

Celebrating Our Faith

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

Feast of the Conception of St. Anne

When She Conceived the Most Holy Mother of God

First mention of this feast was made in the Typicon of St. Sabbas of the fifth century, but it did not begin to develop and spread until the eighth century. During this time, St. Andrew of Crete composed a liturgy for this feast; George of Nicomedia and John of Eubeia extol it in their sermons. By the ninth century this feast had spread throughout the entire Byzantine empire; now it is celebrated in all the Eastern Churches.



The main theme of the liturgy of this feast is the miraculous event when Anna conceived the Most Holy Mother of God. This liturgy describes the grief and distress Joachim and Anna experienced because of their childlessness, and presents the fervent prayer of Anna: "O Lord God of the heavenly Powers," prays St. Anne, "You know the shame of childlessness, therefore, heal the pain of my heart and make this barren one fruitful..." (Stichera of the Vespers service of the Feast). In response to her fervent supplication, an angel appears and announces the concept of the Most Pure Virgin Mary. "Your supplication," says the angel, "has reached the Lord. Do not be sad, and cease weeping, for you shall become a fruitful olive tree, bringing forth a young shoot — a wonderful maiden, who will bring forth a flower — the Christ in the flesh, who will grant great mercy to the world." At the moment of her conception, the womb of St. Anne becomes like a heaven... "A new heaven is being formed in the womb of Anna," says the Sessional Hymn in Matins, "at the command of the Almighty God; from it shines forth the never-setting Sun, illumining the whole universe with the rays of the Divinity, with the great riches of goodness, the one and only Lover of Mankind."

Troparion and Kontakion of the Feast

Today the chains of barrenness are shattered, for having heard the prayer of Joachim and Anna, against all hope God has openly promised the birth of the Maiden of God, from whom the very Infinite One will be born as a man, the One who commanded the angels to cry to her: "Rejoice, O full of grace, the Lord is with you."

Today the whole world celebrates the conception by Anna, which was brought about by God Himself, for she has ineffably borne the one who will bear the Word."

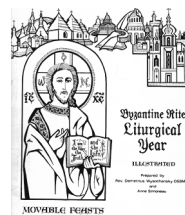
Our Liturgical Calendar: Moveable and Immoveable Feasts



HOLYDAYS OR FEASTS of the Liturgical Year consider not only the objects of veneration, that is, the persons who are being venerated, but also the times when these feasts are celebrated. In this regard, all the feasts of the Church Year are divided into two general groups: the movable and immovable feasts.

The great feasts occupy a special place of honour in the Liturgical Year: the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas) and the Resurrection of Our Lord or the Pasch (Easter). The reason for this is that the Nativity of Our Lord is the beginning, and the Resurrection is the consummation of the redemption of mankind. These two feasts constitute the core around which all the holydays, Sundays, and sacred times are arranged.

What are the Movable Feasts?



In the Church Calendar, we have feasts that do not occur on the same day of the month every year, but which occur sometimes sooner and sometimes later. The reason for this is that the time and day of their celebration depends on the feast of the Resurrection (Easter) which has no fixed date. Easter can occur on any one of the Sundays between March 22 and April 25. Hence, those feasts that have no fixed date are called movable feasts. The centre of all the movable feasts is Easter, therefore, the whole list of Sundays, festivals and sacred seasons which are dependent on Easter form the cycle of feasts called the Easter cycle.

What are the Immoveable Feasts?



Beside the movable feasts which change their date each year, we have numerous feasts which never change, but which fall every year on the same day of the month. For example, the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas) always occurs on the 25th day of December, and the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God on the 15th day of August. These feasts that never change their date are called immovable feasts. The cycle of immovable feasts begins with the Ecclesiastical New Year on the 1st of September and ends on the 31st of August.

While the centre of the movable feast is Easter, the centre of the immovable feasts is Christmas, although not all immovable feasts are dependent on this feast. These immovable feasts, dependent on the Nativity, constitute the Christmas cycle.

More Frequently (and Not-so Frequently) Asked Questions about Byzantine Catholics and How to Answer Them

What are additional differences between Byzantine & Roman Catholics?

Some of the Eastern liturgy distinctive characteristics are as follows: The **Priest** faces towards the altar along with the people, rather than facing the people across the altar, serving as the leader.

The **Sign of the Cross** is made many times during the Liturgy as a sign of our faith and the receiving and accepting of God's blessings.

Chanting or singing of all divine Services including the Epistle and Gospel are often sung to melodies passed down and preserved for generations. Byzantine liturgical tradition emphasizes that we offer ourselves to God as we are, bringing only ourselves and worship with our God-given voices. In the past, the use of musical instruments during the divine services was not permitted and all liturgical prayer was sung **a capella** (without accompaniment). However, in the past number of years, instruments in some parishes (guitar and organ) have been accepted to encourage the faithful to participate, and to provide support.

Incense is usually used (but can be omitted) throughout the Liturgy as a sign of reverence for the sacred place, the sacredness of the people who are made in God's image, and as a sign of preparing for something important about to happen in the Liturgy. It is our prayer ascending like the smoke of incense before the throne of God, recalling the Psalmist's words: "Let my prayer rise like incense before you." (Psalm 141: 2)

Icons (the Greek word *icon* means 'image'), which are the distinctive art form for the Eastern Churches, are used in place of statues. Icons, which express the public teaching of the Church, radiate divine life by their tranquil brilliance and symbolize the human and divine aspects of Christ, His most Holy Mother, the Ever-Virgin Mary, important feast days, and the saints.

Language: In the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada, the liturgy was translated into English from Old Slavonic (used in Europe) in the 1960s. Many churches continue to include some traditional Slavonic in worship, especially hymns and seasonal greetings. Here in Thunder Bay, the Ukrainian language is primarily used during the Divine Liturgy, whereas the Old Slavonic remains in some of the liturgical hymns sung by the faithful.

The **altar (holy table)** is square in shape symbolizing the four corners of the world, where the Apostles were sent to spread the Word. The ornate vestments worn by the priest date back to early Byzantine Empire clothing.

Is the Liturgy celebrated the way it was celebrated before Vatican II?

Yes. We use the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, which dates back to the 300s. Some pastors have tried to shorten it. However, a decree was given in Toronto on March 15, 2017 by Bishop Stephan Chmilar which echoed His Beatitude Patriarch Sviatoslav Shevchuk's statements from February 27, 2017, that "the 1988 Synodal Version of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is to be followed in its entirety and that no part of the Divine Liturgy may be omitted or abbreviated."



THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY of our Lord Jesus Christ is ranked among the greatest feasts of our Church Year. Therefore, the Church encourages the faithful to prepare by prayer and fasting for this encounter with our Saviour.

This festal preparation reaches its peak on the Eve of the Nativity. It is a day of watching, prayer and fasting. The guest from heaven is about to arrive, therefore, it is necessary to prepare for His coming worthily. The Holy Eve of the Nativity has not only its own church significant services; it is also rich in symbolic rites and customs, some of which go back to pre-Christian times.

The Spiritual Preparation at Home

The eve of Christmas brings the forty day Christmas fast (Pylypiwka) to a close. A strict fast is prescribed for the entire day. The whole family feels that on that day a very important heavenly guest will arrive in the evening, and therefore, a deeply festal and spiritual mood pervades the home. Our ancestors highly respected and zealously observed the fast on this day until the appearance of the evening star. Kievan Metropolitan, Maxim (1283-1305), in his rules on fasting says, that even if it be Saturday or Sunday on which the Eve of the Nativity falls, on that day a strict fast must be kept. Only after the Vespers service (Great Compline) is one allowed to strengthen oneself with bread and wine. He orders that the same kind of fast be observed also on the Eve of the Theophany of our Lord.

From earliest times, besides fasting, our ancestors prepared themselves for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord with confession and Holy Communion. This very beautiful and holy tradition comes from the first centuries of Christianity in Ukraine; it began with Kievan Metropolitan George (1072).

The main duty of the members of each family on Holy Eve (Sviat Vechir) is to prepare themselves, their house and property for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord. As soon as the first evening star appears in the sky, the head of the house lights a candle on the table. The whole family, dressed in festive attire, prays together and then sits down to the Holy Supper. The father then extends good wishes to the entire family, and they begin the Supper with 'kutya' — boiled wheat and honey — the most important of the 12 meatless courses. Wheat is the symbol of eternity, and honey is the symbol of the eternal happiness of the saints in heaven. During the Holy Supper, the souls of the departed of the family are remembered, and a separated dish with kutya is set for them on the table or window sill, for it is believed that the departed souls also share in the Holy Supper. After supper, the whole family greets the Nativity of our Lord by singing Christmas carols and exchanging gifts. The mood of the Holy Supper fills the heart and soul of everyone with the unspeakable charm of the very ancient customs of the Ukrainian people.

