

## Chapter x: *The Christian Kalendar*

**T**HE EARTH GOES ROUND THE SUN. The Moon goes round the Earth. These are not secrets, but you'd never guess from the usual calm or distracted manner of mankind that such high truths have been divulged to us. How can we possibly be *blasé* about them? To remember that the Earth spins about the blessed Sun, to recall that all the while the silver Moon spins around us, ought to be enough to set us gasping, or trembling, or dancing. I suppose we deliberately keep these facts buried in forgetfulness so we can remain sober enough for everyday business: for the gaiety of recollecting that our planet spins and circles and rhythmically wobbles and sways would whip us into such an ecstasy we'd hardly get any work done in all our days on this wonderfully wheeling bright body. No one gets work done on a roller-coaster: he's too busy whooping.

Forgetfulness will do for everyday affairs. But in this series of chapters on the Blessed Mass, we are attempting to pierce to the root of its mystery and joy – which is to pierce to the root of everything, even the movement of the physical heavens. The Mass is not an everyday affair, it is not a subject to be drab about: the more we understand it the more we are whipped into laughing awe. Anyway, this is time of year is not fit for sombre gravity. Today is the last and climactic day of Christmas, tonight is Twelfth Night: steadiness can wait until tomorrow. *Enim stellam eius et venimus adorare eum*,<sup>1</sup> we have seen Christ's star moving, and have been moved to come and worship Him. Today and

---

<sup>1</sup> From today's Gospel, Matthew ii<sup>2b</sup>.

tonight all His moving stars and planets move us to be moved. We are going to contemplate their reeling and surrender to giddiness – which is a steadier state than our usual human oblivious vagueness. In the Mass we feel the earth rolling beneath us, and the stars revolving above us, in obedience to the One we see in the Mass. The moving worlds fix our prayers for each day, and thus we join them in their dancing obedience.

We obey their objective movements every week. But of all days of the year, our dependent movement is most apparent today, when we confess that we have seen Christ's star in the East, just like those enigmatic astronomers from Persia, and have come running after it: *Ubi est, where is He? vidimus enim stella eius, for we have seen His star.*<sup>2</sup>

*O God, Who by the leading of a star....*

**S**OME CHAPTERS BACK (pp. 32-34) we discussed the *Proprium Temporale*, the Proper of Time: that part of the Mass which changes as the year turns. Now, as we move slowly through the rite, we've reached the Collect of the Day, which is the central element of the *Proprium Temporale*.

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany, which means we've already heard the Introit 'Proper' to that feast (*Ecce advenit dominator dominus: Behold, He appeareth, our Lord and Ruler*). We're about to hear the three Biblical passages 'Proper' to it. But the pivotal element of the Proper is the Collect: *O God, Who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thy only-begotten Son ....* A Collect collects together all our prayers, and is our guide to how we are to hear the Introit, Secret, Post-communion and so on, as well as how we are to hear the readings. Hearing this Collect now, we ask, Why these words today? What makes the Epiphany the Epiphany?

The superficial thing would be to write at this point: *'Gloria in excelsis' having been sung, the Collect of the Day is chanted. The celebrant reads the Collect from his big book, or missal, the Master of Ceremonies pointing to the right place. The sacristan, a man who makes no mistakes, has looked up which Collect it ought to be, and the book's*

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ii<sup>2</sup>.

*already open at that page. All these things are done very neatly. Then everyone sits.*

But this series of notes is attempting not merely to describe what happens the Mass. We're trying to scrutinise the motor that drives such great prayer. The Latin tag at the top of these chapters, *Orabo spiritu orabo et mente: psallam spiritu psallam et mente*, means *With the spirit I shall pray, and with the mind; sing psaltries with the spirit, and with the mind also*.<sup>3</sup> Our minds can penetrate exactly what cosmic motion causes today's prayers to be today's: and since our minds can grasp this cosmic motion, they should.

There are forces even more tremendous than the sacristan shaping our worship. The heavenly bodies in their high cavorting sculpt our Proper of Time. That's mysterious, but the Church has no secrets, even in her mysteries; and in this chapter our minds will follow this process, which requires some brain-work. Indeed, this chapter will have to be long it'll spread over two chapters. But I think our attention will be worth it – for we don't grasp what Mass is about if we don't see that it has something intimately to do with the solar system.

### **Mass is a mnemonic, Mass is a planetarium.**

**W**HAT MAKES TIME HAPPEN? Nowadays the most accurate clocks are driven by the extremely regular, extremely subtle decay of atoms – but who cares about them? The movement of time, as mankind experiences it, is driven by immense, elegant astronomical movements. These movements are cyclical and repetitious, but they are so immensely varied, and intersect each other in such intricate ways, that the movement of time seems to us always fresh and original. The Earth rotates, the Earth goes round the Sun, the Moon goes round the Earth.

I'm invoking these invigorating truths because we generally manage to forget them, and because the Mass makes us remember them, as it makes us remember everything. Mass is, among many other things, a universal mnemonic, or aid to human memory – a mnemonic for things

---

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians xiv<sup>15</sup>.

so obvious we manage to overlook them (for instance that wine is a great and a miraculous drink, that children should love their parents, that life is an immense glory and death a mysterious terror, that the created world, which we didn't make, is loveable beyond words . . .). The word the theologians use for this recovery of elemental truth is [anamnesis](#), *recollection*. It's word Christ used when He said *Do this, as of as ye shall drink it*, 'ⲁⲛⲙⲁⲛⲉⲥⲓⲛ', *anmanesin, in remembrance*.<sup>4</sup> The Mass is *anamnesis*, a calling to mind: *The Light of Light descendeth ... as the darkness clears away*.<sup>5</sup> The awful chattering gibberish in our heads clears off. We see not only God, but God's world as it is.

One of the many things Mass makes us recollect is the scale of material reality. Our trivial bustling lives are even spatially minute. We scuttle about on the edge of bodies, under the shadow or glare of bodies, so much huger than we are seem are almost infinite. We overlook their colossal elaboration; but Mass, which keeps nudging us to remember things, reminds us. Mass is itself actually rather like the solar system. Its ritual movements, too, are precise and huge and complex beyond the power of mathematics or even poetry to express: the deacon swings around the celebrant, the celebrant moves about the altar, with something of the same vim and precision of planets. In other words, Mass is a sort of planetarium – one of those complicated, expensive rooms made to compel us, despite our every inclination to dullness, to look at the night sky.<sup>6</sup> But unlike planetariums, the changing colour and lighting are not just *imitating* astronomical movement. The movement of the Sun and Moon *cause* the altar to turn purple and then gold and then green.

The cosmic cycles are like immense crystalline circles, turning at different angles, piercing the world invisibly as they spin. At Mass all these cycles come to a focus at the altar, become visible and order proceedings. The motive forces of our worship are Brother Sun and Sister Moon, as St Francis called them: creatures of God like us, greater than we

---

<sup>4</sup> Luke xxii<sup>19</sup>, I Corinthians xi<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The Liturgy of St James, number 197 in our hymnal, stanza 3.

<sup>6</sup> There's a planetarium in the National Air and Space Museum (7th and Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, D.C., just west of the Capitol; 10:00 - 17:30): show every forty minutes, \$4, telephone (202) 357-1400. Alas! it is a dreadful, patronising planetarium; still, it might induce awe, the sanest of all mental states.

are, although also in some senses less (they are less beloved, they are less long-lived).

We say and do what we say and do at Mass today because of the immense movements of four great cycles, daily, weekly, monthly and annual time; or in other word these four motions – spinning of Earth, sacred cycle of Sabbaths, rotation of Moon, and orbit of Earth around Sun.

Is it fanciful to recall here Ezekiel's vision of four immense wheels within wheels, intersecting each other, rushing like lightning, so high that they are dreadful, beneath a firmament of terrible crystal? The most appalling beauty of these wheels, says Ezekiel, was that they force the prophet's gaze up at the burning sapphire throne above the firmament, and on the throne the intolerably bright figure of a Man.<sup>7</sup> Whatever Ezekiel was thinking of, that's how Christians ought to experience the staggering beauty of the movement of time. The Christian kalendar is a witness to the glory of God, and to the humanity of His Christ the cosmic king –

*The heavens declare the glory of God;  
and the firmament sheweth his handywork.  
One day telleth another; and one night certifieth another.  
There is neither speech nor language;  
but their voices are heard ... into the ends of the world.*<sup>8</sup>

These immense circles, moving around and above us, suggest in their loveliness and order what lies above all created things, the source and goal: that awful throne and the royal Man upon it.

