Sidon. Apoll., *Epist.* I; PL, 58, 563. ¹⁹ Can. 27; Mansi, 8, 355. ²⁰ Kellner, 193. ²¹ *Concil. Gerund.*, Can. 2; Mansi, 8, 549. ²² Can. 33; Mansi, 14, 72. ²³ LE, 164. ²⁴ Schuster, II, 371. ²⁵ See note 16. ²⁶ W. van Bekkum, "The Liturgical Revival in the Service of the Missions," AP, 108. ²⁷ F. Cabrol, *Rogations*, DACL, 14.2 (1948), 2459 ff. ²⁸ OiT, 110. ²⁹ Schuster, II, 356. ³⁰ DACL, 10.2 (1932), 1740 (*Litania Septiformis*). ³¹ Schuster, II,

358 (text of these ancient antiphons). ³² Schuster, II, 366. ³³ BR, April 25 (*S. Marci Evangelistae*), rubric at the end. ³⁴ MR, April 25 (*S. Marci Evangelistae*), rubric before Mass text. ³⁵ Nilles, II, 6-11, 51, 646, 697. ³⁶ OiT, 104 ff. (*Die drei Bittage vor Christi Himmelfahrt*). ³⁷ B. Scholz, "The Sacramentals in Agriculture," OF, 5 (1931), 323 ff. ³⁸ Franz, II, 71. ³⁹ Jgn MS, II, 543. ⁴⁰ Franz, II, 7, 68. ⁴¹ Koren, 129 ff.

PART II

5

Advent

HISTORY

ORIGIN · The celebration of Christ's nativity on December 25 was introduced as a special feast in Rome about the middle of the fourth century. It quickly spread through the Roman Empire of the West, and by the fifth century was already established in Gaul and Spain. Since it was one of the main feasts of the Christian year, a spiritual preparation soon began to be held. From the Church in Gaul comes the first news about a definite period prescribed for this preparation. Bishop Perpetuus of Tours (490) issued the regulation that a fast should be held on three days of every week from the Feast of Saint Martin (November 11) to Christmas.¹ The name Advent was not yet used for this preparatory period; it was called *Quadragesima Sancti Martini* (Forty Days' Fast of Saint Martin's).²

This practice of keeping a penitential season before Christmas spread all through France, Spain, and later also to Germany. The fast, however, was started at different times (September 24, November 1 or 11 or 14, December 1). For Mass texts on the weekdays of Advent the Church in Gaul simply used the Masses of Lent.³

In Rome the celebration of Advent originated considerably later, during the sixth century. There the season comprised only four or five Sundays. Pope Gregory the Great (604) preached a number of homilies on Advent.⁴ Unlike the Gallic Church, Rome had no established fast (except, of course, in Ember week). Advent in Rome was a festive and joyful time of preparation for the Feast of the Lord's Nativity, without penitential character.⁵

When, in the eighth century, the Frankish Church accepted the Roman liturgy, the nonpenitential Advent of Rome clashed with the penitential observance of the much longer Gallic Advent. After a few centuries of vacillation there emerged a final structure of Advent celebration which combined features of both

traditions. Rome adopted the fast and penitential character from the Gallic observance, while the Roman tradition of a four weeks' Advent and the Roman liturgical texts prevailed over the ancient Gallic custom of a seven or nine weeks' celebration. This compromise was completed in the thirteenth century. From that time, the liturgical observance of Advent has remained practically unchanged.⁶

FAST · The law of Advent fast was never as strict as that of Lent. It varied widely in different sections, both in content and in time. In most cases people were obliged to fast three days a week and to abstain from certain foods. Bishop Burchard of Worms (1025), for instance, issued the following regulation: "In the Quadragesima before Christmas you must abstain from wine, ale, honey-beer, meats, fats, cheese, and from fat fish."⁷

According to the penitential practice of those centuries, the faithful were also bound to abstain from weddings, amusements, pleasure travel, and from conjugal relations during the time of fasting.⁸

This observance of Advent fasting came from the North to Rome at the end of the first millennium. There it was quickly adopted by most monasteries, later also by the authorities of the Church, and finally prescribed for all the faithful. A letter of Pope Innocent III (1216) shows that in his time it already was a traditional part of the Advent celebration in Rome.⁹ In subsequent centuries the obligation was gradually lessened by papal indulgences, the fast usually being restricted to two days a week (for example, Friday and Saturday in Italy, Wednesday and Friday in Austria), until the new Code of Canon Law (1918) completely abrogated it and only kept the fast of Ember week and of the Christmas vigil (and, lately, the vigil fast of the Immaculate Conception, December 7).

ORIENTAL CHURCHES · The Eastern Churches do not keep a liturgical season in preparation for Christmas, but they observe a fast. In the Byzantine Rite this fast has been customary from the eighth century. It begins on November 15 and lasts till Christmas. Its name is "Quadragesima of Saint Philip" (*Tessarantimeron Philipou*) because it starts on the day after the Feast

of the Apostle Philip. The Syrians of the Antiochene Rite also have a fast of forty days before Christmas, but the Catholic Syrians keep it, by papal indult, only for the last nine days before the Nativity. The Armenians now celebrate a fast of three weeks (instead of the original seven weeks), at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of Advent. (Their Advent starts at the middle of November and runs until Epiphany.) The Copts, too, observe a fast, which is very strict, from November 24 (in upper Egypt) or from December 9 (in lower Egypt) until the Feast of the Nativity (which they celebrate on Epiphany). The Syro-Chaldeans begin their "Fast of the Nativity" or "Fast of the Annunciation" at the middle of November or, in some dioceses, on the Sunday nearest to December 1.¹⁰

LITURGY

SEASONAL CHARACTER · The liturgy of Advent is wanting in that harmony and unity which characterize the other seasons of the ecclesiastical year. Its features present a somewhat confused and unfinished aspect. Three factors are responsible for this. First, Gregory the Great, who had shaped the basic structure of the Roman Advent with the sure hand of an inspired leader, did not fill out the details himself.¹¹ Second, the original form of the Roman celebration was mixed and molded with the Gallic features into a "unit" that contained two somewhat opposite trends of thought (a season of joy and, at the same time, a season of penance). Finally, after the combination was made, no master appeared who could have shaped these elements into a celebration of unified harmony. Instead, the structure was prevented from further growth and development and preserved without change through the past centuries up to the present.¹²

Thus, to give but a few examples, Advent has no ferial Masses, as Lent has, but on "free" days the Sunday Mass is repeated. It has no preface of its own, but must continue (on Sundays) the preface of the Holy Trinity, which does not actually fit the season. (Lent, on the other hand, has two fitting seasonal prefaces.) In Advent the liturgy of the season must bow on most days to feasts of saints, while in Lent only March 19 and 25 take obligatory precedence. The orations in Advent express vari-

ous trends and perspectives. Some of them speak of the coming of the Saviour at His birth, others of His coming at the end of time, and others again of a coming into the hearts of the faithful. Similarly, some lessons and Gospels clearly reveal the purpose of joyful preparation for Christmas, while others treat of the end of the world and the second coming of the Lord, not in the apostolic sense of jubilant expectation, but with the note of salutary fear and admonition to penance. In the Masses of the season (Sundays) the Gloria is omitted, and so is the *Te Deum* in the Divine Office; but the Alleluia is retained, and the third Sunday (*Gaudete*) bears a special character of joy.¹³

JOY AND PENANCE · In Rome, for almost a thousand years Advent was celebrated as a season of joyous preparation for the Feast of the Lord's Nativity.¹⁴

The Gospel of the first Sunday in Advent (Luke 21, 25-33), speaking of the end of the world, did not pertain to the original liturgy of Advent. Gregory the Great used it on a certain occasion when, at the end of November, a great storm had devastated Rome and killed many people. (Its descriptions read like modern reports of a hurricane.)¹⁵ The pope wanted to console the people and explain to them the meaning of such natural catastrophes, hence he took the Gospel text that begins "And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and upon earth distress of nations." After the reading of this Gospel, he preached a homily on it. Now the fact that the pope had used this particular passage on a Sunday around the beginning of December was duly noted in the manual of the Roman Church. In later times it was mistakenly assumed that Gregory had intended it as a regular Advent text, and thus it appeared in the Roman Missal as Gospel of an Advent Mass.¹⁶

As late as the beginning of the twelfth century the liturgical books of St. Peter's in Rome show the use of festive vestments, of the Gloria in the Mass and the *Te Deum* in the Divine Office for Advent. By the middle of the same century, however, the Frankish influence had caused the Roman authorities to make the change from a season of joy to one of penance: Gloria and *Te Deum* were dropped, and Advent soon acquired the traditional marks of a season of penance, similar to Lent. The color

of liturgical vestments then was black (later changed to purple), the dalmatic (deacon's vestment) was prohibited because it represented a "gown of joy," celebration of weddings and organ playing in church were forbidden, and various penitential features were introduced into the Divine Office. In some places the sacred images were even veiled with purple cloth as they were in Lent.¹⁷

On the other hand, all these changes toward a penitential aspect remained more or less on the surface, for its innermost liturgical character distinguishes Advent very sharply from Lent. The texts of the Roman Missal, despite occasional motives of fear, penance, and trembling (which had been added from the Frankish liturgy), kept its basic note of joyful expectation of Christ's birth. Thus the liturgists, from the twelfth century on, have found no simple unity in the celebration of Advent, but have had to explain its character by a diversity of purposes. William Duranti (1296), Archbishop of Ravenna, one of the first to analyze the liturgical significance of Advent, expressed it in a formula which since then has been repeated in many books: Advent is partly a time of joy (in expectation of the Saviour's nativity) and partly a season of mourning and penance (in expectation of the judgment on the Last Day).¹⁸

SIGNIFICANCE · The name Advent (Coming) originally was used for the coming of Christ in His birth and was thus applied to Christmas only. After the sixth century various preachers and writers expanded its meaning to include the whole preparatory season, in the sense in which the word is now used. In the twelfth century it came to be interpreted as representing a two- or threefold "Advent" of Christ: His past coming, in Bethlehem; His future coming, at the end of time; and His present coming, through grace in the hearts of men.¹⁹

