

INSTRUCTION #4 – THE CALENDAR, PART ONE

In the calendar for the Mass of Paul the VI, today is the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. “Ordinary Time” is defined by what it is NOT. It is not Advent. It is not Christmas. It is not Lent, and it is not Easter. It is everything else. It has two parts: the part between Christmas and Lent, and the part between Easter and Advent. The Traditional Latin Mass has no time or season called “Ordinary Time” in its calendar. Instead, the first part of Ordinary Time is filled by the seasons of Epiphany and Septuagesima. The second part of Ordinary Time is the season of (After) Pentecost. Epiphany begins on the feast day of that name and ended just yesterday. Septuagesima begins today and ends on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday (Lent).

What about this long name Septuagesima? Its means “seventieth” in Latin. This Sunday is the ninth Sunday before Easter. It is within 70 days of Easter. Next Sunday is Sexagesima or “sixtieth” in Latin, and it is within 60 days of Easter. The last Sunday of this short season is called “Quinquagesima” or “fiftieth” in Latin. If we count Easter Sunday, Quinquagesima to Easter is a period of exactly 50 days. So these names are an approximation of the time until Easter Sunday. If I could somehow show to all of you the red *Missale Romanum* on the altar, we would see that the entire season of Lent – all the Sundays and all the weekdays – are labeled as part of “Quadragesima” which means “fortieth” or “fortieth part” in Latin. This comes from our Lord's 40 days of fasting in the desert, and that is how many days we fast in Lent.

Where did Septuagesima come from? Septuagesima first appears in a book of Masses, called the Gelasian Sacramentary, which dates from about 750 AD. And why do we have this extra season rather than just a longer Lenten season of nine weeks instead of six? The answer lies in the fact that the fast before Easter should be 40 days like our Lord's fast in the desert. Sunday has never been a day of fast or abstinence. At first, in Rome, the fast before Easter was six weeks – that's 42 days – but, minus the Sundays, the fast was really only 36 days. At the same time, in the eastern churches, besides Sundays, Saturdays also were not fast days. In order to arrive at a 40 day fast, the eastern churches started the Lenten season earlier, nine weeks before Easter, on the Monday after the Sunday we now call Septuagesima. Not to be outdone by the east in its fasting practices, sometime in the eighth century, Rome added Ash Wednesday and the following three days to Lent, yielding 40 days. So part of the history of the Church, east and west, is reflected in the calendar for the Traditional Latin Mass. And, although we do not fast or abstain from meat these first three weeks before Lent, other things, as we shall see, do begin with this Sunday.

What is the purpose of the season of Septuagesima? It is obviously related to the Lenten season that immediately follows it. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as “Pre-Lent” to avoid the long name. If you noticed, last Sunday I wore green vestments. Today I am wearing violet. Violet is a penitential color. Septuagesima is a penitential season like Advent and Lent. In these seasons we prepare for a great celebration like Christmas or Easter by personal acts of penance, and acts of deprivation like abstaining from meat. The Church too, deprives us of some of the celebration and presents a more stark, a more “bare bones” liturgy to us. Last Sunday we said the Gloria. We will not say it again on Sunday until Christ rises from the dead on Easter Sunday. Last Sunday, the Proper contained a Gradual and Alleluia. This Sunday, the Proper has a Gradual, but it is not followed by an Alleluia like last Sunday, but by a Tract. There will be no more Alleluias until Easter. Instead of a joyous Alleluia, the Tract for today

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says:

Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.
Let Thine ears be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant.
If Thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities : O Lord, who shall abide it?

If God is counting our transgressions, keeping score, who can possibly survive it? This is not a cheery thought is it? It is a somber thought. The season of Septuagesima is preparing us for, and easing us into, Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we will be anointed with ashes and reminded of another somber thought – that we are dust and unto dust we shall return.

At the end of Lent, Christ will be crucified. As we get closer and closer to Good Friday, the Traditional Latin Mass will become more and more subdued. Except for the fourth Sunday in Lent, the organ will not be played, except to support the Gregorian chanting in a High Mass. It will not be played at all during the Low Masses like today. In many places it is still the custom to cover the statuary, except the altar crucifix, with violet or purple covers, like my vestments, from Passion Sunday, which is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, until the Easter Vigil Mass. Then, after the coverings are removed, the Gloria and Alleluia are resumed, and the music and organ become joyous again, the contrast to the Lenten season just concluded is even more intense.