We woke up this morning, groaned and got dressed. We have central heating all winter and air conditioning all summer, electric lights to drive out dimness and subtle shades to suppress glare, clocks with bells in them to impose arbitrary divisions on time: in other words, we have gone a fair way toward abolishing natural times and seasons. This

---

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel i<sup>14</sup>, 18, 22, 18<sup>6</sup>, 26; *in similitudinem fulguris coruscantis ... statura quoque erat rotis et altitudo et horribilis aspectus ... firmamenti quasi aspectus cristalli horribilisi ....*

<sup>8</sup> Psalm xix<sup>1-4</sup>; Vulgate xviii<sup>2-5</sup>: *cæli enarrant gloriam Dei et opera manuum eius adnuntiat firmamentum*  
.....

morning as we woke up it could have been any day (which is one reason we are despondent and restless).

But we've not been able to blur the constellations or pad the violent swoop of the planets, and they dictate the Mass. Seasons still matter in church. When we get here we are back to deep reality, and move with the stars. They are incomparably larger than we are, but they are creatures too, and they were made with, among other things, human purposes in mind. We don't need to be told in one of the Old Testament's creation myths that

*God made . . . the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night . . . God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule . . . and to divide the light . . .*<sup>9</sup>

We know that this must be true. It is not *naïve* to assert that – since there is a God, and since God the Holy Ghost wills and guides the Church's worship – one of the reasons Sun and Moon were created was to create the Church's kalendar. The Moon and the Sun are, among other things, liturgical equipment, given to us so that we can speak to God with immense orderliness – a very complex orderliness. The Christian [kalendar](#) is spelt like this to distinguish it from civil calendars, for civil calendars obey the whims of the state, whereas the kalendar acknowledges and exults in complex obedience of heavenly movements; *One day telleth another; and one night certifieth another.*

### The blessed earth spins.

**T**HE BLESSÈD EARTH SPINS ON ITS AXIS, and takes what we earthlings call a [day](#) to turn completely around, whirling at 700 miles per hour. Meanwhile it circles round the Sun, and despite plunging through the heavens at 66,000 miles per hour, the distance is so colossal it takes just over 365 turns or days to get back to where it began. We call this the enormous circuit a [year](#).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1<sup>16-18</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Figures accurate for Washington, D.C.; the earth's rotational speed is over a thousand mph at the equator. See <http://members.aol.com/javawizard/>; incidentally, if you find Roman numerals tricky, check out, on the same site: <http://members.aol.com/javawizard/roman.html>

A mere archangel delegated to design a cosmos would certainly have gone in for neatness: regular intervals, an upright Earth, perfect circles. But divine inventiveness exceeds mere tidiness. In all God's works we observe, with awe and delight, a reckless joy in complication, a limitless outlay of genius, creativity for its own sake. He gave the Earth a distinct tilt, so that first points its southern half toward the Sun, and then, as it goes spinning to the other extremity of its orbit, gradually points its northern half. This tilt creates [seasons](#) – one of those sumptuous touches that give our life inexhaustible colour. If we lived on an untilted and therefore seasonless planet, we'd ache with desire if some poet told us of a world where leaves died luridly because snows were coming, where snows broke up in the face of blossom. We ought occasionally to feel the romantic strangeness of life here, where cyclic change is our model for eternity, and the succeeding seasons an image for the reality beyond time.

*Omnia tempus habent et suis spatiis transeunt universa sub cælo,  
To every thing there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:  
tempus nascendi et tempus moriendi  
tempus plantandi et tempus evellendi quod plantatum est,  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted . . . .  
tempus flendi et tempus ridendi tempus plangendi et tempus saltandi,  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance*

11

– not all dancing, nor all weeping, but both, one after the other in a complex pattern.

