

Celebrating Our Faith

Byzantine Catholic Worship: *Our Church, Its Customs and Rich Heritage*

Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ



THE CHRISTMAS CYCLE of feastdays concludes with the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord on February 2, the fortieth day after the Nativity of Christ. This feast is closely connected with Christmas, for just as Christ's divinity was revealed at his Nativity, so it is also manifested at His presentation in the Temple. From the meeting of the Divine Child and his most Holy Mother with the just Simeon, the feast in the Eastern Church receives its name "The Meeting or Encounter" (Streetenya [Стрітення] in Ukrainian).

The feast is based on an event from the life of our Saviour, recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke (Chapter 2: 22-40). The law of Moses prescribed that every woman who gave birth to a male child was excluded from the temple for forty days, for during that time she was regarded as impure. These forty days were called "days of purification." When this period was ended, the mother of the newly born child went to the temple and offered a year old lamb as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or turtle dove, while a poor woman had to offer a pair of pigeons or a pair of turtle doves. The most Pure Virgin Mary, being the Mother of God, was not bound to submit to this rite of purification, for she was sanctified by the birth of Christ, as our kontakion stresses: "*By Your birth, You sanctified a virgin womb.*" Nevertheless, in her humility, she fulfilled the prescription of the law and offered as a sacrifice two turtle doves.

In addition to this, another rite was performed over the firstborn male on the fortieth day — the rite of offering him up to God and his subsequent redemption. He who was to sanctify and redeem all mankind, desired that He, Himself, first be consecrated to God and then redeemed. "The Eternal God," says the stichera of Lytiya, "who of old gave the law to Moses on Sinai appears this day as an infant. The Creator of the law fulfills the Law. He is brought into the temple and given over to the elder.

Here the providential meeting or encounter of the Divine Child and His most Pure Mother with the righteous Simeon merits special consideration. St. Luke relates that Simeon "was just and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord." (Luke 2: 25-26) Through divine inspiration Simeon recognizes the Child Jesus as the Messiah. He takes Him into his arms and with a beautiful prayer blessed the Lord God for the grace of seeing with his own eyes, though he was blind, the Promised Redeemer.

The Four Pre-lenten Sundays

"Whoever lives like the Pharisee, lives far away from the Church."

(Synaxary of Matins)

BEFORE THE SOLDIER goes into battle, he undergoes a long period of military training to prepare himself physically and psychologically for combat and to enable him to bear the burdens and inconveniences of military life.

In like manner, the holy Church, our good Mother, prepares us, her children, spiritually for the struggles we must undergo before she imposed upon us the strict Great Fast (Lent). This is precisely the aim of the four pre-Lenten Sundays which begin with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and end with Cheesefare Sunday. In the Church services of those Sunday, the Church places before our eyes several biblical scenes: the proud Pharisee and the humble Publican, the conversion of the Prodigal Son, the scene of the Last Judgement and the expulsion of our First Parents, Adam and Eve, from Paradise. These dramatic scenes have the power to move us to the depths; they reveal God's mercy and justice, and convince us of the need for conversion and penance for our salvation. Meditation on these events should evoke in us a serious attitude toward fasting, convincing us of its necessity and benefit as it gradually prepares us for the Fast itself.

The four pre-Lenten Sundays historically were incorporated into our Church Calendar in the later centuries; it was not until then that the Great Fast (Lent) assumed its present day form. First to be added were the Sundays of Meatfare and Cheesefare; only later, sometimes in the eighth or ninth centuries, the Sundays of the Publican and the Pharisee and the Sunday of the Prodigal Son were added.



In particular, the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee teaches us clearly that God does not look at the person or his/her position in life, but at the person's heart and soul. This enables us to understand the truth of the words of Holy Scripture: "God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5) It is understandable then why God rejected the prayer of the vaunting and arrogant Pharisee but heard the prayer of the humble Publican. Since pride is one of the capital sins, it is the greater obstacle to conversion and penance, while humility is the beginning of true conversion and the foundation of sincere penance and fasting.

