

Preface

THE ORDINARY ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN knows the meaning of “feast” through experience. A true feast means setting aside some extra time in honor of a meaningful event of the community’s history. On a national level, in the US Thanksgiving continues to be a day of family gatherings for food and fellowship. The advancements of modernity have not slowed the observance of this day. In every community from Los Angeles to the rural townships of West Virginia, streets, parking lots, and driveways fill with cars that make the trek to gather families for dinner. Similarly, people take a day off and prepare barbecues, games, water sports, and fireworks for the Fourth of July. On a local level, communities continue to cherish festivals and parades in honor of important people and events. On the level of the family, the most nuclear cell of human community, people gather for dinner and fellowship to commemorate birthdays and anniversaries. In spite of the festive mood of any holiday event, they are thoroughly human; feuds, arguments, and bad behavior are part of the package. Both the pleasant and the forgettable are a necessary part of any community feast.

The church is a community of which the parish is the nuclear cell. Like nations, towns, and families, parish communities also gather for feasts. They come together to observe major holidays like Pascha and Christmas. The energy devoted to preparatory activities and the execution of ministries cannot be understated. Parish councils create budgets to buy and prepare food. Choirs schedule extra rehearsals to learn special music. The clergy gather altar servers to rehearse complex actions reserved for special occasions. Volunteers wash linens, sweep and scrub floors, purchase and place floral arrangements, arrange seating, and prepare the technology for recording and livestreaming.

For many parishes, the patronal or temple feast is a big deal. It certainly was in my childhood. The choir would prepare its best music. The pastor always invited the bishop to preside, and when he was not available, the dean would come, along with deanery clergy. In my experience, the best deacons would serve and adorn the church with their powerful operatic voices. Some parishes had formal banquets following the feast, complete with a head table for the bishop and clergy; wine and savory food; speeches; and dance, poetry, and singing performances. More often than not, the banquets were long, and there were too many speeches.

Some feasts spill into family homes. Families gather after Paschal services for dinner, which, among some Slavic communities, involves a festive breakfast that includes savory lamb, cheese, pork and sausage, pizza, and burgers. Throughout the Orthodox world, the meal and music is its own kind of liturgy and blends seamlessly with official liturgy. Dining rooms, decks, and parish basements and halls fill with laughing, storytelling, and serious conversation, along with moments of loneliness and alienation, and occasional episodes of “overdoing” it.

Every year, parishes and their people gather over and over again for these occasions, falling into a rhythm of preparation and performance. Many people—both clergy and faithful—come away asking the same questions. What does it all mean? What is the meaning of this experience of gathering for intense prayer, nonstop singing, complex rituals, and alternating episodes of fasting and feasting? More often than not, pastors are eager to provide answers to these questions. From the apostolic age until today, many have written sermons explaining the meaning of feasts and exhorting the people to observe them. The number and complexity of feasts has increased through history, each associated with scriptural lessons, hymns, and special rites governed by the church.

Sometimes, the different components of feasts are so intense that they become difficult for pastors and musicians to navigate. The services of Holy Week, for example, are both a sprint and a marathon, requiring endless amounts of energy that often leave participants exhausted. Many of the assigned readings repeat themselves. Along with the many other elements of the holiday, pastors are also expected to bless special baskets before the midnight paschal services. Sometimes, holidays overlap. The Annunciation occasionally falls during Holy Week and, once in a great while, on Pascha itself! In addition, the size of services can be hard to estimate. On Christmas, attendance can be uneven, especially in countries with large Catholic and

Protestant communities. This brief description of the reality of the Orthodox liturgical year barely scratches the surface. It can be quite complex, and people ask all kinds of questions about appropriate times for confession, when and where they can obtain holy water, and when they need to fast.

Pastors are eager to answer questions like these, and they turn to sources of information for assistance. Learning the ins and outs of the liturgical year is a difficult task. Many priests, deacons, and musicians master the art, but some struggle to retain it all. I was born and raised in the Orthodox Church, was a choir director for over ten years, and was ordained to the diaconate in 2003, and I still fumble the rubrics on occasion.

The matter of passing on the meaning of a tradition is crucial. Many new people have discovered the Orthodox Church. Converts come from all backgrounds. Some are elected to serve the church as deacons and priests, and others simply want to become familiar with the traditions. Parish priests are the ones usually responsible for passing on the central meaning of tradition to new clergy and faithful.

The impetus for this book came from a parish priest, someone who attended seminary with me and was in the process of introducing the liturgical year to a candidate for diaconal ordination. He would write me and ask questions about the liturgical year, and I found myself responding with articles written by experts, but there was no single book that covered the entire church year, or even most of it. To be fair, there are books that discuss the liturgical year in the Orthodox Church. The venerable Lev Gillet wrote a marvelous devotional work on the liturgical year, a gem that includes commentary on several Sundays after Pentecost. Recently, an English translation of Archbishop Job Getcha's introduction to the typikon was released. Archbishop Job's book is an essential tool for pastors and musicians to understand the history of the church year, especially Orthodoxy's unique mechanism of governing the convergence of feasts with Sundays. Most of the existing scholarship on the Byzantine liturgical year comes from the field of comparative liturgy. These historical works are essential. The church adjusts to contemporary conditions by digging deeply into history, which allows it to come to terms with the past and arrive at an understanding that enables true worship in the present.

This book is rooted in and attempts to honor the scholarship of the heavyweights of Byzantine liturgical history. Its objective is to engage readers in a discussion on the meaning of the liturgical year in its present form by looking at its primary seasons and feasts. It does so by exploring history

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and the primary liturgical components of word, rite, and song. Much of the analysis delves into the significance of the lectionary as the primary source of liturgical theology, but it gives due consideration to primary rites as well. The appointed hymns are, of course, important, and readers will notice that hymns are included as key sources of analysis but not privileged over the other sources. This falls in accordance with one of the primary rules of the method of liturgical theology, which is to respect the liturgy as an act and event. Liturgy is neither a text nor a song, even though euchology and hymnography rank high among the sources for liturgical theology.

If the study's objective is to make sense of the liturgical year as it truly is, then it has the potential to identify problems. It both does so and offers potential resolutions. With the objective of being brutally honest about findings, it is guided by the belief that naming a problem empowers practitioners to resolve it. The suggestions proposed here are designed to be dialogical—let pastors decide the best course of action for their people.

Acknowledgments

MOST BOOKS INCLUDE A section with thanks conveyed to a long list of the author's interlocutors. Readers may be surprised by the brevity and unconventional form of the current list. There are two reasons for the particular structure of this section. The first is deeply personal. This book was in progress with a viable plan for completion until a life-changing event took place when my wife, Tresja, died suddenly and unexpectedly. After a necessary pause, I adjusted my plans, resumed the project, and completed the manuscript.

As for acknowledgments, there are a few. This book has many sources of inspiration. Most of those come from my own experiences of the liturgical year as both a choir director and a deacon. The first time I ever conducted a choir was in 1991 at St. Volodymyr and Ol'ha Ukrainian Orthodox Parish in St. Paul, Minnesota. I led the singing for the midnight paschal services. Pascha happened to coincide with the Annunciation that year. So, the first service I was to lead happened to be a rare occurrence on the calendar—Kyriopascha, a dual feast calling for singing that would take a parish from midnight to sunrise and possibly beyond. The pastor—my grandfather—decided to scale back the number of Annunciation hymns required by the Typikon to keep the service manageable. That occasion was my first experience of the many twists and turns in the Orthodox liturgical year, one that always generated many more questions than answers.

Over the years, conversations with countless clergy heightened my sense of urgency to pursue a better understanding of the church year. I simply cannot include everyone, so I apologize for the omissions, but my interlocutors over the years include Kira Tsarehradsky, my mentor in choral conducting, and several clergy and faithful of numerous Orthodox

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Finally, my preface mentions the “other” side of communal feasts. The study and discussion of feasts tends to idealize community gatherings with the reverent language of peace, tranquility, and fellowship. Feasts include these elements, but they also have the other human side. Celebrants and choirs make liturgical mistakes. Pastors miscommunicate the message of the feast. People misbehave and alienate one another. Try as we may, we cannot get in God’s way. At every feast, God is with us, and nothing can stop God from making God’s dwelling among us. It is for this reason that the liturgical year always has been and always will be a source of joy for Christians.