

(ii) The Great Feasts

Among the festivals of the Christian Year, a place of pre-eminent honour belongs naturally to Easter Day, the 'feast of feasts'. Next in importance come the Twelve Great Feasts, divided into two groups: Feasts of the Mother of God, and Feasts of the Lord.² If a Feast of the Mother of God falls on a Sunday, the special texts for the feast are combined with the Sunday office of the Resurrection, taken from the Octoechos; but in the case of a Feast of the Lord all texts for Sunday are omitted.

Feasts of the Mother of God (Gk. *Θεομητορικά ἑορταί*):

1. The Birth of the Theotokos (8 September).
2. The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (21 November).
3. The Meeting of Our Lord (2 February).³
4. The Annunciation (25 March).

¹ On these and the other service books, see Appendix II, pp. 535–43, where the disposition of these three cycles is further explained.

² The list of Twelve Great Feasts that follows reflects the normal Orthodox practice; but—particularly in iconographic representations of the Twelve Feasts—variations in the list sometimes occur.

³ Western 'Presentation' or 'Purification'. Sometimes reckoned as a Feast of the Lord.

5. The Dormition of the Theotokos (15 August).¹

Feasts of the Lord (Gk. *Δεσποτικά καὶ ἑορταί*):

1. The Exaltation of the Cross (14 September).
2. Christmas (25 December).
3. Theophany (6 January).
4. Palm Sunday (one week before Easter).
5. The Ascension of Our Lord (40 days after Easter).
6. Pentecost (Trinity Sunday: 50 days after Easter).²
7. The Transfiguration of Our Lord (6 August).

As can be seen, three out of these Twelve Great Feasts are movable, forming part of the annual Easter cycle, while the remaining nine are fixed and belong to the cycle of the Menaia. It is the texts for these nine fixed feasts that are contained in the present volume.

Each of the nine feasts in question is preceded by a period of preparation, known as the forefeast; two of them are also preceded by a special fast.³ Three are followed, on the next

¹ Western 'Assumption'.

² In the east the feast of the Trinity is observed on the day of Pentecost itself, not—as in the west—a week later.

³ Four special fasts are observed in the Byzantine liturgical year:

- (i) The Christmas Fast, beginning on 15 November.
- (ii) The Great Fast (Lent), beginning seven weeks before Easter. The Great Fast, strictly defined, ends on the Saturday of Lazarus (the day before Palm Sunday): Holy Week itself, although likewise observed as a fast, stands apart from the six preceding weeks of Lent, and is regarded as occupying a distinctive and unique position within the Church's Year.
- (iii) The Fast of the Apostles, varying in length between one and six weeks: it begins on the Monday after All Saints (the Monday eight days after Pentecost) and ends on the eve of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul (29 June).
- (iv) The Dormition Fast, beginning on 1 August and ending on the eve of the feast of the Dormition (15 August).

In addition, all Wednesdays and Fridays are days of fasting, except:

- (a) between Christmas and Theophany

day, by a distinctive commemoration known as a Synaxis (Slavonic, *Sobór*); and all except one are followed by a period termed the afterfeast, during which the festival continues to be observed. The last day of the afterfeast—the day on which the festival finally closes—is called the apodosis (Slavonic, *otdánie*).

In detail the arrangements for each feast are as follows:

- (i) †The Birth of the Theotokos (8 September).¹
One day of forefeast (7 September).
Memorial of Sts. Joachim and Ann, the parents of the Theotokos (9 September).
Four days of afterfeast (9–12 September).
- (ii) †The Exaltation of the Cross (14 September).
One day of forefeast (13 September).
Seven days of afterfeast (15–21 September).
- (iii) †The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (21 November).
One day of forefeast (20 November).
Four days of afterfeast (22–25 November).
- (iv) †Christmas (25 December).
Fast of forty days, commencing 15 November.
†Five days of forefeast (20–24 December).²
†Special observance (*paramoni*; Slavonic *navechérie*) on the eve of the feast (24 December).
†Synaxis of the Theotokos (26 December).

(b) during the week after the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (the third week before Lent)

(c) during Easter week

(d) during the week after Pentecost.

The Exaltation of the Cross (14 September), the eve of Theophany (5 January), and the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (29 August) are also fasts.

¹ The symbol † indicates that the texts for the day in question are included in the present volume.

² Only the texts for the last day of the forefeast—24 December—are included in this volume.

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Six days of afterfeast (26–31 December).

General dispensation from all fasting until 4 January inclusive.