This is the reason that the Church desires that we also, as we approach the Great Fast, prepare ourselves for it with great humility, mindful of our sinfulness, for only then will we experience compunction (contrition) of heart and possess the courage and goodwill to undertake fasting and penance. Without humility there is no conversion, no sorrow for sin, and no return to God. This is the spirit in which our liturgical services and prayers were composed for this pre-Lenten Sunday (and the others), time and again, emphasizing and praising the virtue of humility and reproaching pharisaical pride.

February 14 in the Eastern Rite | The Repose of Our Venerable Father Cyril, Teacher of the Slavs (+ 869)

Troparion: From your childhood, you befriended wisdom, O God-inspired Cyril. Beholding her as a pure virgin all radiant, you took her as a bride for yourself, and as with beads of gold she adorned your mind and soul. O blessed Cyril, like your namesake of Alexandria, we have found you wise in name and truth.



Kontakion: With teaching that was sound and divinely inspired, you enlightened the world as with luminous rays. Flashing like lightning and surrounding the world, you scattered the radiant word of God in the west, the north, and the southern lands, bringing to the world with your wonders, O blessed Cyril.

Should We, As Christians, Celebrate Valentine's Day?

Question: "What is the origin of St. Valentine's Day, and should Christians celebrate it?"



Answer: The first Valentine was posted around 1806. Almost one billion Valentine's Day cards are sent each year on or near February 14 with females purchasing 85% of the cards. This is second only to the number of Christmas cards sent. The history is somewhat murky as to how Valentine's Day has come to be what we now know and celebrate. Saint Valentine served in third-century Rome. Emperor Claudius decided that single men made better soldiers. Therefore, Claudius banned soldiers from

being married. One version of the story is that Valentine continued to perform the weddings of young soldiers who were in love, and Claudius had Valentine imprisoned. While imprisoned, Valentine reportedly fell in love with the jailer's daughter. Valentine sent her a card and signed it, "Love, your Valentine." Another version is that Valentine defied Claudius by helping Christians escape the torture of the Romans.

Valentine died in approximately A.D. 270. Others claim the church may have decided to celebrate in mid February to "Christianize" the pagan Roman celebration Lupercalia. The first Valentine sent in the United States was in the 1840's by Esther Howgald. Most of us enjoy "spoiling" a loved one on Valentine's Day. Sending gifts and cards conveys love, affection, and friendship.

There is no biblical reason why Christians should not celebrate Valentine's Day by giving their loved ones flowers, candy and/or cards. As with celebrating any holiday, the decision should be between the individual and God. Some people feel very strongly that observing any secular holiday is wrong, while others see it as harmless. The important thing to remember is that celebrating or not celebrating holidays should not be a cause for pride or division among Christians.

Source: www.gotquestions.org

Ukrainian Catholic Practices: Sacred Singing

FROM THE BEGINNING, there was singing in the celebration of the Christian liturgy. The New Testament reveals that Christians sang at their liturgical services and, thus, singing is a fundamental constituent of Christian worship.

Singing brings to the worship of the Church the following benefits:

- 1) After words and gestures, singing is a main element in the liturgical services. It awakens meaning and induces a specific disposition.
- 2) A shared experience is created. Thus, singing reinforces the community spirit of the Church, that is, that the People of God are a *koinonia*, a fellowship.
- 3) Singing by rhythm and melody was used to proclaim the Gospels. The Church has always employed hymns to teach and spread the Christian faith.
- 4) Singing tempers any rigorism and rigidity that could set in, by making prayers and the services more pleasant and sweet.

These are then the positive benefits resulting from singing at the Church's liturgical services.

An outstanding trait of the Ukrainian Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) which distinguishes them from the other Byzantine rite Churches (Russian, Bulgarian, Greek, etc.) is the nature of singing — it is characteristically Ukrainian in feeling. When one attends a sung solemn Divine Liturgy, one is truly in the atmosphere that is distinctly Ukrainian. It is a manifestation of the Ukrainians' love for singing.

Thus, in addition to church architecture, art and furnishings, sacred singing with its solemn and impetative (asking or praying for) quality helps to foster the presence of heaven made present among us here on earth. Singing contributes to the enrichment of the various liturgical functions and ceremonies, and makes worship a more meaningful experience for both body and soul.

~ Rev. Anthony Holowaychuk, OSBM



*Sing a new song unto the Lord
Let your song be sung
from mountains high.
Sing a new song unto the Lord,
Singing "Alleluia!"*