

TWELVE GREAT FEASTS

http://www.zeta.org.au/~aofosm/icons/12_feasts.htm

After Pascha or Easter and the Sunday resurrectional liturgy, the Twelve Great Feasts commemorate the most important saving events connected with the life of Jesus Christ that the Church celebrates throughout the course of the year. Although a few of the feasts (Palm Sunday, Ascension, Pentecost) are movable because they are dependent on Pascha, all the rest are on fixed calendar days. The Christian ecclesiastical year, just as the Jewish year, begins in September, and so the feasts are thus arranged:

1) 8 September, Nativity of the Theotokos

Originating in Syria-Palestine in the 6th c. and celebrated in Rome in the 7th c., this feast commemorates Mary's birthday, not for its historical accuracy—because we do not know the exact date of her birth - but as the first feast of the new year, in a certain way making all other of the feasts possible. The words of the liturgical celebration express it well: "Your birth, O virgin mother of God, announces the joy of the whole world, for from you has come and shines the Sun of Justice, Christ our God."



2) 14 September, Exaltation of the Cross

This day commemorates three historical occasions that are separable, each of which involves the Cross on which Jesus was crucified: **A.** The first is the legend of the finding of the Cross by Helen, Constantine's mother, with his patronage. **B.** Second is the anniversary of the completion of the Constantinian basilica Church of the Resurrection (Holy Sepulcher) in Jerusalem, which also covers the site of the crucifixion. **C.** Last is the recovery of the Cross from the Persians in 629 by the Emperor Heraclius. We know from the pilgrim Egeria's diary that the first two feasts were already celebrated in the 4th c. in the East.



3) 21 November, Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

This first feast of the Christmas-Epiphany fast (beginning on 15 November) is based on the story of Mary's life in the Temple as a child, found in the Protoevangel of James (ca. 150), an "apocryphal" work. The feast, also called the presentation, anticipates the Christmas-Epiphany theophanic themes and shows Mary to be the holy fulfillment of the First Covenant. It also develops the comparison between the Temple of stone and the living temple, Mary, and, by extension, the temple of the Holy Spirit of every human being. It seems to have first been celebrated in Syria at the end of the 6th c.



4) 25 December, Nativity of our Lord, Jesus Christ

This later and lesser of the two winter theophany feasts (i.e., Epiphany and Christmas) was first popularized in the West in the 4th c. in order to compete with the pagan festivals of the winter solstice, *Natalis Solis Invicti* and *Saturnalia*. Soon popular in the East as well, possibly due to the heated Christological controversies of the 4th-6th c., the liturgical texts focus on the Incarnation and the birth accounts in the Gospels of Mt and Lk. The modern celebration curiously juxtaposes some of the most profound theological insights with popular druid, and now capitalist-commercial, festivities.



5) 6 January, Epiphany (or Theophany)

The greatest of the winter theophanic feasts, Epiphany remembers the Baptism of Jesus, prototypical for every Christian, and the revelation of the Trinity. Marking the beginning of Jesus' ministry, this holy day is not only one of personal baptism, but of the blessing of all water, a source of human life, and through that water the blessing of the cosmos. This feast, like Pascha and Christmas, is celebrated in a three-day cycle followed by great feasting.



6) 2 February, Meeting of the Lord in the Temple

This feast, as old as the 4th c. in Jerusalem and spread throughout the Empire by Justinian in 542, commemorates the fulfillment of the Law of Moses (Lev 12; Num 18) forty days after Jesus' birth. Alternately called the Presentation in the West and greatly expanded contextually there, in the East the liturgical texts especially commemorate the Lucan narrative of the meeting of the Lord by Simeon and Anna, and the recitation of the beautiful *Nunc Domitis*.



7) 25 March, Annunciation

As early as Hippolytus and Tertullian in the 3rd c., there is mention of the crucifixion on 25 March, and with it in Hippolytus and other later writers, the Annunciation. But the earliest reference to a liturgical celebration is at the Council of Toledo in 656, though there is a church commemorating the Annunciation built in Nazareth before 400. The feast celebrates the visitation of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary in Lk 1, announcing to her the birth of Jesus, Son of the Most High. It focuses on its connection with the nativity of Jesus and the real role that Mary's sanctity and volition played in that event.