- (v) †Theophany (6 January).
†Four days of forefeast (2–5 January).¹
†Special observance (*paramoni*) on the eve of the feast (5 January).
†Synaxis of St. John the Baptist (7 January).
Eight days of afterfeast (7–14 January).
- (vi) †The Meeting of Our Lord (2 February).
One day of forefeast (1 February).
Memorial of Sts. Simeon and Ann (3 February).
Seven days of afterfeast (3–9 February).²
- (vii) †The Annunciation (25 March).
One day of forefeast (24 March).
†Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel (26 March).³
- (viii) †The Transfiguration of Our Lord (6 August).
One day of forefeast (5 August).
Seven days of afterfeast (7–13 August).
- (ix) †The Dormition of the Theotokos (15 August).
One day of forefeast (14 August).
Eight days of afterfeast (16–23 August).

The pattern of services varies in the case of particular feasts:

(A) *On 8 and 14 September, 21 November, 2 February, 6 and 15 August*

1. Small Vespers

¹ Only the texts for the last day of the forefeast—5 January—are included in this volume.

² Depending upon the closeness of the feast to the beginning of Lent, the afterfeast may be shortened or omitted altogether.

³ Only the texts for Vespers of the Synaxis are included. The feast closes either on 25 March itself, or on the day of the Synaxis, 26 March.

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- 2. Vigil:¹ Great Vespers with Lity
Mattins
First Hour
- 3. Third and Sixth Hour
Liturgy
- 4. Ninth Hour²

(B) *Christmas and Theophany*³

- 1. On the Eve:
 - A. Royal Hours
Typika

¹ Here, and throughout this volume, in the case of all Great Feasts we have assumed as our norm the observance of a vigil (Gk. *ἀγρυπνία*; Slavonic, *vsénoshchnoe bdénie*). This is in fact the standard practice in Russian churches, whether parochial or monastic. Among the Greeks, vigils are held at Great Feasts by certain monasteries, but not as a rule in the parishes.

If there is a vigil:

(i) Small Vespers are recited earlier in the afternoon. (In practice they are scarcely, if ever, said outside monasteries.)

(ii) The vigil begins with Great Vespers or Great Compline, as the case may be, together with the Lity; this is followed immediately by Mattins and then the First Hour.

(iii) Small Compline and the Midnight Office are not read.

If there is no vigil:

(i) Small Vespers are not read.

(ii) Great Vespers with the Lity are celebrated on their own. In the morning Mattins are sung, followed immediately by the First, Third, and Sixth Hours, and the Liturgy. (According to the present practice in Greek parishes, the Hours are omitted and the Liturgy follows at once upon Mattins.)

(iii) Small Compline and the Midnight Office are read as usual. But if Great Compline is prescribed, Small Compline is not used.

² Read immediately before Vespers. On 14 September and 6 August at the Vespers following (i.e. the second Vespers of the Feast) a Great Prokimenon is sung, except on Saturday evenings.

³ Should these feasts fall on Sunday or Monday, the arrangements are different (see pp. 352–3, 337–8).

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- B. Great Vespers
 - Liturgy of St. Basil
 - (Theophany: Great Blessing of the Waters)
- 2. Vigil: Great Compline with Lity
 - Mattins
 - First Hour
- 3. Third and Sixth Hours
 - Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom
 - (Theophany: Great Blessing of the Waters)
- 4. Ninth Hour¹

(C) *The Annunciation*

Here the rules are of great complexity.² If the feast itself falls on a weekday in Lent (Tuesday to Friday inclusive), then the arrangements are thus:

- 1. On the Eve: Great Vespers
 - (Liturgy of the Presanctified)³
- 2. Vigil: Great Compline with Lity
 - Mattins
 - First Hour
- 3. Third, Sixth, and Ninth Hours
 - Great Vespers
 - Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

(iii) The Background and Meaning of the Feasts

It lies far beyond the scope of these introductory notes to discuss in full the theological significance of the liturgical

¹ Read immediately before Vespers. At the second Vespers of the Feast, Great Prokimenon, except on Saturday evenings.

² For details, see pp. 435–7.

³ The Liturgy of the Presanctified is celebrated when the eve of the feast falls on Wednesday or Friday (also on certain other days: see p. 435).

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texts that follow. We have simply attempted to provide certain general indications for those unfamiliar with Orthodox worship, more especially in the case of such feasts as make use of non-Scriptural material.

