

Sacraments and Sacred Seasons:

The Worship of the Church

Symbols, Rituals, and Sacraments

When Does a Sign Become a Symbol?

We are all familiar with signs that use words. Our days are filled with word signs telling us to stop, to go, and to be careful. Some signs point us in certain directions or urge us to buy certain products that are, in turn, sold inside stores with blinking neon signs out front. Word signs, as we usually think of them, are a method of communicating simple, direct messages.

Other familiar signs do not use words at all. These signs speak to us in moving and powerful ways. For example:

- A small, inexpensive gift takes on much more significance than the price tag ever suggests when given to a person for whom we care deeply.
- A young person's jacket may be ordinary, but put a big letter on it, and it represents not only identification with a school but also a personal sense of worth and accomplishment.
- The sun sets every day. When we watch a sunset with a loved one, however, the moment might be remembered forever.

Such experiences and situations in which apparently ordinary events and objects take on extraordinary meaning are what symbols are all about. A symbol is a special kind of sign that helps us give expression to experiences and meanings that are simply too big for words.

Rituals: Symbolic Actions

Symbols are usually objects such as rings, flowers, keepsakes, and so on. But for many occasions, simple objects will not do when we try to convey more profound and complex messages. For example, when we want to tell someone we love him or her, we need to do something more to communicate the way we feel. We make regular phone calls, write letters, embrace, hold hands, and kiss. When we

feel great joy, we do not sit down and write about it, we jump up and shout. When our symbols include actions, and when those actions are repeatedly used for a commonly understood purpose, we call them rituals. Rituals are combinations of objects, actions, and words that have particularly rich symbolic value and power.

To be effective, our rituals must be similarly understood and valued by all those involved. For instance, a birthday celebration is a ritual that can be understood and enjoyed by almost everyone. We often see this in restaurants when one person in a private gathering is presented with a birthday cake and all the patrons spontaneously join in singing the birthday song. Rituals have the power to draw people, even strangers, together. They are a central and defining element in the formation of virtually all communities, including families. Rituals are also at the heart of Catholic Christian identity and community.

Natural Events as Sacramental Moments

As the examples of rings and hugs suggest, we often use symbols and rituals in our relationships. Imagine, then, how much more this special language might be needed for expressing the wonderful but often mysterious relationship that people have with God.

For believers, all of nature is a symbol of God's power and love—an expression of who God is and what God wishes for us. Believers can glimpse something of God in even the smallest natural events, such as a flower's perfume, sunlight on a forest floor, the cry of a baby, or the touch of a loved one. No believer can honestly deny that we can touch and be touched by sacred mystery when admiring a sunset or enjoying the view from a mountaintop. To deny this experience is to deny that all creation is charged with the presence of its Creator.

Whenever sacred mystery is revealed in the wondrous and heartfelt moments in life, we can legitimately call these moments sacramental. The word *sacramental* is based on a Latin word meaning "sacred." In other words, these moments are particularly God-charged and so can touch people profoundly, often changing their lives.

Believers in nearly all religions have recognized that some things in nature have particular potential for symbolically conveying profound meaning—meaning that can be immediately sensed by almost everyone. Examples include fire, water, stone, bread, wine, and light. When religions use such things to convey religious significance symbolically, these objects are said to be sacramental.

Having identified the basic nature and power of symbols and rituals to convey religious meaning, we can begin to explore the meaning of those special ritual actions of the Church that we call the sacraments.

Sacraments: Celebrations of the Past, Present, and Future

We can easily recognize occasions in life that are so memorable and so profound that we feel an almost automatic need to recognize and celebrate them as sacred. Some obvious examples are the birth of a child, the coming of age when individuals are granted adult freedoms and responsibilities, and marriage. These moments in life are not only special when we first experience them but also so important that we often feel the need to recall and celebrate them for years afterward.

Let's take a nonreligious event as an example. Each year we have birthday parties for ourselves and our loved ones. What are we doing?

