

~ From Christmas to Theophany ~

This page describes the course of the liturgical year between the feast of the Nativity of our Lord (December 25) and Theophany, the feast of His baptism (January 6).

Post-festive days of the Nativity

The days from December 26 through December 31 make up the "post-feast" of Christmas. On each day, the services include hymns from the feast, and also hymns that look back to the feast that we have just celebrated. Thus the Church allows us to time reflect upon and more fully absorb the lessons of the feast.

At each Divine Liturgy, the first and second antiphons of the Nativity are sung, and the refrain of the third antiphon changes from "O Son of God, risen from the dead" or "O Son of God, wondrous in your saints" to "O Son of God, born of the Virgin." The troparion of the Nativity is sung before the rest of the troparia and kontakia, and the magnification and irmos of Christmas are sung in place of "It is truly proper" (with one exception; see below).

December 26 - The Synaxis of the Theotokos

Several feast days in the course of the year are immediately followed by a day commemorating individuals connected in some fashion with the previous day's feast. On the day after Christmas, we pause to consider the role of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, in the events that have just taken place.

While the Vespers is largely taken up with repeating the hymns of Christmas, it adds the following prokeimenon, which recalls the fears and hopes of the figures of the Old Testament, but concludes with an act of trust in God:

What God is as great as our God? You are the God Who works wonders.

V. You showed your power among the peoples.

V. I said: This is what causes my grief;
that the way of the Most High has changed.

V. I remember the deeds of the Lord;
I remember your wonders of old.

At the Divine Liturgy, the kontakion proclaims today's topic for consideration:

Before the morning star, he was born of a Father without a mother;
today, on earth, he has become man from you without a father.

A star announces the good news to the Wise Men.

The angels join with the shepherds

to sing the glory of your marvelous child-bearing, O Woman full of grace.

The prokeimenon and Alleluia are from the Common of the Theotokos. The Epistle contains a quote from the Old Testament which could be said equally by the Church in her own behalf, and by the Blessed Virgin: "Here am I, and the children God has given me." The Gospel recounts the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt.

Alone of the post-festive days of Christmas, the Synaxis has its own magnification and irmos.

December 27 - The Feast of Saint Stephen

The second day after Christmas is dedicated to the memory of Saint Stephen, one of the first seven deacons, who preached the message of the Lord in Jerusalem. The kontakion makes clear the connection and contrast between these two days:

Yesterday, in human flesh the Master came to us; today, from the flesh, his servant departs.

Yesterday, the King was born in the flesh; today, his servant is killed by stoning. Thus the holy Stephen, the first martyr, is brought to perfection.

"Martyr" is the Greek word for "witness", and it is for his courageous public witness that Stephen is praised. At the Divine Liturgy, the day's Epistle (from Chapters 6 and 7 of the Acts of the Apostles) recounts his preaching and death. (Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul, was present at the stoning of Stephen by the crowd.)

The following three days are also feasts of martyrs: the Martyrs of Nicomedia (December 28), the Holy Innocents killed by Herod in Bethlehem (December 29), and Anysia, Bishop of Thessalonica (December 30).

The Saturday after the Nativity

Saturday and Sunday were the ordinary Eucharistic days in the early Church, and so special readings are often provided for the Divine Liturgy on Saturday as well as on Sunday. If one of the post-festive days of Christmas falls on a Saturday, the themes of the post-festive days of the Nativity are combined in the day's Liturgy. The prokeimenon, Alleluia verse and Communion Hymn are for the Theotokos; while the readings reflect upon witness and martyrdom. The Epistle (1 Timothy 6:11b-16) encourages the faithful to be steadfast in their faith, and invokes Jesus as first of witnesses to God's truth:

Before God, who gives life to all, and before Jesus Christ, who in bearing witness made his noble profession before Pontius Pilate, I charge you to keep God's command without blame or reproach until our Lord Jesus Christ shall appear.

While the Gospel (Matthew 12:15-21) describes the ministry of Jesus, as He was aware "of the Pharisees' plot to destroy him."

The Sunday after the Nativity

Sunday during the post-festive days of Christmas is dedicated to the memory of the relatives of the Lord, particularly:

- his foster father, Saint Joseph (called Joseph the Betrothed);
- his ancestor, King David; and
- his cousin James, "the Brother of God" and first bishop of Jerusalem

The prokeimenon at the Divine Liturgy ("God is wondrous in his saints, the God of Israel") is that of All Saints; by invoking the "God of Israel", it also reminds us of these saints' background as Godly men of the Old Covenant. The kontakion of the day presents, in shared joy, three men who never met on earth:

Today the godly David is filled with joy; Joseph offers hymns of praise with James. Rejoicing, they take up the garland of relationship with Christ. They sing praise to him whose birth on earth defies description and they cry out: O merciful Lord, save those who honor you.

