

September

September is the first month of the liturgical year in the Byzantine Rite.

The beginning of the liturgical year

Among the ancient Mediterranean cultures, it was common to begin a new year in the autumn, with the end of the previous year's harvest. From at least the time of the Emperor Constantine, the civil year of the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire began in September, and **September 1** became the **first day of the Church's year** as well.

On this day, the Church's readings from the Old and New Testament announce "a year of grace of the Lord", and encourage Christians to pray for the needs of all. In the troparion of the New Year, we sing:

O Lord, maker of the universe,
who alone has power over times and seasons,
bless this year with your bounty,
preserve our country in peace,
and keep your people in peace.

We also commemorate Saint Simeon Stylites, the first of the *stylites* or "pillar saints." Living in the fifth century, he withdrew to live on a stone pillar, in order to withdraw from the world - but became famous for his preaching.

The birthday of the Mother of God

On **September 8**, we celebrate the first major feast of the liturgical year: the **Nativity (birth) of the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary**. This is one of her four major feasts in the course of the year. The stories of the feast are taken from extra-Biblical writings and the Church's tradition; the hymns of the Liturgy recall the longing of her parents, Joachim and Anna, for a child, but also place the Mother of God in her full context: as a descendent of King David, and the "cause of our joy."

On **September 9**, we commemorate Joachim and Anna; the post-festive days of the Nativity of the Theotokos continue through September 12, the "leave-taking" of the feast.

The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The month of September also gives us the first feast of the Lord in the Church's new year. On **September 14**, we celebrate the **feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross**. This feast commemorates an event which took place in Jerusalem in A.D. 335. On September 13, of that year, the Church of the Resurrection was solemnly dedicated, and on the following day, the bishop of Jerusalem, Saint Macarius, brought forth for public veneration the Cross of our Lord.

The hymns of the feast recount the finding of the Cross by the emperor Constantine's mother, Helen, and its subsequent history. But these historical events are used as a backdrop for the true meaning of the Cross, as a sign of our salvation.

The feast of the Exaltation of the Cross is preceded by a single pre-festive day (September 13, on which we also commemorate the dedication of the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem), and the post-festive days continue through September 21. There are also special readings and hymns for the Saturday and Sunday before the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and the Saturday and Sunday after the feast. The overlap between the post-festive days of the feast of the Mother of God on September 8, and the pre-festive days of the feast of the Holy Cross, lead to the complicated rules for the services from September 9 through September 13.

Other feast days

The feasts of the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8) and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14) provide the most important days of September in the Church's liturgy; apart from these, there are only two "feast days" (days of polyeleos rank or higher), and both occur toward the end of the month.

On **September 26**, we commemorate **Saint John the apostle and evangelist** (Gospel-writer) on the date of his death. In keeping with the custom of the Byzantine Rite, this is referred to as his "dormition" or "falling asleep"; according to tradition, Saint John was the only one of the twelve apostles who did not die a martyr's death. He is referred to the "the Theologian" on account of the spiritual depth of his teaching.

On **September 28**, we celebrate the memory of **Saint Chariton**, a monk and founder of monasteries in fourth-century Palestine. He is referred to as "our venerable father Chariton"; in this context, "venerable" means a monastic saint, a monk or nun. This feast is of polyeleos rank (the usual rank for feasts of apostles). Several of the early monastic saints from Palestine are especially venerated in the Slavonic tradition of the Byzantine Rite, probably because our typikon or order of services came out of Palestine.

For a complete list of saints' days as celebrated in our church, see the Calendar of Saints.

Recommended Reading

Father Basil Shereghy. *The Liturgical Year of the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Byzantine Seminary Press, 1968.)

A good book-length introduction to the liturgical year as celebrated in the Byzantine Catholic Church.

A Monk of the Eastern Church (Father Lev Gilet). *The Year of Grace of the Lord*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.)

An beautiful explanation and commentary on the liturgical year; an Orthodox classic.