

The End and the Beginning of the Church Year

Interlocking Clasps in the Hidden Season

by Michael P. Foley

It may seem strange that in a calendar with “only one” annual cycle of readings, two of the Sundays share virtually the same Gospel. And it may seem stranger still that these two Sundays occur consecutively. The Gospel for the Twenty-Fourth or Last Sunday after Pentecost, taken from Matthew 24:15-35, contains Christ’s twofold description of the destruction of the Temple and the world. That same discourse reemerges the following week on the First Sunday of Advent, in the slightly abridged form in which it appears in the Gospel according to Saint Luke (21:25-33). From the perspective of the worshipper, it makes little difference that these Sundays are at opposite ends of the calendar, since the cyclical recurrence of the liturgical year ensures that they are experienced back-to-back.

Why then this redundancy, especially when there are fewer “slots” for Gospel readings in the traditional Missal? Shouldn’t one of these “slots” have been put to better use? The answer to these questions teaches us much about the providen-

tial nature of liturgical development, the Time After Pentecost, and the season of Advent. And perhaps most interestingly, it reveals a hidden season in the Church year.

Historical Background

An obvious place to begin is how the 1962 calendar took its present shape. Some time during the pontificate of Saint Gregory the Great (590-600), a devastating natural catastrophe (possibly a hurricane) struck Rome in late November. To console the people, the Pope read Luke 21:25-33, which warns of natural portents and “the distress of nations,” and delivered a homily on it. The Pope’s precedent was duly noted by later generations, who assumed (mistakenly, it is believed) that it was his intention to make this Gospel a permanent feature of Advent. Hence it was included in later liturgical books.¹

During that same millennium, the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost served as the capstone to the liturgical year. Originally, it dealt explicitly with the conversion

of the Jews that is to take place at the end of time, and even after its readings were later modified to give the Sunday its current configuration, it continued to explore those themes indirectly.²

A few centuries ago, however, the Church added the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, with its Gospel reading of Matthew 24:15-35, knowing full well that essentially the same Gospel would be read the following “Advent Sunday.” Instead of ending on the “eternal Alliance” that would at last be struck between Gentile and Jew, the Church year would now conclude with “the prophetic description of the dread coming of the Lord, which is to put an end to time and to open eternity.”³

How to Interpret

A cynic looking at these historical data might conclude that the Tridentine calendar has both a false start and a false ending. But were he to do so, he would be neglecting two important considerations, one “aesthetic” or artistic and the other theological. Like the great

cathedrals of Europe, the traditional Roman rite is a work of art; and like any work of art, every element must be understood in context, even authorial “mistakes.” What may be an accident, a later interpolation, or even a defect, can, with or without the author’s intention, contribute to a larger unified whole. Sometimes, these “happy faults” can even be the best or most interesting part of the work. And if this is true on a purely human level (and as a Great Books teacher I can assure you that it is), imagine how much more it is true when the art in question involves the providential guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we must be careful not to confuse historical development with theological meaning—an unfortunately common presumption in a great deal of twentieth-century liturgical scholarship. The historical reasons behind the use of incense in Christian worship, for example, may be quite different from its ongoing symbolic significance. As Saint Gregory the Great would put it, the fact (*factum*) is one thing, the mystery (*mysterium*) another; and although every fact discloses a mystery, the mystery cannot be reduced to the fact.

Time After Pentecost

When we keep in mind these artistic and theological hermeneutics, a startling image emerges, like a figure from the fog: a hidden liturgical season, if you will, that begins around the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, stretches over the Last Sunday after Pentecost and Advent Sunday, and ends on Epiphany. This season, as we shall see, begins in wonder at the eschatological glory and justice of God present in Himself and in His members: the Church Triumphant (the Angels, the Saints, and the bodies of the Elect) as well as the Church Suffering (the poor

souls in Purgatory). Then, it moves to the Church Militant, especially to my own dreadful ill-preparedness for the Last Things. Finally, it conditions me in such a way that I may, God willing, find just cause to say gladly with the Apostle, *Maranatha*—Come, Lord!

To espy this season more clearly, let us first turn to the Time after Pentecost. As both the Bible and Church Fathers attest, there are several distinct periods of sacred history. The age before the Law was replaced by the age under it; and that age, in turn, was closed during the time that Jesus Christ walked upon the face of the earth. Likewise, the age of divine revelation (which ended at the death of the last Apostle) gave way to a different era, the era immediately preceding the Second Coming.

It is that era which the Time After Pentecost liturgically commemorates and that era in which we now find ourselves. Despite the expanse of two thousand years and the plethora of cultural and technological changes that separate us from the Christians who outlived the Beloved Disciple, we are still living in the same age as they, the last age of mankind. Just as Advent symbolizes life before and under the Old Law while the Christmas, Lenten, and Easter seasons

recapitulate the thirty-three-year era of Jesus Christ’s earthly sojourn, the Time after Pentecost corresponds to the penultimate chapter of the story of redemption, the chapter that is currently being written.

Put differently, just as Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church in the Holy Spirit, so too does the Time after Pentecost mark the life of the Church moving through the vicissitudes of history under the protection

and guidance of that same Spirit. It is for this reason that the Epistle readings from this season emphasize the Apostles’ advice to the burgeoning churches of the day while its Gospel readings focus on the kingdom of Heaven and its justice. It is also the reason why the corresponding lessons from the Breviary draw heavily from the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament. All are somehow meant to teach us how to comport our-

selves as citizens of the city of God as we pass through the kingdoms of this world.

The Sanctoral Cycle that concurs with the Time after Pentecost underscores this ecclesiastical focus. Providentially, this is the part of the year with the most saints’ days. Saints are an important component in the Christian landscape, not only because of their capacity to intercede for us, but because they are



Saint Phillip Neri at the Consecration by Joan Llimona

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living proof that a holy, Catholic life is possible in every age.

In fact, the feasts kept during the Time after Pentecost encompass virtually every aspect of Church life. If the saints in general remind us of the goal of holiness, certain saints, such as Saint John the Baptist (June 24 & August 29) and Saints Peter and Paul (June 29), remind us of the role that the hierarchy plays in leading the Church towards that goal. Likewise the feasts of the Temporal Cycle, such as the Feast of the Holy Trinity, Corpus Christi, or the Sacred Heart of Jesus, direct our attention to the explicit dogma, sacramentality, and spirituality of the Church, respectively. Even the physical space consecrated for sacred use is adverted to: significantly, all feasts for the dedication of churches take place during the Time after Pentecost.

This time of year truly is “the time of the Church,” the liturgical period that corresponds to the spotless Bride’s triumphant pilgrimage through the world. Hence the liturgical color of green, the symbol of hope and life.

The Hidden Season

The Time after Pentecost mirrors the “penultimate chapter” of history, as I have called it, because we have it on good authority that the final chapter is the Last Judgment and the creation of a new Heaven and earth. Regardless of whether this cosmic grand finale occurs tomorrow or in a thousand years, it remains urgently relevant to how we live our lives today. Every believer must heed Saint Paul’s admonitions about the

Parousia or coming of the Lord and be ready for the end times.

Consequently, beginning on the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday Mass Propers begin to take on an apocalyptic tone and theme. Verses from the prophets become more common and references to the final manifestation or visitation of Christ more insistent.

Again the Sanctoral Cycle collaborates. In August, there are early salvos across the bow with feasts like the Transfiguration of our Lord (August 6) and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (August 15), both of which give us a hint of the body’s

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final glorification at the Resurrection of the Dead.⁴ Michaelmas (September 29) and the Feast of the Guardian Angels (October 2) likewise point us to the eternal glory of Heaven, as does the Feast of Christ the King (last Sunday of October). All Saints’ Day (November 1) and All Souls’ Day (November 2) direct us to the theme of eternal reward and the end

times (note the Epistle reading from the Book of the Apocalypse on All Saints’ Day). Significantly, these holy days occur mostly during autumn, the season that heralds the end of life.

Finally, this growing sense of apocalyptic anticipation crescendos with the last Sunday after Pentecost, when the Gospel recalls Christ’s ominous prophecies concerning the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the end of the world, when the “remaining elect will be gathered into their glory.”⁵ But this climactic Gospel also marks a shift for me the worshipper. Previously during this

hidden season, I have been ruminating on “a magnificent vision of eternal glory and reward,” both in Christ the King and in His members, the Church triumphant and suffering.⁶ Even on the previous Sunday, depending on the date of Easter, I was happily contemplating how our Savior will “reform the body of our lowliness” to make it like “the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).⁷ But with the Gospel for the Last Sunday, I am now vividly struck by how Doomsday will affect *me* and other members of the Church militant. I like the part about having a glorified body, but will I make it that far? Am I ready for the distress of nations?

Advent

Which brings us to Advent, a curious commingling of joy and penance, of sorrowful violet vestments and jubilant prayers and hymns, of suppressed *Gloria*’s and unsuppressed Alleluia’s, of holding back yet not quite fasting. The historical explanation of this duality is that centuries ago the customs of the Frankish Church, which treated Advent as a mini-Lent, coalesced with those of the Roman Church, which treated Advent as a time of festivity.

But here we again see that history is not the whole of the story. If indeed Advent commemorates the time before Christ, when the world groaned in darkness for its Redeemer and when Israel held up the lamp of hope, then it makes sense Biblically that the sentiments of the Church during this season should be mixed like those of the Patriarchs of old, who were filled with joy by their hope in the Messiah but grieving that because He was not yet here, the Devil still held humanity in bondage.

And theologically, Advent brings to mind not just the coming (*adventus*) of the Lord in humility to Bethlehem but His coming in glory at

the end of time. This double commemoration of the first and second Comings again makes sense Biblically, since the Prophets themselves rarely distinguished between the two (which is one of the reasons why deciphering prophetic literature is so difficult).

Moreover, the Church is teaching us that in order to be ready for the Lord's triumphant return as Judge of the living and the dead, we must prepare as our holy forefathers once did for His nativity. By preparing for Christmas, soberly and vigilantly, we prepare ourselves for our Final Judgment.

In other words, one of the goals of Advent and Christmastide (the second half of the "hidden season") is to use the First Coming to make us ready for the Second. And here again both joy and penance come into play.

The more we are prepared for our Lord's Coming through penance, the more we will truly welcome it, moving beyond our well-deserved sense of unworthiness to an exultation in His arrival. We will know that we are ready for the Parousia when the very mention of it strikes not the slightest trepidation in our hearts, even though we are fully aware of its awesome nature. On the contrary, we will welcome the Day of Wrath with the same joy as welcoming Christmas morning.

Such, in sum, is the prayer of the Church on December 24:

O God, who dost fill us with gladness each year in the expectation of our redemption: grant that Thine

only-begotten Son, whom we joyfully remember as our Redeemer, may be seen by us also without dread when He comes as our Judge, our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son who livest...⁸

What an astonishing aspiration: to have our hearts so thoroughly purified, rectified, and inflamed with the love of God that beholding Him as our Judge in His terrifying glory will bring us no dread but merely the warm joy of greeting Him as if

He were still a Babe in the stable with His mother. Yet that is precisely the aspiration of the Church in her sacred liturgy.

Nor is it unattainable. When a young Saint Aloysius Gonzaga was told on his sickbed that he was going to die, he quoted Psalm 121:1—"I rejoiced

when I heard them say, we shall go into the house of the Lord." And when Saint Thérèse the Little Flower first coughed up blood in her kerchief, indicating that she had the fatal disease tuberculosis, she called it "a joyful thing." Both of these saints were in the prime of youth with a long and lustrous life ahead of them, and so their zeal for death and judgment is all the more impressive.

In any event, it is clear that the question of personal preparedness is not abandoned at the close of the Church year with the Last Sunday after Pentecost but continued into and even heightened by the seasons of Advent and Christmas. The return of the same Gospel discourse (albeit

from a different canonical author) during the First Sunday of Advent underscores this central fact.⁹

Interlocking Harmony

Moreover, both the similarities and the differences between these two Gospels serve as interlocking clasps which serve to unite the bejeweled necklace that is the ecclesiastical calendar. For like a clasp, these Gospel selections have parts that are identical and parts that are different but complementary.

As Saint Augustine points out, Christ's discourses on the destruction of the Temple recounted in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 are essentially in harmony, both occurring in the same context and both having more or the less the same content.¹⁰ In both cases, Jesus makes a remark about the days of the Temple being numbered, and in both cases the Apostles ask for more information. Christ's answer, as Saint Jerome observes, combines three different events: the destruction of the Temple (which took place in August A.D. 70), the Second Coming of Christ, and the end of the world. It is not always easy to distinguish among the three, and indeed it is possible that the Evangelists themselves were not clear on which passages applied to which event.

