

Thank God It's Friday: Feasting in Orthodoxy

The Need To Celebrate

There has never been a culture that does not have some form of celebration or festivals. Even the restaurant chain, "T.G.I. Friday's" may express in a very American way, the need to rest and rejoice after laboring at work. God rested on the seventh day so that we may break from the busyness of life and recover the vision of goodness and beauty of this world. I am sure someone said in ancient times, "Thank God, it's the Sabbath." The "Sabbath" is now Saturday, a day of expectation for the coming of the "Lord's Day" or Sunday. It is also known as the day beyond time, the 8th Day, the Day of God's Kingdom. The Church is a continual invitation to attend a feast centered upon Sundays, Feast days, Saint days and Holy seasons. These are not only pauses from the busyness of life but serve to "re-set" our worldview so that the Orthodox worldview may change how one lives the American way of life. This Orthodox worldview is more than just certain values; it allows the Kingdom of God to act upon every aspect of one's life ~ every day.

The Orthodox Church has kept intact an extremely rich liturgical tradition; however, the Church is not a museum of Byzantium. The purpose of this rich tradition is to provide inspirational worship by which this vision of the Kingdom of God can be experienced and allow its power to transform all aspects of life including business. The reality is that most have a very minimal and limited experience of a liturgical life. "To a great, if not overwhelming, majority of our people the liturgical life of the Church is limited to Sunday morning and two or three additional 'must' days: Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Friday . . . All that, which was so vital, so central, so essential in the liturgical piety of the past: the feasts and their eves, the 'bright sadness' of the Lenten services, the unique celestial beauty of the Mariological cycle (15 days of August), the warm, almost personal, commemoration of the Saints, the long and solemn crescendo of the Holy Week—all this, although it is still dutifully listed in ecclesiastical calendars—is virtually absent from the real liturgical life (Problems of Orthodoxy in America, 1964)."

The challenge before this generation of Greek Orthodox priests is to lead communities in a liturgical renewal. We are very busy people with family activities and work obligations. At the same time, parishes are also very busy places. Meetings abound, youth activities are organized, and social events are planned. It is not that we do not have time for a liturgical life; we make time for the things we value. The challenging question to the church leadership is why many do not connect with the church services. The answer is complex and cannot be reduced to any single solution but they include how we do church services, the quality of English translations, adequate chanting skills, choral arrangements and perhaps the most important is the influence of secularism on the Orthodox themselves.

Secularism: the compartmentalization of religious life from other parts

If Church is only attended on some Sundays and has very little to say about how one lives out their life, the more powerful force of secularism will shape one's worldview as opposed to the experience of the Kingdom of God acting upon the culture. "For the first time in her long history, the Orthodox Church is to live within a culture, a 'way of life' to which she is deeply alien, and this, not because of her 'oriental-ism (being eastern)' or a difference in ethnical background, but, because of her fundamental theological and spiritual presuppositions, of her whole 'worldview.' Secularism is a complex phenomenon...it is sufficient to define it as the autonomy of the secular, i.e. worldly life of man and society from religion and its scale of values, a radical distinction between the religious and the secular 'sectors' of life... America, for example, is both deeply religious and deeply secularistic.

It may sincerely proclaim the need for religion, give it a place of honor and cover it with many privileges. But this coexistence, cooperation and even mutual inspiration does not alter the fundamental dichotomy of religion and life. Religion can supply life with ethical standards, with help and comfort, but it cannot transform life into religion, make it a religious life whose very content is God and His Kingdom. Thus, for example, a businessman can believe in God and in the immortality of the soul, he can pray and find great help in prayer, but once he has entered his office and begun working, this work itself is not even supposed to be 'referred to' the fundamental religious realities of Creation, Fall and Redemption, but is indeed 'self-sufficient' or autonomous.

But the Orthodox 'worldview' excludes secularism, for it is indeed the central and all-embracing idea and inspiration of Orthodoxy that the whole life not only belongs to God, but is to be made God-like and God-centered, transformed into communion with God, and, therefore—no 'sector' of human activity or creativity, be it the most 'secular' or 'profane' can be neutral, not capable of being sanctified, i. e. transformed into communion with God. (Fr. Schmemmann, Problems of Orthodoxy in America, 1964)." The purpose of the liturgical life is to re-orientate our lives in the right direction so that our worldview understands the world as the object of our mission. If one is seriously engaged in the life of the church it serves to provide the criterion for judging what takes place at work, how a business is conducted and how the experience of worship influences my behavior, my mind, my heart and decision making processes at work.

Walking in Fear or Walking in Joy?

The Church does not as much seek to explain the events in the life of Christ but celebrates them in awe and joy of a great mystery that is simply beyond logic and understanding. Each event is an epiphany, a revelation of God's Kingdom breaking into the reality of this world. The Feasts allow us to restore that vision of God's Kingdom that we have lost. Peter's entering into the boat without Christ and being tossed about by the waves is an image of living in the world without Christ. This is a life of fear that

perishes under the weight of storms. It is precisely in the midst of the storm of life that Christ comes towards us walking on the water. Peter recognizes Christ and responds with ecstatic joy, he celebrates and leaves the boat, strengthened by Christ who makes it possible for Peter to walk on water. The liturgical life of the Orthodox Church is nothing less than Christ coming to each of us in the midst of the storm of life offering a safe haven and calm harbor."

This was for centuries and centuries the real function of the liturgy in the Orthodox Church: to immerse the man in the spiritual reality, beauty and depth of the Kingdom of God and to change his mind and his heart. By revealing and manifesting the 'bridal chamber adorned' the liturgy was revealing to man his exile and alienation from God and thus was bringing him to repentance, to the desire to return to God and do his commandments. It was judgment and inspiration, condemnation and transformation. I do not mean that the Orthodox man of the past was more 'moral' or led a better life. But, at least, he knew he was a sinner and in the best part of himself he had a nostalgia for the 'peace and joy' of the Kingdom; he referred his life to it and judged it by Christian standards. He knew, and he knew it by and through the power of worship, that God wants him to be a saint and that he is not a saint. Today, however, this power of worship has all but vanished. Worship is something one must attend and even enjoy, it is a self-evident 'obligation' for the religious man, but it has lost all relevance for the real life. (Problems of Orthodoxy in America, 1964)."

Beginning in September, we will be offering evening classes on the great Feasts of the Orthodox Church with the hope that they will inspire us all to be more engaged in the rich liturgical tradition of the Church. Many times these Feast days are intentionally celebrated in the evening so to encourage participation. The hymns and scripture readings of Feast days teach us important lessons related to salvation. More importantly however, Feast days and the entire liturgical year serve to transform our minds and hearts by the reality of the Kingdom of God so that we may make a difference in the world. May we come to say with all our hearts, "Thank God, It's a Feast Day."

The major Feast days of the Orthodox Church are as follows:

- September 8, the Nativity of the Theotokos
- September 14, the Exaltation of the Cross
- November 21, the Presentation of the Theotokos
- December 25, the Nativity of Christ/Christmas
- January 6, the Baptism of Christ -- Theophany, also called Epiphany
- February 2, the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple
- March 25, the Annunciation
- Palm Sunday before Pascha (Easter)-- the Entry into Jerusalem
- Pascha (Easter)
- Forty Days after Pascha (Easter) -- the Ascension of Christ
- Fifty Days after Pascha (Easter) -- Pentecost
- August 6, the Transfiguration

- August 15, the Dormition (Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos

+ Fr. Andrew