8) One week before Pascha, Entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem

Known popularly as Palm Sunday (although it falls on Monday in the Gospel of John), this feast inaugurates Holy Week—separate from Lent in the East—and is intrinsically linked with the raising of Lazarus and the causal events that led to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. On this day the faithful hold palms, or branches of willows in the Russian Orthodox tradition, to identify themselves with the people who greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, an entrance that was both a display of political and eschatological significance as the beginning of the last week.



9) Forty days after Pascha, Ascension

Celebrated by the whole Church from at least the 4th-5th c., this feast commemorates the end of the Resurrection appearances and the joyous "sitting down of Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father." Although the Eastern Church liturgically follows the Lucan chronology (Lk 24; Acts 1), the only one that gives us a forty-day ascension, it is not unaware of the other alternatives that see the Resurrection - Ascension - Pentecost as a single event, since the Johannine readings are prescribed for the forty day period. A Russian Orthodox monastery sits atop the Mount of Olives and marks the traditional identification of the site of the Ascension.



10) Fifty days after Pascha, Pentecost

The fiftieth day after Passover is the Feast of Weeks in Jewish practice, or Pentecost; and in the Lucan chronology (Acts 2) is identified as the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church and falls near the end of the Paschal celebrations, although the whole of the time between Easter and Pentecost has occasionally been referred to as Pentecost, a fast-free time when the liturgical book the pentecostarion is used. On this day, in addition to the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Orthodox especially remember the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel as contrasted with the translation of the Good News into languages comprehensible to all.



11) 6 August, Transfiguration of the Lord

Celebrated in Asia, probably by Armenians, as early as the 4th c., it was in wide use in the East before 1000, but not in the West until it additionally commemorated the defeat of the Turks at Belgrade in 1456. The Gospel event is recorded in the synoptics (Mt 17; Mk 9; Lk 9), alluded to in 2 Pet 1, and marks the center of all the synoptic Gospels, along with the confession of Peter and the prediction of the Cross and Resurrection. The understanding of transfiguration and *theosis* are quite different in the East from the West. Whereas the West might see the event on Mount Tabor primarily as a revelation of Jesus as God, the East understands it, not only as a revelation of the Trinity, but as the visible manifestation of the transformed humanity of Jesus, a glory shared by Moses and Elijah.



12) 15 August, Dormition of the Theotokos

Known in the East also as the feast of the Falling Asleep of Mary, and in the West as the Assumption, the holy day was observed in Syria- Palestine from at least the 4th-5th c. Belief in the bodily assumption of Mary was a topic of the 6th c. among Gregory of Tours, Dionysius (Ps.) the Areopagite, and later Germanus of Constantinople. The celebration not only draws attention to the sanctity and faithfulness of Mary's life, but to the recapitulation of the experience of the whole Church and the life of the believer in her: "The source of life is laid in the grave and her tomb becomes a ladder to heaven." This feast is an apt conclusion to the cycle of the liturgical year, which began with Mary's birth.



Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Palm Sunday

A mere few days before His brutal [crucifixion](#), Jesus was received by adoring throngs at his entry into Jerusalem on the back of young donkey. The crowds threw palm branches in his path in jubilation, and even the children shouted praises to Him. The Orthodox celebrate this day with joy, but with the realization that very sad events are soon to come. Among the Russian Orthodox, pussy willow branches are substituted in the celebration of this event, owing to the lack of availability of palm trees in Slavic climes.

The feast of the [Resurrection of Jesus](#), called [Easter](#) or Pascha, is the greatest of the feasts of the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#). In addition, there are other days of great importance in the life of the Church - the **Twelve Great Feasts**.

Dr. Alexander Roman - Orthodox Explanation

The number twelve is truly a richly significant number for Christians! Ultimately, it represents the number of children of Jacob who became the heads of the twelve tribes of the chosen people of Israel. As the Messiah Who came to fulfill, but not destroy, the Old Covenant, Christ inaugurated the New Israel which is His Church on the foundation stones of the twelve Apostles.