- Certainly we are remembering the past event of a birth. We hear the familiar stories surrounding this great moment—the time of day, what the weather was like, any unusual circumstances involved, and so on.
- Yet we are doing more than just remembering that past moment. We are also celebrating what we have become during the years since then. So we talk about how much we have grown—physically, of course, but also mentally and emotionally. In other words, we celebrate who we are now.
- We are also looking forward to what we will become or hope to become: "I wonder if I'll get that promotion next year." "Only a few more years, and we'll be celebrating our silver anniversary!"

So, along with the past and the present, we look to the future. We celebrate all the memorable moments in our life with reference to these three dimensions: we remember the past, we celebrate the present, and we point toward the future.

Historic Religious Events Relived Today

Most religious celebrations are based on the human need to remember profound events from the past, to find ways to celebrate those moments in the present, and to give a sense of promise and hope to the future. Often the historic moments that are being recalled and celebrated occurred for the first time in the lives of the founders or of the early believers of the religion. These events, in turn, take on profound significance in the life of later believers.

For example, Passover and Pentecost are two of Judaism's major religious feasts. The historical basis of the feast of Passover is, of course, the escape from slavery in Egypt by the Israelite ancestors of the Jews. The celebration of Passover recalls that historical event, reminds Jews of their personal liberation through the saving acts of Yahweh, and gives the loyal Jew a sense of hope that one day all the promises of Yahweh will be fulfilled. Similarly, Pentecost recalls the historical giving of the Law to Moses, helps the Jews celebrate their present gratitude for the Law, and enables them to renew their commitment to live out the statutes of the Law in the future.

The major point to be stressed in the following discussion is that the religious rituals we know as the sacraments have three fundamental purposes:

- to recall profound religious events of the past
- to allow current believers to experience and to celebrate the reality and power of those events in their own life today
- to provide the hope and direction that will sustain believers in the future

Jesus as the Primary Sacrament of the Church

For the early Christian believers—those who walked with Jesus, who lived and ate with him, and who experienced his death and Resurrection—the encounter with Jesus was the most powerful religious event they had ever experienced. In meeting Jesus, believers gained a tremendous sense of having met God. Certainly many of the people of Jesus' time had already experienced God through nature and through various human encounters, but they had never experienced godliness as fully as they did in this person Jesus. Although many were devout Jews—people who had their own history, religious traditions, and sacred memories—they had never encountered God in such an astounding way as they did now.

The Scriptures make it clear that as Jesus taught, preached, and healed both broken hearts and crippled bodies, his impact on the disciples was powerful. Yet Jesus' effect on them was even more profound after they witnessed his death and then experienced him alive again and present among them after his Resurrection. In this experience of Jesus' death and Resurrection, the members of the early Church recognized Jesus for the first time for what he truly was: God fully present in human flesh. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

The believers of Jesus' time experienced him as the perfect sacrament of God; that is, Jesus served as the perfect physical, concrete symbol, or image, of the living God.

After his time on earth, however, Jesus became present to people in a new way. Now Jesus was present through his Spirit, which continues to enliven and encourage the community of Christian believers. Just as Jesus is the sacrament of God, so the Church is the sacrament of Jesus—the outward, physical expression of the risen Jesus.

The Seven Catholic Sacraments

The Church is most clearly the sacrament of Jesus in its sacramental life. Catholics believe that the sacraments of the Church are rooted historically in the life and teachings of Jesus. The sacraments celebrate the past, the present, and the future. They allow Christians to recall Jesus, to "re-present" him—that is, to connect powerfully with him in the present—and then to redirect their life in light of his presence. For example:

- Jesus gave an entirely new meaning to the Jewish Passover meal, which he shared with the Apostles at the Last Supper. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Catholic Church recalls that special meal.
- The Eucharist is not just a remembrance of the historical event, however. In the Eucharist, the believers who are gathered experience Jesus' real presence by sharing the consecrated bread and wine.
- The Eucharist always points Christians to the future. Nourished by their sharing of the Lord's presence in the consecrated bread and wine, the believers renew their commitment to work toward the unity required if the Kingdom of God is to be fully realized.

