

HAVE A BLESSED NEW YEAR

Beginning of the Church Year – September 1

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In the year 325 the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea adopted the first of September as the beginning of the liturgical year of the Church. Whereas the Latin Church begins its Liturgical Year on the first day of Advent, most of the churches of the Eastern Rites still observe September 1st. On this date we commemorate the day on which Christ entered the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the book of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has chosen me ... to proclaim ‘This is the year the Lord has chosen.’ (Luke 4:18-19)”. When the first day of September was designated as the beginning of the “New Year” it became a feast-day of the Church. It has its own special liturgical service with a short prayer expressing the feast.

***“O Author of all created things
Who has established the seasons
and the years, bless the crown
of the year with your goodness,
O Lord.” (Kontakion)***

It was some 1,200 years ago that Isaiah with the solemn words of a prophet petitioned God for a blessed year. Today Holy Mother the Church has placed its daily praise and our petitions to Him within the framework of a liturgical year. We call the Liturgical Year, the Church Year, because it contains the Church Calendar. A calendar that in some respects is similar to and in others differs from the civil calendar. The liturgical year has a natural rhythm. Every day of the year belongs to the Lord but there are sometimes special days and seasons that call for a greater festivity. The Easter cycle, Lent, Christmas, Resurrection, Dormition, Pentecost and the Transfiguration come to mind.

The purpose of the liturgical calendar is to remind us of the teachings of the Gospel and the main events of Christian history in a certain order. It has an educational function. But it’s more than that. Its **aim is to orient our prayer in a certain direction.** Each liturgical feast day brings alive the event of which it is a symbol. But it’s more than that. It is a special way that we can have union with Christ. How does it do that? Well, in the liturgical year we are called upon to relive the whole life of Christ. We are called upon to unite ourselves to Christ in his birth and in His growth; to unite ourselves to His suffering, and to His dying; to unite ourselves to Christ in His triumph and to the Christ who is inspiring his Church. In essence, the liturgical year is transformational. It forms Christ in us.

The Blessed Mother is next in prominence to Christ in the Liturgical Year. Canadian Ukrainian Catholics, as do all Eastern Rite Catholics, have a profound love of Mary and accord her sincere veneration in all its church services, especially the two holy days of obligation in her honor – the feasts of the Annunciation and Assumption. And at each Divine Liturgy when the priest after silently commemorating those in the state of heavenly glory, sets Mary above all when he sings her commemoration aloud: “Especially, the most blessed and glorious Lady, mother of God and every virgin Mary”. And the people respond by singing one of the most popular hymns in her honor: “It is indeed fitting to glorify you, mother of God... O true Mother of God we magnify you.”

The Constitution of the Church (pp. 65-67) decrees that since her entry into salvation history, Mary calls the faithful to her Son, His sacrifice and to the love of the Father. St. Epiphany of Cyprus who died in 403 said of the Blessed Mary “Whoever honors Christ honors also Mary; whoever does not honor Mary, does not honor Christ.” A scholar and authority on the tradition of the Eastern Church, Maximilian of Saxony, reminds us that all the great Marian feasts began in the East, so that devotion to Mary permeated the blood of all the faithful of the Eastern Church and whosoever did not venerate her was simply regarded as an unbeliever and non-Christian.

In addition to the cycle of feasts that bear directly on Jesus and his Mother the liturgical year includes a cycle of feasts of the saints, of martyrs, of holy people and of holy events. Because they are glorified members of the body of Christ, when we celebrate their feasts, we celebrate a special grace that flows from Christ to the saint/martyr/holy person and then on to us. As the feast days of our Lord renew the events of His life, so the feasts of the blessed in heaven make their lives, their merits and their deaths come alive in our memories. In that way, their feast day should be a source of encouragement for us as we strive to bond ourselves more closely to Christ.

It is a custom in North America that people make New Year’s resolutions. They pledge themselves to commit to a behavioral change for their own good. To give up smoking, lose weight, being more physically active and not to put things off that need to be done. This same custom can also apply to the start of our new liturgical church year. On the feast days for Christ, or Mary or the holy saints we could attend Divine Liturgy. We could attend other liturgical services suited to the feast. We could recite the rosary; have homilies or talks that explain the importance of the feast. We also could engage in private devotion like prayer and spiritual reading. All these resolutions are doable, irrespective of age and physical ability. All are worthwhile. Whatever our New Year pledges, I pray that they bring us closer to Jesus Christ who is the center of the Liturgical Year. So too He should be the center of our life.

GLORY BE TO JESUS CHRIST. GLORY BE FOREVER

Suggested reading:

A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year. Julian J. Katrij, OSBM. Basilian Fathers Publication, 1992.

The Byzantine Ukrainian, Canadian Catholic Conference, Ottawa, 1975.

The Bible for Today’s Family - Catholic Edition, New Testament. Catholic Bible Press, 1991.

NOTE: *The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of Ukrainian Catholic Church.”*