The present penitential character of Advent, although not consonant with the original celebration in Rome, still usefully fits the purpose of the season. By a spirit of humble penance and contrition we should prepare ourselves for a worthy and fruitful celebration of the great Feast of the Nativity. This penance is not as harsh as that of Lent—there is no prescribed fast—and the joyful note of the season helps people to perform

penitential exercises in a mood of happy spiritual toil, to "make ready the way of the Lord" (Matthew 3, 3).²⁰

THE SECOND COMING · There actually is a season of the year in which the Church draws our minds and hearts to the second coming of Christ. This season extends over the end of the ecclesiastical year through Advent and up to Epiphany. After having celebrated the events of the Lord's life on earth, His birth, Passion, resurrection, and ascension, and also the descent of the Holy Spirit and the life of Christ in His Mystical Body, the Church finally puts before our eyes a magnificent vision of eternal glory and reward: in the Lord Himself (Feast of Christ, the King), in His members who have already passed from this world (All Saints and All Souls), and in the events at the end of time when the remaining elect will be gathered into their glory (Gospel of the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost; Matthew 24, 15-35).²¹ Thus the ecclesiastical year, like a majestic symphony, ends on the powerful and triumphant strains of a final victory, not yet obtained by all, but assured and certain for those who remain "faithful unto death" (Apocalypse 2, 10). Then follows, in Advent, the thought of our own spiritual preparation for this glorious coming of the Lord at the end of time, and the humble security of our hope that His last coming will be consoling and joyful, just as His coming and His manifestation was in the first Christmas and the first Epiphany at Bethlehem.

FOLKLORE

THE ADVENT WREATH · The Advent wreath originated a few hundred years ago among the Lutherans of eastern Germany.²² It probably was suggested by one of the many light symbols which were used in folklore at the end of November and beginning of December. At that season of the year our pre-Christian forefathers began to celebrate the month of Yule (December) with the burning of lights and fires.²³ The Christians in medieval times kept many of these light and fire symbols alive as popular traditions of ancient folklore. In the sixteenth century the custom started of using such lights as a religious symbol of Advent in the houses of the faithful. This practice quickly spread among

the Protestants of eastern Germany and was soon accepted by Protestants and Catholics in other parts of the country.²⁴ Recently it has not only found its way to America, but has been spreading so rapidly that it is already a cherished custom in many homes.

The Advent wreath is exactly what the word implies, a wreath of evergreens (yew or fir or laurel), made in various sizes. It is either suspended from the ceiling or placed on a table, usually in front of the family shrine. Fastened to the wreath are four candles standing upright, at equal distances. These candles represent the four weeks of Advent.²⁵

Daily at a certain time (usually in the evening), the family gathers for a short religious exercise. Every Sunday of Advent one more candle is lit, until all four candles shed their cheerful light to announce the approaching birthday of the Lord. All other lights are extinguished in the room, and only the gentle glow of the live candles illuminates the darkness. After some prayers, which are recited for the grace of a good and holy preparation for Christmas, the family sings one of the traditional Advent hymns or a song in honor of Mary.

The traditional symbolism of the Advent wreath reminds the faithful of the Old Testament, when humanity was "sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 2, 79); when the prophets, illumined by God, announced the Redeemer; and when the hearts of men glowed with the desire for the Messiah. The wreath—an ancient symbol of victory and glory—symbolizes the "fulfillment of time" in the coming of Christ and the glory of His birth.

In some sections of Europe it is customary for persons with the name of John or Joan to have the first right to light the candles on Advent wreath and Christmas tree, because John the Evangelist starts his Gospel by calling Christ the "Light of the World," and John the Baptist was the first one to see the light of divinity shining about the Lord at His baptism in the Jordan.²⁶

CHILDREN'S LETTERS · This is an ancient Advent custom, widespread in Europe, Canada, and South America. When the children go to bed on the eve of St. Nicholas's Day (December 5), they put upon the window sills little notes which they have

written or dictated, addressed to the Child Jesus. These letters, containing lists of desired Christmas presents, are supposed to be taken to heaven by Saint Nicholas or by angels. In South America the children write their notes to the "little Jesus" during the days from December 16 to 24 and put them in front of the crib, whence, they believe, angels take them to Heaven during the night.

PREPARING THE MANGER · This custom originated in France but spread to many other countries. It is the practice of having children prepare a soft bedding in the manger by using little wisps of straw as tokens of prayers and good works. Every night the child is allowed to put in the crib one token for each act of devotion or virtue performed. Thus the Christ Child, coming on Christmas Day, finds an ample supply of tender straw to keep Him warm and to soften the hardness of the manger's boards.

ADVENT CALENDARS · Originating in Germany, this custom has of late been spreading widely in other countries. A colored scene of the "Christmas House" printed on a large piece of cardboard is put up at the beginning of December. Every day one "window" of the house is opened by the children, revealing a picture or symbol that points toward the coming Feast of Christmas. Finally, on December 24, the "door" is opened, showing the Nativity scene. These calendars are a useful means of keeping the children's minds pleasantly occupied with the expectation of Christmas and with the spiritual task of preparing their souls for the feast.

