

THE ECCLESIASTICAL CALENDAR

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We have been keeping ecclesiastical calendars for, literally, millennia, with a detailed Jewish calendar in use long before the birth of Christ. With the organization of the Christian church, a new church calendar (called liturgical calendar in the modern church) was created.

As genealogists, we are concerned with historical church calendars because we often find events that give only the ecclesiastical date. Even nonchurch events reference ecclesiastical dates. This article explains the ecclesiastical dates you are most likely to find in records.

The church calendar contains two different types of events: fixed and moveable. Fixed events, which are assigned to a specific date in the secular calendar, include feast days and saint's days. There were a lot of them. One online list, which focuses on the English church, lists almost two hundred. The *Feast Day Calendar for Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Protestant Germany* by Inger M. Bukke and Finn A. Thomsen lists more than 1600! Fortunately, most of them are rarely mentioned in the documents we use. Note that I did not say none of them are ever mentioned.

To convert moveable ecclesiastical dates to secular dates, you need a basic understanding of the church calendar.

Placing moveable events in the ecclesiastical calendar for any given year was not a simple matter. It required calculations based on the weekly cycle, the solar cycle, the lunar cycle, and the secular calendar. There were variations over the centuries. For example, the important element of the full moon was not an agreed-upon event; it has been calculated a variety of ways, almost none of which agree with the astronomical full moon.

After six columns of very small type explaining the various factors and formulas involved in the calculations, my ancient copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* gets to the point, "The principal use of the calendar is to find Easter." It is now agreed that Easter should be on a Sunday, specifically the first Sunday after the 14th day of the paschal moon, which is the first full lunar cycle after the vernal equinox, which is always considered to be 21 March (no matter when the equinox occurs physically). See, I said it wasn't simple. This means that the earliest that Easter Sunday can be is 22 March and the latest it can be is 25 April.

It is helpful to think of the church calendar as circular. It doesn't have a beginning or end. It contains both specific days and seasons. Since we've just discussed Easter Sunday, we'll begin there, but we begin by counting backwards. You know that Easter Sunday determines the season of Lent, which is 46 days long and begins with Ash Wednesday. It also determines Septuagesima Sunday, which is the ninth Sunday before Easter, hence the third Sunday before the beginning of Lent. You occasionally find this date in church records, with the subsequent Sundays counting down to Lent, Sexagesima Sunday and

Quinquagesima Sunday. Note, however, that the words may be used literally, to mean, respectively, 70, 60, and 50 days before Easter. Lent is the time during which you will find the fewest church events.

We think of Easter and Christmas as being specific days, but in the church calendar, they are seasons. In modern times we may refer to them as Eastertide and Christmastide, but in historical records they may be identified by the lack of the word "Sunday." If you are having trouble matching up a date based on a perpetual calendar (especially if you're having to translate from another language), carefully reexamine the wording. Does it perhaps say "Easter Monday" or "the third day of Easter"? Also, watch out for abbreviations. In church registers, examine the dates for the entries above and below to assure yourself that you are where you think you are in the ecclesiastical year.

Ascension Day, the fortieth day of Easter (39 days after Easter Sunday), is a Thursday. Pentecost, the fiftieth day of Easter, also called Whitsunday, is always 10 days after Ascension Day, hence the seventh Sunday after Easter Sunday. It ends the Easter season and begins the season of Pentecost. I often see Easter and Pentecost as the most popular times for confirmations and annual communions in the German churches in Pennsylvania. The participants were prepared the week before. Similarly, I suspect that as I was, many of you were confirmed on or about Palm Sunday, regardless of our different denominations.

At this point in the church year there is a difference in how dates are usually noted in the church we attend on Sunday and in the church of our ancestors. Following Easter, the modern church begins the longest liturgical season of the year, Pentecost, and we refer, for example, to the fourth Sunday of Pentecost. Our ancestors, however, were more apt to count the dates from Trinity Sunday, the Sunday immediately following Pentecost Sunday. We find many events listed as occurring on a certain Sunday after Trinity. There could be anywhere from 23 to 27 such Sundays! The last day of Pentecost or Trinity, the final moveable day counted from Easter, is the day before the beginning of Advent.

The season of Advent begins on Advent Sunday, which is the fourth Sunday before Christmas. It can occur anywhere from 27 November to 3 December. Christmas Day is 25 December, but Christmas is 12 days long (think of the song), followed on 6 January by Epiphany. The length of Epiphany varies because it is dependent upon the date of the upcoming Easter.

You may find other special days mentioned, such as Judica or Passion Sunday (the second Sunday before Easter), Transfiguration (August 6), Assumption (August 15), or All Saints (1 November).

The secular calendar and the ecclesiastical calendar are interrelated. For example, the Julian calendar began its year on Lady Day, March 25, which is the Feast of

Annunciation. However, there were a few English parishes that began numbering their years on Michaelmas (September 29).

In England, the judicial and business years also were related to the ecclesiastical calendar. The English Court sits in terms referred to by ecclesiastical names: Hilary term (a bishop whose feast day is in January), Easter term, Trinity term, and Michaelmas term. Many business events, such as payments of rents, taxes, and bequests in wills and the duration of contracts and leases, occurred on one of the

four “quarter days,” which were Lady Day (March 25), Midsummer Day (June 24), Michaelmas (September 29), and Christmas Day (December 25). In the American colonies, we see this custom continued, as lease payments and quitrents were often due at the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel (Michaelmas).

Additional information on the calendar and the historical use of dates can be found in “Recording and Interpreting Dates.”