(i) *The Birth of the Theotokos* (8 September). The texts for this day are based largely on the *Book of James* or *Protevangelion*, a work dating from the second century A.D., and recounting the nativity and early years of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹ According to the story there recorded, Mary's parents, Joachim and Ann, remained childless for many years. Both were true servants of God, righteous and devout: but their prayers for a child were not answered. One day, when Joachim came to make his offering in the temple, to his humiliation he was turned away by the High Priest, who reproached him sharply for his lack of children. In discouragement and bitterness Joachim retired into the desolate hill country, among the shepherds and their flocks, in order to hide his shame. As he was praying there to God, it chanced that his wife Ann was praying at the very same time in the garden of their house at Jerusalem. An angel appeared to them both, announcing that Ann should bear a child, whose name was to become illustrious throughout all the world. Ann promised to offer her child, boy or girl, as a gift to the Lord. All his depression gone, Joachim returned home in haste; his wife, anxious to share the good news with him, ran out of the house and they met at the city gate. In due course the angel's promise was fulfilled, and Ann bore a daughter, Mary.

The Orthodox Church does not place the *Protevangelion* of James on the same level as Holy Scripture: it is possible, then, to accept the spiritual truth which underlies this narrative, without necessarily attributing a literal and historical exactness to every detail. The deeper meaning of

¹ English translation in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924), pp. 39–49.

the story is not difficult to appreciate. It makes clear that, from the moment of her birth and even long before it, the Mother of God was specially consecrated to the Holy Trinity, elect and marked out by God. The Incarnation was not a casual and fortuitous event but the fruit of lengthy preparation, something ordained from before all ages in the providence of God. And so, at her first entry into the world, she who was chosen to be the instrument of this mystery was to an especial degree the object of God's ever-watchful care. Such is the inner truth underlying the infancy narratives of Our Lady; and such also is the point repeatedly stressed in the liturgical texts for the day—that Mary was 'foreordained before the womb as Mother of our God' (Great Vespers, aposticha).

The Theotokos, we have said, was marked out and chosen by God 'from the moment of her birth *and even long before it.*' From one point of view the whole history of the Old Covenant points forward to her: and for this reason the Orthodox Church constantly discerns, throughout the pages of the Old Testament, veiled references and allusions to the Theotokos. The long sequence of patriarchs, prophets, priests, and kings reaches its culmination in the daughter of Joachim and Ann. Born under the Old Covenant, she is the last and greatest of the righteous men and women of Israel: in her is summed up all the holiness and faith of God's chosen people, the children of Abraham. When she answered at the Annunciation, 'Be it unto me according to thy word', she spoke not only for herself, but as their representative, in the name of them all. Forming as she does the link between the Old and the New, between the Law and Grace, it is most important not to isolate her from her context within Israel after the flesh.¹

¹ This is one of the reasons why Orthodox feel reservations about the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Another 'link figure' between the Old and the New—though in a different way from the Theotokos—is the Forerunner, St. John the Baptist.

Since the Church's Year begins on 1 September, the Nativity of the Theotokos is the first Great Feast in the annual cycle. Its position at this point is appropriate. The birth of Mary may be seen as marking the inauguration of the scheme of salvation: with her birth we begin already to look forward to the birth of her Son, and so to the redemption that He accomplished in the flesh. 'The preordained tabernacle of our reconciliation with God now begins to be' (Mattins, First Canon, Canticle Eight). 'Today grace begins to bear its first fruits' (Great Vespers, sticheron on *Lord, I have cried*).

The feast of Our Lady's Nativity—as the texts for the day abundantly indicate—is above all else an occasion of great joy. The birth of a child is rightly a cause for happiness to the mother and father, particularly when they have begun to despair of ever having children. In Mary's case, however, the parents' rejoicing is shared by all creation, for her birth foreshadows the universal salvation that is to come. 'Thy birth, O Theotokos, has brought joy to all the inhabited earth' (troparion of the feast); 'Let there be common joy in the world among angels and mankind' (second exapostilarion).

One fundamental truth is plainly expressed in the liturgical material for 8 September. Mary's link with her Son, her place within the saving and redemptive mission of Christ, is never for one moment forgotten. Mary is honoured by the Church, not primarily for herself, but as Mother of the Lord—because it was within her womb that the hypostatic union between God and man was brought to pass. The many titles given to the Theotokos in the services for the day—'Temple and Throne of God', 'Bridge of Life', 'Mystical Paradise', 'living Pavilion of the glory of God'—all alike serve to illustrate this vital truth. Always Mary is venerated because of the Child that she bore: Mother and Son are not to be separated, but Mariology is to be understood as an extension of Christology.