The Book of Revelation's reference to the "24" who stand before the throne of God in heaven has sometimes been interpreted to refer to the combined number of the sons of Jacob and the Apostles, the Church of the Old and New Covenant.

Although I've never heard of an actual location for the memorial of the twelve stones, it is a tradition that Christ was baptized at that spot. In the same way, as we see in icons of the Crucifixion of our Lord, tradition states that the Cross itself was planted on top of the very grave of Adam (whose skull is often depicted at the base of the Cross).

The establishment of the 12 major Feasts came about gradually in the liturgical life of the Church.

We know that the Feast of the Theophany or Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan was kept early by Christians and that the feast of the Nativity of Christ was part and parcel of that Feast. The Armenian Church today is the only Christian Church that continues to celebrate the Nativity of Christ and the Theophany on January 6th.

The early Church began its annual cycle of feasts on the basis of the three main feasts of the Jewish Temple - Pascha/Easter, Pentecost and the Transfiguration (Feast of Tabernacles). Later, the Church established Pascha in a separate liturgical category, as it is the "Feast of Feasts."

The Church established its "symphony of 12 Feasts" (you put it very well and most beautifully!) by the end of the 8th century to be celebrated "religiously" by the entire Church as reflecting the most important events of our salvation in the life of Christ and that of His Most Holy Mother.

The Kyivan/Ukrainian Church also added three Church-wide, local Feasts that it celebrates almost on the same level as the 12 - the Feasts of the Protection, the transfer of the relics of St Nicholas in May and the commemoration of the Baptism of Kyivan-Rus' and the Maccabees in August.

The number twelve also reflects the months of the year that are organized around the activity of the sun - the sun in this case being OLGS Jesus Christ.

There are many traditions about our Lord that the Church recognizes in her liturgical prayers that are not contained in the scriptures.

Our Lord Himself and His Apostles acknowledged as valid the oral traditions of the Old Testament - e.g. the "Seat of Moses" which is nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament but a chair of authority in the Temple and the story of St Michael's taking of the body of Moses to heaven etc.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Nathaniel acknowledges Christ for seeing him "under the sycamore tree."

As mentioned in the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, I believe, Nathaniel was quite ill as a child from a disease that killed his brother.

The Mother of God happened to be in the neighbourhood with Her Child and told his mother to place him on the bedclothes of our Lord Jesus - under a sycamore tree. Nathaniel was healed and he knew that only a very few people knew this personal story.

When Christ mentioned this to him, Nathaniel realized that the Healer Whose clothes saved him from death was standing before him.

And again, we only know this from the deuterocanonical tradition of the New Testament.

Short explanations of the Orthodox Christian feasts

Nativity of the Theotokos

Mary was born to elderly and previously barren parents by the names of [Joachim](#) and [Anna](#) (now saints), in answer to their prayers. Orthodox Christians do not hold to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the [Immaculate Conception](#) of Mary, in which it is supposed that Mary was preserved from the ancestral sin that befalls us all as descendants of [Adam](#) and [Eve](#), in anticipation of her giving birth to the sinless Christ. The Orthodox believe that Mary indeed received the ancestral sin, having been conceived in the normal way of humanity, and thus needed salvation like all mankind. The Catholic Doctrine of the [Immaculate Conception](#) also recognizes that Mary was in need of salvation, viewing her as prevented from falling into the filth of sin, instead of being pulled up out of it. Orthodox thought does vary on whether Mary actually ever sinned, though there is general agreement that she was cleansed from sin at the [Annunciation](#).

Elevation of the Holy Cross

The Elevation of the Holy Cross commemorates the recovery of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The Persians had captured it as a prize of war in Jerusalem, and it was recovered by the forces of the Eastern Roman Empire ("Byzantine Empire"). The cross was joyously held up for veneration by the Christian faithful upon its recovery.

Presentation of the Theotokos

According to Tradition, Mary was taken -- [presented](#) -- to the Jewish [Temple in Jerusalem](#) as a young girl, where she lived and served until her betrothal to [Joseph](#).

Baptism of Christ

This observance commemorates Christ's baptism by [John the Baptist](#) in the River Jordan, and the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry. It is known by the Orthodox as both Epiphany and Theophany. These are bundled, along with Christmas, differently in some [eastern Christian](#) traditions.

