

Various Other Feasts

In addition to the Holy Pascha of the Lord, and the Twelve Great Feasts, there are several other Feasts ranking in importance just after them. These are: The Circumcision of the Lord, The Nativity of St. John the Baptist, The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, The Beheading of St. John the Baptist, The Protection of the Most-Holy Theotokos (Russian Church only), and The Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and the Other Bodiless Powers.

The Protection of the Most-Holy Theotokos (Oct. 1).

This Feast commemorates an event that happened at Constantinople in the 10th Century. In the year 911, during the reign of Emperor Leo the Wise, a large army of Saracens was preparing to attack the city and conquer it. The pious people of Constantinople reacted to the threat by turning to prayer. They thronged to the Church of Blachernae (where was preserved the Robe and Veil of the Mother of God) and there raised their voices to Christ the Lord, and to His Mother, the All-Holy Theotokos, pleading for mercy and help against the foe.

As the soldiers raised their arms in battle, the church was filled with hymns and prayers. Among the believers was St. Andrew, a Fool-for-Christ, and his disciple, St. Epiphanius. Suddenly they saw a vision of the Virgin Mary surrounded by a choir of angels, prophets and apostles. Do you see, brother, the Queen of all praying for the peace of the world asked Andrew? Indeed I see, father, answered the disciple. I see and I fear.

The inhabitants of the city heard of this vision of the two men, and were filled with joy and hope that this was a sign of deliverance. They thanked God and sang hymns to the One who interceded for them. All night they prayed in the church, while outside, the Christian army fought against the invaders. The tide of battle turned against the enemy and the defenders of Constantinople emerged with a decisive victory. Saints Andrew and Epiphanius told everyone of their vision in the church, seeing the Holy Virgin with outstretched arms, holding a veil over the city as a sign of protection, and imploring God's mercy upon the people.

Since that time the Feast of the Protection has come to be celebrated by the Church. In the Feast of the Protection of the Most-Holy Theotokos, we entreat of the Queen of Heaven to protect and help: Remember us in your prayers, O Lady, Virgin Theotokos, that we not perish for the increase of our sins; protect us from all evil and cruel misfortune. For we put our hope on you, and honoring the Feast of your Protection, we magnify you!

Synaxis of the Holy Angels (Nov. 8).

The Feast of the Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and the Other Bodiless Hosts was established at the beginning of the 4th Century at the Local Council of Laodicea, a few years before the First Ecumenical Council. This Council, among other things, condemned and rejected the heretical worship of angels as creators and rulers of the world and confirmed the Orthodox in their particular veneration.

The Feast is celebrated in November the 9th Month (counting March, which, in antiquity, was the beginning of the year) conforming to the traditional Nine Ranks of Angels Seraphim and Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Powers, Authorities, Principalities, Archangels and Angels. [All of these titles are mentioned in Holy Scripture, and a detailed exposition of them, their characteristics and function may be found in The Celestial Hierarchies by Pseudo-Dionysius, who wrote in the 6th Century.] The fact that the Feast is celebrated on the 8th Day of the month indicated the future assembly of the Heavenly Powers on the day of the awesome judgment of God which the Holy Fathers called the 8th Day, since after this present age, characterized by 7-day weeks, will come the 8th Day, when the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him (Matt. 25:31).

In the theology of the Church, the angels are seen as pure spirits, but nonetheless created spirits, destined to worship and reflect the infinite divine beauty as well as being sent forth to do the divine bidding. As St. Paul tells us, Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation (Heb. 1:14)? Angels appear at times in the Old Testament to the Patriarchs and Prophets and often were seen to be the bearers of God's image and power by the ancient Jews. Especially noted is the manifestation of the Holy Trinity to Abraham (Gen. 18) in the form of three angels (the subject of Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the Holy Trinity).

In the New Testament the Archangel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus; angels ministered to Him in the wilderness and also during His agony in Gethsemane before His crucifixion; and the Resurrection is announced to the Myrrhbearers by angels. They are closely involved in the life of the apostles and also in the beginnings of the Church.

In addition, the Church teaches that everyone is given a Guardian Angel at birth to act as a guide and protector to every individual. The Lord Himself bears witness to this, when speaking of little children, He cautioned His disciples: See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of My Father Who is in heaven (Matt. 18:10).

The leader of the Heavenly hosts is Michael the Archangel, whose name means Like unto God. He is mentioned by name in the Old Testament book of Daniel, as well as in

the New Testament Epistle of St. Jude, and especially figures in the Revelation of St. John. In ancient Jewish tradition, he was seen as the heavenly protector of Israel.

According to the Revelation of St. John, seven angels serve before the throne of God (Rev. 8-10) and take part in the final woes of the world. In the tradition of the Church, the names of these angels, commemorated by name in the Church Calendar on November 8 are: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Selaphiel, Jegudiel and Barachiel.

The Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Jan. 1).

January 1 is dedicated to the memory of the Circumcision of Christ. According to the covenant which God made with Abraham, God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.... Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-12).

In submitting to the Law of Circumcision, Our Lord signifies that He is the fullness and the completion of the Old Covenant: And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:21). At the same time He showed the way to humility by submitting to humiliation of the flesh, prefiguring the bloody consecration His All-Pure Body was to receive on the Cross.

