

*A tree of priceless value
stands in the centre of paradise;
by his own death on this tree,
our Saviour overcame death for us, alleluia.*

(Easter responsory)

ASCENSION

The Ascension is celebrated “forty” days after Easter (in Canada it is always observed on Sunday). Previously, the Easter candle was extinguished after the principal Mass to reflect Jesus’ return to the Father. Today, the Easter candle remains near the altar or reading stand (ambo) to emphasise the presence of the risen Christ in his Church. It is he who gives us his Spirit.

The (nine) days between Ascension and Pentecost are kept as days of prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit; this is the original novena. The prayers that were formerly used in the week after Pentecost are now the Mass texts for these days. We use them to prepare for the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

PENTECOST

The Easter season (Paschaltide) was previously extended through the Saturday after Pentecost (Octave of Pentecost). Today, the season closes on Pentecost (after Evening Prayer) as the celebration of the Paschal Mystery is brought to its close with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Easter candle is lighted at Masses and then placed in the baptistery, where it is displayed with due honour. It is used during the celebration of Baptism, and the candles of the newly baptized are lighted from it. The Easter candle is also used in funeral Masses, standing near the casket.

MARY

The weekdays of May generally fall within the Easter season. May devotions should always be centred on the special sharing of the Blessed Virgin in

the paschal mystery of Christ her Son, including the Pentecost event in which she joined with the apostles awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit.

EASTER CUSTOMS

Food. It is the tradition in many cultures for people to ask for God’s blessing on the festive foods to be eaten at Easter. These foods especially include those that were forbidden during the strict Lenten season: foods made with eggs, milk and cheese as well as meat products (paralleled in the custom of Shrove Tuesday).

Eggs. The egg has been the most identifiable Easter symbol for centuries: it is the symbol of fertility and new life. Although eggs represent new life, the symbolism goes deeper: it represents the emergence of Christ from the tomb into everlasting life. That is why at Easter, eggs are traditionally decorated with symbols of life and victory.

The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Easter which we are celebrating at present signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something that we do not yet possess. Such is the meaning of the *Alleluia* we sing.

St. Augustine (+430)

Celebrating the Season of Easter Liturgical Leaflet edited by the National Liturgy Office, and published by Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2500 Don Reid Drive, Ottawa, ON. K1H 2J2 Canada. Copyright © Concacan Inc., 2006. All rights reserved. This text may be reproduced for personal or parish use. For commercial licence, please contact the publisher.

CELEBRATING THE SEASON OF EASTER

Christ is risen, *alleluia!*

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The Easter festival is an extended event. The fifty days from Easter to Pentecost Sunday are kept as one great feast day called the “Great Sunday”.

The Easter season begins after Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday and continues through Pentecost evening. The season begins with the Octave of Easter, the first week of the season. These are days of joyous reflection on the resurrection. No other feast is permitted; important celebrations are rescheduled to the next week. The Easter sequence may be sung and *Alleluia* is added to the dismissal. Easter week ends on the second Sunday of Easter, an indication that this is one continuous event, but the season continues for the next six weeks.

Although other feasts may be celebrated during the Easter season, they take on a distinctive character: reading of *Acts of the Apostles*, inclusion of *Alleluia* in antiphons, and use of the Easter Preface. Ideally, Easter hymns and festive decoration should continue throughout the fifty days.

The newly-baptized (neophytes) have a prominent role in the season; they properly have special seats at Eucharist for their period of final teaching (mystagogy). In earlier times they wore their white baptismal garments for the first week of Easter; the Sunday after Easter was called *in albis*, a reference to their white robes.

We pray standing on the first day of the week, but we do not all know the reason. On the day of the resurrection (Greek *anastasis*: standing again) we remind ourselves of the grace given by standing at prayer, not only because we rose with Christ and are bound to “seek those things which are above”, but because the day seems to us to be in some sense an image of the age which we expect. The Church teaches her own foster children to offer their prayers on that day standing, so that through continual reminder of the endless life we may not neglect to make provision for our participation in it.

(Basil the Great (329-379), *De Spiritu Sancto*, chap. 27, no. 66).

ASPECTS OF THE SEASON

The **Easter candle**, symbol of the presence of the risen Lord, blessed at the Easter Vigil, remains in a prominent place beside the reading stand (ambo) or near the altar for the entire season. It is the central symbol of the season and is often the focus of festive decoration.

Alleluia is the Easter song. It is added to acclamations and antiphons and may be used as a refrain for the Responsorial Psalm and Communion Song. It is the song of the Church’s rejoicing and simply means: Praise the Lord!

Acts of the Apostles is read at all celebrations in place of the Old Testament which, by an ancient tradition, is not read during the season. The reading of Acts presents the life, growth and witness of the early Church.

Initiation. Confirmation and First Eucharist find their proper place for celebration during the Easter season, especially at the parish Sunday Eucharist.

The *sprinkling rite* (with water blessed at the Vigil) is often used at the beginning of Masses on Sundays.

Special Easter texts are used on the feasts of martyrs and in the funeral liturgy.

The *Regina Caeli* takes the place of the *Angelus* in daily prayer.

The **constant joy** of the season continues throughout the 50 days and should be reflected in the festive decoration of the church building.

As far back as the Council of Nicaea (325) the Church reflected Easter joy by a prohibition on fasting and kneeling (a sign of penance) throughout the season. This is reflected today in the direction that we **stand** (rather than kneel) during the Litany of the Saints.

EASTER READINGS

SUNDAYS

Easter and the two following Sundays present appearances of the risen Lord; the second Sunday reading is always the appearance to the apostles and Thomas on Easter night and the following Sunday evening.

The fourth Sunday centres on Jesus the Good Shepherd.

The following Sundays offer excerpts from the Last Supper Discourse and High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.

First Reading: *Acts of the Apostles*.

Second reading: reflects on the joyful faith and confident hope of the season.

Year A. *First Letter of Peter*

Year B. *First Letter of John*

Year C. *Revelation*

The *Acts of the Apostles* recounts the growth of the early Church under the dynamic guidance of the Holy Spirit; that Spirit is portrayed as the one who moves the Church from its fearful beginning in Jerusalem out to the world, especially in the missionary journeys of St. Paul. *The Book of Revelation* extends this dynamism even farther and celebrates the ultimate victory of the People of God despite trial and persecution when the Lord Jesus comes again.

WEEKDAYS

As on Sunday, the first reading is a semi-continuous reading of *Acts of the Apostles*.

The gospel readings during Easter week tell of the Lord’s appearances. Week two continues the reading of *John’s Gospel* begun in Lent. (*John’s Gospel* is the traditional text throughout Lent and Easter independently of the A,B,C cycle.) The last weeks offer the Last Supper Discourse and High Priestly Prayer.