But there are also differences between the two readings. Part of this is by design of the Evangelists: while both accounts are cryptic and frightening, Matthew's is arguably more so, with eerie phrases like the "abomination of desolation." Luke, on the other hand, contains verses that point more clearly to the destruction of the Temple, such as the prediction that an army shall surround Jerusalem (21:20), an event that occurred when four Roman legions led by the future Emperor Titus camped around the city in April A.D. 70 and laid siege to it.



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Part of the difference, however, is by design of the Church. The Last Sunday reading from Saint Matthew is longer, containing more of Christ's discourse, while the Advent reading from Saint Luke contains only part of the second half of the discourse, omitting several of the frightening details and the clear references to the Roman invasion. When the Matthean excerpt is proclaimed first, the hearer's first response is one of fear or apprehension. When it is followed by the Lukan excerpt the following Sunday, that fear is slightly mitigated. Not only has repetition dulled the initial impact, but the shorter account is less frightening. After confronting us with the awesome facts about the Last Day, the Church slowly prepares us for a joyful appropriation of them. The transition from fear to trust in God's mercy has begun.

Finally, the interlocking quality of



Rest on the Flight to Egypt by Francesco Mancini

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worshipper gets the sense of something overlapping the two seasons, with the last and first Sundays as the double hinge.

the first and last Sundays of the year may be seen in the Collects. The Collects of the first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent are "Stir up" prayers, orations beginning with *Excita* or "stir up" that petition the Lord to arouse either the people or His own power. Sometimes

the prayers are addressed to God the Father, sometimes to the Son. Fitting in neatly with this pattern is the Collect for the Last Sunday after Pentecost, which asks God the Father to stir up (*excitare*) the wills of the faithful that they may receive the greater remedies of His mercy. Highlighting the distinctiveness of these Collects is the fact that there are no others like them in the rest of the Temporal Cycle. Once again the

Conclusion

Father Francis Weiser finds the traditional season of Advent "to be wanting in that harmony and unity which characterizes the other seasons of the ecclesiastical year," in part because it contains "two somewhat opposite trends of thought," a "season of joy" and a "season of penance."¹¹ Weiser's critique is especially curious given that his own excellent work discloses the answer to his dilemma. If indeed Advent is a season about the Second Coming, then what better disposition can there be for the faithful to have than one of both joy and penance: joy at the prospect of eternal peace with our Savior, penance at the thought of one's own unworthiness? Holding in tension these two opposite trends of thought could well be the secret behind the Wise Virgins' vigilance in waiting for the Groom. And the interlocking clasps formed by the end and the beginning of the traditional liturgical year are instrumental in fostering this salutary tension, helping us—as we learn from the Epistle on Advent Sunday—to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ✠



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Notes

- Francis X. Weiser, S.J., *The Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs: The Year of the Lord in Liturgy and Folklore* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 52.
- See Dom Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year*, vol. 11, trans. Dom Laurence Shepherd (St. Bonaventure Publications, 2000), 468-82.
- Guéranger, 483-484.
- For more on this subject, see Michael P. Foley, "Showing the Tree to the Acorn: Feasts About the Resurrection of the Body," *The Latin Mass: The Journal of Catholic Culture and Tradition* 20:3 (Summer 2011), 38-42.
- Weiser, 54.
- Weiser, 54.
- From the Epistle from the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost. If there are more than twenty-four Sundays after Pentecost, Masses from the Time after Epiphany are inserted in between the Mass for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost and the Mass for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (which then becomes the "Last Sunday after Pentecost").
- Collect of the Mass and Breviary.
- For more on "repetition" in the 1962 calendar, see Michael P. Foley, "Divine Do-Overs: The Secret of Recapitulation in the Traditional Calendar," *The Latin Mass: The Journal of Catholic Culture and Tradition* 19:2 (Spring 2010), 46-49.
- On the Harmony of the Gospels* 2.76.
- Weiser, 54. In fairness, Weiser lists other "wanting" qualities in the Advent seasons, such as the absence of a proper Preface. This deficiency was rectified in 1962 with inclusion of an optional Gallican Preface for Advent.