NOVENA · In Central and South America, the nine days before Christmas are devoted to a popular novena in honor of the Holy Child (*La Novena del Niño*). In the decorated church, the crib is ready, set up for Christmas; the only figure missing is that of the Child, since the manger is always kept empty until Holy Night. The novena service consists of prayers and carol singing accompanied by popular instruments of the castanet type. After the novena service, the children roam through the streets of the cities and towns, throwing firecrackers and rockets, expressing their delight over the approach of Christmas.²⁷

In central Europe the nine days before Christmas are kept in many places as a festive season. Since most of the religious observances were held after dark or before sunrise, people began to call this season the "Golden Nights." In the Alpine sections it is the custom to take a picture of the Blessed Virgin from house to house on these nine evenings (Carrying the Virgin). Every night the family and servants gather before the image, which stands on a table between flowers and burning candles. There they pray and sing hymns in honor of Mary the Expectant Mother. After the devotion, the picture is carried by a young man to a neighboring farm. The whole family, with torches and lanterns, accompanies the image, which is devoutly received and welcomed by its new hosts in front of their house.²⁸

Meanwhile, schoolboys carry a statue of Saint Joseph every night to one of their homes. Kneeling before it, they say prayers in honor of the saint. On the first night, only the boy who carried the statue and the one to whose home it was brought perform this devotion. The following nights, as the statue is taken from house to house, the number of boys increases, since all youngsters who had it in their home previously take part in the devotion. On the evening of December 24 all nine of them, accompanied by nine schoolgirls dressed in white, take the image in procession through the town to the church, where they put it up at the Christmas crib. This custom is called *Josephstragen* (Carrying Saint Joseph).²⁹

ADVENT PLAYS · A peculiar type of Advent play is the German *Herbergsuchen* (Search for an Inn). It is a dramatic rendition of the Holy Family's fruitless efforts to find a shelter in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, tired and weary, knock at door after door, humbly asking for a place to stay. Realizing that they are poor, the owners refuse their request with harsh words, until they finally decide to seek shelter in a stable.³⁰

Usually the whole performance is sung, and often it is followed by a "happy ending" showing a tableau of the cave with the Nativity scene. There are scores of different versions, depending on the various songs and sketches provided in the text.

A similar custom is the Spanish *Posada* (the Inn), traditional

in South American countries, especially Mexico. On an evening between December 16 and 24, several neighboring families gather in one house, where they prepare a shrine, and beside it a crib with all its traditional figures, but the manger is empty. After a procession through the house, pictures of Joseph and Mary are put on the shrine, venerated with prayer and incense, and all present are blessed by a priest. The religious part of the *Posada* is followed by a gay party for the adults, while the children are entertained with the *Piñata*. This is a fragile clay jar, suspended from the ceiling and filled with candy. The children, blindfolded, try to break the jar with a stick so the contents will spill, and everybody then rushes for some of its treasures.³¹

RORATE MASS · In the early mornings of the "Golden Nights," long before sunrise, a special Mass is celebrated in many places of central Europe. It is the votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin for Advent, called *Rorate* from the first words of its text (*Rorate coeli desuper: Dew of Heaven, shed the Just One*). By a special permission of Rome, this Mass may be sung every morning before dawn during the nine days preceding Christmas provided the custom existed in a place from ancient times.³² The faithful come to the Rorate Mass in large numbers, carrying their lanterns through the dark of the winter morning.³³

SAINT THOMAS'S DAY · In some parts of central Europe ancient customs of "driving demons away" are practiced on the Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle (December 21) and during the following nights (Rough Nights), with much noise, cracking of whips, ringing of hand bells, and parades of figures in horrible masks.³⁴

In a Christianized version of this custom farmers will walk through the buildings and around the farmyard, accompanied by a son or one of the farm hands. They carry incense and holy water, which they sprinkle around as they walk. Meanwhile, the rest of the family and servants are gathered in the living room reciting the rosary. This rite is to sanctify and bless the whole farm in preparation for Christmas, to keep all evil spirits away on the festive days, and to obtain God's special protection for the coming year.³⁵

CHRISTMAS EVE · Christmas Eve, the last one of the "Golden Nights," is the feast day of our first parents, Adam and Eve. They are commemorated as saints in the calendars of the Eastern Churches (Greeks, Syrians, Copts).³⁶ Under the influence of this Oriental practice, their veneration spread also in the West and became very popular toward the end of the first millennium of the Christian era. The Latin Church has never officially introduced their feast, though it did not prohibit their popular veneration. In many old churches of Europe their statues may still be seen among the images of saints. Boys and girls who bore the names of Adam and Eve (quite popular names in past centuries) celebrated their "Name Day" with great rejoicing. In Germany the custom began in the sixteenth century of putting up a "Paradise tree" in the homes in honor of the first parents. This was a fir tree laden with apples, and from it developed our modern Christmas tree.³⁷

