



SANCTIFYING TIME AS THE WORLD ENDS

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The liturgical year is, in its [temporal cycle](#), a summary of the life of Jesus Christ, but it is also a summary of all time *as salvation history*. Beginning with the four weeks of Advent symbolizing the four thousand years (in the Hebrew/Vulgate reckoning) from Creation until the coming of Jesus Christ, it ends with, "the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with great power and majesty" (Matt. 24:30), bringing rapid completion to those events which immediately precede the end of time.

That Gospel passage from Matt. 24 comes from the "Twenty-Fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost," which we just celebrated this past Lord's Day as the Twenty-*Sixth* Sunday after Pentecost. If those differing numbers confuse you, please understand an important bit of Catholic erudition concerning the traditional Roman liturgical cycle, as explained by Father Leonard Goffine: "The Mass of this Sunday is always the last, even if there are more than twenty-four Sundays after Pentecost; in that case the Sundays remaining after Epiphany, which are noticed in the calendar, are inserted between the twenty-third and the Mass of the twenty-fourth Sunday."

THE END, AND THE BEGINNING

This last week after Pentecost, which lasts till the office of None inclusive (about 3:00 p.m.) on Saturday, points us to the end of the world, to the dark and terrifying things that immediately precede Christ's second coming — as foreshadowed in [the destruction of Jerusalem](#) — as well as to the everlasting happiness or misery which awaits each of us. It is a very [eschatological and apocalyptic](#) week. In this week, Dom Gueranger also focuses us on one of the great mysteries that will immediately precede the reign of Anti-Christ, a sign of the imminence of the Second Coming, that happy event of the mass [Conversion of the Jews](#).

At this time of the Catholic year when we look to the end of time, and also to its beginning again with the first Sunday of Advent next week, I would like to take a quick glance at how four natural divisions in the solar year coincide with four Christian feasts, how the Church dates Easter, how the beginning of the Church's year is determined, and, lastly, how our superior Gregorian calendar came to replace its

Julian predecessor.

“Praise Ye Him, O Sun and Moon” (Ps. 148:3)

The four seasons are traditionally sanctified by the four sets of [Ember Days](#), but there are also four feasts on the [sanctoral cycle](#) that touch upon the astronomical events that define those seasons, to wit: the Annunciation, March 25, corresponding roughly with the Vernal Equinox; the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 24, corresponding roughly with the Summer Solstice; the Conception of Saint John the Baptist, September 23, corresponding roughly with the Fall Equinox; and Christmas, December 25, corresponding roughly with the Winter Solstice. There is some variation on the exact dating of these quarterly astronomical events, and there are useful tables online, [like this one](#), which give the dates with astronomical precision.

I believe that Jesus was born on the concurrence of two things: the Jewish festival of Hanukkah and the astronomical reality of the Winter Solstice, historically observed as a religious feast by many pagans. In my piece, [In Defense of Christmas](#), I go to some pains to elaborate this view, which is certainly not something I came up with myself.

You will note that the four festivals have to do with conceptions and births. The conceptions are associated with the equinoxes and the births with the solstices, and by them the Holy Infant and His Forerunner cousin divide up the Church year. The equinoxes are those days wherein daylight equals nighttime; the solstices are the days on which the daylight hours are most radically unequal from those of the night, making for the longest duration of daylight on the Summer Solstice and the longest night on the Winter Solstice. Here is a schema that spells it out clearly (again, keep in mind the [slight variation](#) in the dating of the solstices and equinoxes):

- Vernal (Spring) Equinox: March 20 (Near the Annunciation, March 25)
- Summer Solstice: June 21 (Near the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist: June 24)
- Autumnal (Fall) Equinox: September 23 (The exact date of the Conception of Saint John the Baptist: September 23)
- Winter Solstice: December 21 (Near Christmas: December 25)

The first of these mysteries, the Annunciation, occurs on March 25, a date that is [traditionally accepted](#) as both the anniversary of the first day of Creation and of the first Good Friday. (Tolkien enthusiasts will recall that this is also the date that the Ring was destroyed in the Cracks of Doom, just as October 24, the feast of the healing angel, [Saint Raphael](#), was the day Frodo was healed of the injury received from the Nazgûl on Weathertop Hill.) There is something poetic in the thought that day and night — light and darkness — were perfectly equal in their duration on that first day, when God Himself “divided the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:4).