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(ii) *The Exaltation of the Cross* (14 September). In the liturgical observances of Good Friday the Church views the Crucifixion within its original setting, as an event in the first Holy Week at Jerusalem. At the feast of the Exaltation, by contrast, the Cross is regarded rather in its effects upon the subsequent history of the Church. On Good Friday the note is predominantly—though never exclusively—one of sorrow and mourning; on 14 September the Cross is commemorated in a spirit of triumph, as a ‘weapon of peace and unconquerable ensign of victory’ (kontakion of the feast).

The services for the day allude in particular to four themes:

(a) There are constant references to the vision of the Cross seen by the Emperor Constantine in the year 312, shortly before his victory over Maxentius.

(b) The feast of the Exaltation recalls more especially the finding of the True Cross by Constantine’s mother, St. Helen. As the news of the discovery spread through the Holy City, vast crowds gathered to venerate the Cross of the Lord. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, St. Makarios, carried it up into a pulpit: and when the people saw it lifted on high, they all began to cry out, again and again, *Kyrie eleison*, ‘Lord, have mercy’—an event recalled in the service of the day, with the frequent repetition of *Kyries* at the ceremony of Exaltation.

(c) The feast on 14 September also commemorates the second great Exaltation of the Cross, at Constantinople in 629. The True Cross had fallen into the hands of the Persians in 614, when they captured the Holy City of Jerusalem. It was subsequently recovered by the Emperor Heraclius and brought to the capital, Constantinople, where it was triumphantly exalted in the Great Church of Agia Sophia.¹

(d) Finally, there are allusions to an event which is now more specifically commemorated on 13 September: the

¹ i.e. Holy Wisdom: often termed ‘St. Sophia’ or ‘Sancta Sophia’ by English writers.

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Dedication of the Church of the Resurrection, built by Constantine on the site of the Holy Sepulchre and completed in 335.

In the title of the feast, the Exaltation is termed ‘universal’. This is an essential element in the meaning of the festival: the power of the Cross extends to every part of the universe, and the salvation which it brings embraces the entire creation. That is why, in the ceremony of Exaltation, the priest turns in blessing towards each point of the compass: ‘The four ends of the earth, O Christ our God, are sanctified today’ (troparion at the ceremony of Exaltation).

(iii) *The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple* (21 November). This feast takes up the story of Mary’s infancy from the *Protevangelion* of James, at the point where it was left by the previous feast of Our Lady’s Nativity (8 September). When Mary was three years old, Joachim and Ann decided that the time had come to fulfil their promise and to offer her to the Lord. Joachim gathered the young girls of the neighbourhood to form an escort, and he made them go in front of Mary, carrying lighted torches. Captivated by the torches, the young child followed joyfully into the temple, not once looking back at her parents nor weeping as she was parted from them. Such was precisely Joachim’s plan: he wished her to go to her new home in gladness, not in sorrow. The High Priest Zacharias—future father of John the Baptist—received her and set her to dwell in the Holy of Holies, where she was fed miraculously by the hand of an angel. In the words of the *Protevangelion*, ‘The Lord put grace upon her, and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her.’ So she remained in the temple until the age of twelve, when Zacharias betrothed her to Joseph.

As with the feast of the birth of the Theotokos, what matters is not the historical exactness of the story but its inner meaning. This account of Mary’s Entry into the temple

and of her dwelling there signifies her total dedication to God, in readiness for her future vocation as Mother of the Incarnate Lord. At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit overshadowed her at the word of the angel and she conceived the Saviour; but the Spirit had also dwelt within her from infancy, preparing her in body and soul to be a fitting tabernacle for the Deity—a living Temple, a personal Holy of Holies. Such is basically the spiritual meaning of the feast. Its chief theme is this indwelling grace of the Spirit, present and active within her from her earliest moments. As one of the texts for the day expresses it, speaking not of the Annunciation but of her Entry into the temple: ‘All the powers of heaven stood amazed, seeing the Holy Spirit dwell in thee’ (Great Vespers, theotokion before the entrance).

Along with Mary’s Nativity on 8 September, her Entry into the temple is a feast of anticipation. ‘Today is the foreshadowing of the good pleasure of God, and the herald of the salvation of men’ (troparion of the feast). As we show honour to Mary ‘the child of God’, we look forward always to the Incarnation of Christ. We look forward, more specifically, to the feast of Christmas which is to follow in little more than a month; and for this reason some of the Christmas hymns are already sung in advance, during the course of today’s canon.

