

Dates & Celebrations

Parishes and churches commonly prepare wall and/or book-type calendars for the use of their faithful. We often don't think too much about the value of such calendars, but when utilized conscientiously they can be of great help to our spiritual life and growth.

Besides the date, a wall calendar usually includes three other important items of information: the daily commemoration – i.e., what event or saint the Church is honouring on a particular day; the scripture readings appointed for the day; and whether or not a particular day is solemnized by fasting.

Every day of the year we celebrate the memory of a saint, an event in the life of our Lord or His Mother, or some other important happening in the history of salvation. Saints are normally commemorated on the day of their repose, and sometimes on the day their relics were found or transferred as well. The commemoration of a person's patron saint (their "name day") is traditionally celebrated joyfully, much like a birthday. Other solemn commemorations include Christ's Resurrection (Pascha) and Baptism, the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, etc.

In addition to the daily commemoration, the church calendar lists the scripture readings appointed for each day of the year. A passage from the Acts of the Apostles or one of the Epistles and a reading from one of the Gospels is normally assigned for every day. On weekdays during the Great Fast readings are taken from the books of Genesis, Isaiah, and Proverbs. On the eve of feasts other Old Testament readings are assigned. If we were to attend daily services in Church throughout the year these are the readings we would hear.

Though most of us are not able to attend daily services in church, there is no reason for us not to receive benefit from these appointed readings. By following the lectionary (the schedule of appointed readings) Orthodox Christians read the entire New Testament (with the exception of the book of Revelation) and a large portion of the Old Testament during the course of a year.

A lack of Biblical literacy inevitably leads to spiritual ignorance and trouble. Reading the scriptural passages given for each day on the Church calendar should be a consistent and unchangeable part of our personal daily routine. If we have time to read a newspaper, a magazine, a textbook, or watch the news

on a daily basis what good reason can we possibly have for not spending five to ten minutes reading the one book whose sole subject is the Person we claim to model our lives after?

The Orthodox, almost uniquely among those who call themselves Christians, still maintain the traditional Christian discipline of fasting. Nowadays fasting often gets a bad rap, which is understandable given the fact that we are inundated with advertising telling us to indulge and satisfy our animal (often lustful) desires where, when, and how often we have them. In a self-indulgent society the message that self-renunciation is beneficial and necessary is certainly countercultural. But as we know from both scientific research and practical experience, the ability to delay gratification, to keep our passions, wants and desires under control is ultimately the surest way to success and happiness in life.

The wall calendar tells us which days are set aside for fasting and abstinence. This includes every Wednesday and Friday during the year excluding fast-free periods, as well as the Great, Apostle's, Dormition, and Nativity fasts, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (September 11th), and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 27th). These days are usually shaded a darker colour to remind us that we should abstain from meat and dairy products, etc.

Fasting is a beautiful, spiritually beneficial practice. Just as we are united by the sacrifice of our Lord at His table in Church, we are united by our own small sacrifice of food at our dinner tables.

An almanac or booklet type of calendar, in addition to the information printed on a wall calendar, usually gives additional information on such things as Church regulations and the typicon.

The regulations outline specific practices that are recommended or proscribed by the Church, such as those having to do with marriage, baptism, burial, morality, and in general everything which pertains to Orthodox Christian faith and spiritual discipline.

The typicon outlines in greater or lesser detail the particulars of the liturgical services for a given year. We find, for example, the proper order for the singing of tropars at liturgy, stykhyry at vespers, the variable parts of matins, and the way services are conducted when two or more feasts coincide. Last year, for example, the feast of the Presentation fell on the first day of Lent. Because it is

forbidden to serve the Liturgy on weekdays during Lent the typicon directed that the service for the Presentation was to be combined with the service for Cheese-fare Sunday. This year the Annunciation falls on the day we normally read the Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew. Since the Annunciation is a great feast, the typicon directs that this year the Great Canon will be celebrated two days earlier than normal, on Tuesday of the fifth week of Lent.

In addition to an accurate translation of the Bible and a good prayer book, a church calendar, when used consistently and conscientiously, is one of the most important tools we can have with us on our journey towards salvation.

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