

Meeting God in the Church Year

BY KIMBERLEE CONWAY IRETON

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readers to know what they know: that living this way
shapes our lives into a cruciform pattern in which we,
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Most of my childhood spiritual formation occurred in the context of an Assemblies of God elementary school. Weekly chapel and Bible memory verses formed the spine of my understanding of faith. In junior high and high school, I internalized much of what I had learned in elementary school and embraced it as my own. But my faith really came alive when I learned of older traditions, ones that had been around for centuries, ones with strange customs like marking foreheads with ashes or refraining from the word “Alleluia” for weeks on end. Such customs fascinated me, and through them I slowly entered into the tradition variously known as the liturgical year, the church year, and the Christian year.

I’m not alone in my hunger for traditions that are older than I am. Renewed interest in liturgical expressions of faith among Christians of many denominations has recently sparked a spate of books on the Christian year. Each of the four books reviewed here approaches the church year from a slightly different perspective and with a different primary audience in view.



The most accessible book for those with little to no experience of the church year is Bobby Gross’s *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 332 pp., \$17.00). Part introduction, part devotional guide, the book begins with a helpful overview of the

church year. In each succeeding section, Gross delves deeper into one of the church's seasons, holding it up to the light and showing its various facets and themes. Each section concludes with prayers, scripture readings, and reflections for each week of the season.

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parts of his story to illustrate or illuminate some aspect of the season he is discussing. For instance, in his introduction to Lent, he explores his response to a piece of artwork entitled *Grace and Gravity*, including a poem he wrote. The poem turned out to be prophetic, though it was many weeks before he realized it was preparing him for a spiritually dry time of metaphorical

desert wandering—a time that left him feeling a spiritual failure, providentially coinciding with Lent. When he reread the poem during Easter, he realized:

Yes, I had been in the desert, but I had not been alone. Yes, I had been tested, but I had not failed. And yes, I had been humbled, but in turning from my spiritual pride and sense of entitlement, I was now open to a new encounter with God's transforming presence. (p. 127)

It is this very downward movement of the soul, a spiritual gravity—a descent into the grave—that is at the heart of Lent.

Throughout the book, such stories ground the seasons of the church year in real life and provide a way for the reader to enter into them. These stories also reinforce that Bobby Gross loves the church year. He has lived these seasons for years, and he mines their depths and richness not for their own sakes but as a means of drawing nearer to God in Christ. He shares both his struggles and the practices that have been most meaningful for him, inviting readers to join him in those practices.

The lion's share of this book is the weekly devotions: for each week of each season Gross has included several prayers, scripture readings, and short reflections. I used this book through much of Lent and Easter as the centerpiece of my morning devotions this year. Each day I prayed the prayers for the week, read one of the Scriptures, and reflected on it using Gross's meditations and questions as a starting point.

This is a book I will return to again and again, both for information about the seasons of the church year and for formation in my walk with Christ.



Joan Chittister's book, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009, 240 pp., \$17.99), is part of Thomas Nelson's "Ancient Practices" series, which is intended for "every Christian seeker who wants more." However, this is not a book for newbies to the church year.

For one thing, the structure of the book is confusing. There is no overview of the Christian year until chapter four. Advent, which marks the beginning of the church year, does not appear until chapter nine. Interspersed with chapters on the various seasons are thematically-related chapters on joy, asceticism, suffering, celebration, and fidelity – but those thematic correspondences will only be obvious to someone already familiar with the texture of the Christian year.

Indeed, Chittister assumes throughout the book that readers will be familiar with the church year, particularly with Roman Catholic expressions of it. She writes of vigils, masses, feasts, fasts, and cycles of lectionary readings, often without explanation. Readers not raised with or exposed to Catholic liturgy will likely be perplexed by many of these references.

Further, Chittister makes sweeping statements about the transformative potential of the church year that come across as if those potentialities are, instead, inevitabilities. For instance: "Nowhere more than in the liturgical year is that presence [of Christ] felt and seen and heard" (p. 15); "Perhaps nothing so serves to keep the Christian aware of all [the] dimensions of life than does the progress of liturgical time" (p. 39); and "[The liturgical year] gives us the energy to become the fullness of ourselves" (p. 59).

Perhaps my skepticism about such claims comes from my not having lived the Christian year long enough – my own experience with the seasons of the year began a mere fifteen years ago – whereas Chittister is a cradle Catholic and has been living these seasons her whole life. It is entirely possible that these claims emerge from her experience.

If this is the case, I wish she had couched those claims in individual rather than universal terms. Throughout the book, I felt a disconnect between my lived experience of the seasons and Chittister's universalizing claims of what the church year was supposed to be effecting in the lives of the faithful. For this reason alone, I would not recommend the book to anyone unfamiliar with the rhythms and seasons of the liturgical calendar. Even for someone (like me) who has lived those seasons for a number of years, this book might be discouraging, given its tendency toward exalted rhetoric and its lack of on-the-ground discourse about *how* exactly the church year does all that Chittister claims it does.

Occasionally, Chittister grounds her discussion in a specific example. She tells, for instance, how her own monastic community celebrates Maundy Thursday – the transition from high-spirited celebration to silent contemplation. Though her community's observance of this day is not immediately trans-

ferrable to my life or the life of my local congregation, reading about it helped me see Maundy Thursday in a new light and gave me ideas about how to incorporate both celebration and silence in my own life and home on this day.

Unfortunately, such concrete illustrations were the exception rather than the rule. I wanted more of them, especially from someone like Chittister who has lived the church year far longer and far more deeply than I have.