Through the centuries, Christians have surrounded the Eucharist with additional symbols arising from various cultural influences. The basic sacramental action of the shared meal, however, remains unchanged.

Catholics believe that in their sacraments they encounter God's grace in special ways. Grace can be defined as the unconditional and undeserved love of God for people. Catholic Christians believe that the grace of God is nowhere more available and more recognizable than in the Church's celebration of its sacraments.

Given all that has been said to this point, we can now define the sacraments as the Catholic Church celebrates them: Catholic sacraments are the religious celebrations through which the community of faith does the following:

- recalls the teachings and actions of Jesus
- experiences the grace of God now present through a personal encounter with the risen Jesus
- gains confidence and a sense of direction in its efforts to live out Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God

The Number of Sacraments

One of the historical disagreements between the various Christian churches is the question of the number of valid sacraments. For example, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther accepted only Baptism and the Eucharist. He believed that only these two sacraments had clear roots in the Scriptures. Many Protestant churches follow this same line of thought. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church, relying on Tradition as well as on the Scriptures, identifies seven sacraments. Although noteworthy, these different Christian teachings and practices are not nearly as divisive as they once were. Current discussions between Catholics and Protestants display much agreement on many sacramental issues.

In any case, the seven Catholic sacraments flow from the teachings and actions of Jesus as follows:

1. Jesus experienced a particular kind of baptism and later called all his followers to an even more special kind of rebirth. This event is recalled and celebrated in the sacrament of Baptism.
2. Jesus sent his Spirit upon people and called them to witness through that Spirit to the presence of a loving God in their midst. Catholics recall that event and celebrate it anew in the sacrament of Confirmation.
3. Jesus broke bread and shared wine with those he loved, and he told them that the bread and wine are his body and blood. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Church celebrates Jesus' continuing presence.
4. Jesus valued marriage and prayed that nothing would destroy the union of love that Christian marriage celebrates. The Catholic Church remembers that value and celebrates the permanent union of man and woman in the sacrament of Matrimony.
5. Jesus recognized that some persons have a specific role to play in the life of the community of faith, a role of leadership and of a particular kind of service. Catholics recall and celebrate that value in the sacrament of Holy Orders, the special anointing of the priesthood.
6. Jesus constantly forgave others and called all his followers to the same willingness to forgive and accept those who may fail in their efforts to love. In the sacrament of Reconciliation (also called the sacrament of Penance), the Catholic Church remembers that attitude, celebrates the liberation from sin of its members, and reaches out to others.
7. Finally, Jesus healed the sick and promised his followers that not even death could keep them from the fullness of life that he offers. Catholics remember that promise and face their own sicknesses

and death with the strength gained from the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

The Church celebrates all these profound values and teachings through the rich and powerful symbols and rituals of the sacraments. As a result, Catholics move into their future as stronger, better, more hopeful Christians.

More Than Memories of the Past

An essential concept in the Catholic understanding of the sacraments is that they are not simply recollections of past events but representations of those events in the life of believers today. Jesus died nearly two thousand years ago, but he also rose from the dead, and he promised that he would be with us "always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Jesus is present, here, among us.

Catholics believe that in the sacraments and in a special way in the consecrated elements at Mass, the risen Jesus is present more clearly than at any other time. In other words, the sacraments do what religious rituals are meant to do: they allow persons to reach to the depths of life rather than merely bob on its surface. Catholics believe that the seven sacraments help them reach to the depths of their faith experience of Jesus and there meet God.

The Communal Experience of the Sacraments

Earlier we learned that rituals and celebrations can be effective only if they are understood, valued, and genuinely engaged in by these persons sharing them. Imagine, for example, a birthday party at which most of the guests don't care for the one celebrating the birthday.