In the Epistle (Galatians 1:11-19), Saint Paul recounts his origins as a devout Jew, and his abrupt change of life and his journeys ("immediately, without seeking

human advisors") after receiving a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. In the same way, the Gospel tells of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, and how Joseph acted immediately upon receiving a message from God in a dream that Jesus was in danger from Herod.

Feast of the Circumcision

Seven days after his birth, in accordance with the Law of Moses, the incarnate Son of God was circumcised, and given the name Jesus. Accordingly, the Church celebrates these events seven days after the feast of the Nativity, on January 1 - the feast of the Circumcision.

This day is also the anniversary of the death of Saint Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia; his commemoration is kept on this day as well.

See Feast of the Circumcision.

Only two events from our Lord's childhood are described in the Holy Gospels: his presentation in the Temple on the fortieth day from his birth, and his family's journey to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old, on which He remained behind for three days in the Temple, listening and asking questions of the teachers there. The first event will be remembered on February 2, forty days from the feast of Christmas; the second is included in the Gospel read on the Circumcision.

Pre-festive days of the Theophany

After the feast of the Circumcision, the Church turns its gaze from our Lord's infancy and childhood to his public ministry, which will begin with His baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). The feast of our Lord's baptism is called the Theophany, meaning "the manifestation or appearance of God", and is celebrated on January 6.

During the days leading up to the Nativity, we sang the pre-festive troparion: "Bethlehem, make ready; Ephrathah, prepare yourself." Beginning on January 2 at Vespers (that is, starting on the evening of January 1), we look to Galilee and the River Jordan and sing the pre-festive troparion of Theophany:

Zebulon, make ready; Naphtali, prepare yourself. O River Jordan, stand and leap for joy to receive the Master coming to be baptized. O Adam, rejoice with the first mother, Eve, and do not hide yourselves as once you did in Paradise. For, seeing you naked, Christ has appeared to put on the first robe. He has appeared to renew all creation.

Both events - the birth of Christ, and His baptism in the Jordan - were manifestations or appearances of God; in other words, theophanies. Each was a crucial step in God's plan of salvation for the human race.

The Saturday before Theophany

If one of the pre-festive days (January 2-5) falls on a Saturday, then the liturgical books appoint special readings for the day's Divine Liturgy. The Epistle (1 Timothy 3:14-4:5) contains an early statement of faith in Jesus, which emphasizes the theme of manifestation or theophany:

He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit; seen by the angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

The Gospel (Matthew 3:1-11) describes the preaching and baptismal ministry of John the Forerunner.

The Sunday before Theophany

If one of the pre-festive days falls on a Sunday, then a special prokeimenon and alleluia are sung at the Divine Liturgy, asking God's blessing and assistance. In the Epistle (2 Timothy 4:5-8), Saint Paul refers to all those "who have looked for his appearing with eager longing." The Gospel is another account of the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist, taken this time from the very beginning of the Gospel according to Saint Mark (Mark 1:1-8).

The Royal Hours of the Theophany

Since December 25, there has been no fasting; we have kept festival in honor of our Lord's birth.

However, the Church does appoint a single day of fasting before the feast of our Lord's Theophany. Normally, this is on January 5, the "Paramony" of "Vigil" of

Theophany. However, if January 5 falls on a Saturday or Sunday - days on which we do not normally fast - then the fast day is transferred to the previous Friday.

On this day, a special service called the **Royal Hours** is celebrated. This service consists of the daytime services of the First Hour, Third Hour, Sixth Hour, Ninth Hour, and Typika, celebrated with special psalms and readings for the Theophany. (This service is called royal because, at one time, the Emperor himself always attended the service.) Each part of the service has an Old Testament prophecy, an Epistle reading, and a reading from the Holy Gospel.

The Vigil of the Theophany

Finally, we have come to the eve of the feast - the Paramony or Vigil of Theophany (January 5). If it is a weekday, it is a day of strict fasting, with the Royal Hours celebrated during the day, and Vespers and the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil in the evening.

If January 5 is a Saturday or Sunday, the Divine Liturgy may be celebrated in the morning, and we sing the troparion of the Vigil:

After Elijah has been taken up, the River Jordan was parted in two by Elisha's mantle; and a dry path was opened in the waters as an image of true baptism by which we pass beyond this fleeting life. Christ appeared at the Jordan to sanctify the waters.

By tradition, a Holy Supper (meatless but festive) is held on the evening of January 5, after Vespers, just as on Christmas Eve. We have arrived at the brink of the feast of the Theophany - the baptism of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Recommended Reading

- *The Traditional Byzantine Celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord*. Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 5. (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 1976).
- *The Byzantine Rite Celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord*. Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 9. (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 1977).
- Father Thomas Hopko. *The Winter Pascha*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). An excellent account of the Christmas Fast, and the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany.