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Introducing the Liturgical Year

CELEBRATING THE LITURGICAL YEAR in the Orthodox Church is eventful. Orthodoxy shares many feasts with the churches of the West. Lent, Holy Week, Pascha (Easter), and Pentecost are among the most solemn seasons and days. Orthodoxy also has many Marian feasts, similar to the Roman Catholic liturgical tradition. Mary's Birth, Entrance into the Temple, Annunciation, and Dormition (Assumption) occupy central places on the church calendar.

The particularities of the Orthodox calendar are easily explained by liturgical history. Lent begins with a special Vespers office on the Sunday evening before the Monday of the first week. There is no Ash Wednesday in Orthodoxy—this rite is particular to the West, a regional tradition that the churches of the East neither experienced nor received. Similarly, though the Sundays of Advent are central to the Western Christian celebration of Christmas, there is no official Advent in Orthodoxy, but there is a forty-day fast preceding Christmas, along with two preparatory Sundays. Theophany (Epiphany) is a festive occasion in Orthodoxy, featuring the blessing of waters, which the faithful then take home to be consumed for protection, healing, and the forgiveness of sins. This short description of differences between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church barely breaks the surface—the Orthodox liturgical year contains many more mysteries to be explored.

This Study's Objective

There is a plethora of scholarship on the liturgical year in Orthodoxy. A cadre of first-rate comparative liturgists has delivered numerous monographs

and articles explaining the historical development of specific feasts, fasts, and seasons. Much of the scholarship is devoted to Holy Week and Pascha. The editions of the late-antique to medieval Armenian and Georgian lectionaries provide insights into the celebration of the entire liturgical year in Jerusalem. The editions compiled, translated, and published by scholars such as Athanase Renoux and Michel Tarchnischvili remain necessary for the study of this early period of liturgical history. The so-called Anastasis typikon provides details on hagiopolite Holy Week and Pascha in the tenth century. The editions of the Typikon of the Great Church published by Juan Mateos reveal the Constantinopolitan cursus of services.

Several scholars have contributed to an ongoing narrative on the details of Holy Week and Pascha. These studies include Mark Morozowich's detailed analysis of Holy Thursday, Sebastia Janeras's study of Holy Friday, and Gabriel Bertoni  re's history of the Paschal Vigil.¹ In addition, Miguel Arranz has written multiple essays on paschal baptism and the kneeling prayers at Pentecost, Robert Taft has an analysis of the cross-pollination of Jerusalem and Constantinople during Holy Week and Pascha, Thomas Pott has examined the Paschal Triduum, and Daniel Galadza has produced a groundbreaking study of liturgical Byzantinization in Jerusalem.

General studies on the origins of the liturgical year are informative. Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson's survey of the historical development of feasts, fasts, and seasons reflects on many issues relevant to the Orthodox tradition. The significance of Lazarus Saturday in the period bridging Lent and Holy Week is of particular interest and updates the previous scholarship of Thomas Talley. A number of important questions on the objectives of studying the liturgical year have surfaced in the academic community. These are summarized in an important survey essay by Harald Buchinger, who discloses the existing questions on certain assumptions such as the origins of the Christmas feast and the role of the interplay of theory and practice in the history of the liturgical year.² The most important study written for a general audience on the Orthodox liturgical year is Archbishop Job Getcha's exposition of the typikon, published originally in French and now translated in English.³ Getcha's study analyzes

1. Morozowich, *Holy Thursday*; Janeras, *La Vendredi-Saint*; Bertoni  re, *Historical Development*; Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform*; Galadza, *Liturgy and Byzantinization*; Taft, "Holy Week"; Taft, "In the Bridegroom's."

2. Buchinger, "On the Origin."

3. Getcha, *Typikon Decoded*.

the intersecting liturgical cycles through the lens of the liturgical books. His presentation explains the overarching system that pastors find in the typikon, including the categorization of feasts through their symbols and the historical development of the liturgical books that provide the content for the offices of the church year. Getcha's study is particularly valuable for its digests of historical evolution and descriptions of the primary features of the liturgical year. He covers Lent, Holy Week, Pascha, the Ascension, Pentecost, Christmas, and the Theophany.

A selection of other publications offers reflections on the liturgical year. These include Alexander Schmemmann's essays on Great Lent, Thomas Hopko's collections on the Christmas and Lenten seasons, Lev Gillet's meditation on the church year, and Alkiviadis Calivas's important introduction to Holy Week and Pascha in the Greek Orthodox tradition.⁴

This book's objectives are as follows: First, this study surveys the received liturgical tradition and considers the present realities of its celebration in the Orthodox Church. The examination of each ritual celebration is irreducible to any single festal feature. The relationship of the liturgical year with the calendar can lead to the impression that the significance of a feast depends largely on its position within the structures and rhythms of seasons. This study will show that the liturgical year is irreducible to the governance of time and the interpretations of dates and numbers.

In this sense, the study does not seek to reveal the origins of the feasts or reconstruct their historical development, though each section will discuss history's contribution to our understanding of feasts. The book approaches Orthodoxy's celebration of the liturgical year as it is in the present. We explain the meaning of each celebration by accounting for all festal components. For most feasts and ritual acts, the order of the cycle of services, appointed scriptural lessons, hymns, and special ritual actions are the primary components for defining its meaning. The methodology of this book follows the principle elucidated by Mark Searle, who described the liturgical year as "a carousel of sayings and stories, songs and prayers, processions and silences, images and visions, symbols and rituals, feasts and fasts in which the mysterious ways of God are not merely presented but experienced, not merely perused but lived through."⁵

4. Schmemmann, *Great Lent*; Hopko, *Winter Pascha and Lenten Spring*; Calivas, *Great Week and Pascha*; A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Year of Grace*. "A Monk of the Eastern Church" is a pseudonym occasionally used by Lev Gillet.

5. Searle, "Sunday," 59.

In Orthodoxy, festal hymnography occupies a place of prominence in expressing liturgical theology. Hymns are regarded as the living repository of patristic preaching, the continued echoing of the voice of the fathers in the contemporary church. This study devotes more energy to gleaning liturgical theology from the appointed scriptural lessons to clarify the meaning of any given feast.

Ordering the Liturgical Year

This analysis of the liturgical year does not follow a chronological order. We do not begin on September 1 (the Indiction) and proceed to the end of August. Rather, this survey has a thematic organization. The first content chapter covers the movable cycle, Pascha and the seasons and commemorations that depend on the calculation of its annual date. It provides a detailed analysis of the pre-Lenten cycle of Sundays, Lent, Holy Week, Pascha, and the Ascension and Pentecost. The discussion of the commemorations included in the movable cycle includes the Sundays honoring ecumenical councils and All Saints Sunday. The next chapter presents the fixed cycle of the liturgical year and focuses on the feasts of the Lord and Marian commemorations. The analysis begins with the cycle of incarnational feasts—Christmas, the Theophany, and Hypapante (Meeting). The chapter proceeds on to an analysis of the Marian cycle (the four Great Feasts), a discussion of the commemorations of John the Baptist, and a section on two stand-alone, fixed feasts of the Lord—the Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Cross. The last content chapter covers “everything else,” including a discussion of the veneration of the saints followed by a description of a selection of prevalent icon feasts. The analysis of this chapter addresses the occasionally thorny relationship between sanctorals and ideology, especially when church communities use beloved national saints or historical events as platforms for promulgating ideological agendas. Themes expressed in the services of St. Job of Pochaiv, the Baptism of Rus’, and St. John Maximovich are the examples explored here. The section on icon feasts discusses the real inspiration for these holidays—modern epiphanies through icons and relics—and ethical issues related to the church’s tendency to use miraculous icons to recruit new members.

One aspect of the liturgical year that warrants much more academic and pastoral analysis is the presence of a number of domestic traditions associated with feasts. Orthodox members throughout the world practice

rituals that represent the life of the church in the home. The last chapter orients readers to the significance of such domestic practices by surveying three well-known traditions: the Serbian *Krsna Slava* (patron saint celebration); the *Sviata Vechera* (Holy Supper) observance common to Ukrainians, Belarussians, Carpatho-Rusyns, and Poles; and the annual baking of the savory *Vasilopita* in honor of St. Basil on January 1 among Greeks.

Discussion of Problems and Opportunities

An engaged discussion of the challenges posed to the church by the liturgical year takes place in the penultimate chapter of this book. The unique history of the Orthodox Church has constrained the freedom of church leaders to meet regularly and deliberate on pressing issues. Many liturgical reforms have been implemented but not universally and only in certain local churches.

