

Holy days help draw attention to major mysteries of the faith

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In *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the council fathers wrote:

"Within the cycle of a year, moreover, (the church) unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, not only from his incarnation and birth until his ascension, but also as reflected in the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of a blessed, hoped-for return of the Lord.

"Recalling the mysteries of redemption, the church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present at all times, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold of them and become filled with saving grace."

The constitution goes on to state that through holy days and the feasts commemorating Mary, the church "holds up the most excellent fruit of the redemption" as "a faultless model." Further, through the saints the "church proclaims the paschal mystery as achieved in the saints" and "proposes them to the faithful as examples."

Canon law permits bishops conferences — with approval from the Holy See — to remove the obligations from some of the holy days, or to transfer liturgical observances to Sundays. In the United States, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has opted not to observe the feasts of St. Joseph or St. Peter and Paul, and to move the celebrations of the Epiphany and Corpus Christi to Sundays.

Beginning this year, the U.S. bishops have also removed the holy-day obligations from the feasts of Mary, the Mother of God, the Assumption and All Saints when those solemnities fall on Saturdays or Mondays.

The liturgical calendar currently used by the U.S. Catholic Church is a far cry from that which existed at the birth of the nation, noted Father Thomas P. Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan liturgy office.

"In 1787," Father Mull reported, "we

had as many as 34 holy days."

What has happened since that time is similar to the pattern that has developed since the church's early days, Father Mull continued. Popes or commissions appointed by them have periodically re-examined the list of holy days to "begin to size it down," the priest said.

In some cases, Father Mull added, new solemnities have been added to the list as well.

Such was the case on Dec. 8, 1854, when Pope Pius IX promulgated the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which declares that Mary was born without sin.

Father Mull explained that the decision of whether to drop or add a holy day is based, in part, on the feast's universal significance.

"All (holy days) are important," he noted, "but not all are of equal significance in the universal church."

Thus holy days generally focus on Jesus and Mary. The other holy days feature individuals with universal impact on the church — such as St. Joseph and St. Peter and Paul — or, collectively, all the saints who set a model of holiness for church.

The calendar did not exist in the early church, Father Mull noted. But certain days were set aside as special in the church's early days.

From the beginning, Sunday was the primary holy day, Father Mull observed. Several other days began to stand out as well, such as those associated with Easter: Good Friday, Holy Saturday and the Ascension of Jesus, celebrated at first on Easter itself, then established late in the fourth century as a separate feast 40 days after Easter.

Early in the fourth century, Christmas began to be celebrated as a holy day on Dec. 25. The leading theory for setting it on this date — since scholars acknowledge that the actual date is unknown — is that it was intended to

Liturgical year has its own seasons

One of the recommendations that came out of Vatican II was to revise the church's calendar, which was accomplished in the Roman Calendar of 1969 (promulgated Jan. 1, 1970).

Some traditional feasts were restored in this calendar. Thus, Jan. 1, which had become a commemoration of Jesus' circumcision, was restored to its original purpose: a feast dedicated to Mary, Mother of God.

The new calendar also changed the cycle of readings for Sundays, according to Father Thomas P. Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan liturgy office.

Previously, the same readings were used on Sundays every year. Under the new calendar, however, three cycles of readings are used. They are simply called A, B and C.

The idea behind creating these cycles, Father Mull explained, "is to give Catholics an experience of the whole word of God. The majority of the Bible would be introduced to the community. This opens the richness of the whole message of the Bible to the community."

Each of the cycles emphasizes one of the Synoptic Gospels. Thus Cycle A — the current cycle — presents Matthew; Cycle B, Mark; and Cycle C, Luke. Readings from

John's Gospel are used during the Easter season, and to fill in the final weeks of Mark's year because Mark's Gospel is shorter than the others, Father Mull noted.

The Old Testament readings are selected to agree thematically with the Gospel readings, while the second readings — which do not necessarily follow the thematic lead of the Gospel readings — form a continuum from New Testament readings other than the Gospel, Father Mull observed.

