

PARENT GUIDE TO FEAST DAYS AND HOLY DAYS

This section is a brief introduction to Feast Days and Holy Days to enable parents to teach their children to understand and participate in these special services. It is not comprehensive and is meant only to provide simple information. We encourage parents to speak with their pastor, church school directors or church school teachers to obtain more information.

Throughout the Church Year, Feasts and Holy Days are celebrated to remember people and events of particular importance to Christians. The Feast of Christ's resurrection, Holy Pascha (Easter), is the greatest Feast of the Church, and is often referred to as the Feast of Feasts. There are twelve Great Feasts: eight feasts of our Lord and four in honor of His Mother, the Theotokos. In addition, every day in the Christian year is sacred to the memory of some saint or memorable event in the history of the Church. *(The faithful are encouraged to look up their patron saint's day and have a small celebration on their "Name Day".)*

Below are brief descriptions of the Great Feasts as well as Great Lent and Holy Week and suggestions to help children participate in the service. In each case, it is suggested that you:

- read the related Bible story or church history story before the Feast.
- show the icon to your children, discuss at their level and encourage them to look for it in the church. Buy a packet of icons, if you can, that show these Feasts and Holy

Days. Have children bring the icon of the Feast to church

- read the special hymns and prayers for the day and bring the children's attention to special words for which they should listen.
- look for any visual changes in the church for the Feast or Holy Day as in the color of the priest's vestments and altar cloths. The priest wears gold for regular Sundays, blue for the Feasts of the Theotokos, red for the Feasts of the Cross and Christmas Fast, purple is for Great Lent, white is for Pascha (Easter), and green is for Pentecost.

1. NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS SEPTEMBER 8

The church celebrates the birth of Mary, the Mother of God, with special veneration since it is through her that the Son of God was made man. The story of her birth is not found in Scripture, but is based on the Tradition of the Church and non-scriptural sources such as The Protevangelion of St. James. Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, were an aged couple who prayed fervently for a child and pledged to dedicate the child to the service of God. Read the story of Mary's birth, study the icon and discuss at your child's level, listen to the special hymns of the Feast and bring your children's attention to the color of the vestments and altar cloths which will be blue for this Feast. The Gospel Reading for the day is Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28.

2. THE ELEVATION OR EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS — SEPTEMBER 14

The feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross is celebrated to commemorate the discovery of the true cross by St. Helen. During the Divine Liturgy, the cross is borne aloft on a tray of flowers, or the herb basil in some traditions. At the end of the service, the blessed flowers or sprigs of basil are distributed to the faithful.

In addition to the introductory suggestions, have your child wear his/her cross and bring a small hand cross as well. Have them listen and learn the hymn "Before Thy cross..." which replaces the Trisagion (Holy God) for this feast. The Gospel Reading for the Feast is John 19:6-35, the story of the Crucifixion.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE THEOTOKOS — NOVEMBER 21

In fulfillment of their vow, Joachim and Anna brought young Mary (at the age of 3) to the Temple where she studied and served. In the icon, she is shown, with her parents, being met by the High Priest. When Mary is presented, the High Priest takes her into the Holy of Holies, a Sanctuary, where even he is allowed to enter only once a year.

Find a copy of the story of the Presentation and read it to your children. Bring your children's attention to the color of the vestments and altar cloths which will be blue in honor of the Theotokos. The Gospel Reading is Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28, the same reading as the Feast Day of her birth.

4. NATIVITY OF OUR LORD DECEMBER 25

In preparation of the celebration of the Nativity, have your family keep the Christmas Fast which begins on November 15 and lasts until the Feast. Although many churches do not celebrate all the special services as in Great Lent, there are many things you can do to mark this special time such as reading the Bible stories about Christmas as well as the saints who are commemorated at this time (St. Andrew the Apostle - November 30, St. Barbara - December 4, St. Nicholas - December 6, etc.); making Advent calendars and wreaths (Note: there are 6 candles for six weeks of the Fast); fast (as in Great Lent) from certain foods and activities.

5. EPIPHANY OR THEOPHANY JANUARY 6

This Feast celebrates the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. The main feature of this feast is the Great Blessing of Water. Special hymns are sung including those that are heard at Baptisms. After the service, the priest sprinkles all present with the blessed water and offers water to the faithful to drink as well as in containers to take home to sanctify their home or to save for times of adversity and illness.

In addition to the introductory suggestions, have your children bring in their own special container and photos of their own baptism. Invite godparents to a special dinner or call them with special greetings. The Gospel reading is Matthew 3:13-17.