

# Catholic Feasts: Learning the Faith through Celebration

*Rick Hinshaw*

Cardinal Donald Wuerl and Mike Aquilina, *The Feasts: How the Church Year Forms Us as Catholics* (New York: Image, 2014)

While the feasts of the Catholic Church might “seem to be a crazy quilt of customs,” they are in reality so much more than that – if we take the time to understand their origins, their meanings, and what they teach us. In *The Feasts*, Cardinal Donald Wuerl and Mike Aquilina give us the opportunity to do just that, and so to allow our own faith to be strengthened and even transformed by our celebration of our Church’s feasts.

“They are lessons, too. They teach us. They evangelize us,” and thus prepare us to evangelize others, Cardinal Wuerl and Aquilina write. “They tell and retell the stories of the Gospel. They proclaim the dogmas of the faith.” As such, “they are our dress rehearsal for heaven,” drawing us closer to God, helping us to know Him better and worship Him more perfectly, preparing us for that eternal existence when “we shall share God’s life intimately in heaven.”

At the same time, our Catholic feast days and special seasons are also vital to us along our earthly journey toward that eternal life. They draw us more deeply into the knowledge and practice of our faith, and equip us for our essential earthly vocation of sharing that faith with others, and so bringing them also closer to Christ.

And, because of their festive nature, “they do all this,” the authors observe, “in the sweetest and most memorable way – in a family way.”

Indeed, the very essence of our feast days is that of celebration. "All the feasts are celebrations of Jesus Christ," the authors write. And it is that spirit of joyful celebration that makes religious feasts so effective in teaching us our faith, drawing us more joyfully into the life of Christ and his Church, and assisting us in inviting others to experience that joy with us.

In *The Feasts*, Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., and Mike Aquilina, author of more than forty books—including two previous works with Cardinal Wuerl, "The Mass" and "The Church" – help us to understand why this is so.

They explain how "for close to fifteen hundred years" – prior to the printing press, let alone today's mass communications technologies – the Church still "raised up devout generations of worshipers, millions of people who had a lively faith in Jesus Christ and a deep familiarity with his saving doctrine." This was made possible, they explain – quoting "one of the great Church historians of the last century, Father Josef Jungmann" – by the prevalence of feast days in the church calendar, which "impressed the chief mysteries of faith upon the popular consciousness."

"Calendars," the authors point out, "help to define us as the people we are," giving us reference points to the past, a grounding in our present time and a context for future hopes. And so for Christians, the Church "calendar and its feasts remind us who we are," providing "a standard medium for the expression of the profound loves at the center of our lives – our love for God and for our family, for our Church and our community."

"Keeping the feasts is part of our commitment to live as a child of God," Cardinal Wuerl and Aquilina write. "Christians benefit spiritually when we understand the Christian calendar – when we've come to know 'the reason for the season.'"

“By celebrating Christmas, believers grew in their understanding of the incarnation of the Lord,” the authors observe. “Through the many memorials of the saints and martyrs, ordinary people became familiar with the great historic exemplars of heroic virtue. On Easter – and indeed on every Sunday – they celebrated the glory of God in a human being who is fully alive, who is in fact the fullness of life: Jesus Christ.”

That emphasis on Sunday Mass as “the model for all other feasts” is perhaps the book’s most important focus. Many Catholics today, while they pack our churches for major celebrations like Christmas and Easter, take a decidedly lackadaisical approach to the weekly Sunday Mass celebration. Yet it is “Christianity’s ‘primordial feast,’” the authors remind us – quoting from the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments – “and the ‘basis and centre of the liturgical year.’” All of our other liturgical feasts, Cardinal Wuerl and Aquilina write, “make little sense apart from it.”

In one sense, the authors trace the importance of weekly celebration to the book of Genesis, when God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh – bringing into being the weekly Jewish Sabbath, “the original religious festival, the prototype of all the feasts.” And indeed, the authors draw a direct connection between Jewish festival traditions dating from the Old Testament – such as Passover – and our Catholic feast day celebrations. In both cases, they emphasize, believers *learn* about their faith through such celebrations. “Jews absorbed the central ideas of their faith not by studying them systematically,” the book quotes best-selling author Rabbi Harold Kushner, “but by celebrating the weekly Sabbath and the annual cycle of festivals, and gradually absorbing the lessons they conveyed.” Just as, the authors write – again citing Father Jungmann – “Christians through most of history ... *learned* the mysteries of Christianity by

*celebrating the mysteries of Christianity."*

And of course, while each of our feasts celebrates something historic –events in the life of Christ, the lives of the saints, miraculous interventions – they are "not merely the recollection of past events," the authors quote the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "In the liturgical celebration of these events, they become in a certain way present and real."

