

# The Five Cycles

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**The Great Cycle of Life** The life of an Orthodox Christian can be seen as being composed of five cycles. There is, first of all, the great cycle of life, which embraces the whole life of a man from birth to death, and which consists in liturgical actions which are not repeated, occurring only once in a person's lifetime. These are Holy Baptism, Holy Chrismation, and the Burial Service. In addition, there also belongs in this great cycle the Sacraments or Sacramental Blessings which bestow special grace for a particular office or vocation with the community. These are Holy Matrimony, the Monastic Tonsure and Holy Orders.

**The Daily Cycle** Another major cycle which involves the entire life of an Orthodox Christian is the daily cycle of prayers and praises offered by the Church, once every twenty-four hours. These services express our remembrance of events which happened at certain hours and contain petitions relevant to these memories.

In antiquity the day was considered to begin at sunset and thus was divided according to the following order. Night began at 6:00 p.m. (according to our reckoning) and was divided into four parts (called watches the time of changing guards): Evening (6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.); Midnight (9:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight); Cock-crow (12:00 midnight to 3:00 a.m.); and Morning (3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.). Day began at 6:00 a.m. (our reckoning) and it, too, was divided into four watches (or hours). First Hour (6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.); Third Hour (9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon); Sixth Hour (12:00 noon to 3:00 p.m.); and Ninth Hour (3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.).

Following this ancient pattern, Orthodox Christians begin each portion of the day with common prayer, which has resulted in the following eight Services, customarily divided into three groups: Ninth Hour, Vespers, and Compline; Nocturns (Midnight Service), Matins, and First Hour; Third and Sixth Hours. In addition to this daily pattern, in certain monasteries during certain periods of fasting, each of the Hours is followed by an intermediate Office called the Interhour. Also included in the daily cycle are the Offices for the Blessing of the Table and the Morning and Evening Prayers.

The Divine Liturgy is often included in this daily cycle, normally being served after the Sixth Hour (although, during Fast Periods it is celebrated after Vespers). Often treated as part of the daily cycle, the Divine Liturgy is not prescribed to be celebrated every day (as it is in many cathedrals and monasteries) and in a theological and mystical sense actually stands outside of chronological time since it also serves as a point of contact with the eternal, where its participants (by virtue of their partaking of the Holy Eucharist) are transported to a point outside of time where there is no past, present or future, but only the eternal Now [The Festal Menaion, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, p. 40]. On days when the Divine Liturgy is not celebrated, the Service of the Typical Psalms is celebrated in its place after the Sixth Hour (it also sometimes precedes the Liturgy), thus forming part of the third group of Daily Services with the Third and Sixth Hours.

In addition to these two cycles, there are also three others: The Weekly Cycle of the Eight Tones (Octoechos), the Annual Cycle of Movable Feasts (dependent upon Pascha), and the Annual Cycle of Fixed Feasts, beginning on the first day of the Church Year September 1. These three cycles

are combined and superimposed on each other, giving the Liturgical Year a constant and unfailing variety.

**The Weekly Cycle** Each day of the Weekly Cycle is dedicated to certain special memorials. Sunday is dedicated to Christ's Resurrection; Monday honors the Holy Bodiless Powers (Angels, Archangels, etc.); Tuesday is dedicated to the prophets and especially the greatest of the Prophets, St. John the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord; Wednesday is consecrated to the Cross and recalls Judas' betrayal; Thursday honors the Holy Apostles and Hierarchs, especially St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Lycia; Friday is also consecrated to the Cross and recalls the day of the Crucifixion; Saturday is dedicated to All Saints, especially the Mother of God, and to the memory of all those who have departed this life in the hope of resurrection and eternal life.

Each week of the Weekly Cycle is centered around the Eight Tones (the basis for Orthodox Church music) and each Week has its appointed Tone. On Saturday Evening of Bright Week (the Eve of St. Thomas Sunday), the cycle of Tones begins with Tone One and, week by week, the sequence continues through the successive Tones, One to Eight, changing to a new Tone every Saturday Evening, throughout the year.

**The Annual Cycle of Movable Feasts** The yearly cycle of Movable Feasts is that centered around Holy Pascha and is called movable because, being linked with the Feast of Feasts, it shifts from year to year as Pascha itself falls on a different date each year. The Feasts which comprise this cycle are Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Pascha), Holy Ascension (the fortieth day after Pascha) and Holy Pentecost (the Descent of the Holy Spirit the fiftieth day after Pascha).

**The Annual Cycle of Fixed Feasts** Each day of the year is dedicated to the memory of particular events or Saints and these memorials always fall on the same Calendar date each year. Thus, in honor of each event or Saint(s), special hymns have been composed which are added **to the usual hymns and prayers of the day.**

**The Great Feasts** Among the feasts of the Church Year, a place of special honor belongs to the Feast of Feasts, Holy Pascha. Next in importance come the Twelve Great Feasts, which can be divided into two groups: Feasts of the Lord and Feasts of the Mother of God.

