



### The Annunciation: A Major Feast in Lent

While the Annunciation is one of the four core Marian commemorations, we treat it independently because of its connections to the incarnation cycle. It was celebrated in Constantinople possibly as early as the fifth century, the date of March 25 was codified during the reign of Justinian in the sixth century, along with Christmas and the Hypapante.<sup>59</sup> The significance of the dates revives the crucial function of the solar rhythms governing the year. The

59. Taft and Carr, "Annunciation."

Lukan account states that the Annunciation occurred six months after the conception of John the Baptist (Luke 1:26). This coincided with the autumn equinox, so Jesus' conception takes place at the spring equinox.<sup>60</sup>

The Orthodox observance of the Annunciation occasionally entails complex variations on liturgical celebrations, especially since Pascha is still observed on the Julian (old) calendar. It always takes place after Lent has started and can occur during Holy Week or even on Pascha (known then as Kyriopascha). When the Annunciation falls during Lent, a Divine Liturgy is celebrated with Vespers, the lone exception to the rule of having a liturgy on a weekday of Lent. As the book illustrating how the church governs the convergence of commemorations, the typikon lists no less than ten scenarios for the coincidence of the Annunciation with the weeks of Lent, the days of Holy Week, and Pascha.<sup>61</sup>

Technically, the Annunciation is a Marian feast. Many of the Marian themes explored in the three other core feasts appear here as well. For example, the second sticheron of the lity at Vigil folds Mary into the soteriological scheme by identifying her as the restoration of Adam and the deliverance of Eve.<sup>62</sup> The hymns employ paradox to play on Mary as the antithesis of Eve, with Gabriel the opposite of the serpent.<sup>63</sup> In fact, many of the hymns recreate a complete dialogue between Gabriel and Mary, especially the canons assigned to the feast.

The outstanding theme of the feast is joy in the incarnation. The hymns express this joy repeatedly. The doxastikon of the stichera on the praises is among the most poignant expressions of incarnational joy in the language of Orthodox christological doctrine. The hymn calls upon creation and nature to rejoice because the "Son of God becomes the son of man" and, in so doing, makes it possible for humanity to partake of the life of God.<sup>64</sup>

60. Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 8–13, 91–103.

61. See the list in *Festal Menaion*, 435–37.

62. *Festal Menaion*, 442.

63. "Once the serpent beguiled Eve, but now I announce to thee the good tidings of joy!" (*Festal Menaion*, 444). Quote is from the doxastikon of the lity when the feast falls upon a Saturday or Sunday.

64. *Festal Menaion*, 460. The third sticheron on the praises is even more theologically profound, announcing that the "coeternal Word of the Father without beginning" has come down to become human (*Festal Menaion*, 459).



### Summary Observations on the Marian Cycle of Feasts

The four core feasts of the Marian cycle are multifunctional. The feasts represent the expansion of the liturgical year and Christian flexibility to designate events that are not recorded by the New Testament as major solemnities, as long as they are part of the church's memory. The Marian feasts are expansive in another way, by extending the soteriological scheme to underscore the importance of Mary's assent to give birth to Christ. Mary contributes to the salvation of humankind because of her agreement to participate in God's plan. It is for this reason that the feasts praise Mary and call upon the church to honor her while also celebrating the mystery of Christ as the heart of each. Essentially, the church shows how secondary characters in God's grand narrative illuminate the gift of salvation to humankind. At their core, the Marian feasts point to Christ and ultimately reveal his mystery and that of his incarnation and Pascha.

It is essential to acknowledge that the Marian feasts are products of the rapid and substantial *déroutement* of Marian piety from the fifth century onwards. The feasts call upon the faithful to honor Mary above all others, even the angels. She exercises a ministry exclusive to her, becoming an intercessor for Christians by pleading for them at God's throne. A number of factors contributed to Mary's exaltation in Christianity, and her titles and ministry—including ruling with Christ as queen—represent

the influence of Christian piety. The festal exhortation to honor her often takes on a life of its own and detaches from the narrative that presents Mary as referring all to Christ. In other words, the feasts become about Mary only, even if this is not the pastoral intention.

This examination of the Marian feasts demonstrates that the incarnational and paschal undercurrents remain in place. A simple pastoral correction is both possible and desirable. The solution is to embrace Mary as an essential but secondary character in the story. The narratives are not about Mary but ultimately remind the faithful that Mary, along with her parents Joachim and Anna, are also faithful disciples. As a secondary character, Mary provides a model for Christians to adopt and follow. She does not replace Christ as the mediator before God's throne but adds her petitions. Mary also functions as a female model of Christian discipleship to be adopted by all Christians, regardless of gender identity.

### John the Baptist: Another Secondary Character

The Orthodox calendar has several feasts of John the Baptist. These are connected to the incarnation and Marian cycle because of the Lukan account. John's birth is appointed to June 24, the summer equinox, and just over six months prior to the birth of Christ. This places the feast of his conception on September 23. The Church commemorates John's death (beheading) on August 29 with a strict fast day. John's birth and beheading are designated as great feasts in the typikon.<sup>65</sup> There are also liturgical commemorations of the finding of John's head, and the synaxis devoted to his memory on January 7, the day after Theophany.

The hymnography of the feasts employs some of the same literary flourishes discussed in the Marian feasts earlier. The commemoration of the synaxis of John the Baptist on January 7 is a good example. The hymns fold John into the soteriological scheme as demonstrated by the troparion, which claims that John "preached also to those in hell the good tidings of God made manifest in the flesh."<sup>66</sup> The feasts of John depend upon the biblical patterns of divine intervention through conception that appear in the birth of Christ and Mary. The troparion for the feast of John's birth (June 24) expresses joy at John's birth for ending his father's silence and his

65. Typikon, 704, 813.

66. *Festal Menaion*, 392.

mother's barrenness.<sup>67</sup> Jesus, Mary, and John have similar cycles of feasts inscribed on the liturgical calendar and presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Cycles of Jesus, Mary, John

|                                   | Jesus         | Mary        | John         |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| Conception                        | March 25      | December 9  | September 23 |
| Birth                             | December 25   | September 8 | June 24      |
| Death (resurrection, translation) | Movable Cycle | August 15   | August 29    |

The entire Marian cycle is not recorded in the New Testament but is observed on the liturgical calendar. The inclusion of this cycle of feasts for Christ and the two most prominent secondary characters of the New Testament (Mary and John) represents the liturgical tendencies identified earlier: the expansion of the liturgical calendar to include significant markers in the life cycle of important figures, such as the conception of Mary by Anna and John by Elizabeth, and the coincidence of these feasts with the solar equinoxes. This coincidence forms one of the pillars of the liturgical year and its sense of seasonality. The specific dates warrant one final observation: only Jesus' conception and birth amount to a perfect nine months. The conceptions of Mary and John are slightly imperfect, differentiating them from Jesus. This discrepancy functions as an important difference between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church for Marian observances.

### Fitting in: Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Cross

Two holidays remain from the cycle of great feasts observed in Orthodoxy: the Transfiguration on August 6 and the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14. The historical origins of the Transfiguration feast are somewhat uncertain. One hypothesis is that the dedication of three churches on Mount Tabor inspired the annual commemoration of the Transfiguration.<sup>68</sup> The Georgian Lectionary (fifth to eighth centuries) includes an entry for it with

67. See the festal Troparion at <https://www.oca.org/saints/troparia/2017/06/24/101800-nativity-of-the-holy-glorious-prophet-forerunner-and-baptist-joh> (accessed February 15, 2022).

68. Podskalsky, Taft, and Carr, "Transfiguration."

readings from the prophecies of Amos and Zechariah, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Matthew.<sup>69</sup> The likelihood of its hagiopolitan provenance suggests that Constantinople adopted it from Jerusalem. The feast is established on the Constantinopolitan calendar by the ninth or tenth century, evidenced by the Typikon of the Great Church.<sup>70</sup>

The Exaltation of the Cross originated as the feast of dedication of the Anastasis Church in Jerusalem in the fourth century, accompanied by St. Helena's finding of the cross.<sup>71</sup> In Jerusalem, the dedication feast took place on September 13 and the veneration of the cross in the Martyrium Church occurred the following day (September 14). Daniel Galadza shows that the commemoration of the cross superseded the dedication commemoration by the eleventh century.<sup>72</sup>

While these two feasts were inspired historically by a sense of sacred topography, they became connected fixtures on the liturgical calendar. The Gospels for the Transfiguration are taken from Luke (9:28–36) and Matthew (17:1–9), and the epistle is 2 Peter 1:10–19. The hymns appointed to it have two primary themes: the appearance of the divine light in Christ and the anticipation of the forthcoming feast of the cross on September 14. The third apostichon at vigil mentions the “overwhelming flood” of Christ's divine light that the three disciples beheld.<sup>73</sup> A troparion on the first canon of the feast expresses Orthodox Christology, stating that the “nature that knows no change” was revealed to the disciples in some “small measure.”<sup>74</sup> The ikos exhorts the faithful to approach Christ in the form of a “divine ascent.”<sup>75</sup>

The connections to the Exaltation of the Cross are threaded throughout the order of services. The first two stichera of vespers have the same beginning, “before Thy crucifixion, o Lord.”<sup>76</sup> The hermoi for the canon for the Exaltation of the Cross are sung as the katavasia for the festal

69. *Le Grand Lectionnaire*, nos. 1126–33, 25.

70. Mateos, *Typicon*, vol. 1, 360–63.

71. See Galadza, *Liturgy and Byzantinization*, 244–46.

72. Galadza, *Liturgy and Byzantinization*, 245.

73. *Festal Menaion*, 477. A second sessional hymn at Matins is more explicit, referring to Christ's revelation of his hidden and blinding light to the disciples (*Festal Menaion*, 479–80).

74. *Festal Menaion*, 487.

75. *Festal Menaion*, 488.

76. *Festal Menaion*, 470.

canon at vigil, a clear marker of connecting the two feasts. These liturgical cues are not manufactured, since the Gospel accounts have Jesus foretelling the crucifixion at the end of the episode on Tabor (e.g., Matt 17:9, the last verse of the liturgy gospel). Forty days separate the Transfiguration from the Exaltation, a traditional period of preparation. The forty-day period is not, however, one of strict fasting. The day of the Exaltation itself requires a strict fast, but in the current scheme, the Transfiguration occurs during the two-week period of the Dormition fast. The Gospel account itself functions as the source of the connection between the Transfiguration and the Exaltation.

The Exaltation of the Cross has essentially become one of the three primary commemorations of the cross and Christ's death in the liturgical year. It accompanies the movable solemnities of the Sunday of the Cross (third of Lent) and Good Friday. The preparation for the feast reveals its degree of its solemnity, as special psalmody and readings are appointed to the Saturdays and Sundays before and after it. The readings are compatible with the general theme of the cross. The first Old Testament reading from Exodus (15:2–16:1) recounts Moses throwing a tree into the bitter waters of Marah to quench the people's thirst. The second reading from Proverbs (3:1–11) pairs with the epistle (1 Cor 1:18–24) to reveal the cross as the fulfillment of the manifestation of God's wisdom. The Gospel from John consists of select passages from Jesus' crucifixion and death.

The hymns appointed to the feast reveal the occasion as centered on the relic of the cross. Many of the hymns address the cross—"Hail! Lifegiving cross," "O precious cross"—and then define it as an instrument of victory over adversaries.<sup>77</sup> The hymnographers incorporated bellicose vocabulary in their praise of the cross, referring to it as a trophy, a weapon, and an instrument of victory over enemies visible and invisible, past and present.<sup>78</sup> The collection of hymns reveals the cross as the instrument of reconciliation with God, a shield of protection from enemies, and a weapon to defeat the empire's enemies. George Demacopoulos asserts that some of the hymns evince a sacralization of violence and a fusion of Roman political ideology with Orthodox ecclesiology.<sup>79</sup> The feast, therefore,

77. These exhortations are threaded throughout the hymns appointed to the day.

78. These themes permeate many of the hymns. See, for example, the hymns attributed to emperor Leo that exhort the people to come forward and venerate the cross in *Festal Menaion*, 156.

79. Demacopoulos, "Feast of the Exaltation," unpublished essay. I am grateful to Dr. Demacopoulos for sharing his essay with me.

has multiple purposes. The primary theme of triumph is in homage to Constantine and the Roman emperors defending the Christian Empire.<sup>80</sup> The hymns refer to multiple instances of Old Testament figures making the gesture of the sign of the cross as antecedents. The most repeated Old Testament scene is taken from Exodus 17, when Moses holds his arms outstretched so the Hebrews can defeat the Amalekites.<sup>81</sup> The repetitive references of the hymns to victory, Christian triumphalism, and regency—to the point of referring to Christ as king—disclose the original inspiration for this feast. It is a celebration of the finding and elevation of the relic of the cross first and foremost, and this theme supersedes the secondary and tertiary ones of Christ's victory over death.

The Exaltation feast includes an elaborate and dramatic rite of the elevation of the cross with the singing of “Lord, Have Mercy” five hundred times, one hundred for each time the presider elevates the cross and faces each of the four directions. Some parishes do not include this rite in the festal observances, as it is most frequently celebrated under episcopal presidency. The rite expresses cosmic Christian triumphalism, facing four directions to indicate the cross's victory over the world, and the relic and act of veneration of the cross as the primary purpose of the feast.

The Transfiguration and Exaltation feasts round out the most solemn feasts of the Orthodox liturgical year. Both are inspired by the dedication of churches, sacred topography, and relics. Sacred topography was an important element of the development of the liturgical year in Jerusalem. The veneration of relics becomes the primary ingredient in the continued population of feasts on the annual calendar. The Exaltation is one of the earliest and most solemn examples of this phenomenon, and we will treat the continuation of this pattern in the next chapter.

This review of the Transfiguration and Exaltation feasts raises a question on the synergy of these feasts with the rest of the liturgical year. If they originated as themes associated with sacred topography and the anniversary of the finding of a relic, what is their significance in the liturgical year? The Synoptic Gospels place Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Tabor before his crucifixion, a significant event foreshadowing Pascha. The additional commemoration of the Transfiguration as the second Sunday of Lent in the

80. See, for example, the third sticheron on the praises, containing a passage that says, “by the cross barbarian nations are conquered, by the cross the sceptres of kings are confirmed,” (Demacopoulos, “Feast of the Exaltation,” 153).

81. See, for example, hymns on the lity on 128, 129, and of the aposticha on 140. Note that Exodus 17 is not included in the cursus of readings appointed to the feast.



Roman Church is sensible in terms of its organic connection with Pascha.<sup>82</sup> The Orthodox Church has not implemented this reform.

For Orthodoxy, then, the Transfiguration feast has two purposes. First, it is a feast of revelation, an occasion to proclaim the church's Christology. Second, there is the matter of the evangelical synergy of the Transfiguration with Pascha. This synergy makes it convenient to begin singing the hymns of the Exaltation on the Transfiguration despite the fact that the historical and thematic origins of the respective feasts are mutually exclusive. Lev Gillet's remarks on the blessings received by the people on the Transfiguration illuminate its second purpose. Gillet observes that the conversation of Moses and Elijah with Jesus about the passion deserves more attention.<sup>83</sup> He states that the faithful's Transfiguration is inexorably caught up with the carrying of the cross.<sup>84</sup> In other words, we can be truly transformed only when we accept the crosses God brings to us. Gillet's explanation of the Transfiguration provides a new perspective on the synergy between the Transfiguration and the Exaltation.

The themes of Christian universalism and venerating the relic of the cross supersede the core message of the Exaltation. These messages are simply not transferable to the post-imperial cultural and pastoral environments no matter how creatively one manipulates the hymnographical material. The presence of paschal and incarnational themes in Theophany and the Marian feasts suggest a pastoral solution for presiders and parishes. It is appropriate to honor the cross and commemorate Jesus' Pascha during any time of the liturgical year. The readings assigned to the Exaltation facilitate the possibility of celebrating the Exaltation on September 14, a late summer feast of the cross.

## Conclusion

The overview of the fixed cycle of the Orthodox liturgical year yields a number of observations and issues. Several factors contribute to the growth of the calendar. These include solar events, historical mimesis, theological development, sacred topography, and the dedication of

82. See *Roman Missal*, 226–29. Protestants using the Revised Common Lectionary celebrate Transfiguration Sunday as the last Sunday after the Epiphany. See, for example, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 25–26.

83. A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Year of Grace*, 240.

84. A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Year of Grace*, 241.