The reality is that pastors have inherited a largely unedited tradition. On the one hand, the sheer volume of content—the calendar has countless saints, and their feasts often coincide with one another—provides opportunities to share the life of a new saint or epiphany with the faithful. On the other hand, the absence of a sustained stewardship of the liturgy and the sources that govern the rhythm of the liturgical year frequently requires pastors to make decisions on content when the rubrics call for multiple commemorations or rigorous liturgical cycles.

Pastors navigate the complexities of the liturgical year in diverse ways that can be described by two broad schools of thought.⁶ The first regards the received tradition as the natural outcome of organic historical development, a sacred tradition that prohibits change. This approach encourages pastors to exhort the people to engage the liturgy as it is and, in so doing, to change the culture. The other approach views the liturgy as constantly evolving through the vicissitudes of time and culture in the spirit of *ecclesia reformanda semper*. This views the typikon that governs the distribution of content as providing an ideal pattern that pastors consult and adapt to the realities of their community's life.⁷ This is not so much the adaptation of the liturgy to the prevailing culture as it is an honoring of the core of the pattern without the obligation of adopting every detail. Here, I

6. Pott's discussion of the approaches of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* apply here in Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform*, 43–46.

7. On the typikon as a pattern, see Larin, “Feasting and Fasting.”

raise the issue of pastoral interpretations of the concept of the typikon to magnify the real challenges the liturgical year occasionally poses to pastors. These issues are especially prevalent during the most solemn seasons: Holy Week, Pascha, and Christmas. Pastors who want to observe the established pattern without adaptation will find themselves in church every day. Observing this order is difficult for the standard parish community with one choral or music leader and a handful of singers.

A tendency has taken shape in Western Orthodox culture that defines Holy Week as a progression leading up to Pascha as the destination of the journey. The same principle applies to the shorter but still intense cycle of Christmas services. The Hours, Vespers, and Vigil precede the Divine Liturgy on Christmas morning as the end of the journey. In some instances, pastors instruct people to use vacation time to attend all of the services and—more importantly for our purposes—define participation in the entire cycle as necessary, singling out one of the services as the summit of the liturgical journey. A discussion about the inner synergy of the festal cycle and the expectations for participation is the first of a handful of problems and opportunities discussed in the penultimate chapter. The rest of the chapter is devoted to three distinct problems. The first is the exploitation of feasts to promote spurious ideological platforms or recirculate polemical tropes expressed by the hymnography. The next is the temptation to commodify icon feasts and the reproduction of relics. Third is the question of time in the liturgical year.

The sheer volume of hymnography appointed to feasts and the impact of the multiple messages proclaimed in hymns on people's cognitive capacity is a difficult issue because of the church's veneration for the hymnographical tradition. The analysis suggests a review of the corpus of hymnography so that the songs that proclaim the Orthodox theology of feasts are able to be heard, learned, and received in the minds and hearts of the faithful.

Scholars and theologians have naturally associated the liturgical year with the human experience and meaning of time. Early scholarship considered the classic relationship between *kairos* and *chronos*. Liturgical scholars incorporated the analysis of time, the liturgical year, and the Liturgy of the Hours into the sanctification of time and the symbiosis of the past, the present, and the future in the liturgy. The section on time emphasizes the contributions of Robert Taft and Matias Augé, who described

the liturgical year as a spiral progressing toward the parousia.⁸ We also present the important perspective of Lizette Larson-Miller, who argues for the retention of concrete festal gatherings as a Christian response to the crisis of the commodification of time.⁹

The chapter concludes with our assessment of the question of time. The energy devoted to developing scholarship on this matter was necessary, but, in the process, the assumption emerged that the liturgical year is all about time. This study suggests that the power of community memory is the core energy cell of the liturgical year. When the power of community memory becomes traditional—passed on from one generation to the next—it enables anamnesis to lead organically to epiclesis so that every generation receives the blessings of the feast. This study asserts that the liturgical year can be experienced and comprehended more effectively when appraised from the lens of community memory.