The same can be said of the sacraments: They are God-charged moments that can touch people and change their life, but only if they have the eyes to see and the ears to hear (Mark 8:18), as Jesus said. Catholics who experience the sacraments as empty and meaningless might check to see whether their understanding of the sacraments is correct and complete.

We turn now from our concentration on the celebrations that make up the sacramental life of the Catholic Church to a discussion of the annual cycle of religious feasts and seasons that serves as the broad context of the communal worship of Catholics.

Celebrating with Sacred Seasons

God Revealed in Nature

Imagine yourself as a cave dweller living tens of thousands of years ago. Put yourself in the place of a prehistoric hunter out alone at

dusk, gazing in wonder at the moon's rising, yet having none of our modern scientific explanations for what is happening. As an early human, how would you explain the mysteries of creation?

We can begin to find an answer to that question by reflecting on how people typically react to natural events. When a snowfall blankets the earth, bringing with it incredible beauty and deep stillness, we will often hear people say, "God, how beautiful!" Similarly, when the springtime sun warms skin that has been covered for months by winter clothing, northerners especially will sigh, "My God, how good it is to be alive!" When a long-awaited rainstorm eases the pain of a drought, farmers immediately want to shout, "Thank God!"

Even when nature seems to turn against humanity, people find the hand of God at work. A hurricane smashes into an island and kills thousands. A volcano spews forth molten lava, burning and crushing homes in its path. A tornado rips apart a neighborhood. An earthquake devastates whole sections of a city, leaving thousands dead or homeless. In response, people search their heart and mind for answers to the haunting question, "Why? My God, why?"

If the workings of nature can put modern people in touch with sacred mystery, we can begin to appreciate the religious response of prehistoric humans to such events: our early ancestors saw gods at work behind every event in nature. In fact, most religions—early or modern—have been sensitive to the revelation of God within nature.

Developing a Sense of Time

As history progressed, people recognized nature's cycles. They became increasingly conscious of the repeating seasons and of the predictable movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Based on their observations of natural cycles, humans slowly developed the notion of time. The idea that ancient people did not know about time may seem impossible. In our society we are so concerned about being "on time" that a historical era in which no sense of time even existed is hard for us to imagine. Yet the whole notion of time only gradually developed out of people's growing awareness of natural cycles as well as out of their changing social needs. For example, when humans took up farming, they had to determine the best time to plant and to harvest crops to avoid the risk of damage by floods or frosts. Our familiar units of time developed along the following lines:

The day. Throughout history, the notion of a twenty-four-hour day evolved based on observations of the sun. For us, the official start of a day is midnight, but this was not always the case. Originally people measured the day from one sunrise to another or from one sunset to another. Jewish holy days, for example, last from one

evening to the next. Then again, we often talk about the morning as the start of a new day.

The week. Eventually early cultures began to think in terms of units of time larger than days. The concept of a seven-day week, for example, was based mainly on the Jewish story of Creation, which is found in the Bible. According to the account in the Book of Genesis, God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh. This led the Jews to establish the weekly holy day called the Sabbath, from the word for "rest." We will have more to say about the Sabbath a little later.

The month. The unit of time that we call a month was based on observations of the moon's changing phases. The lunar cycle lasts approximately twenty-nine and one-half days. So the earliest unit that we now call a month included either twenty-nine or thirty days. Throughout history, people linked many religious observances to this monthly cycle. As we will see later, our modern approach to determining the date of Easter is directly related to the lunar cycle.

The year. When people gradually recognized the need for a unit of time longer than the month, the answer seemed obvious. They could add up enough lunar months to make a year. The problem was that lunar cycles do not match the cycle of the seasons. Eventually the lunar calendar for a year falls out of step with the growing seasons. Clearly, another natural cycle was needed that would be a more practical and predictable standard for figuring out when to plant or harvest crops. People eventually realized that the position of the earth in relation to the sun follows a consistent pattern. Based on this predictable cycle, a period of 365 days became the unit of time that we call a solar year. Days were then added to the lunar months to fit them to a solar year.

Religions and the Passage of Time

Why discuss the cycles of nature, the changing seasons, and the evolving concept of time? Almost all religions have developed major religious celebrations centered on their central beliefs and on key moments in their histories. These celebrations are, in turn, often linked to the cycles of nature. The result is an annual cycle of religious celebrations that are considered sacred days or sacred seasons.

Occasionally a religion will take a nonreligious festival or the celebration of another religion and give it a new religious significance. For example, we earlier noted the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Before the Jews existed as a people, Pentecost was a springtime festival celebrating the harvest of the winter crop. Jewish rabbis then

began to associate this celebration with the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. What was once a celebration with little religious significance thus became an important religious feast. As we will see in a moment, the Christian celebration of Christmas has a similar history.

The Liturgical Year of the Church

The Church has evolved a complex series of religious seasons and special feasts based on the life, death, Resurrection, and Gospel message of Jesus. Although not organized on the basis of our modern solar calendar, these seasons and feasts do follow an annual cycle. The purpose of this cycle of worship is to help Christians touch daily the heart of their faith—the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, risen and alive among us today. This annual cycle of religious feasts and seasons is known as the Church's liturgical year. The word *liturgy* is based on a Greek word meaning "public," so the term *liturgical* refers to the public or communal worship practiced by a religion.

The Liturgical Year at a Glance

Just as our solar year is divided into units of time—days, weeks, months, and seasons—so also is the liturgical year divided into recognizable units of time. The Church year includes five major seasons that unfold in this order:

- Advent
- Christmas
- Ordinary Time, which is divided into two parts—the first part falls between the Sunday after Epiphany and Lent; the second part follows Pentecost
- Lent
- Easter

The Liturgical Year

Easter falls anywhere from late March to late April, so the dates for Ash Wednesday and Pentecost also vary from year to year.

Within this annual cycle, many individual days celebrate important events in the life and ministry of Jesus.

- Every Sunday is dedicated to Jesus and the memory of his death and Resurrection.
- Certain Sundays are recognized as particularly significant, as are a few weekdays during the year.
- Most weekdays of the year are dedicated to the memory of saints who in special ways witnessed to the Gospel values of Jesus.

The following insights into the specific days and seasons of the Church year can make our experience of the Church's liturgy more rich and satisfying.

The Liturgical Year: A Closer Look

The Season of Advent

Keep in mind during our discussion of the Church's liturgical year that our normal calendar year and the liturgical year of the Church do not begin at the same time. We immediately think of the new year as beginning on January 1. The Church's liturgical year, however, begins with the season of Advent, which starts four Sundays before Christmas. During these weeks, the church prepares to celebrate the coming of Jesus by focusing on scriptural themes related to the coming of the Messiah.

The Season of Christmas

The season of Christmas begins, of course, with the joyous celebration of Christmas on December 25. As a whole, this season continues the celebration of the early life of Jesus and the growing awareness by the early Church of his identity as the Son of God. As early as the fourth century, the Church recognized and celebrated Christmas as a special day. Remember the comment earlier that the Jewish feast of Pentecost had its roots in a relatively nonreligious celebration? Our celebration of Christmas also has borrowed some characteristics from non-Christian customs. Perhaps by coincidence, the celebration of Christmas fell about the same time as the Roman feast of the Invincible Sun and customary observances based on the position of the sun in the midwinter sky. Out of this mix of cultural and religious practices, Christians developed such customs as giving gifts, decorating homes with greenery and lights, and so on. Even the symbol of the Christmas tree has its roots in pagan custom.

The Christmas season closes with the feast of the Epiphany. The word *epiphany* is based on a Greek word meaning "manifestation." On this day and during the period immediately following it, the Church celebrates the first awakenings of people to the special identity of Jesus as God. In the Western churches—that is, the Christian churches of which most Christians of Western cultures are members—the Epiphany emphasizes the first recognition by non-Jewish people of Jesus' identity. The Gospel story of the Magi's visit to the infant Jesus illustrates this aspect:

The Season of Ordinary Time—First Part

At this point in the Church's liturgical year, we have the first part of the season of Ordinary Time, which lasts from Epiphany to the beginning

of Lent. The length of time can vary depending on when Easter falls in a given year. During Ordinary Time, which is also known as the Season of the Year, the church concentrates on the life and teachings of Jesus rather than on the central events of his birth and Resurrection. Christians as individuals reflect on the qualities of Jesus that should characterize their daily life.

