

## MARKING SACRED TIME: MIDPOINTS ON THE JOURNEY

For reasons inexplicable even to myself, I have often marked the halfway point in various endeavors I have undertaken. As a child, I would calculate the halfway point of Christmas Break (“It’s half over today”) or the midpoint of a long journey in the car. As an adult, I noted my 10,000th day as a priest a little over a year ago, and am amazed that by next December, I will have served two-thirds of my active priesthood based upon the typical retirement age of 70. Time flies! I consider myself “middle-aged,” but based on statistics, I am already well past that point, for only 26% of the U.S. population is older than I am. The midpoint of the 2018 baseball season will not be the All-Star game as most assume, but the 81<sup>st</sup> game, fully two weeks before. Heresy! What are they thinking? I am nothing, if not desirous of being precise. But I digress.

*Gaudete* Sunday, this year falls on December 17, ostensibly marks the **midpoint of Advent**. Yet, those of you reading this on Sunday are already on day 15 of a mere 22-day season. Advent is a liturgical season so rich in symbolism, Scripture and theology. Always a fleeting season, and especially so this year, it’ll be over in a flash—the **briefest Advent possible**—with Christmas falling on a Monday. Why are mid-points important? For me, I have appreciated the ability to mark beginnings and ends in a manner most conducive for planning and review. Mid-points represent built in “re-sets” for the remainder of the period. An ordered life indicates a life of purpose, a deliberate and intentional desire to move forward with the Lord.

Some people recoil at the thought of an ordered daily routine, preferring instead to be less given to the strict demands of schedules. Others thrive in such a system. I know people who deliberately avoid wearing a wrist-watch, while I am careful to synchronize mine with an atomic clock located in Colorado, and hope that our bell tower is at least in the same ballpark. Punctuality is a virtue! Yes, we try to begin Mass precisely at the stroke of the bell tower. It is a pet peeve of mine when Mass begins late, while admitting that I can become obsessive about it. Thus, marking time is a mixed blessing, and I acknowledge the pitfalls. It is mildly painful to utter “Merry . . .” fully **two weeks before** the feast, and yet there are many times in which I am stuck appearing to be a Scrooge for holding ground in a losing battle. It is the classic “lose-lose” situation.

Time matters. For centuries, the Church has marked time with split-second precision with respect to the process for determining the moveable date of Easter. The **Gregorian Calendar**, eschewed for centuries by the Eastern Orthodox (because it was promulgated by Pope Gregory XIII), was nonetheless an improvement over the Julian. That improvement is a matter of science, not faith. The **Julian Calendar** (named after Julius Caesar in 45 B.C.) deviated from the real solar calendar by just 11½ minutes a year (simply remarkable given it was devised more than 2000 years ago), but over the centuries that added up. The spring equinox kept slipping backwards on the calendar one full day every 130 years. By 1500 AD the vernal equinox fell on the 10th or 11th of March. Oops!

**Saint Teresa of Avila’s** feast is observed on October 15, yet she died in the middle of night on October 4, 1582, just as the new Gregorian calendar was going into effect. In the transition, eleven days were skipped in order to get back in sync with the phases of the moon. October 4th was followed by October 15th in 1582, and this remains why the Orthodox liturgical calendar remains distinct from the Catholic, resulting in different dates for major feasts such as, you guessed it, Christmas. Despite the accuracy of Pope Gregory’s correction, many Protestant countries ignored the Papal Bull. (Sorry, that’s what they called such documents in those days!) Germany and the Netherlands agreed to adopt the Gregorian calendar in 1698; Russia only accepted it after the revolution of 1918, and Greece waited until 1923 to follow suit. Prior to that, the calendar date in Greece differed from the rest of Europe. Today, only the liturgical calendars in Orthodox countries differ from ours, not the secular.

If you are patient enough to have continued to read this column, perhaps you see why accuracy is worth the effort. Marking time is a generous response to the **desire for an ordered life**. The Church’s liturgical calendar is neither considered a doctrine, nor as superfluous to our Catholic life. In the northern hemisphere, these precious days of Advent meticulously inch towards the Winter Solstice with its dead of darkness. Christmas

marks the entry of the **Eternal Word** into the darkness of sin, becoming a light to the Nations, our Newborn Savior. We honor Him best by patiently awaiting his arrival and preparing our hearts to receive Him. We accomplish this by means of clearing away all that obscures the Gospel truth and by our devout and joyful expectation, inviting others to discover His love.

- Last summer, the **Minnesota Twins** had announced plans to play two regular-season “home” games in **Puerto Rico** next April against the Cleveland Indians. Twins stars **Jose Berrios** and **Eddie Rosario** hail from there. But I cannot imagine that those games will proceed as scheduled following the horrific hurricane. Baseball is huge in Puerto Rico and it shows forth their interest in celebrating the island’s rich baseball heritage and growing influence on the Major Leagues.
- As you make your Christmas plans, this year the 4th Sunday of Advent occurs on December 24, Christmas Eve morning. May I suggest you **consider attending** the anticipatory Mass at 5:15 p.m. on **Saturday, December 23**, for your 4th Sunday of Advent? That would provide a little breathing space between that celebration and Christmas, especially since so many people today prefer attending Mass on Christmas Eve.
- Today’s second collection for Christmas flowers provides the decorations for the sanctuary and all the other ten altars spread throughout the Church. The donations collected today will provide flowers all throughout the season, as the arrangements need periodic freshening up from time to time. Thank you for your generosity!
- The college football bowl season is upon us, with **41 games being played** between now and January 8. I attended the **Orange Bowl** in January of 2003 when my cousin played for the University of Iowa, and it was really fun. But the proliferation of bowl games is about television money, as only 25% of the stadiums were filled (+90% capacity) last year. The average attendance at Bowl Games has **decreased by more than 10,000** since 2003. My own take on the situation– too many games, not enough studying!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector