

Celebrating Our Faith

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

Happy New 'Church' Year!

EVER WONDER WHY the Liturgical Year in the Eastern Church traditionally begins on September 1 rather than January 1? To answer this question, let's examine this a bit deeper.

The first day of the New Church Year is also called the “**Beginning of the Indiction**,” a term that comes from a Latin word meaning, “to impose.” It was originally applied to the imposition of taxes in Egypt. The first worldwide Indiction was in the year 312 A.D. when the Emperor Constantine saw a miraculous vision of the Cross in the sky [as he and his army marched against Rome]. Before the introduction of the Julian calendar, Rome began the New Year on September 1. In modern times, the Roman Rite Liturgical year begins with Advent — the time of preparation for both the celebration of Jesus' birth, and His expected second coming at the end of time.

According to Holy Tradition, Christ entered the synagogue on September 1 to announce His mission to mankind (Luke 4:16-22). Quoting Isaiah (61:1-2), the Saviour proclaimed, “*The spirit of the Lord is upon me; because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to proclaim release to captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...*” Tradition also says that the Hebrews entered the Promised Land in September.

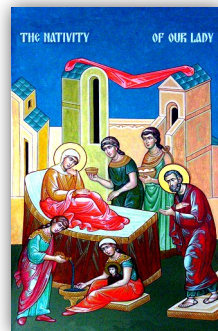
The Liturgical Year is so arranged that its central place is occupied by our Divine Saviour; around Him are gathered all the angels and saints. The Most Pure Virgin Mary, who has been accorded the most prominent place after Christ in the work of redemption, also stands nearest to Christ in the Liturgical Year; this is evident in the various feasts in honour of the Mother of God.



In summary, our Liturgical Year is a mighty hymn of honour and glory to God, in which the threefold Church takes part — the Church Triumphant in heaven, the Church Suffering in purgatory, and the Church Militant on earth. In the Church Year, the entire content of our holy faith finds its most beautiful expression. Like a colourful rainbow our Liturgical Year joins earth to heaven, and enlightens, purifies, sanctifies and lifts us up to God.

So, having begun both another Liturgical Year, may we continue our devotion to God, embrace the Living Word of God, Jesus, in our lives daily, and may we truly have a Happy and Blessed “New Year”!

The Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God



ONE OF THE GREAT FEASTS we celebrate at the beginning of the Liturgical Year is the feast of the Nativity of the most Holy Mother of God, in Ukrainian “*Богородици*” (Bohorodytsi) on September 8. As is evident from the words of the troparion of this occasion, it is a joyful and significant feast. Joyful, because it is the birthday of the Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven and earth, and significant because it places before our eyes the great truth of our holy faith concerning the Divine Motherhood of the most pure Virgin Mary, from whom “*shone forth the Sun of Justice, Christ our God.*” The morning star has risen, therefore, the rising of the sun is not far off. The sublime name of the feast given in our liturgical books also indicates the great significance of this feast: “*The Nativity of our most Holy Queen, the Mother of God and ever-Virgin Mary.*”

The Gospels record very few incidents in the life of the most pure Virgin Mary. It says nothing about her nativity, her parentage, her childhood or youth, or her holy dormition and assumption into heaven. The chief source of information on the life of the most Holy Mother of God is the Apocryphal book written around the year 170-180 called the *Proto-evangelium of James*. This book presented the basis for the institution of such feasts as the Conception of St. Anna, the Nativity of the most Holy Mother of God, the Presentation in the Temple, and the feasts honouring Joachim and Anna, the parents of Mary. From this book we learn of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Virgin Mary, and the names of her parents.

In the same book, we learn that the most pure Virgin Mary was descended on her father's side from the royal house of David, on her mother's side from the priestly line of Aaron. Her parents lived in Nazareth and were fairly well-off. They were also distinguished for the great holiness of their lives and their great love of God and neighbour. Joachim was accustomed to dividing the fruits of his labour into three parts: one part he gave to God as a sacrifice, the second part he distributed among the poor, and the third part he kept for himself and his wife. Their one great sorrow was that they had no children. Among the Jews, childlessness was looked upon not only as an absence of God's blessing, but as a punishment from God. Because of this, Joachim and Anna had to suffer much. Therefore, it is not surprising that they should unceasingly implore God for a child. This was the main purpose of all their prayers, fastings, and alms. Finally, the Lord God blessed them in their old age with a child who was destined to become the Mother of God.

“By your birth, O immaculate one, Joachim and Anna were freed from the reproach of childlessness, and Adam and Eve from the corruption of death. And your people, redeemed from the guilt of their sins, celebrate as they cry out to you: “The barren one gives birth to the Mother of God and nourisher of our life.”