In the mystery of the Annunciation, the Eternal Logos becomes the Incarnate Logos. He thereby ushers in a new creation, both as God and as the “Last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45; cf. [What is a 'Type'?](#)). He will, following normal human gestation, be born on the Winter Solstice, that darkest day of the year being the right time for the “Light of the World” to be born. The coincidence with Hanukkah, the Old-Testament “Festival of Lights” provides another luminous layer of meaning. (For further details, see [In Defense of Christmas](#).)

The [Conception of Saint John](#) the Baptist is not a feast in the West, but it is in the East, where it is celebrated on September 23, the exact date of the Autumnal Equinox. Nine months later is the liturgical feast, in both East and West, of Saint John's Nativity. Our Lord's birth on a date when each successive day grows longer and Saint John's on a date when the following days grow shorter are, according to many commentators, an astronomical fulfillment of that utterance of the Forerunner himself, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Another fulfillment, which pertains, oddly enough, to corporeal height, is the manner in which each of the cousins was martyred: Jesus was *lifted up* on the Holy Cross, John was *shortened* by the cutting off of his head. The deeper meaning of the Baptist's words is that his disciples should leave him and follow his Cousin, whose reputation and following must eclipse that of His Precursor, whose vocation was simply to prepare the way for and point out the Lamb of God, making him “more than a prophet” (Luke 7:26).

The Dating of Easter

The year is regulated by the sun's revolution around the earth; the month, by the lunar cycles. The Church's most important festival, the Pasch (Easter), is dated by a coalescence of both the solar and lunar cycles. The formula for its dating, devised by the [First Council of Nicea](#) is “the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the Vernal Equinox.” For this reason, the full moon on or after the Spring

Equinox is called ["the Paschal Full Moon."](#)

This situates the Pasch always on a Sunday — the day of the week sanctified by the Father creating on a Sunday, the Son resurrecting on it, and the Holy Ghost's descent at Pentecost on [the first day of the week](#). But it is, specifically, the Sunday closest to the lunar and solar dating of the day that Jesus rose from the dead.

Saint Andrew, the "Strong Man" Who Carries the Year

What determines the first Sunday of Advent, the very beginning of the Church's Liturgical Year? In the Roman Rite, it is very simply the Sunday nearest to the feast of [Saint Andrew](#), November 30. The first Sunday of Advent can occur either before or after November 30; the formula is that it is the *closest* Sunday. There is something appropriate here. Saint Andrew is the *Protoclete*, the "First Called," as he is named in the East. He was the first of Saint John the Baptist's disciples to follow Our Lord and he, in turn, brought his brother, Simon, to do the same: "We have found the Messiah.... And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41-42). It was then that Jesus told Simon he would become Peter. Andrew's name comes from the Greek word for *man*. He is to the liturgical year what [Atlas](#) is to the celestial spheres in Greek mythology; the manly Protoclete holds the liturgical year, as it were, on his shoulders.

St. Teresa of Ávila and the Ten-Day Night

At the time of Pope Gregory XIII, the Church reformed the calendar. It has been known for quite some time that the old Julian calendar was off, but there was not sufficient astronomical knowledge to solve the problem of fixing it until the late sixteenth century. Following a plan devised by learned astronomers, Pope Gregory issued the Bull, [Inter gravissimas](#), which removed ten days from the calendar and simultaneously adjusted the system of leap years to prevent similar slippage of the calendar in the future. Centennial years were henceforth no longer leap years, unless divisible by 400. (How is that for careful planning for the future? In my lifetime, this century leap year happened in the year 2000. It will not happen again until 2400.)

The night that was set for the implementation of this plan was the night of October 4, the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. The next day, as declared by the Holy Father, the world would wake up on October 15. The great [Saint Teresa of Ávila](#) died during that night, which is why her feast is October 15 and not October 5, which it otherwise would have been. (Brian Kelly [narrated this story at greater length](#) on our site.)

Redeeming the Time

Twice in his canonical corpus, the Apostle says we ought to be “redeeming the time” (Col. 4:5, Eph. 5:16). Taking time seriously, not wasting it, consecrating it to Our Lord, making good use of it for God's glory, for our and our neighbor's salvation — these are all ways we can fulfill the injunction of Saint Paul. (Father Paul Scalia has [a good meditation](#) on this at *The Catholic Thing*.)

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We never know when it will come to an end.

Brother André Marie is Prior of St. Benedict Center, an apostolate of the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Richmond New Hampshire. He does a weekly Internet Radio show, [Reconquest](#), which airs on the [Veritas Radio Network's Crusade Channel](#). This article appears courtesy of [Catholicism.org](#).

[Featured](#): Creation. Light and Darkness, engraving, 1585.