¹ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, X, 31, 6; PL, 71, 231 ff.
² J. A. Jungmann, *Advent und Voradvent*, ZKTh, 61 (1937), 341 ff.
³ *Conc. Matiscon.*, Can. 9; Mansi, 9, 933. ⁴ *Homil. in Evang.* (1, 6, 7, 29); PL, 76, 1078 ff. ⁵ Schuster, I, 320. ⁶ LE, 169 ff. ⁷ *Decreta*, 19, 5; PL, 140, 951 ff. ⁸ DACL, 7.2 (1927), 2492 ff. ⁹ *Epist.*, 9, 3; PL, 215, 811. ¹⁰ Nilles, II, *passim*. ¹¹ DACL, 6.2 (1925), 1776 ff.; on Saint Gregory's reform of the liturgy see also Schuster, I, 39 ff.
¹² F. Cabrol, *Advent*, DACL, 1.2 (1924), 3223 ff. ¹³ See note 2, 369 ff.
¹⁴ DACL, 1.2 (1924), 3227. ¹⁵ *Sermo* I, 1; PL, 76, 1078 ff. ¹⁶ W. Croce, *Die Adventsliturgie*, ZKTh, 76 (1954), 273. ¹⁷ See note 2, 373 ff. ¹⁸ Dur., VI, 2, 6. ¹⁹ See note 16, 469 ff.; Saint Bernard, *Sermo* 3, 4; PL, 183, 45. ²⁰ P. Parsch, "How To Interpret Seasons" (Advent), OF, 22 (1947), 1 ff. ²¹ See note 2, 387 ff. ²² GH, 1 (1931), 147. ²³ Frazer, 638 ("The Midwinter Fires"). ²⁴ See note 22.
²⁵ Koren, 37. ²⁶ RCF, 38 ff. ²⁷ A. A. Marchant, "Christmas in Brazil," in *Bulletin, Pan-American Union*, Washington, December 1936.
²⁸ Koren, 51; Geramb, 202. ²⁹ Koren, 54; Geramb, 203. ³⁰ VL, 144.
³¹ Crippen, 82 f.; see also NGM, December 1951, 799. ³² SRC, *Decretum*, December 10, 1718. ³³ Koren, 35. ³⁴ Geramb, 211.
³⁵ VL, 148 f. ³⁶ Nilles, II, 541 ff.; Spamer, 74. ³⁷ Spamer, 73 ff. (picture opposite p. 92).

CHAPTER

6

Feast of the Nativity

HISTORY

ORIGIN · In the Roman Empire it was a general custom to celebrate the birthdays of rulers (see Matthew 14, 6) and of other outstanding persons. Such birthdays often were publicly honored even after the death of the individual. The day of the celebration did not always coincide with the actual date of birth. The birthday of Plato, for instance, used to be celebrated on a feast of the god Apollo.¹

The early Christians, who attributed to Christ not only the title (*Kyrios*) but also many other honors that the pagans paid to their "divine" emperors, naturally felt inclined to honor the birth of the Saviour. In most places the commemoration of Christ's birth was included in the Feast of the Epiphany (Manifestations) on January 6, one of the oldest annual feasts.

Soon after the end of the last great persecution, about the year 330, the Church in Rome definitely assigned December 25 for the celebration of the birth of Christ. For a while, many Eastern Churches continued to keep other dates, but toward the end of the fourth century the Roman custom became universal.²

No official reason has been handed down in ecclesiastical documents for the choice of this date. Consequently, various explanations have been given to justify the celebration of the Lord's nativity on this particular day. Some early Fathers and writers claimed that December 25 was the actual date of Christ's birth, and that the authorities in Rome established this fact from the official records of the Roman census that had been taken at the time of the Saviour's birth. Saint John Chrysostom held this

opinion and used it to argue for the introduction of the Roman date in the Eastern Church.³ He was mistaken, however, for nobody in Rome ever claimed that the records of the census of Cyrinus were extant there in the fourth century, and much less that Christ's birthday was registered in the lists.⁴ In fact, it was expressly stated in Rome that the actual date of the Saviour's birth was unknown and that different traditions prevailed in different parts of the world.⁵

A second explanation was of theological-symbolic character. Since the Bible calls the Messiah the "Sun of Justice" (Malachi 4, 2), it was argued that His birth had to coincide with the beginning of a new solar cycle, that is, He had to be born at the time of the winter solstice. A confirmation of this opinion was sought in the Bible, by way of reckoning six months from the annunciation of John the Baptist (which was assumed to have happened on September 24) and thus arriving at March 25 as the day of the Incarnation. Nine months later, on December 25, would then be the birthday of the Lord. This explanation, though attractive in itself, depends on too many assumptions that cannot be proved and lacks any basis of historical certitude.⁶

