

Canadian Nights

Something has always confused me about the liturgical year. All of the big liturgical events (All Saints, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter) happen in the six months from November to April. Then from May to October there's the feast of Pentecost and then just endless "Sundays after Pentecost". Why don't they spread out the big events a bit more? Why does very little happen, liturgically, from May to October? I haven't thought about these questions very much, but they've been in the back of my mind for a long time.

This is probably something that doesn't bother most people. I guess I'm a liturgical nerd. But doesn't it seem like the whole liturgical year is...unbalanced? How could that happen? Why so much action in six months, then almost nothing for six months?

Well, one thing I've learned in my 47 years is this: when there's something I don't understand about some kind of ancient tradition, there's usually a good explanation. In fact, often the things that seem the most confusing are actually the most interesting and enlightening.

A few months ago, I was reading a great book called *Where Three Streams Meet: Celtic Spirituality*. Now there are a lot of books on Celtic Spirituality out there, and a lot of them are just making things up as they go along. But this one was written by an actual Irish Catholic monk and university professor, Seán Ó Duinn, OSB. (OSB means that he is a Benedictine monk.) So he's got the real academic and monastic credentials but he also has a deep love for Irish nature and pre-Christian traditions. And he's obviously very familiar with the Gaelic language as well. So this is not a book just trying to cash in on all the interest in everything Celticky. Ó Duinn is writing about something that means the world to him and he has studied it thoroughly.

As I was reading it, I came to a place that started to solve my old problem about why the liturgical year seems so unbalanced. Ó Duinn was saying that, for the ancient Celts (Christian and pre-Christian) there were actually two years in one: a Dark Year and a Bright Year. The Dark Year started November 1st and the Bright Year started on May 1st.

For rural Irish or Scottish communities, the Bright Year and the Dark Year were very different. The modern, industrial reality is that the year is just basically the same from beginning to end: we drive to work, we drive home, we stare at our phones and TVs, we sleep, then we do it again. Technology doesn't change from month to month. Our lives are based on technology's consistency and uniformity. We are comfortable and filled with despair. The seasons change. Our lives do not. During the blizzards of winter, we try to rush around just as much as (or even more than) we do during the months of nice, easy weather.

For the Macdonald Clan of Glen Coe, May 1st was when the cattle were driven out of the glens and up into the high pastures where there was good grazing during the Bright Year. The people would actually live in huts up in the high places near the cattle for the summer months. It was a time of great activity, gardening, games, and stealing cows from neighbouring clans. And there was always the occasional battle or two. Then, around November 1st, the cows were driven back down into the shelter of the glen, where the people would live for the Dark Year in their little smokey cottages, gathered together in villages. It really was two very different years.

November 1st was the celebration of "Samhain" for the pre-Christian Celts. This wasn't just a one day festival, but was the door to the entire Dark Year. The Dark Year was a more spiritual, otherworldly time, contrasting the Bright Year, the busy year, in which people were focussed on outdoor agricultural activity. As the Christian era began in Ireland, Samhain easily became All Saints' Day: a celebration in which the earthly church joins the heavenly church.

All Saints' Day inaugurates the six months in the church's liturgy in which we focus intentionally on the major events in the life of Jesus. These six months, with the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, are a more reflective, spiritual, contemplative time. Many of us feel "low" during these dark times. The wind howls sadly through the bare branches. We wake up and go to work in the dark. And often, we come home in the dark too. It's a difficult time for many people.

But the liturgy of the Church encourages us, during these six months, to dig deeper in our spiritual life. When nature is dead, it's the time for the spirit to grow. The person who comes out of their house and starts planting a garden in May, shouldn't be the same person who cut down all the dead hydrangeas and sedum in those

gardens in late October. We should grow spiritually as we experience these great festivals of the Church during the Dark Year from November to April.

Long, cold, wet November evenings or minus twenty January evenings are perfect times for reading, thinking, journaling, writing poems, watching documentaries, listening to music, and talking to friends about the deep things that matter. These times that drive us inside, drive us inside ourselves.

Then in February, as hail falls on muddy roads, we start to wonder, “What the heck is the point of it all?” In February and March, you have to have some good answers regarding the meaning of life. For me, February, March, and April are the toughest months. The winter starts to feel too long at that point. And early spring with its mud and cold rain is as difficult as winter.

But those difficult months, February, March, April, are the time of greatest spiritual energy and activity of the Church year: Lent and Easter. It’s the time of death and resurrection. February, March, April is the perfect time to focus on your spiritual life. When the snow’s melting, the rain’s falling, and the mud’s rising, stay inside. Read. Think. Change. Grow. Become renewed. Be born again. As long as you don’t forget to tap your maple trees.

In the darkest time of the year, the end of December, the churches are alive, glowing with candlelight and filled with Christmas carols. It’s exactly what the human needs at that time. But don’t stop there. Enjoy all 12 days of Christmas, then the Feast of Epiphany. As the days begin to get longer, there’s the season of Epiphany, then the day of Transfiguration. Then in the real depths of winter, there’s my personal favourite religious celebration, Pancake Tuesday. Then as Lent progresses, the snow melts and the days get longer and longer, till...the Great Feast, the Resurrection of Lord to eternal life.

The liturgical year of the Church carries us through the Dark Year. The darkness and the cold actually work for our benefit because they encourage us to dig deeper into our souls.

It’s no secret that church attendance goes down quite a bit during the season of Pentecost. In the dog days of August, (I’m not gonna lie to you) there are mornings when I’ll enjoy a long sunny Sunday morning on the porch, then I might find myself kayaking down the river to Marten’s Cove instead of going to church.

Is it wrong to say that we may feel more religious at some times of the year and less religious at other times? Maybe this is okay.

There is an ebb and flow in the liturgical year. The tide goes out after Pentecost and there is a long spiritually calm season. But right now, as Advent begins, the tide is coming in. As the snow and cold rain fall, we light the fire of the Spirit in our hearts. The times of fasting and feasting begin. The Christ candle burns at the darkest time of the year. 40 days after Christmas is Candlemas, when candles are blessed and people remember the Presentation of the baby Jesus at the temple. Then the Paschal candle burns as the winter is finally dying. By Pentecost, the days are long, bright, and warm again.

You could almost divide the year into an *active* year and a *contemplative* year. Summer is for work, travel, outdoor play, exploring, and just feeling the sun and the breeze. Then in the winter, we can take more time to think and learn: to contemplate. We can be more intentional about our church lives, living Christ's life with him, from the prophecies of his coming (in Advent) to his resurrection (at Easter).

This winter, I'll probably be pretty active, with lots of snowshoeing and hockey. But also this winter, I'm going to be more intentional about using the darkness to my advantage. Long, long dark winter evenings are perfect for reading, thinking, and examining my assumptions and prejudices. During this dark, spiritual year, what will I find? What will I leave behind? When the Bright Year begins next May, will I be wiser? Or just older?

Hurray for the long Canadian nights in the dark time of the year:
the time for spiritual journeys.