

Every culture has things to celebrate. Birthdays and wedding anniversaries, graduations and promotions are the usual focus of revelry. If such temporary things can be the occasion for joy and gladness, how much more should the works of God be celebrated! The Holy Orthodox Church celebrates twelve Great Feasts which help the faithful in at least two ways. First of all, the Great Feasts enable us to re-live the important events in Christian salvation history. We celebrate Feasts of our Lord, such as the Transfiguration, and Feasts of the Mother of God, such as the Annunciation. When we do this we are reminded that God has entered into time and space to be with us! The Great Feasts teach us to use our time in remembering God and all that He has done for our redemption and salvation. Earth is joined to Heaven through Christ and the twelve Great Feasts show how this comes to be so.

The Church calendar, like the academic year, begins in September. Bearing this fact in mind, we begin our look at the Great Feasts with the ninth month.

**The Nativity of the Most-Holy Theotokos — 8 September:** This Feast has been called the «inauguration of the scheme of salvation». As the Mother of God is born we look ahead to the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The Holy Theotokos is born, and so the time of our Lord's miraculous birth has drawn that much closer, the time of our redemption. We honour Mary because it is in her womb that the union of God and man came to pass.



**The Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross — 14 September:** On this day faithful Orthodox Christians are mindful of the fact that our salvation was fulfilled through our Lord Jesus Christ's death on the cross. The Troparion hymn of the Feast declares: «Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify». In particular we remember the finding of the True Cross by Saint Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great.

**The Entry of the Most-Holy Theotokos into the Temple — 21 November:** The Holy Virgin's parents, Saints Joachim and Anna had made a promise to dedicate their child to God's service. They were advanced in age and had expected never to have any child. The High Priest Zacharias — father of Saint John the Baptist — received the young girl, and set her to live in the Holy of Holies until she was twelve. The Theotokos' life was dedicated wholly to God.

**The Nativity According to the Flesh of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — 25 December:** The Troparion Hymn of this Feast reads: «Thy Nativity O Christ our God, has shone upon the world the light of wisdom, for by it those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore Thee. The Sun of Righteousness, and the know Thee the Orient from on high, O Lord Glory to Thee». The pre-eternal God is now born as a Child, and heaven now has come into the world heralding our salvation. We praise and thank the Lord for His great love and condescension.

**The Theophany of Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — 6 January:** Our Lord Jesus Christ is baptized by Saint John the Forerunner in the Jordan. Here the participation of the Holy Trinity in our salvation is manifest. God the Father speaks from Heaven identifying Christ as His Beloved Son. The Holy Spirit, like a dove, alights upon Christ showing the unity of Three in One. Having taken on human nature, and by extension all creation, Christ makes us worthy of forgiveness. This Feast is marked by a special Great Blessing of Waters.

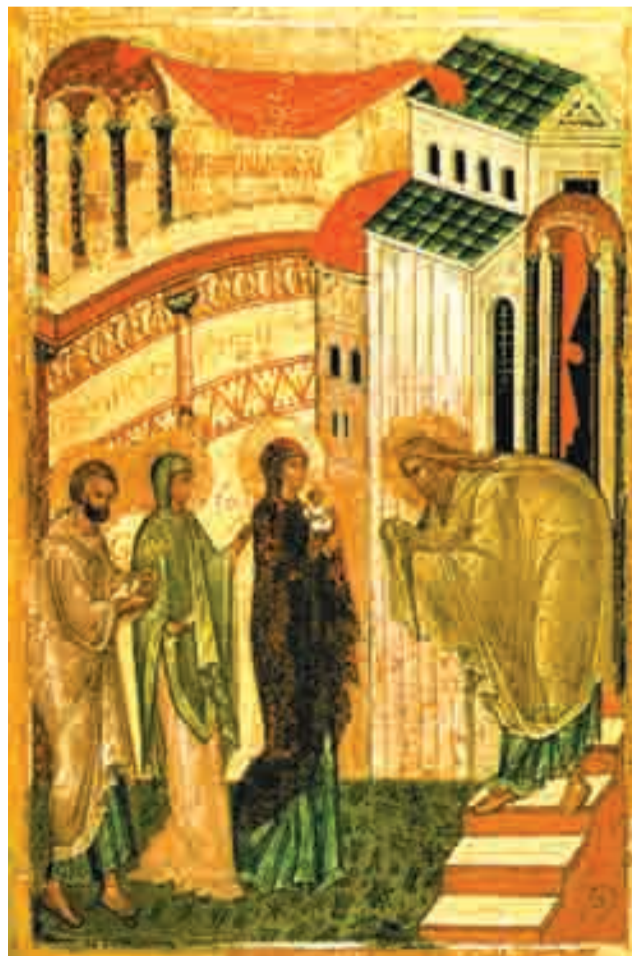
**The Meeting of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple — 2 February:** On this day the Church celebrates the fact that Jesus Christ fulfills the ordinances of the Law (Ex.12.51-13.16) so that we are freed from their heavy demands. In fulfillment of the Law Christ is presented to God in the temple, and the

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offering of two young doves and two young pigeons is made. The doves symbolise the Church and the newly-chosen people of the Gentiles. The two pigeons represent the Old and New Covenants originated by God. Salvation is offered to the whole world.

**The Annunciation of the Most-Holy Theotokos — 25 March:** The Troparion Hymn of the Feast: «Today is the crown of our salvation and the manifestation of the mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel announces the good tidings of grace. Therefore let us also join him and cry aloud to the Theotokos: Hail, thou who art full of grace: the Lord is with Thee». We remember that the Incarnation was the work of both the Holy Trinity and the will and the faith of the Theotokos.



**Palm Sunday or Entry into Jerusalem — the Sunday before Pascha:** Orthodox Christians celebrate the arrival of the Saviour to fulfill his work of salvation.



The palms or tree boughs that are carried this day symbolise victory, however, we know that much suffering must happen before the final triumph of life over death. We remember our spiritual death in baptism, and praise God for bestowing the Resurrection.

**The Ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — forty days after Pascha:** Christ has now completed the work that He came to accomplish on earth, and ascends to the Father. As the Second Person of the Holy Trinity He rises with His human body, and completes the union of creation with Heaven. With His parting He blesses the disciples and promises them the Gift of the Holy Spirit who will descend upon them at Pentecost.

**Pentecost — fifty days after Pascha:** This day marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the holy Apostles in the form of «tongues of fire». Although the Apostles were mostly uneducated men, they are now given the gift of speaking in foreign languages. With this blessing they begin the work of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the whole world. Pentecost is often called the birthday of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

**The Transfiguration of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — 6 August:** Jesus Christ is transfigured on Mount Tabor revealing to His disciples the glory of His Divinity. Moses and Elijah appear on his right and left to show that both the Law and the Prophets minister to Him as God. Just as at Theophany there is a revelation of the Holy Trinity: the Father speaks from Heaven, and the Holy Spirit in the form of dazzling light surrounds Christ's person. Orthodox Christians remember that we are called share God's glory, and the full potentiality of human nature is revealed. By God's grace, Christ's followers are to be «deified». Traditionally a blessing of «first fruits» is celebrated.

**The Dormition of the Most-Holy Theotokos — 15 August:** The Orthodox Church commemorates the death of the Mother of God. How can she who gave birth to God in the Flesh be taken by death? She dies a physical death, like Christ, but then is taken up both body and soul to Heaven. For the Theotokos, the Resurrection of the Body which will be granted to all Christians has already been accomplished. Because she is the fountain of Life, the mother of Christ our God, we rely on the Theotokos to intercede for us before Christ.

The Twelve Great Feasts are an integral part of an Orthodox Christian's spiritual life. They help the faithful to participate in of all the wondrous works of God that are accomplished for our salvation. However, we should remember that attending a Paschal Resurrection service or Christmas worship does not compensate for neglecting regular weekly or daily personal devotion. To fulfill the Gospel and unite ourselves truly with our Lord Jesus Christ, we dedicate «ourselves and each other and all our life» to Him. To appreciate more fully the meaning of the Great Feasts we should participate fully in the life of the Church. Taking time off school or work to participate in these celebrations is an important way to show our love for the Lord. When we hear and see the Church's witness of God's mercy we become better witnesses of Christ in the world, and better able to praise the wonderful works of God.