The liturgical year is divided into seasons such as Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. Ordinary time encompasses approximately 34 weeks of the year, running briefly between Christmas and the beginning of Lent, then returning after the Easter season and continuing until the end of the year at the feast of Christ the King in November.

The current liturgical year began Nov. 29, 1992, and continued through Advent and Christmas. It will enter ordinary time (Jan. 17, 1993), then Lent (Feb. 21) and Easter (April 11) before going back into ordinary time (June 6). The current liturgical year will end the week following the feast of Christ the King, meaning that this church year ends on Saturday, Nov. 27.

— Leo Strong

supplant the pagan festival of the sun, celebrated on Dec. 25, according to *Holy Days in the United States: History, Theology, Celebration*, a 1983 book written by the NCCB's Committee on the Liturgy.

Meanwhile, the feast of the Epiphany — the visitation of the Magi — was celebrated on Jan. 6 in the Eastern church at about the same time Christmas was being set at Dec. 25 in Rome. The two feasts became linked as part of the cycle of Christmas by the end of the fourth century, the committee noted in its book.

Father Mull noted that two of the other early feasts were Marian — Mary, Mother of God, and the Assumption.

The Council of Ephesus (431) defined the divine motherhood of Mary, the bishops' committee reported. Following that decision, liturgical feasts began to appear on days as close as possible to Christmas and Epiphany, with the Roman date of Jan. 1 gradually assuming prominence.

The feast evolved away from its Marian nature into a feast of the circumcision of Jesus, but the Roman Calendar of 1969 restored it to its original meaning, the committee noted.

The feast of the Assumption, on the other hand, grew out of a memorial feast for Mary celebrated by monks in

the Holy Land. This feast of the "dormition," or "falling asleep" of Mary was established on Aug. 15 by Emperor Maurice in 602 A.D.

The dogma of the Assumption of Mary's body and soul into heaven developed out of this feast, and was ultimately defined as dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

All of these holy days, Father Mull observed, serve as reminders throughout the year. He noted that they "all reflect the mystery of eternal life, and the mystery that redemption is always at hand."

Indeed, Father Mull pointed out that holy days have a positive psychological value. Thus he would not be in favor of reducing their number.

"There's a certain psychological comfort that comes from the holy days that tells you to break from your routine to celebrate those days," Father Mull observed. "The fewer we have, the more mundane we become, the less celebrative we become."

TGA

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assigned TGA quotas they were required to meet — either through pledges from parishioners or by dipping into general parish revenues.

For the past two appeals, however, the quota system has been abandoned. Parishes have set their own goals, but have not been required to meet them.

"Nobody has mentioned a return to quotas," D'Agostino said. "Our hope is to at least stabilize this year."

D'Agostino, who became the TGA director Sept. 8, 1992 — after planning for this year's campaign was already completed — noted that he is beginning to study ways of improving next year's TGA.

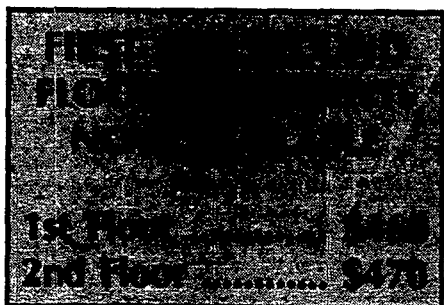
Among those strategies, D'Agostino said, is meeting with pastors and leaders on a regional basis this spring. He also plans to talk with pastors whose parishes have had successful campaigns. He said he hoped to share some of their strategies with other pastors.

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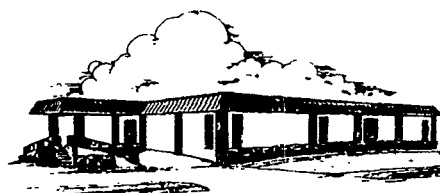


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