(iv) *The Nativity of Christ* (25 December). The two feasts of Christ’s birth and of His baptism are so closely linked together as to form in reality one single and undivided observance. The Church’s Year contains accordingly two great moments, two ‘poles’: the first is Easter; the second, Christmas and Theophany.

Before Christmas, as before Easter, there is a lengthy and elaborate period of preparation. Christmas is preceded by a fast corresponding to Lent and lasting for forty days. On the Sundays immediately before 25 December, there are special commemorations which emphasize the link between the Old

Covenant and the New. The second Sunday before Christmas—the Sunday of the Forefathers—calls to remembrance the ancestors of Christ according to the flesh, whether before or under the Law. The Sunday that follows is still broader in scope, commemorating all the righteous men and women who pleased God from the beginning of time, from the days of Adam the first man down to Joseph, the betrothed of the Mother of God. Approaching Christmas in this way, the worshipper is enabled to see the Incarnation, not as an abrupt and irrational intervention of the divine, but as the culmination of a long process extending over thousands of years. It was the translators’ original intention to include the services for these two Sundays in the present volume, for they constitute a marvellous summary of the history of God’s people: unfortunately reasons of space rendered this impossible.

The forefeast of Christmas commences on 20 December, and from this point onwards most of the texts are directly concerned with Christ’s Nativity. Once more, considerations of space made it necessary to omit all but the last day of the forefeast. On Christmas Eve (24 December)—which is known by the special title *paramoni* (Gk. *παραμονή*; Slavonic, *navechérie*)¹—the services take an exceptional form. The Hours are unusually long and are termed the Great or Royal Hours, since they were attended in the Byzantine period by the Emperor and court. They are followed by Great Vespers and the Liturgy of St. Basil.

On Christmas Day itself the services commemorate not only the birth of Christ in Bethlehem and the adoration of the shepherds, but also the arrival of the Magi with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The story of the three Wise Men (Matthew 2:1–12), which in the Roman and

¹ This term is applied in particular to the eves of Christmas and Theophany. *Παραμονή*, a watch or vigil, is derived from *παραμένειν*, to wait.

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Anglican use is appointed for 6 January, is read in the Byzantine rite on the morning of 25 December.

The familiar and homely elements of the Nativity story—the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, the ox and the ass beside Him, the shepherds watching with their flocks by night—are by no means forgotten in the Orthodox hymns for this day. But the main centre of interest lies elsewhere: not in these picturesque details, touching though they may be, not simply in the humanity of the child Jesus, but rather in the paradoxical union of that humanity with the divinity. ‘A young child, the pre-eternal God’ (kontakion of the feast): this is the supreme and crucial meaning of Christmas. Without ceasing to be what He is from all eternity—true God—One of the Trinity yet became truly and entirely man, born as a baby from a human mother.

It is to this theme, under ceaselessly varying forms, that the liturgical texts of the day continually revert—to the *contrast* between the divine and the human in the one Person of the Incarnate Christ. He who formed the world now Himself ‘takes form’ as a creature; the Creator makes Himself to be created; ‘He who holds the whole creation in the hollow of His hand today is born of the Virgin’ (Christmas Eve, Ninth Hour); ‘older than ancient Adam’, He lies in His mother’s arms; the Lord of Glory, who ‘looses the tangled cords of sin’, is wrapped in swaddling bands; He who is the divine Reason (*Logos*) rests in a manger of beasts without reason (*aloga*); He is fed with milk who gives food to all the universe. Passages such as these are more than a rhetorical *tour de force*: they are intended to make the members of the Church realize, in some small measure, how strange and amazing a thing it is that God should become very man. As the worshipper stands in spirit beside the crib, it is not enough for him to see, lying in the straw, ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’; he must see more than this—

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the Son of God, begotten of His Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God.

The days following Christmas are associated with the two who were nearest to God at His Nativity—His mother and His foster-father. 26 December is the Synaxis of the Mother of God, while the first Sunday after Christmas commemorates ‘Joseph the Betrothed’, along with David, the ancestor of Our Lord, and St. James ‘the Brother of God’ (Gk. *Ἀδελφόςθεος*).¹ Other events connected with Christ’s infancy are remembered on 29 December (the Massacre of the Innocents) and 1 January (the Circumcision of Our Lord). Although the afterfeast of Christmas concludes on 31 December, the spirit of the festival extends until the eve of Theophany, all fasting being suspended in the ten days that follow Christmas.