So, too, in the spiritual sense, every Christian must submit his body and desires to the will of God. As St. Paul says, in the Epistle Lesson read on the Feast: For in [Jesus] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in Him, Who is the head of all rule and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ (Col. 2:9-11).

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24).

The birth of St. John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the Old Testament Prophets, was the result of a miracle. As Holy Scripture tells us: In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years

(Luke 1:5-7).

Childlessness was a terrible thing to an Old Testament Jew; not having a firm belief in life after death, barrenness meant that one's name would not be carried on in life. In addition, Zechariah and Elizabeth were both getting on in years, and the likelihood of bearing children diminished with each passing day.

But then the miraculous hand of God intervened. One day, while Zechariah was serving in the Temple, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his barren wife Elizabeth would bear a son, whose name would be John. Zechariah was incredulous. He doubted the angel since both he and his wife were old. As a result, by divine command, he was struck dumb until the time when the child would be born (Luke 1:8-23). After this, Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men (Luke 1:24-25).

We find parallels to this account in the Old Testament stories of the births of the Prophet Samuel and of Samson, both of whom were born of barren mothers at the intervention of God. But we find an even greater parallel in the birth of the Most-Holy Theotokos, who was born of barren parents, Joachim and Anna, also by means of Divine Intervention.

Finally the time came for the consummation of the miracle. For the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbors and kinfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, Not so; he shall be called John (Luke 1:57-60). This was confirmed by Zechariah in writing; and when he wrote the name John, his mouth was opened, and he spoke openly.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:67, 76-77). We know that John later became a great Prophet and was privileged to baptize the Lord Himself in the waters of the Jordan. As the Evangelist tells us, he acknowledged Christ's divinity when, after he had baptized Him and witnessed the events of that glorious day, he said, / have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God (John 1:34).

The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (June 29).

From the 4th Century on, the Church of Rome has celebrated the Feast of the Holy Apostles on June 29. This became the usage of the Universal Church. Spiritually the Feast is linked with Holy Pentecost, as the witness of the Apostles is the immediate fruit of the descent of the Holy Spirit which came upon them. The  Feast is preceded

by the Fast of the Holy Apostles which begins on the Monday following All-Saints' Sunday (1st after Pentecost). The two most important Apostles of the early Church were Peter and Paul and, according to Church Tradition, they were both martyred in Rome, Paul by beheading and Peter by crucifixion. Thus this Feast became especially prominent in Rome.

Although St. Peter had a special zeal concerning Christ and is considered the chief of the Apostles, he did not have any special authority over the other Apostles, but was only first in honor. When there were important questions in the Church, it was a Church council that decided them, and St. Peter himself was sent by a council to preach the Word of God.

According to St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul sought dishonor more than we seek honor, death more than we seek life, poverty more than we seek wealth, sorrows more than we seek joy, and that he prayed for his enemies more than others pray against their enemies. For him there was only one thing to be feared: that he might offend God! He desired nothing more in life than to please God and the whole meaning of his life was his love for Christ.

The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (Aug. 29).

During His earthly ministry, the Lord bore witness to the stature of His Baptizer. Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, who shall prepare Thy way before Thee.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he (Matt. 11:7-11).

John was the greatest of the prophets; however, as the Resurrection had not yet occurred, no man had ascended to the glory of the Kingdom of God. Even so great a prophet as John had not been redeemed. Like all men, John had to die a bodily death and it is entirely appropriate that this occurred as the result of his high moral integrity and courageous words such as would come from a great prophet.

The Holy Evangelist Mark tells the story: Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it. And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom. And she went out, and said to her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the baptizer. And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb (Mark 6:17-29). Thus the Baptizer of Christ met a tragic end. In commemoration of this event, on the Day of his Beheading, the Holy Church has decreed a day of strict fasting.

In addition to the above Feasts, other days are dedicated to the Saints and Holy Events. Among these are:

St. Anthony the Great, Father of Monasticism (Jan. 17)

The Three Holy Hierarchs: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom (Jan. 30)

The Repose of St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to the Americas (Mar. 31)

The Holy Greatmartyr and Victorybearer George (Apr. 23).

The Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian (May 8)

The Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Cyril and Methodius, Evangelizers of the Slavs (May 11)

The Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Emperor Constantine and his mother, St. Helena (May 21)

Our Venerable Father Sergius, Wonderworker of Radonezh (July 5).

The Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Great Prince Vladimir (July 15).

Our Venerable Father Seraphim, Wonderworker of Sarov (July 19).

The Holy Glorious Prophet Elijah (July 20)

The Procession of the Honorable Wood of the Life-Giving Cross of the Lord (Aug. 1)

The Glorification of Our Venerable Father Herman, Wonderworker of Alaska and All America (Aug. 9)

The Repose of St. Tikhon, Bishop of Voronezh, Wonderworker of Zadonsk and All Russia (Aug. 13)

The Holy New-Martyrs of Alaska: Peter the Aleut and Priest-monk Juvenaly (Sept. 24)

The Glorification of St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow, Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to the Americas (Oct. 6)

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia (Dec. 6)

The Repose of Our Venerable Father Herman, Wonderworker of Alaska and All America (Dec. 13).

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