

12. The Church's Cycles — Redeeming the Time

The Church has a daily cycle of prayer, described above. It also has an annual cycle of Feast days, fasts and commemorations, and even a weekly cycle. St. Paul says we ought to be “redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). That is, we dedicate our days, weeks, and years to the Lord, seeking spiritual profit from the time we have!

The **weekly cycle** ties each day of the week to particular events or remembrances. The “first day of the week” is **Sunday**, the “day of the Lord” (“Kyriaki” in Greek). From the beginning of Christian history, this day became special because it was the day of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead. It replaced the Sabbath as the primary day of worship for Christians. Besides being the first day, it also mystically represents the “Eighth day” of eternity.

On **Monday** the Angels are particularly remembered, as the first intelligent beings created, even before man’s creation. **Tuesday** commemorates St. John the Baptist, the “Forerunner” who prepared the way for Christ. **Wednesday** recalls with sorrow the betrayal of the Lord by Judas, anticipating the Lord’s crucifixion, which we remember that day as well as on Friday. In solemn remembrance of those events, Wednesday is a fast day. **Thursday** is the day of the Lord’s supper and the preparation of the disciples to be Apostles; thus we celebrate the evangelistic ministry of the Apostles and great pillars of the faith, especially St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. **Friday** is the day of the Crucifixion, and along with Wednesday, it is a day of fasting and meditation on the Lord’s suffering and death for us.

Saturday (the Sabbath) is the Jewish day of rest. For Christians, this “rest” is understood spiritually. The rest we seek is the eternal life of Heaven; in this life we can begin to taste this spiritual rest in Christ. The Saints have found perfect rest, and we remember all the Saints on this day, beginning with the Mother of God, the holy martyrs, and all our forebears in the Faith. Saturday is particularly a day for remembering our departed loved ones.

The **Church’s New Year** begins on **September 1**, which in former times was the civil new year, as well. Each day of the year, from the first day of September, to the last day of August, calls to mind particular members of the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1; that is, the Saints and Angels) that are specially honored on that day. Punctuating the year at various intervals there are 12 Great Feasts held during the year, which are celebrated as particularly solemn or festive events.

The **12 Great Feasts** are as follows:

1. September 8 — the **Nativity (Birth) of the Theotokos (Virgin Mary)**
2. September 14 — the **Elevation of the Holy Cross**
3. November 21 — the **Presentation of the Theotokos In the Temple**
4. December 25 — the **Nativity of Christ (Christmas)**
5. January 6 — **Theophany, the Baptism of Christ**
6. February 2 — the **Meeting of the Lord in the Temple**
7. March 25 — the **Annunciation**
8. **Palm Sunday** (The Sunday before Pascha)

9. **The Ascension of Christ** (40 days after Pascha)
10. **Pentecost** (50 days after Pascha)
11. August 6 — the **Transfiguration of the Lord on Mt. Tabor**
12. August 15 — the **Dormition (Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos**

Pascha

Not numbered with the 12 Great Feasts, but in fact the greatest Feast of all, is the Resurrection of Christ, called “Pascha” (from “Pesach” meaning “Passover” in Hebrew, which became “Pascha” in Greek; “Easter” was a term used later in English). Pascha has its own cycle, which has changeable dates. So while the other feast days have fixed dates, Pascha and the feasts connected with it are moveable. Whatever date Pascha falls on, Palm Sunday is the Sunday before, Ascension is 40 days after, and Pentecost 50 days after Pascha. The Orthodox Church calculates the date of Pascha based on the Julian Calendar, rather than the Gregorian Calendar, resulting in a date that is usually different from “Western Easter.”

Fasts

Leading up to some of the feasts are fasting periods. There are four extended fasting periods in the year. The longest and most solemn is the Great Fast (known as “Lent”), leading up to Pascha. The second longest, which is modeled after Lent is the Nativity Fast, a 40-day period leading up to the Nativity (Christmas). Then there is the Apostles’ Fast in June, lasting for a varying period of time from after All Saints’ Sunday to the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Finally, the Dormition Fast lasts two weeks (Aug. 1-14), leading up to the Dormition (the “Falling Asleep”) of the Mother of God.

As mentioned above, Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year are fast days. There are special exceptions during festive periods (such as “Bright Week,” the first week after Pascha) when those days are not kept as fast days. Also, there are a few other particular fasting days, such as: September 14, the Elevation of the Holy Cross, which although it is a feast, is a “fasting feast,” in remembrance of the Crucifixion; January 5th, the day before the Theophany; and August 29, on which the beheading of St. John the Baptist is remembered. For more information about fasting in the Orthodox Church, please see the section called “A Guide to Fasting.”

In general, remembering the Saints and events in the history of salvation and life of the Church helps to sanctify each day of the week and each day of the year. There are always new Fathers and Mothers in the Faith to meet — and inspiring examples to follow — in the lives of the Saints. Living from Feast day to Feast day, the Liturgical cycle of the Church teaches us to live always in joyful anticipation of the ultimate Feast Day of the Heavenly Banquet. Fast days and extended fasting periods sharpen our spiritual senses and heighten our longing for that ultimate Feast, and for our ultimate rest and fulfillment in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.