Kontakion of the feast

The New Testament: Questions and Answers

Question: In some of the Epistle Readings, namely the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians and Galatians, the name 'Cephas' is mentioned. Who is that person?

Answer: The commonly understood answer is that one of the apostles was named Simon. Jesus nicknamed Simon the "Rock," in Greek "Petros." Cephas is a transliteration of the word Kefa, meaning rock in the Aramaic language, spoken in Israel at that time. Therefore, Peter = Cephas = Rock = Simon. The pronunciation can be said with both a soft or hard C, thus it is heard sometimes as "Sefas" or "Seefas" or as "Kefas" or "Keefas." (Note: in Ukrainian it is always "Ки́фа" transliterated as "Kifa.").

So why did Paul sometimes write Peter and other times Cephas? He may have been referring to Peter when 'Peter acted like Peter' — resolute, but gentle and firm, and capable of great loyalty and love, and Cephas (Kefa) when he acted in a less sanctified manner — rash and hasty, irritable and capable of great anger, and to rebuke him, for at times, Peter and Paul had disagreements. (See Galatians 2:11-16)

In the 2004 American biblical feature film, "*The Passion of the Christ*" directed by Mel Gibson, in which the dialogue is entirely in reconstructed Aramaic, vernacular Hebrew, and Latin, the word "Peter" appears in the subtitles whenever the character of "Kifa" (Peter) is being addressed. Christ was speaking in Aramaic and would have called (Simon) Peter "Cephas." St. John wrote his gospel in Greek, so he included the note for his readers that "Cephas" meant "a stone."



However he is referred to as, the love of Christ was the chief motive of Peter's apostolic activity, labours and sacrifices. He witnessed the glory of Christ on Mt. Tabor at the Transfiguration; in the name of all the Apostles, he professed the divinity of Christ; he was sent with St. John to prepare the Paschal Supper; and he witnessed Christ's agony in the Garden of Olives. And after the Ascension of Christ, St. Peter became the head of the Apostles and the leader of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. That love finally led him to suffer and die for the sake of his beloved Teacher. A pious tradition related that he considered himself unworthy to die on the cross as Christ did, and therefore asked to be crucified upside down. This tradition is confirmed by Bishop Eusebius (†340) in his History of the Church and by St. John Chrysostom, in a sermon on the Apostles Sts. Peter and Paul, in which he says, "Rejoice, Peter, who died on the cross head downward." St. John Chrysostom also calls Peter "the firstborn lamb from the flock of the Good Shepherd." He was martyred in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero between the years 64-67 A.D.

The Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross



THE SERVANT OF GOD Andrew Sheptytsky once said in one of his pastoral letters that "the veneration of the Holy Cross of the Lord is one of the most significant aspects of the worship of the God-Man...Signing ourselves with the sign of the Cross is one of the oldest customs of Christians."

The feast of the Exaltation is one of the twelve great feasts of our Church and has a one-day pre-feast and a seven day post-feast. The Saturday and Sunday before and after the Exaltation carry the name "before" — or "after the feast of the Exaltation", because on those days the Epistle and Gospel speak of the Holy Cross.

One must remember that in celebrating this feast, we are not concerned with the ordinary veneration of the Holy Cross, which takes place on the third Sunday of the Great Fast, but with that aspect of the feast which is expressed in the name of the feast itself — EXALTATION or ELEVATION — of the Cross, that is, a special solemn rite connected with the veneration and glorification of the Holy Cross.

The service of the feast of the Exaltation or Elevation of the Venerable Cross is, strictly speaking, one glorious hymn in honour of the Cross. Here the Holy Cross is continuously praised and glorified as the sign of victory, power and salvation: "Hail, O life-giving Cross," exclaims the stichera at the Aposticha in the Vespers service of the feast, "invincible victory of religion, gate to paradise, fortress of the faithful, defence of the Church. Through you, corruption is utterly destroyed, the power of death is swallowed up, and we are raised up from earth to heaven. You are an invincible weapon, subjugator of demons, glory of the Martyrs, true ornament of the Saints, the refuge of salvation, — grant the world great mercy."

St. John Chrysostom, author of our Divine Liturgy, speaks of the significance of the Cross for us: "The Cross is a trophy against the demons, a weapon against sin, a sword with which Christ pierced the serpent. The Cross is the will of the Father, the glory of the Only-begotten One, joy of the Spirit, ornament of the angels, fortress of the Church, the glory of Paul, stronghold of the Saints, the light of the whole world."