Picture the cycle of the solar year as a circle. Its pinnacle is at midsummer, around 22 June; it circles down (clockwise) through the Fall equinox, in late September, when the Sun from the human point of view crosses our equator, down to the winter solstice at the bottom of the circle, when our days are shortest and nights longest, up through the spring equinox, around 25 March, and so on to midsummer again.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes iii<sup>1-2,4</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Off course all this is, grotesquely, back-to-front in the Southern Hemisphere, where Christmas is summery, Annunciation is autumnal, Easter marks the decline of natural life. Catholic Christians should avoid living down there, and enduring rites so out of step with nature.

### **The Moon goes round the earth.**

**M**EANWHILE, IN ANOTHER COMPLICATION no archangel would have conceived, a big moon goes round the earth. Many planets have moons, which are essentially fragments of rock left over from their mighty nativities, spinning around them because physics declares that everything should dance merrily about something bigger than itself (as all creation dances around God). The little moons of Jupiter make no particular difference to huge Jupiter, being almost in the proportion of dandruff whirling around a big Texan hairdo. But our Moon is proportionally enormous, and as she spins around us, she makes quite a difference. She drags our seas with her cycles, creating the subtle cycle of the tides. And her phases – sickle, crescent, half, full; waxing, waning, gone – dominate the night sky.

### **The week.**

**S**O FAR, WE'VE CONTEMPLATED three cycles. The earth spins, which gives us [daily](#) time. The Sun is danced around by the earth, a motion which looks to us as if the Sun crossed our sky every day, slow and high in mid-summer, fast and low in mid-winter: this is the [annual](#) cycle, of a bit more than 365 days. The month dances around the earth, and that gives us the [monthly](#) cycle: a little more than 28.

There's a fourth cycle to consider, too: the 'revealed' rather than 'natural' cycle of seven days. This [weekly](#) cycle originated with the ancient Hebrew nation, who dedicated every seventh day to God as the Sabbath, a day of feasting and rest. This seven day structure of time has nothing to do with the physical universe, for nothing in nature moves in seven day cycles (unless, indeed, it ultimately derives from the phases of the Moon: full, half, crescent, gone. But the week has never been aligned with the actual lunar cycle). The point of the Sabbath is the story that God created the cosmos in six days, and rested on the seventh; the Jews held that God had revealed this cycle to them, and demanded, as the Fourth Commandment, that they mark out the seventh day. They took



this demand very seriously, elaborating ritual prohibitions to make the Sabbath as different as possible. This elaboration wasn't just custom for custom's sake. The Sabbath, and therefore the seven-day week, assert Creation: the doctrine that there is a Creator beyond the physical universe.

The Church soon stopped keeping the Jewish Sabbath, or Saturday. But since Christ rose before dawn on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week, Christians adapted the Jewish cycle, celebrating the Resurrection each week on the *first* day. When the Empire turned Christian the sacredness of Sunday and thus a seven-day cycle became universal (although the seven days got given pagan names, which we retain).

Nowadays we clumsily run the seventh day, Saturday, and the first day, Sunday, together, calling them 'the weekend'. But it's worth remembering that Sunday is not at the week's end, and Sunday Mass is not folded into the middle of a two-day break. Sunday is the *first* day of the week; on Sunday morning we begin each week by assembling before God.

It's an important gesture to dedicate this first day of every seven to worship, and then (as far as we can manage it) to feasting and play. For by making a weekly celebration of Sunday, we make the structure of our days assert the essential facts of reality: God's creation of the world, and His recreation of it in Christ. And by giving our week this particular structure – *first* a burst of praise and delight, *then* work our days of work – we flaunt the primacy of delight and worship over labour. The point of humanity is to know God and enjoy Him for ever, as the catechism says; work is only a means to an end. Sunday comes first.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Although it's so bizarre I'm relegating it to a footnote, I ought to mention at this point the heresy known as [Sabbatarianism](#), which appeared amongst English Protestants late in the sixteenth century. Continental Protestantism never caught this disease, but it was carried to America by those bad and ridiculous people on the *Mayflower*.