### **Great Feasts of the Lord**

1. The Universal Exaltation (or Elevation) of the Life-creating Cross (Sept. 14)
2. The Nativity of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ (Christmas Dec. 25)
3. The Theophany (or Epiphany) of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ (Jan. 6)
4. The Entrance of Our Lord Jesus Christ into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday Sunday before Pascha)
5. The Ascension of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (40 days after Pascha)
6. The Descent of the Holy Spirit (Holy Pentecost 50 days after Pascha)
7. The Transfiguration of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ (Aug. 6)

## Great Feasts of the Mother of God

1. The Nativity of the Most-Holy Theotokos (Sept. 8)
2. The Entrance (or Presentation) of the Theotokos into the Temple (Nov. 21)
3. The Meeting of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple (Feb. 2)
4. The Annunciation to the Most-Holy Theotokos (Mar. 25)
5. The Falling-Asleep (or Dormition) of the Most-Holy Theotokos (Aug. 15)

All of the Feasts listed above, with the exception of Palm Sunday and Holy Pentecost are preceded by a period of preparation known as the Forefeast. In addition, The Nativity of Christ and the Dormition are preceded by a special fasting period (the Nativity Fast begins on November 15 and the Dormition Fast begins on August 1). Three of the Feasts are followed, on the next day, by a distinctive commemoration known as a Synaxis: The Nativity of Christ is followed, on Dec. 26 by the Synaxis of the Most-Holy Theotokos; the Theophany is followed, on Jan. 7 by the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist; and the Annunciation is followed, on Mar. 26 by the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel. In addition, all except one (Palm Sunday) are followed by a festal period called the Afterfeast, during which the prior Feast is continually observed. The last day of the Afterfeast the actual close of the Feast is called the Leavetaking.

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# Easter in the Liturgical Year

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

Excerpts from the lecture "The Sanctification of Life" on the Third Annual Church School Conference sponsored by the Metropolitan Council Religious Education Committee, July 1963.

In the center of our liturgical life, in the very center of that time which we measure as year, we find the **feast of Christ's Resurrection**. What is Resurrection? Resurrection is the appearance in this world, completely dominated by time and therefore by death, of a life that will have no end. The one who rose again from the dead does not die anymore. In this world of ours, not somewhere else, not in a world that we do not know at all, but in our world, there appeared one morning Someone who is beyond death and yet *in* our time. This meaning of Christ's Resurrection, this great joy, is the central theme of Christianity and it has been preserved in its purity by the Orthodox Church. There is much truth expressed by those who say that the real central theme of Orthodoxy, the center of all its experience, the frame of reference of everything else, is the Resurrection of Christ.

The center -- the day -- that gives meaning to all days and therefore to all time, is that yearly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection at Easter. This is always the end and the beginning. We are always living *after* Easter, and we are always going *toward* Easter. Easter is the earliest Christian feast. The whole tone and meaning of the liturgical life of the Church is contained in Easter, together with the subsequent fifty-day period, which culminates in the **feast of the Pentecost**, the coming down of Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. This unique Easter celebration is reflected every week in the Christian Sunday, which we call in Russian "Voskresenie" (Resurrection Day). If only you would take some time to read the texts of Sunday Matins you would realize, though it may seem strange to you, that every Sunday we have a little Easter. I say "Little Easter," but it is really "Great Easter." Every week the Church comes to the same central experience: "Having seen Thy Resurrection..." Every Saturday night when the priest carries the Gospel from the altar to the center of the church, after he has read the Gospel of the Resurrection, the same fundamental fact of our Christian faith is proclaimed: Christ is risen! St. Paul says: "If Christ is not risen, then your faith is in vain." There is nothing else to believe. This is the real center, and it is only in reference to Easter as the end of all natural time and the beginning of the new time in which we as Christians have to live that we can understand the whole liturgical year. If you open a calendar, you will find all our Sundays are called Sundays after Pentecost, and Pentecost itself is fifty days after Easter. Pentecost is the fulfillment of Easter. Christ ascended into heaven and sent down His Holy Spirit. When He sent down His Holy Spirit into the world, a new society was instituted, a body of people, whose life, though it remained of this world and was shared in its life, took on a new meaning. This new meaning comes directly from Christ's Resurrection. We are no longer people who are living in time as in a meaningless process, which makes us first old and then ends in our disappearance. We are given not only a new meaning in life, but even death itself has acquired a new significance. In the Troparion at Easter we say, "He trampled down death by death." We do not say that He trampled down death by the Resurrection, but by *death*. A Christian still faces death as a decomposition of the body, as an end; yet in Christ, in the Church, because of Easter, because of Pentecost, death is no longer just the end but it is the beginning also. It is not something meaningless which therefore gives a meaningless taste to all of life. Death means entering into the Easter of the Lord. This is the basic tone, the basic melody of the liturgical year of the Christian Church. Christianity is, first of all, the proclamation in this world of Christ's Resurrection. Orthodox spirituality is paschal in its inner content, and the real content of the Church life is joy. We speak of feasts; the feast is the expression of joyfulness of Christianity.

The only real thing, especially in the child's world, which the child accepts easily, is precisely joy. We have made our Christianity so adult, so serious, so sad, so solemn that we have almost emptied it of that joy. Yet Christ Himself said, "Unless you become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of God." To become as a child in Christ's terms means to be capable of that spiritual joy of which an adult is almost completely incapable: to enter into that communion with things, with nature, with other people without suspicion of fear or frustration. We often use the term "grace." But what is grace? *Charisma* in Greek means not only grace but also joy. "And I will give you the joy that no one will take away from you..." If I stress this point so much, it is because I am sure that, if we have a message to our own people, it is that message of Easter joy which finds its climax on Easter night. When we stand at the door of the church and the priest has said, "Christ Is Risen," then the night becomes in the terms of St. Gregory of Nyssa, "lighter than the day." This is the secret strength, the real root of Christian experience. Only within the framework of this joy can we understand everything else.



*St. Vladimir's Seminary Chapel, mid-seventies; Father Cyril Staurevsky, Dean of Students, and Father Alexander Schmemmann, Dean, lead the Prayer Before Communion.*