The Season of Lent

The fourth major season of the Church's liturgical year is Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, which occurs forty days before Easter Sunday, not counting Sundays. Lent reminds Christians of two events: the forty days Jesus spent in prayer in the desert after his baptism in the Jordan River and the forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt. A solemn time during the Church's cycle of seasons, Lent helps Christians recall and reflect on all the events that led up to the world's rejection and ultimate execution of Jesus. As individuals, believers reflect as well on those areas of their life in which they have failed to live out the values of Jesus.

Yet Lent is not meant to be a totally sad time. The primary purpose of Lent is to help the Church and its members properly prepare for the celebration of the central Christian mystery—the Resurrection of Jesus. Lent, therefore, does not celebrate pain and suffering but the inevitable triumph of life and hope over death and despair.

The season of Lent has particular relevance in regard to the celebration of Confirmation. Historically, Lent emerged out of the early Church's complex catechumenal approach to the initiation of new members. The third period of that process, known as the period of purification and enlightenment, was a time of intensely prayerful, immediate preparation before the reception of the three sacraments of initiation—Baptism, what we now know as Confirmation, and the Eucharist. The contemporary Church has recovered the catechumenal approach to initiation with the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972. The Church now requires that *all* initiation of new members—including the celebration of Confirmation among adolescents—must be grounded in the theology of the RCIA. That is why in *Confirmed in a Faithful Community*, the third period of the preparation process, which we call the period of reflection, immediately precedes the rite of Confirmation and has a particularly prayerful and reflective quality and focus. The period of reflection tries to capture, in ways appropriate to the contemporary adolescent, the earliest and most central meaning of Lent—prayerful preparation for full initiation into the community of faith.

The Season of Easter

Easter Sunday, the most important feast in the Church's cycle of worship, is the start of the fifth major season of the liturgical year—the Easter season. Just as the Jewish feast of the Passover is a major springtime feast for the Jews, so the central Christian feast of Easter is celebrated in the spring of the year, the time of new life. Easter does not fall on the same day each year as do Christmas and Epiphany. For complicated historical reasons, Christians celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the first full moon of springtime. This date can fall anywhere from late March to late April. Curiously, a part of our worship is still linked to the changing phases of the moon.

The Easter season lasts fifty days and is a period of great joy and hope. During this time the readings at Mass focus on the disciples' encounters with Jesus after his Resurrection from the dead. The entire Church, it seems, is joined in spirit with Thomas, the Apostle who initially doubted that Jesus had been raised and who later joyfully exclaimed in meeting him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

The Easter season lasts until the feast of Pentecost, which is celebrated on the Sunday that falls on the fiftieth day after Easter. Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Spirit upon the group of frightened disciples who had gathered following the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Traditionally it is said that the Church was born on that day, a Church that nearly two thousand years later continues to celebrate these marvelous events.

The Season of Ordinary Time—Second Part

The second part of the season of Ordinary Time begins the day after Pentecost and lasts until the beginning of Advent and the start of a new year in the Church. Several of these weeks of Ordinary Time focus on the divinity of Jesus. The last Sunday of the year, for instance, celebrates the feast of Christ the King. During the closing weeks of Ordinary Time, the Church celebrates the belief that the risen Jesus will one day come again in glory. In other words, Christians renew their sense of awaiting the coming of the Lord. We can best sum up the spirit of the Church's worship during this season by quoting the final words of the Bible:

The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I [the Lord] am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

(Rev. 22:20–21)

At the close of the liturgical year, Christians renew their sense of awaiting the coming of the Lord and in that spirit enter into Advent. The marvelous cycle of the liturgical year begins anew.