We know this, of course, with regard to the Mass, in which Christ, every Sunday – indeed, *every day* if we so choose – again offers us the sacrifice of His Body and Blood for our salvation. But this book, as it takes us through some of the significant feast days that fill the Church's calendar, reminds us how *each* of them celebrate not just a historical event or person, but a *living* embodiment of Christ and His Church that can enter into our lives today if we open ourselves to these celebrations. The gift of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate on the feast of Pentecost, for example, did not occur just one time, to one group of Jesus' disciples; Jesus sent the Spirit upon all of us, for all time. Our Blessed Mother's Assumption did not bring to an end her role in human history; rather, it placed her in heaven as Mother of us all, ready to intercede for us with her divine Son. Similarly, the authors write, the feast days of our saints serve as "annual reminders of their great example" – not simply for us to admire, but for all generations to learn from and emulate – and "their intercessory power before the throne of God." One of our newest feast days, Divine Mercy Sunday, should fill us with joy and hope at the gift of God's infinite mercy.

Cardinal Wuerl and Mike Aquilina quote Saint Faustina, the nun who inspired the annual feast of Divine Mercy: "Almost every feast of the Church gives me a deeper knowledge of God and a special grace." And in this work they offer us the same opportunity to grow in knowledge of God and to gain special graces, by inviting us to journey with them through the

marvelous faith experiences that our Catholic feast days and special seasons offer. They help us to connect our feast celebrations to the origins of religious festival in the Jewish traditions of the Old Testament – with even a chapter on “The Feasts That Jesus Kept.” They explain the reasons for religious feasts – from the practical human need for respite and celebration amid the trials of daily life, to the religious teaching that such feasts provide, to the spiritual graces they offer. They give a sampling of some of the many significant feast days on the Church calendar, so that we may enter into their celebration with a deeper understanding of their meaning. And they embrace the many different cultural traditions that make the Church truly universal, and that allow for each culture to mark its own Catholic heritage with its own unique festivals commemorating its own local devotions and saints.

Just as important, the authors make clear, is the power of our feast celebrations to “fortify” us for our work of evangelizing the world.

“The Church is both a mother and a teacher,” they write, “and the feasts are always timely lessons she delivers to her children – giving us something we otherwise lack, or fortifying us against some emerging challenge.” So, for example, they note that the feast of Corpus Christi calls us to be Christ’s witnesses “as we live our faith by loving and serving others.”

The feast of Christ the King, they explain, was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI “to be an antidote to the poisons of secularism, which was then spreading in deadly forms throughout the world.” Most glaring were anti-Catholic laws in Mexico, under which thousands of men, women and children were martyred, and the religious persecutions in Communist Russia. But Pope Pius warned against a broader sweep of secularism that would exclude religion from public life, with dire consequences. Cardinal Wuerl and Mike Aquilina observe how

that reality has taken hold today.

Noting how the Puritan-led government of 17th century England tried to impose a ban on Christmas, they warn that although “the seventeenth century Puritans may seem amusing to us now, they represent an anti-Catholic, anti-festive spirit that is always in the world.

“Today’s Puritans,” they point out, “tend to have a secularist bent, but they are as joyless as their spiritual ancestors. They would rather drain the cheer out of days than permit any public reference to Jesus Christ. They advocate legislation to have his name and symbols removed from every postage stamp, courthouse square, and even window sills that can be seen from the street.” They note that “Western nations treat the name of Christ as an expletive to be deleted from all public discourse.”

Indeed. In fact it seems that the only acceptable use of “Jesus Christ” is when it is literally uttered as an expletive.

“We should charitably resist” the anti-Catholic joylessness of the secularists, the authors urge. “We should, by the example of our joy, teach the world how to feast.” Even as the secular world rejects Christ, they need what we as a Church have to offer.

“We need, once again, to teach the world how to celebrate, how to feast, how to be happy,” the authors write.

They have given us a good start, with a book that helps us to better understand and celebrate our Church’s feasts and their meaning; and so fortifies us to go forth and offer to the world the joy of the Gospel, as it radiates through the celebration of our Catholic feasts.

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