

The Rhythm of Life

by Fr. Bohdan Hladio

Whether on the job, at school, or at recreational activities such as music, dancing or sports, one thing which is of primary importance to our employers, teachers, co-workers and team members is attendance. Attendance is one of the most basic yardsticks of everything we do, because if we are not present at work, school or practice it is virtually impossible for us to learn, to work or to play together — in a word, it is impossible to contribute. When we speak of our commitment to Christ attendance plays no less important a role — first and foremost attendance at holy services, as well as attendance at parish meetings, social events, etc.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that most services in our Churches are under attended. It is interesting to wonder how lively and active our parishes would be if parishioners treated church attendance with the same seriousness they treat attendance at their job, school, sports team or folk-dance club. We sometimes hear or read calls for “spiritual renewal”, which often propose an easy fix. “Let's shorten the Liturgy,” “maybe we should have hot dogs for the kids after Liturgy,” and “Lets forget about all this fasting stuff” are just three suggestions which I personally have heard proposed. Our Lord described the Christian life as a narrow path, a journey requiring discipline, sacrifice and courage. There is no easy or painless way to achieve spiritual renewal or growth in our parish or personal life — but attending the services is probably the most important step if we are truly interested in seeing this growth.

The first Christian feast day was and still is Sunday. Before there were any other feast days the Christians celebrated Sunday as the commemoration of the Resurrection. To this day Sunday morning is the day when the community gathers and we celebrate the “breaking of the bread.”

Some sects and denominations have in the recent past fallen away from this apostolic practice. The Seventh-day Adventists, for example, worship on Saturday, saying (correctly) that this is the Biblical Sabbath. They forget, however, that we are Christians, not Jews, and we celebrate the new Passover — the Resurrection — and neither the Passover nor the Sabbath of the Jews. This particular controversy was decided by the Church during the first centuries of her existence, and could only remain a matter of contention for those unacquainted with the authentic, historic Christian tradition.

Since the second Vatican council the Catholics have instituted Saturday evening masses — so that members who have “more important” things to do on Sunday morning can fulfill their “Sunday obligation” and not miss these commitments. Again, this is an innovation, not a part of the authentic Christian tradition.

Many protestant sects are philosophically bereft of any reason for going to Church on Sunday morning at all. If it is true, as they contend, that all you have to do to be saved is to accept Jesus as your personal Saviour this very nicely does away with both the “Sunday obligation” and any other type of obligation as well!

While we are forbidden to judge others we can say without hesitation that in contrast to the Western denominations Orthodox Christianity possesses the fullness of the apostolic Christian teaching and practice. The participation of the faithful in the Liturgy is not an onerous obligation but a divinely granted privilege, and is in fact constitutive of the Church. This is what the apostles taught by word and deed, and this is what we believe. If we wish to have a truly healthy Church the first step that each and every member of the Church must take is forming in themselves an attitude towards Church attendance which is at least as serious as their attitude towards attendance at their job, school, service organization meeting or dance class.

Besides the Sunday Liturgy the Orthodox Church celebrates many other feast days as well. Some of them, Pascha and Pentecost for example, always fall on Sundays. Others, the so-called “immovable” feasts, always fall on the same date, the best known of these being Christmas — the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord. The vast majority of non-orthodox denominations do not celebrate or even admit the existence of these traditional and historic feast days. Even those who retain the traditional calendar of feasts and fasts, such as the Roman Catholic Church, have in most cases given these feasts and fasts a purely symbolic meaning. The Roman Catholic Church in Canada, for example, has “transferred” almost all feast days to the nearest Sunday. Several years ago, while conversing about feast days with a devout Catholic, I was amused to hear him say “we will be celebrating Ascension Thursday next Sunday”!

As is obvious from the word itself, the original meaning of holiday is “Holy day” — a Church feast day. Besides attendance at holy services one of the traditional ways of marking a holy day is to refrain from work. If we look at the current celebration of civil holidays we see that they are generally regarded simply as a day off of work — a Christian hand-me-down to our secular society. Consequently, due to the fact that the festal calendar of the Church has been to a large degree suppressed by the western denominations, we live in a society which has almost totally divested itself of any authentic Christian consciousness regarding holidays.

The Orthodox Church maintains the original, authentic understanding of “Holidays,” some of which — the commemoration of the death of martyrs or the feast of the Resurrection for example — date from the first century, and others — such as the feast of the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos — which are of later origin. The development of the Church Calendar, just like the development of Holy Scripture, is witnessed to in the life, history and legislation of the Orthodox Church — we know what we celebrate, when we celebrate, and why we celebrate. And most importantly, the Orthodox Church has never seen fit to ignore or suppress feast days, but sees the celebration of a feast in the same light She sees the blessing of water or oil or the faithful — as the sanctification of that which God has created for us, in this case the sanctification of time.

