

Understanding the Liturgical Calendar of the Armenian Church

(A brief introduction for Christian educators)

Part II

II. Cycle of Seasons

The Armenian Church year has eight seasons: 1) Nativity-Epiphany, 2) Great Lent, 3) Easter, 4) Pentecost, 5) Transfiguration, 6) Assumption of the Holy Mother of God, 7) Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and 8) Advent.

1. Christmas-Epiphany

The liturgical year of the Armenian Church begins with the Feast of the Nativity-Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ, on January 6. So our church year opens with the celebration of the coming of God among us in the person of Jesus Christ—the “Emmanuel [in Hebrew] which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). Christmas is celebrated for 8 days, and the length of the Christmas-Epiphany season is variable, lasting anywhere from a few days to 5 weeks. Why is this so? Well, because of the **date of Easter**, which is central to understanding our church year. So let me explain.

According to the Council of Nicaea (held in 325 AD), **Easter** has to be celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox, that is, after March 21. And hence/thus, Easter could fall between March 22 and April 25. That means, we can have **35 different possible dates for Easter**. And because of that, we have **35 different calendar years**, not counting leap years. Last year, for instance, Easter was on March 27. This year, it’s on April 16. (Fortunately for us, all that is laid out in the *Donatsooyts*, a book that indicates all these different calendar years with feasts and fasts and Bible readings appointed for each day of the year, and much more.)

Easter is the most important feast of the church. Because without the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is no Christianity. It’s the *reason* for *all* the seasons. And our calendar expresses that reality. Easter is the fulcrum of our church year. The date of Easter determines the entire church year.

Now in order to answer the question regarding the duration of the Christmas season, we also need to look at the season immediately preceding Easter, i.e., Great Lent, our next season.

2. Great Lent and Holy Week (7 weeks)

Great Lent is a period of **six weeks**, followed by Holy Week, leading up to Easter Sunday. So, that is 7 weeks. And Great Lent is preceded by a 3-week period of Pre-Lent, the first week of which is the Fast of the Catechumens, *Arachavorats Bahk*.

So here you have 10 weeks before Easter, all *fixed* relative to Easter Day. Meaning, the *Poon Pargentan* Sunday (which is the day before Great Lent) is always 7 Sundays before Easter, *regardless* what the date of Easter is. The Sunday before the Fast of the Catechumens (i.e., the Eve of the Fast of the Catechumens) is *always* 10 Sundays before Easter. So these 10 weeks simply move with the date of Easter (as a unit).

So back to our question—why the Nativity season is variable. Here is why: Christmas season is sandwiched between Christmas (January 6) and the Sunday before the Fast of the Catechumens (which, as I said, is always 10 weeks before Easter). So, if Easter falls on March 22, the earliest possible date of Easter, move back 10 weeks from that date, and the Sunday before the Fast of the Catechumens will be on January 11, and, you'll have merely a few days for the Christmas season. On the other hand, if Easter comes late in the year, say, April 25, the latest possible date, again move back 10 weeks from that date, and the Sunday before the Fast of the Catechumens will be on February 14, and the Christmas season will be a little over 5 weeks.

Once we grasp this, the rest is easy.

Easter (7 weeks)

After 7 weeks of preparation, Easter season is 7 weeks of *celebration*—from Easter Day to Pentecost (the 50th day). And the Sundays of the season: New Sunday, Green Sunday, Red Sunday, and so forth...and the **7th Sunday** is always the Feast of Pentecost. Here again, every single day in this season is *fixed* with respect to Easter Day. For instance, *Nor Giragi* (New Sunday) is always the first Sunday after Easter, or the 8th day of Easter, no matter what the date of Easter is. Ascension is always the 40th day of Easter (Acts 1). Pentecost is always the 50th day of Easter. You get the idea.

Pentecost (7 weeks)

The Pentecost season is also 7 weeks long, leading up to the Feast of the Transfiguration (the 14th Sunday after Easter). Here also all those weeks are *fixed* relative to Easter Day.

So, look at this—the 14 weeks after Easter (Easter + Pentecost seasons) and the 10 weeks before Easter (Holy Week, Great Lent and Pre-Lent)—all these 24 weeks remain *fixed* with respect to Easter Day. This whole section simply moves with the date of Easter.

Transfiguration

The Feast of the Transfiguration is always the 7th Sunday after Pentecost (the 14th Sunday after Easter).

Now, unlike the Easter and Pentecost seasons, the length of the Transfiguration season is variable, it changes. It changes because of the date of Easter. The season of Transfiguration can be as long as seven weeks or it can be merely two weeks. Why? The same reason why the Christmas season fluctuates (as we saw earlier).

This season is sandwiched between the feast of the Transfiguration (the 14th Sunday after Easter), which fluctuates with the date of Easter by 35 days, and the feast of Assumption, which is always celebrated on the Sunday closest to August 15. So, if Easter comes early, that means all these 24 weeks (Pre-Lent, Great Lent, Easter, Pentecost) will move counterclockwise, and thus the season of Transfiguration will expand, and the Christmas season will shrink. And if Easter comes late, then the opposite will happen—the transfiguration season shrinks and the Christmas season expands. So Nativity-Epiphany and Transfiguration seasons vary inversely—when one expands, the other shrinks, and vice versa.

The last three seasons of our church year—Assumption, Exaltation, and Advent—are straightforward, because they are connected to a fixed date: Assumption is connected to August 15; Exaltation, to September 14, and Advent, to November 18.

Assumption

The Assumption of the Holy Mother of God is celebrated on the Sunday closest to August 15. And the season is 4-5 weeks long.

Holy Cross

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is celebrated on the Sunday closest to September 14. And, the season extends from the Feast of the Exaltation to the Eve of the Fast of the Advent season, 9 or 10 weeks long.

Advent

And finally, the Advent season is a period of 6-7 weeks, which starts on the Sunday closest to November 18 and goes all the way to the end of the church year. This season has a dual function: 1) preparation for the celebration of the Nativity-Epiphany of Our Lord, 2) preparation for the second coming of Christ.

Well, that's our church year, and this poster captures all the feasts and the fasts and the seasons of our liturgical calendar.

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