There remains then this explanation, which is the most probable one, and held by most scholars in our time: the choice of December 25 was influenced by the fact that the Romans, from the time of Emperor Aurelian (275), had celebrated the feast of the sun god (*Sol Invictus*: the Unconquered Sun) on that day.⁷ December 25 was called the "Birthday of the Sun," and great pagan religious celebrations of the Mithras cult were held all through the empire.⁸ What was more natural than that the Christians celebrate the birth of Him Who was the "Light of the World" and the true "Sun of Justice" on this very day? The popes seem to have chosen December 25 precisely for the purpose of inspiring the people to turn from the worship of a material sun to the adoration of Christ the Lord. This thought is indicated in various writings of contemporary authors.⁹

It has sometimes been said that the Nativity is only a "Christianized pagan festival." However, the Christians of those early centuries were keenly aware of the difference between the two festivals—one pagan and one Christian—on the same day. The coincidence in the date, even if intended, does not make the two

celebrations identical. Some newly converted Christians who thoughtlessly retained external symbols of the sun worship on Christmas Day were immediately and sternly reprov'd by their religious superiors, and those abuses were suppressed.¹⁰ Proof of this are the many examples of warnings in the writings of Tertullian (third century) and the Christian authors of the fourth and fifth centuries, especially the sermons of Saint Augustine (430) and Pope Leo I (461).¹¹

The error of confusing Yule (solstice) and Christmas (the "Mass of Christ"), as if both celebrations had a common origin, occurs even in our time. Expressions like "Christmas originated four thousand years ago," "the pagan origins of Christmas," and similar misleading phrases have only added to the confusion. While it is certainly true that some popular features and symbols of our Christmas celebration in the home had their origin in pre-Christian Yuletide customs, Christmas itself—the feast, its meaning and message—is in no way connected with any pagan mythology or Yule rite.

Christmas soon became a feast of such great importance that from the fifth century on it marked the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. After the tenth century, however, the season of Advent came to form an integral part of the Christmas cycle; thus the beginning of the ecclesiastical year was advanced to the first Sunday of Advent.¹²

Emperor Theodosius, in 425, forbade the cruel circus games on Christmas Day, and Emperor Justinian, in 529, prohibited work and public business by declaring Christmas a civic holiday. The Council of Agde (506) urged all Christians to receive Holy Communion on the feast.¹³ The Council of Tours (567) proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred and festive season, and established the duty of Advent fasting in preparation for the feast.¹⁴ The Council of Braga (563) forbade fasting on Christmas Day.¹⁵ Thus the groundwork was laid for a joyful celebration of the Lord's nativity, not only in the house of God but also in the hearts and homes of the people.

MIDDLE AGES · The great religious pioneers and missionaries who brought Christianity to the pagan tribes of Europe also introduced the celebration of Christmas. It came to Ireland through

Saint Patrick (461), to England through Saint Augustine of Canterbury (604), to Germany through Saint Boniface (754). The Irish monks Saint Columban (615) and Saint Gall (646) introduced it into Switzerland and western Austria; the Scandinavians received it through Saint Ansgar (865). To the Slavic tribes it was brought by their apostles, the brothers Saint Cyril (869) and Saint Methodius (885); to Hungary by Saint Adalbert (997).

Most of these saints were the first bishops of the countries they converted and as such they established and regulated the celebration of the Nativity. In England, Saint Augustine observed it with great solemnity. On Christmas Day in 598, he baptized more than ten thousand Britons.¹⁶ In Germany, the observance of Christmas festivities was officially regulated by a synod in Mainz in 813.¹⁷

By about the year 1100, all the nations of Europe had accepted Christianity, and Christmas was celebrated everywhere with great devotion and joy. The period from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries was the peak of a general Christian celebration of the Nativity, not only in churches and monasteries, but in homes as well. It was a time of inspiring and colorful religious services. Carols and Christmas plays were written. It was at this period, too, that most of the delightful Christmas customs of each country were introduced. Some have since died out; others have changed slightly through the ages; many have survived to our day. A few practices had to be suppressed as being improper and scandalous, such as the customs of dancing and mumming in church, the "Boy Bishop's Feast," the "Feast of the Ass," New Year's fires, superstitious (pagan) meals, impersonations of the Devil, and irreverent carols.¹⁸

DECLINE · With the Reformation in the sixteenth century there naturally came a sharp change in the Christmas celebration for many countries in Europe. The Sacrifice of the Mass—the very soul of the feast—was suppressed. The Holy Eucharist, the liturgy of the Divine Office, the sacramentals and ceremonies all disappeared. So did the colorful and inspiring processions, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. In many countries all that remained of the once rich and glorious religious festival

was a sermon and a prayer service on Christmas Day.¹⁹ Although the people kept many of their customs alive, the deep religious inspiration was missing, and consequently the "new" Christmas turned more and more into a feast of good-natured reveling.

