

Introduction

Birds aren't known by what they feel or think. They're known by habits and habitats, by diet and coloration. Tree-clinging birds do just that; they cling to trees. So field guides to birds are arranged by areas of identification that might help you find, say, a Bohemian Waxwing or a Western Tanager.

We've written a field guide to the daily acts that make up a Catholic life, for Catholics, like birds, can be identified by habits and habitat, by diet and coloration. Like bird life, our life can be identified by its practices. Some of ours are going to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation; saying certain prayers at certain times of the day; making our confessions; fasting during Lent and feasting during Easter; and wearing the white baptismal garment, the religious medal, the alb, or the clerical collar.

Before all else Catholicism is a life, a life that moves through cycles and seasons. That's why this book, this field guide, is divided into sections organized around these times and seasons—of the Church year, of human life—and the elements—smells and bells, religious signs and symbols, fasting and feasting, gathering and processing, baptizing and burying—that mark us as Catholics.

Some of us grew up celebrating St. Lucy's Day with breakfast in bed, or cooking minestrone soup on the Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker, but many of us did not. Many of these cultural practices have been lost. Perhaps you grew up Catholic but you're not sure what it means to *be* Catholic. Maybe you want to know more about your faith and its practices. Perhaps you are considering joining the Church, or you just joined and you're unsure of how to keep track of feast days and name days and maybe wondering why they even matter. Maybe you'd like to know what a wake is and how it differs from a funeral. Maybe you're curious about what it means to keep Lent.

Maybe you'd like a book to give to non-Catholic friends and family who have questions about the flock of which you are a part. If so, this book is for you.

If you've ever used a field guide, or a cookbook, you know that it doesn't have to be read in order from front to back. Probably you'll start with what interests you most. In a field guide to birds, it might be identifying the little bird with the red crest you saw this morning. In that case, you'll start with your geographical area and then go on to characteristics of birds in that region. In a cookbook, you'll probably go to the section that meets your needs. If you're planning to make a birthday cake, you'll turn to pastries. Use this book in the same way. If you wonder why Catholics use incense and holy oil, go to "Smells and Bells." If you've heard of the Advent wreath but you don't know how to pray around it, go to "Advent." If you're going to be a godparent or will be attending an infant baptism for the first time, go to "Childhood and Adolescence."

People usually pick field guides because they are interested in a subject. Often, a cursory glance becomes a study, and the casual glance at birds outside the window progresses to a walk in the forest with a pair of binoculars. That's our hope with this guide, too. Start anywhere you like, with any practice that catches your attention or speaks to your heart. This book is an opportunity to discover, or re-discover, the sounds and sensations of being Catholic. We pray the life will draw you in and delight you, and fill your days with its riches.

Melissa Musick

June 9, 2015, Memorial of St. Ephrem the Syrian,
deacon and Doctor of the Church