Sources for the Celebration of the Liturgical Year

Pastors and musicians need to be competent in navigating a selection of books and related sources for celebrating the feasts of the liturgical year. The primary book scholars and pastors refer to—somewhat informally—is called the typikon. It originated as a written rule for monastic communities and became associated with liturgics when monasteries added the particular details for their community's liturgical celebration to the monastic rule. In everyday Church parlance, it is a book that lists the appointed psalmody, Bible readings, the order of hymns, saints commemorated, and any other special ritual instructions. It refers to multiple iterations, not one master source used by all Orthodox communities. Rather, each local church publishes its own version of a typikon on an annual basis to guide parish observance of the liturgical year. No two typika are identical since history led to minor regional differences in the celebration of certain offices, and each church has its own list of local saints. The typikon provides a summary and does not include the entire texts of readings or hymns. It is a guide used by pastors and musicians who consult other related sources for the performance of the celebration.

8. Augé, "Theology," 322; Taft, *Beyond East and West*, 15–30.

9. Larson-Miller, "Consuming Time."

An example of a master typikon is one published by the Moscow Patriarchate (Russian Orthodox Church).¹⁰ This typikon follows the established order of rules that address issues ranging from etiquette (when to cover one's head) to the times appointed for silence during meals. The instructions for observing the liturgical year occupy only a few chapters but also compose most of the content. This study occasionally refers to this particular master typikon when discussing certain festal liturgical components and issues.

Festal Types

The Moscow typikon was designed to be a helpful guide. It includes the numbers assigned to the specific Gospel readings, allowing priests, deacons, and lectors to search for and find the reading. The typikon also includes a kind of categorization of festal celebrations indicated by specific markings or signs adjacent to the corresponding date.¹¹ These signs alert liturgical participants to the kind of feast they are celebrating. An encircled cross designates great feasts of Christ, Mary, two of John the Baptist, and the feast of the apostles Peter and Paul. A cross with a circle on the bottom half designates middle feasts that include a vigil with a canon to the Theotokos. Readers seeking more detailed information should consult Getcha's description of the signs used in the Slavic and Greek versions of the typikon.¹² He states that the categorizations reveal the degrees of solemnity and the shape of the office to be celebrated.

Four books are essential for the Orthodox celebration of the liturgical year: the Octoechos, Menaion, Triodion, and Pentecostarion. The Octoechos provides the hymns for each Sunday.¹³ The word refers to the system of eight modes assigned to each Sunday and its corresponding week throughout the year. The Octoechos forms the basis for Sunday singing. Its repetition throughout the year makes it memorable, so communities are familiar with the hymns repeated every eight weeks. It contains the complete texts of the appointed hymns for cantors and choirs. The Menaion contains the instructions and texts needed for the celebrations of the fixed cycle of the liturgical year. This study relies upon the English

10. *Тѣпиконъ сіестъ уставъ*. "Typikon" hereafter.

11. Typikon, 107–8.

12. Getcha, *Typikon Decoded*, 99.

13. See *The Great Octoechos* for an English translation.

translation of *The Festal Menaion* by Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary, widely known and circulated among Anglophone Orthodox communities.¹⁴ Ware and Mother Mary also translated and compiled an extensive English translation of *The Lenten Triodion*.¹⁵ This book contains the propers and hymns for the Lenten services, beginning with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee of the pre-Lenten period and up until the end of the Paschal Vigil (also known as the Vespers and Liturgy of Holy Saturday). The Pentecostarion covers the liturgical content for Pascha through the first Sunday after Pentecost (All Saints).¹⁶ The method and objective for using this book is the same as the others.

Practical Sources for Exercise of the Ministry

In practice, parishes do not use these sources for liturgical celebration. Numerous publications and translations are available online. Local churches provide resources for parishes to execute the office of the liturgical year. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America maintains an online digital chant stand providing convenient access of the required texts and hymns to pastors and musicians.¹⁷ This resource serves the needs of the archdiocese by providing both text and musical settings in English and Greek. The Orthodox Church in America provides a similar online service by publishing on its website the necessary liturgical texts for each Sunday and some major feasts.

Local churches also publish convenient offprints of specific feasts, cycles, or individual services of the liturgical year. For example, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has one book containing the texts for Holy Week and Pascha in bilingual format. The primary books of the liturgical year have been repackaged into a variety of print and online sources that are more convenient for users. The four primary sources are necessary reference tools, and practitioners have redistributed them into user-friendly, pocket-sized service books and downloadable online documents.

The result of this necessary repackaging is the presence of multiple translations of texts and varying musical settings in print and online. Pastors and musicians have many options when searching for sources for the

14. *Festal Menaion*.

15. *Lenten Triodion*.

16. This study uses *The Pentecostarion*, rev. 2nd ed.

17. Digital Chant Stand.