On the other hand, some groups, including the German Lutherans, preserved a tender devotion to the Christ Child and celebrated Christmas in a deeply spiritual way within their churches, hearts, and homes.²⁰

In England the Puritans condemned even the reduced religious celebration that was held in the Anglican Church after the separation from Rome. They were determined to abolish Christmas altogether, both as a religious and as a popular feast. It was their contention that no feast of human institution should ever outrank the Sabbath (Sunday); and as Christmas was the most important of the non-Sunday festivals, they directed against it all their attacks of fierce indignation. Pamphlets were published denouncing Christmas as pagan, and its observance was declared to be sinful. In this anti-Christmas campaign these English sects were much encouraged by the example of similar groups in Scotland, where the celebration of the feast was forbidden as early as 1583, and punishment inflicted on all persons observing it.²¹

When the Puritans finally came to political power in England, they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas. The year 1642 saw the first ordinances issued forbidding church services and civic festivities on Christmas Day. In 1644, the monthly day of fast and penance was appointed for December 25.²² The people, however, paid scant attention to these orders, and continued their celebrations. There was thus inaugurated a great campaign of two years' duration (1645-1647). Speeches, pamphlets and other publications, sermons and discussions were directed against the celebration of Christmas, calling it "antichrist-Mass, idolatry, abomination," and similar names. Following this barrage of propaganda, Parliament on June 3, 1647, ordained that the Feast of Christmas (and other holidays) should no longer be observed under pain of punishment. On December 24, 1652, an act of Parliament again reminded the public that "no observance shall be had on the five-and-twentieth of December, commonly called Christmas day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches in respect thereof."²³

Each year, by order of Parliament, town criers went through the streets a few days before Christmas, reminding their fellow citizens that "Christmas day and all other superstitious festivals" should not be observed, that market should be kept and stores remain open on December 25.²⁴

During the year 1647 popular riots broke out in various places against the law suppressing Christmas, especially in London, Oxford, Ipswich, Canterbury, and the whole county of Kent. In Oxford there was a "world of skull-breaking"; in Ipswich the festival was celebrated "with some loss of life"; in Canterbury "the mob mauled the mayor, broke all his windows as well as his bones, and put fire to his doorsteps."²⁵ An ominous note was sounded against the republican Commonwealth at a meeting of ten thousand men from Kent and Canterbury who passed a solemn resolution saying that "if they could not have their Christmas day, they would have the King back on his throne again."²⁶

The government, however, stood firm and proceeded to break up Christmas celebrations by force of arms. People were arrested in many instances but were not punished beyond a few hours in jail.²⁷ Anglican ministers who decorated their churches and held service on Christmas Day were removed from their posts and replaced by men of softer fiber.²⁸ Slowly and relentlessly, the external observance of Christmas was extinguished. December 25 became a common workday, and business went on as usual. But in spite of these repressive measures many people still celebrated the day with festive meals and merriment in the privacy of their homes.

REVIVAL IN ENGLAND · When the old Christmas eventually returned with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, it was actually a "new" Christmas. The spiritual aspect of the feast was now left mostly to the care of the ministers in the church service on Christmas Day. What was observed in the home consisted of a more shallow celebration in the form of various nonreligious amusements and of general reveling.²⁹ Instead of the old carols in praise of the Child of Bethlehem, the English people observed Christmas with rollicking songs in praise of "plum pudding, goose, capon, minced pie and roast beef."³⁰ However, a spirit of good

will to all and of generosity to the poor ennobled these more worldly celebrations of the great religious feast. Two famous descriptions of this kind of popular celebration are found in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and in Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*.

The singing of hymns and carols, which had been suppressed by the Puritans, found only a slow and restricted revival in England. Even as late as 1823, an English collector of Christmas lore, William Hone (1842), wrote in his *Ancient Mysteries* that carols were considered as "something past" and had no place in the nineteenth century.³¹ Meanwhile, a few religious carols had been written and soon became favorites among the English-speaking people. The most famous of these are "While shepherds watched their flocks by night" (Nahum Tate, 1715) and "Hark the herald angels sing" (Charles Wesley, 1788).

CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA · To the North American continent the Christmas celebration was brought by the missionaries and settlers from the various European nations. The Spaniards established it in their possessions in the sixteenth century, the French in Canada in the seventeenth century. The feast was celebrated with all the splendor of liturgical solemnity and with the traditional customs of the respective nationalities in Florida, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, in Canada, and in the territory of the present State of Michigan.

In the colonies of New England, however, the unfortunate and misdirected zeal of the Puritans against Christmas persisted far into the nineteenth century. Christmas remained outlawed until the second half of the last century.³²

The Pilgrim fathers worked as usual on their first Christmas Day in America (1620), although they observed the most rigid Sabbath rest on the preceding day, which was Sunday.³³ December 25 until 1856 was a common workday in Boston, and those who refused to go to work on Christmas Day were often dismissed. In New England, factory owners would change the starting hours on Christmas Day to five o'clock in order that workers who wanted to attend a church service would have to forego it or else be dismissed for being late for work. As late as 1870, classes were held in the public schools of Boston on Christ-

mas Day, and any pupil who stayed at home to observe the feast was gravely punished, even shamed by public dismissal.³⁴

It was not until immigrants from Ireland and from continental Europe arrived in large numbers toward the middle of the last century that Christmas in America began to flourish. The Germans brought the Christmas tree. They were soon joined by the Irish, who contributed the ancient Gaelic custom of putting lights in the windows. All Catholic immigrants, of course, brought the crib, their native carols and hymns, the three Masses on Christmas Day, and the religious obligation of attending Mass and abstaining from work on the Feast of the Nativity.³⁵

