

What Is Ordinary Time?

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One of my former professors, in anticipation for the next class session, said we would begin to look at the liturgical calendar—the way the Church tells time. The first topic would be Ordinary Time. Then he said something that would change the way I view, celebrate, and prepare for Ordinary Time. With excitement, he exclaimed, “There is nothing ordinary about Ordinary Time!” At the time, I was quite perplexed. What does he mean that Ordinary Time isn’t ordinary? Then why call it ordinary? This confused undergraduate walked back to his dorm room and began feverishly reading for the next class on Ordinary Time.

When we hear the word “ordinary,” we tend to think, “common,” everyday, or mundane. In other words, if something is ordinary it isn’t special. Ordinary from its Latin root means “order.” When we order something, we arrange in a sequence. That is, it is numbered. It is ordinal. This same professor suggested that Ordinary Time is Ordinal Time. It is counted time. We now know why it is called Ordinary Time, but how is it differentiated from other liturgical seasons and feasts?

The liturgical year is the calendar the Church uses for seasons, feasts, and solemnities. Various calendars are used for various reasons: civil, school year, lunar (for example, for calculating Chinese New Year or Jewish holy days), etc. The liturgical year basically celebrates one thing: The Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery is Jesus Christ’s birth, life, Passion, death, Resurrection, Ascension, and subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus to the apostles, is the One who brings us into relationship—into communion—with Christ’s death and Resurrection. This death and Resurrection is the saving event that frees us from sin and death. The Father’s raising of Jesus from the dead transcends all time, because the Spirit—whom Jesus said the Father would send—invites us into this saving Paschal Mystery.



That means, we are always invited by our Triune God to enter into the depths of the Paschal Mystery. What does the Paschal Mystery have to do with Ordinary Time?

The Paschal Mystery is so big, so deep, so vast, that we journey through this mystery for a whole year: the liturgical year. Sundays in Ordinary Time, as the official document on the liturgical year the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* states, “are devoted to the mystery of Christ in all its aspects” (43). Other liturgical seasons focus on one aspect. For instance, during Lent we focus on turning away from sin in order for our Triune God to transform us into more faithful disciples. Feasts for saints celebrate the exemplary life of a saint who witnessed to

Christ’s Paschal Mystery in his or her very life, sometimes unto death. The 33 or 34 weeks in Ordinary Time then celebrate the whole Paschal Mystery on each Sunday. According to the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, “Ordinary Time begins on the Monday after the Sunday following 6 January and continues until Tuesday before Ash Wednesday inclusive. It begins again on Monday after Pentecost and ends before evening prayer I of the First Sunday of Advent” (44). Therefore, Ordinary Time is segmented into two parts, with Lent-Holy Week-Easter-Pentecost being in the middle.

My former professor was indeed right; there is nothing ordinary about Ordinary Time. Rather, we count the Sundays and the weeks as we celebrate the mystery of Jesus Christ who calls us into communion with himself as he leads us through the power of the Holy Spirit to the Father.

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