

THE HISTORY OF EASTER

Easter is the celebration of Christ's resurrection, the culmination of Christ's mission and the foundation of our faith. Easter is also the oldest Christian holiday, one that Pope Leo I regarded as the greatest feast of the liturgical year, a conviction that has since been widely embraced. As St. Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith has been in vain" (1 Cor 15:14).

St. Bede suggests that word "Easter" could be related to *Estre*, an ancient goddess of spring. The more common term for Easter was the Latin *Pasch* or Passover. Easter was the *Festa Paschalia*, a name that is plural because Easter is not just a one-day event but includes seven more days of celebration (called the Easter octave). The name Easter is also related to the German word for east, *ostern*, where the sun rises. So the associations of light from the rising sun and the new life of spring naturally carry over to our celebration of new life through Christ.

The fixing of the date of Easter was complex and somewhat controversial. To the members of the early Church, every Sunday was regarded as a celebration of the resurrection. When it was determined to single out one day to highlight the feast, there was disagreement as to the proper date. Some Christians, including St. Irenaeus and St. Polycarp, felt it should coincide with the Jewish Passover, which was determined by the lunar calendar, while others preferred the Sunday celebration date that eventually prevailed when the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 determined that Easter is to be celebrated on the first Sunday following first full moon that occurs on or after the spring (vernal) equinox.

Alleluia

THE SEASON OF NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Easter, the central feast of Christianity, is also a difficult mystery to grasp: even the disciples didn't believe it at first. Many had trouble even recognizing the risen Lord.

The 50 days of the Easter Season allow us to concentrate on the mystery of the resurrection and Christ's continued presence with us through the Holy Spirit.

The resurrection narratives in the Gospel readings on the **Sundays of Easter** help us to realize the meaning of the resurrection. Other readings emphasize the importance of Christ's continued presence with us.

Ascension Thursday celebrated forty days after Easter, reminds us that although Jesus has left us physically, his Holy Spirit remains with us.

Pentecost completes the Easter season with the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Church, born of the Spirit, will now be the presence of Christ on earth until he comes again.



TERMS OF THE EASTER SEASON

Alleluia: From the Hebrew word meaning "Praise the Lord," *Alleluia* is a special acclamation of joy in the Easter Season.

Ascension: Originally celebrated on Thursday (40 days after Easter), now all U.S. dioceses except 6 celebrate it on the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

Easter: The first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox, Easter is the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. The Church considers every Sunday in the year a commemoration of Easter.

Easter Duty: Having received First Communion, every Catholic in the United States must receive communion at least once a year during Easter time, defined in the U.S. as the period from the First Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday.

Easter Season: The fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday.

Paschal Candle: A large decorated wax candle that is a symbol of the risen Savior, the light of the world. It is lit during Mass from the Easter Vigil to Ascension Thursday, and used thereafter in baptisms and funeral liturgies.