Very soon their neighbors, charmed by these unusual but attractive innovations, followed their example and made many of these customs their own. For some years, however, many clergymen continued to warn their congregations against celebrating Christmas with these "new" customs. But eventually a powerful surge of enthusiasm from people of all faiths swept resistance away. New Englanders especially were so won over by this friendly, charming way of celebrating Christmas that a revival of deeper and richer observance followed in many of their churches. One by one, the best of the old traditions were lovingly studied, revived, and became again common practice. Catholics and Protestants co-operated, uniting in a sincere effort to restore the beauties of a truly Christian celebration of the Nativity.³⁶

NAMES AND GREETING

LITURGICAL NAMES · The original Latin names for Christmas are: *Festum Nativitatis Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ) and the shorter form, *Dies Natalis Domini* (the Birthday of Our Lord).

From these Latin names most nations obtained their popular terms for the Christmas feast: *Il Natale* in Italy, *La Navidad* in Spain, *Natal* in Portugal, *Nadal* in southern France, *Nadolig* in Wales (and probably the Gaelic *Nollaig*, as well). The Greek *Genethlia* means "Nativity," as do the names for Christmas in Hungarian (*Karácsony*) and in most of the Slavic languages: *Boze Narodzenie* (God's Birth) in Polish; *Rozhdestvo Khrista* (Christ's Birth) in Russian and Ukrainian.³⁷

The French word *Noël* can be explained as either coming from the Latin *natalis* (birthday) or from the word *nowel* which means "news." In an old English Christmas verse the angel says:

*I come from hevin to tell
The best nowellis that ever befell.*

It is possible that both explanations are right. *Noël* and *nowel* may be words of different origin that have become identical in meaning because they are pronounced the same.³⁸

POPULAR NAMES · The English word Christmas is based on the same pattern as the old names for other feast days in the liturgical year, such as Michaelmas, Martinmas, Candlemas. The first mention of the name, "Christes Maesse," dates from the year 1038. It means "the Mass of Christ." The English nation (as did all Christian nations at the time) acknowledged the Sacrifice of the Mass as the most important part of the Christmas celebration. For instance, the word in the Dutch language was *Kersmis* (the Mass of Christ); the old Dutch form is *Kerstes-misse* or *Kersmisse*, the German, *Christmesse*.

The German word for Christmas, *Weihnacht* or, in the plural form, *Weihnachten*, means "the blessed (or holy) night." Similar terms meaning "the holy night" are used in some Slavic languages (Czech, Slovak, Yugoslavian). The Lithuanian word *Kaledos* is derived from the verb *Kaledoti* (to beg, to pray) and has the meaning "Day of Prayer."

YULE · The origin of the word yule is disputed. Some scholars say it comes from the old Germanic word *Iol* (*Iul*, *Giul*), meaning a turning wheel (in this instance the sun wheel rising after the winter solstice). A better explanation, however, might be the Anglo-Saxon word *geol* (feast). Since the greatest popular feast in pre-Christian times was the celebration of the winter solstice, the whole month of December was called *geola* (feast month). This name was preserved in the English and German languages, and later applied to the Feast of Christmas: Yule in English, and *Jul* in German.³⁹

MERRY CHRISTMAS · When this greeting was originally used, the word merry did not mean “joyful, hilarious, gay,” as it does today. In those days it meant “blessed, peaceful, pleasant,” expressing spiritual joys rather than earthly happiness. It was thus used in the famous phrase “Merry England.”

The well-known carol “God rest you merry, gentlemen” is an excellent example of the original meaning of merry. The position of the comma clearly shows the true meaning (that the word is not an adjective describing “gentlemen”), and therefore is not “God rest you, joyful gentlemen,” but “God rest you peacefully, gentlemen.”⁴⁰

LITURGY

THE VIGIL OF CHRISTMAS · The Mass of December 24 is not the original vigil Mass of the feast, but was inserted later, during the fifth century. The actual vigil Mass, following the night service of prayer, was the midnight Mass at St. Mary Major, which is now the first Mass of Christmas Day. Another unusual feature of this Mass is its joyful and festive character. Unlike the other vigils, in which the penitential note is stressed, the Mass of the Christmas vigil is jubilant, filled with holy joy. That the vestments are of penitential color appears almost an incongruity when one studies the Mass text.⁴¹

The spirit of this joyful and jubilant vigil has asserted itself in the observance of the faithful through all the past centuries. In the countries of central Europe people just could not see how this day should be as strict and painful a fast as other fast days of penitential character. While gladly keeping abstinence from meat all through the day, they felt justified in reducing the strictness of fasting as to the amount of food. Thus a legitimate custom of “joyful fast” (*jeiunium gaudiosum*) was established in such countries for this one day of the year.⁴²

THREE MASSES · A custom that reaches back to the early centuries of Christianity is the celebration of three Masses on the Feast of the Nativity. It was originally reserved to the pope alone, and did not become universal until the end of the first millennium