Sunday: Christians Dedicate the Week to God

We must make special mention of the central role of the Eucharist on Sunday in the Church's worship. Christians throughout the world and since the earliest days of the Church have recognized the obligation of believers to worship together on the first day of each week. Many Catholics are so accustomed to following this practice that they may not even know where it comes from. So let's briefly explore the origins of Sunday worship.

We noted earlier that the Jews consecrated their week to God through Sabbath worship. From early in their history, the Jews have regarded the Sabbath, which extends from sunset on Friday until nightfall on Saturday, as a sacred time. Absolutely no work was allowed on this day of rest. During their pre-Christian history, some Jews even allowed themselves to be slaughtered rather than break the Sabbath law by taking up arms against their enemies. When we hear the commandment to "keep holy the Sabbath," we must remember this history to gain a sense of the importance of this law in the minds of the Jews.

Most of the earliest Christians were, of course, Jews. After they had experienced the Resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week—what we know as Sunday—they almost immediately began to gather on that day each week to celebrate the Resurrection and to prepare for what they expected to be the almost immediate return of the risen Jesus. For a time, many of the Jewish converts continued to attend Sabbath worship with the Jews and then join with Christians for worship on Sunday.

This Christian worship on Sunday was simple compared with what Christians experience today. Believers gathered in small neighborhood communities for prayer and the breaking and sharing of bread. The worship would often take place very early in the morning because Sunday was an ordinary workday at that time, and many Christians had jobs; also, the act of gathering at the time of the rising sun to honor the risen Son was a strong symbol in itself.

In the beginning these weekly gatherings were celebrations of Easter. Only when Christians realized that the risen Lord would not be returning soon did they set aside one Sunday of the year as a special celebration of the Resurrection. Naturally they associated the Resurrection with the Jewish feast of Passover. So, even today, these two religious holy days occur at nearly the same time every year.

Parts of the Jewish synagogue service were gradually incorporated into Sunday worship. Later, as the New Testament began to emerge, readings from it also became part of the worship. Throughout the centuries, of course, the celebration of the Mass has taken on ever greater complexity. Incidentally, since 1967 the Catholic Church has considered the time period from Saturday evening through Sunday as appropriate for attending a Sunday Mass. This change reflects the original Jewish understanding of a day lasting from one sundown to the next.

Right from the beginning of Christianity, believers recognized Sunday worship as a special responsibility. Society did not acknowledge Sunday as a special day, however, until the Roman emperor in the fourth century accepted Christianity as the official religion of the state. At that time, Sunday was established as an official day of rest for the entire Roman Empire. This practice remains somewhat true to this day, although it seems increasingly difficult for many to avoid work on Sundays.

Today Catholic Christians of all ages frequently question the value of Sunday worship. They offer many reasons for this attitude—among them a reluctance to attend Mass merely out of a sense of obligation. Rather than treating Mass as a question of duty, however, believers might be more in touch with the spirit of Sunday worship if they recalled its profound and beautiful history. When Christians gather for worship now, they are in a real and wonderful way gathering in spirit with their fellow believers from the earliest days of the Church until the present. As always, they gather in the sure conviction that they do so not only in the name of the Lord but also in the Lord's presence. "For where two or three are gathered in my name," promised Jesus, "I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20).

A Final Word

What a tremendous responsibility—but also a great gift—it is to participate in passing on the Catholic Tradition to another generation of believers. In doing so, you join that early community of Christians, who in experiencing the Resurrection, were moved by the Spirit of Jesus to proclaim the Good News. On behalf of the Church as a whole, and in a special way on behalf of all the young people you touch through your generous service, thank you. May the Lord continue to bless you and your ministry.

(The material on this background piece is adapted from *Confirmed in a Faithful Community, Catechist's Theology Handbook*, by Thomas Zanzig [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2001], pages 158–177. Copyright © 2001 by Saint Mary's Press.)