(As a footnote to a footnote: can anyone explain to me why we still celebrate that sorry crew? They're the exact equivalent of the Taliban: religious cranks who abandoned their homeland to fall upon undefended territory and turn it by violence into a fanatics' utopia. The real America, tolerant, loyal, constitutional and worldly, was founded by tobacco-growing Englishmen: charming Virginia Anglicans and delightful Maryland papists. The frenzied tyranny of the bigots in Massachusetts was

## The poetry of the kalendar, and the Crime of 1979.

**A**MERE ARCHANGEL CREATOR would certainly have synchronised these four rhythms of time: the annual cycle would have lasted exactly ten months, for instance, so that new year's eve would always have seen a full Moon. But in fact no cycle is 'in sync' with any of the other three: 28½ days, which is the length of the Moon's cycle, doesn't divide into 365¼ days, which is the Sun's. Thus the moment of midwinter is at a different hour of a different day each year, and so on.

Any way we can reckon time is necessarily going to be magnificently complicated, and have a certain poetry to it.

The Christian kalendar is a particularly complicated and poetic affair. The rest of this chapter describes how it works, and how it causes each day's Proper to occur.

But first, a chilling note of siege and decay. Christian civilisation has been besieged for two centuries. One of the dreariest evils of these centuries has been the impulse to 'rationalise' inherited patterns of culture, which means letting fussy intellectuality go to destructive and irrational extremes. That shoddy, inhuman affair, the metric system, is one example. Mean-spirited men don't like the calendar's poetic richness, and have tried to batter it into their own miserable image by abolishing one or more of its cycles. The French revolutionaries who invented the fiendish metric system also abolished Christianity, the Christian kalendar and even the Christian week, substituting a much more rational week of ten days, with decimal months as well.<sup>14</sup>

---

suppressed soon enough by the imperial government. So why on earth does anyone venerate the landing at Plymouth in 1620, and not the landing at Jamestown in 1607?)

English and American Sabbatarianism tried to impose on the Christian Sunday the negative ritual prohibitions of the Jewish Sabbath, with its strict pharisaic rules against work, but without any of the Jewish ritual celebrations. Our Lord said that *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*; Sabbatarianism argued the exact opposite, and sought to impose its fetish on civil society by legislation. One of the crimes for which St Charles Stuart was martyred was issuing *The Book of Sports*, which detailed games for his people to play on Sundays after church.

Anyone unfortunate enough to have had an old-fashioned Protestant childhood will remember the gruelling taboos against swimming, cooking, normal conversation.... If it comes to that, it's still illegal to sell bottles of wine in Washington, D.C., on Sundays. Kabul is less enslaved than the world's capital, and Christian conviviality is enchained here more than in Peking. Up, good Catholic folk! To the barricades!

<sup>14</sup> See <http://windhorst.org/calendar>, and [www.ecben.net/calendar/shtml](http://www.ecben.net/calendar/shtml)

Every so often some wet synod takes it into its head to try to fix the date of Easter, complaining that the ancient Paschal system is ‘inconvenient’.

In the same spirit, the rascals who composed the 1979 Prayer Book swept aside the kalendar they had inherited from their wiser and more manly fathers. They murdered such ancient days as TRINITY XXI (which means the twentieth Sunday Sun, Moon and cycle of weeks cause to fall after Trinity Sunday, the ninth Sunday after Easter. The very title suggests a happy and awed deference to the mystery of the Trinity and to natural cycles). Instead, they established such banalities as ‘PROPER 6 (SUNDAY NEAREST TO JUNE 15)’.

You wouldn’t expect me to describe this ugly, *ad hoc* system, which no doubt will be swept away soon enough by another even uglier innovation. Anyway, I’m proud to say I do not understand it.

### **Breaking off.**

**T**HE CONTEMPLATION of the physical heavens, the glory of their motion, the subtle way they move time for mortal men, the way they fashion the prayers of God’s Church – these are all large subjects, and we’re going to have to break off our contemplation of them until next chapter. Meanwhile, we leave the celebrant standing at the Missal, about to sing the Collect fixed for him by the turning spheres. In seven days’ time we’ll return to hear him sing, and then examine the workings of the Christian kalendar that sets our song for us at every Mass.

I mean of course, not some gimcrack system concocted by a modern committee of vandals and philistines, but the real Christian kalendar: the ancient system of time integral to the culture of the Church, with which we confront the face of God through the medium of wheels within wheels millions of miles across, rushing like lightning, so high that they are dreadful, beneath a firmament of terrible crystal.