Robert Webber expands our understanding of Epiphany spirituality: it calls us to a rich relationship—indeed a union—of believers with Christ so that God’s glory might be manifest in us and through us.

For those who have lived with the liturgical year for a long time, some of Chittister’s explanations of its various aspects may prove helpful. I found her explanation of an octave instructive and vivid—“Like incense, an octave is the sweet memory, eight days later, of what has gone before” (p. 92). Her read on Ordinary Time as a pause

“between the two poles [i.e., the birth and death] of Jesus” was likewise interesting: the two seasons of Ordinary Time “give us time to contemplate the intersection between the life of Jesus and our own” (p. 97).

Chittister insists that this focus on the Jesus-story, on our re-living and internalizing it, is the *raison d’être* of the church year. In fact, her insistence on this is one of the book’s strongest messages, a message that all who observe the church calendar would do well to keep foremost in our practice.



Robert Webber’s *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004, 206 pp., \$18.00) is more academic in approach and content than either Bobby Gross’s or Joan Chittister’s books. Despite this, readers who have some theological education or occasionally read books of theology or liturgy will have no problem following *Ancient-Future Time*.

Webber’s intended audience, it seems, are pastors and lay leaders. While I, as a layperson, found this book rich and rewarding, I think it holds most potential for those who lead and plan worship services.

It seems that Webber intends to convert a slightly skeptical audience, people who are open to liturgical expressions of faith but also unsure of how to explain or defend them to others. His first chapter, therefore, offers a defense of the Christian year as well as an introduction to it.

From there he introduces “The Cycle of Light” — Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany — devoting a chapter to each season or day. These chapters

are followed by “The Cycle of Life” – Lent, the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday), Easter, and the time after Pentecost – again, with a chapter devoted to each.

Webber’s purpose is not historical; it is spiritual. Thus, throughout the book he focuses on the spiritual import of the day or season under discussion. For instance, in his chapter on Epiphany, he emphasizes that “through this event [the coming of the Magi], we are to experience a manifestation of our own spirituality” (p. 76). Or to put it more baldly, Epiphany spirituality is “a mandate to be a witness to Christ in our everyday working lives, . . . a mandate that cannot be denied. We are [Christ’s] body, the church. And the church is a movement sent on a mission by God – a mission that involves us all” (p. 80). Webber then expands this understanding of Epiphany spirituality: it calls us to a rich relationship – indeed a union – of believers with Christ so that God’s glory (the theme of Epiphany) might be manifest *in us* and *through us*.

In each chapter, Webber pulls out such themes from the season’s scripture readings and reflects on the season’s spiritual emphasis. He includes practical disciplines for each season, to help readers enter more deeply into the spiritual reality of the church year – and thus into union with Christ, which is, he insists, the whole point of entering into and living the Christian year in the first place.

At the close of each chapter, Webber includes a summary of that chapter’s themes and spiritual emphases as well as a prayer for the season, questions for reflection, and worship and preaching resources for those in church leadership roles.



If Robert Webber’s book is somewhat academic in tone, Adolf Adam’s is more so. The intended audience of *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990 [reprint Verlag Herder, 1979], 324 pp., \$34.95) is theology teachers and students and those involved in the instruction of Christians in churches, particularly Roman Catholic churches. It is not the book for someone new to the church year. For those who have read other books on the Christian year and have lived its seasons for awhile, Adam’s book is a fascinating look at the history of the seasons and the way they have evolved over the centuries – though it focuses specifically on Catholic expressions of the liturgical year.

Adam begins with a reflection on cosmic time; he then moves into a discussion of the Jewish festal calendar, which is the framework from which the Christian calendar emerged. The heart and soul of the Christian year, Adam claims, is the paschal mystery – called Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, depending on the tradition – and he spends a great deal of time unpacking this mystery and the history of its celebration in the Church, including an entire chapter on Sunday as the original “pasch.”

Because of his emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist, Adam structures

his book with Easter coming before Christmas. This is a theological move: Easter, with its historical and theological links to Passover and thus to the Lord's Supper, is the center of the Christian year. It is the reason—the *logos*, if you will—for all the other seasons and makes sense of them.

From Easter, Adam works his way backward, liturgically speaking, through the Triduum and Lent. Only after he has unpacked the history and meaning of the Easter cycle does he introduce Christmas. Here again, he works backward, with Advent following his discussion of Christmas Day. However, after Advent, he returns to the season of Christmas and thence to Epiphany.

Following his discussion of the two major cycles—Easter and Christmas—Adam ventures into Ordinary Time. Because of his Roman Catholic emphasis, he devotes much of this chapter to “The Feasts of the Lord” that fall during Ordinary Time (including Trinity, Transfiguration, and Christ the King). The penultimate (and longest) chapter focuses on saints' days. This is followed by a short chapter on the liturgy of the hours and its relation to the church year.

While Adam's book is not for the faint of heart, it is a fascinating look at the evolution of the liturgical year and its meaning for contemporary Christians.

Each of these authors views the church year through a different lens—Gross and Webber are evangelicals who came to this practice as adults; Chittister grew up breathing the air of liturgy; and Adam approaches it with both an academic and a spiritual interest—but all four writers clearly want their readers to see what they see when they look at the church year: a way of marking time, of *living*, that centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. More, they want their readers to know what they know: that living in such a way shapes our lives into a cruciform pattern in which we, as followers of Jesus, become more and more like him.



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