Presentation of Christ

In the [Gospel of Luke](#) 2:22-35, Mary and Joseph [took the baby Jesus to the Temple](#) in Jerusalem. He was received in the arms of the elder [Simeon](#), who then prayed, "Now let Thy servant depart (die) in peace,...for I have seen Thy salvation." This was one of the

things that Mary "pondered in her heart" -- the fact that others recognized that her Son was the [Messiah](#). This feast is also known as the **Meeting of the Lord**, or **Hypapante**.

Annunciation

According to the [Gospel of Luke](#) 1:26-38, the angel [Gabriel](#) appeared to Mary to announce to her that she would conceive and bear a son, even though she "knew no man." This date is selected to be exactly nine months ahead of Christmas, indicating that Christ was conceived at that time "by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary", as stated in the [Nicene Creed](#).

Nativity of Christ

December 25 -- Christmas. The nativity account begins with Mary and Joseph (Mary's betrothed) traveling to [Bethlehem](#) to be enrolled in the Roman census. On the way, they look for a place for Mary to give birth to her child, but all the inns are full and the only suitable place is a cave (shown as a stable in most Western descriptions) where animals are kept. The Theotokos (God-bearer, the Virgin Mary) gives birth ineffably (without pain or travail) and remains virgin after childbirth.

Palm Sunday

A mere few days before His brutal [crucifixion](#), Jesus was received by adoring throngs at his entry into Jerusalem on the back of young donkey. The crowds threw palm branches in his path in jubilation, and even the children shouted praises to Him. The Orthodox celebrate this day with joy, but with the realization that very sad events are soon to come. Among the Russian Orthodox, pussy willow branches are substituted in the celebration of this event, owing to the lack of availability of palm trees in Slavic climes.

Ascension

Forty days after the Resurrection, while blessing His disciples ([Gospel of Luke](#) 24:50-51), Christ ascended into heaven, taking His place at the right hand of the Father ([Gospel of Mark](#) 16:19 and Nicene Creed).

Pentecost

Fifty days after the Resurrection, on the existing Jewish feast of [Pentecost](#), while the disciples and many other followers of Jesus were gathered together to pray, the [Holy Spirit](#) descended upon them in the form of "cloven tongues of fire", with the sound of a might rushing wind, and they began to speak in languages that they did not know. There were many visitors from the Jewish diaspora to [Jerusalem](#) at that time for the Jewish observance of the feast, and they were astonished to hear these untaught fisherman speaking praises to God in their alien tongues. The [Acts of the Apostles](#), chapter 2.

Transfiguration

Jesus had gone with his [disciples](#) (later called [apostles](#)) [Peter](#), [James](#), and [John](#) (also called [John the Evangelist](#)) to [Mount Tabor](#). Christ's appearance was changed while they watched into a glorious radiant figure. There appeared [Elijah](#) and [Moses](#), speaking with Jesus. The disciples were amazed and terribly afraid. This event shows forth the divinity

of Christ, so that the disciples would understand after his Ascension that He was truly the radiant splendor of the Father, and that his [Passion](#) was voluntary. [Gospel of Mark](#) 9:2-9

[Dormition](#)

The Orthodox feast of the [Dormition](#) is analogous to what Roman Catholicism calls the [Assumption of Mary](#). According to Orthodox Tradition, Mary died like all humanity, "falling asleep", so to speak, as the name of the feast indicates. (Catholic theologians are divided on the issue of whether Mary died. Today most would favor an actual death before the Assumption.) The Apostles were miraculously summoned to this event, and all were present except Thomas when Mary passed from this life. She was buried. Thomas arrived a few days later, and desiring to see her one more time, convinced the others to open her tomb, and behold! her body was not there. This event is seen as a firstfruits of the resurrection of the faithful that will occur at the [Second Coming](#) of Christ. The event is normally called the "Dormition", though there are many Orthodox Churches with the name "Assumption". In Greek, "Dormition" is "Kimisis" -- falling asleep in death -- from which the word "[cemetery](#)" derives.