Understanding this, the celebration of feast days by participation in the Divine Liturgy is for the Orthodox a very important sign of our faith, especially in our North American social context. Even more so than attendance at Sunday Liturgy, attendance at Feast-day Liturgies is a sign of real commitment not just to some kind of indistinct “Christianity,” but to true, historical Orthodox Christian Faith. Just as we give of our money and talents for the good of God's Church, we give of our time and our gratitude and our worship. We are called upon to be a worshipping

people — and this we do first and foremost in Church on Sundays and Holy days — i.e., on the days God has set aside for us to do so.

At this point someone might say “yes, father, this is all well and good, but in this day and age it is not practical to take a day off of work or school to attend services.” I remember well a conversation I had a few years ago with a young mother who was also a school-teacher. I had suggested that it might be nice if parents occasionally booked the morning off from work to attend feast-day services with their children. She dismissed this as impractical. I asked her if she took off time for vacations, for doctor's appointments, or just “mental health days.” The answer to every question was “yes.” I then repeated the thought, that it would be nice for parents to take off one morning, even if only once a year, to attend services on a weekday with their children. She looked at me as if I were from Mars! She could understand taking a month of paid vacation for herself or her family, but could not understand taking even 4 (paid) hours, once a year, to worship God with her children on a weekday morning.

Others might say “In the old country people did not have anything better to do than attend Church services.” I find the argument that our ancestors had “nothing better to do” than go to Church extremely amusing — and whether it is the “old country” or America, the reason is the same. Try spending a year living and working on a farm with no electricity, running water, gasoline engines or social safety net, being dependent upon what you can harvest from the earth for your very life. Try carrying all your water 3 or 6 or 9 blocks from a well, or baking all your bread every day in a wood-fired oven from grain you have sown, harvested, threshed, and probably even ground. The fact of the matter is that our ancestors had much less “personal” time than we have at our disposal, and certainly no paid vacations. Perhaps they simply had more faith in God?

Why should I attend services on feast days? Any priest or pious layman can give you many theological and practical reasons why the faithful should attend festal liturgies if at all possible. One of the reasons often overlooked is that attendance at these liturgies permits us to understand our Faith from another perspective. Attending Liturgy on Holy days permits us to enter into the rhythm of the life of the Church.

The rhythm of Church life has three components — the daily, weekly and yearly cycles. The daily cycle for an average Orthodox Christian in the world usually consists of prayers upon arising, prayers before sleep, and prayer before and after meals. This might be expanded by personally reading through one of the shorter services or praying on the prayer rope. The weekly and yearly cycles, however, require a liturgical participation to truly experience them. While we can speak of personal prayer or devotion, it is impossible to speak of a “personal” liturgical experience. If the Divine Services truly are important for our salvation then the faithful must take part in them. This participation is different for everyone. Only the monk or nun will be able to participate fully in the daily cycle of services, but the weekly and yearly cycle of worship is accessible to all the faithful who live within reasonable proximity to a Church.

Music has three basic parts: melody, harmony and rhythm. Rhythm is the basis of all music, the foundation upon which melody and harmony are built. Likewise the life of the Church — which we understand to be a foretaste of life in paradise — is built on a concrete rhythm, the

rhythm of the Church calendar, of the feasts and of the fasts. Beginning with attendance at worship every Sunday, and building up to the attendance at all services throughout the year, we are given a chance to take our lives out of the rhythm of the world — the mundane — and enter into the rhythm of Paradise.

Practically speaking, this is one of the important reasons for serving Great Vespers before every feast. It is probably unrealistic to expect all the faithful to take days off to attend Liturgy the morning of every feast day (though it is a lot easier for us to do than we often care to admit), and like it or not many people are forced to work on Sunday morning. Serving Vespers gives all the faithful the opportunity to experience the rhythm of the Church year in their lives, by attending services the evening before Sunday or feast day even if they cannot attend the Liturgy.

Making time to attend the festal services as a family and as a community will strengthen our faith, our families and our parishes more than we can imagine. The Jews have lived their religious life according to a different calendar for millennia. This simple fact has exerted an immense influence on their continued existence. When our Churches are as full every Sunday as they are on Pascha, and when they are as full on Holy days as they are now on Sunday, we will see a spiritual revival in our parishes and in our Church — a revival the scale of which we probably cannot imagine.

As any builder knows, the most important part of the house is the foundation. Our Lord Himself spoke of this, saying that the one who follows His commandments is like the one who builds their house on a rock (Mt. 7:24 - 8:4). If the Church truly is Christ's body, as St. Paul says (Col. 1:18, Rom. 12:4, I Cor. 12:12, etc.), then Her commandments are the commandments of Christ. And if we wish to build our lives on a firm foundation, what foundation can be more solid than the mystical life of the Church? By making the rhythm of the Church the rhythm of our own personal life we will certainly see marked spiritual growth in our lives and communities, and upon this foundation we will be able to more deeply experience the melody of prayer and the harmony of true Christian life. ■

Note: this essay is reprinted from Fr. Bohdan's book "Northopraxis", published by Holy Dormition Press, and available from Holy Dormition Monastery in Rives Junction, Michigan