(v) *Theophany* (6 January). In the eastern tradition this feast celebrates Our Lord’s baptism in Jordan, not the adoration of the Magi. The general pattern of services is the same as at Christmas, with a special *paramoni* and the reading of the Royal Hours on 5 January, which is observed as a strict fast. Theophany is marked, however, by a distinctive ceremony, not held at Christmas—the Great Blessing of the Waters. This is performed twice, on 5 January after the Liturgy, and on 6 January at the end of Mattins or (more usually) after the Liturgy. The first blessing is held in church; the second, if possible, in the open air beside a river or spring, or at the sea shore. In countries where the winter is of extreme severity holes are dug in the ice of the frozen rivers. During recent years in England, the Greeks have established the custom of blessing the sea at Margate, with the bishop present and large numbers of the clergy. The culminating moment in this ceremony of blessing occurs

¹ See Mark 6:3, Acts 1:14, etc. ‘Brother’ is here understood by Orthodox to mean half-brother (perhaps child of Joseph by a previous marriage); or else cousin or other close relative.

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when the officiating priest plunges or throws the Cross three times into the water, thus recalling the triple immersion of Christ in the Jordan, as well as the triple immersion which every Orthodox Christian undergoes at his own baptismal initiation. Lest the phrase 'Great Blessing of the Waters' be misunderstood, it should immediately be emphasized that the blessing is effected, not by the officiating priest and the people who are praying with him, but by Christ Himself, who is the true celebrant in this as in all the mysteries of the Church. It is Christ who has blessed the waters once for all at His baptism in the Jordan: the liturgical ceremony of blessing is simply an extension of Christ's original act. This is a point of primary importance, about which more must be said shortly.

The basic meaning of the feast as a whole is summed up in its title *Epiphany*, 'manifestation', or more specifically *Theophany*, 'manifestation of God'. Christ's baptism in the Jordan is a 'manifestation of God' to the world, in the first place because it forms the beginning of Our Lord's public ministry; but secondly, and in a deeper sense, because at this baptism there was granted to the world a revelation of the Holy Trinity. All three Persons were made 'manifest' together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father's testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son. This threefold disclosure is the subject of the troparion of the feast:

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan,
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest.
For the voice of the Father bore witness unto Thee,
Calling Thee the beloved Son,
And the Spirit in the form of a dove
Confirmed His word as sure and steadfast.
O Christ our God, who hast appeared and enlightened
the world,
Glory to Thee.

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This theme of 'manifestation' or 'revelation' is expressed in particular under the symbolism of light: in the words of the troparion just quoted, Christ has 'appeared and *enlightened* the world'. Thus, besides the title 'Theophany', 6 January is known also as the 'Feast of Lights' (Gk. 'Εορτή τῶν Φώτων). The Church celebrates on this day the illumination of the world by the light of Christ: 'Light from Light, Christ our God has shone upon the world, God made manifest' (Mattins of the feast, first sticheron at Lauds); 'Thou broughtest light to all things by Thine Epiphany' (Mattins of the feast, *ypakoë*); 'Ye that lie in darkness, leap for joy, for a great light has now appeared to you' (Mattins on 5 January, Canon, Canticle Nine).

Manifestation, illumination—with these two ideas there goes a third: renewal, regeneration, re-creation. Christ's baptism in Jordan renews our nature, for it is the prelude to our baptism in the font; and it renews and regenerates, not our human nature only, but the whole material creation.

To understand this idea of renewal, it is helpful to begin by asking a question which is, in fact, posed repeatedly in the texts for the feast. Why was Christ baptized? We are baptized because we are sinful: we go down dirty into the water, and we emerge cleansed. But what need had Christ, who is sinless, to undergo baptism in the Jordan? To this, the liturgical texts answer: 'Though as God He needs no cleansing, yet for the sake of fallen man He is cleansed in the Jordan' (Mattins of the feast, First Canon, Canticle Five); 'As man He is cleansed that I may be made clean' (Compline on 5 January, Canon, Canticle One). 'For the sake of sinful man': in reality it is not He who is cleansed in the Jordan but we ourselves. In taking manhood upon Him at His Incarnation, Our Lord assumed a representative rôle: He became the New Adam, summing up the whole human race in Himself, just as the first Adam summed up and contained all mankind in himself at the Fall. On the Cross, although

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sinless, Jesus Christ suffered and died for the sins of all humanity; and in the same way at His baptism, although sinless, He was cleansed for all men's sins. When He went down into the Jordan, as the New Adam He carried us sinful men down with Him: and there in the waters He cleansed us, bearing each of us up once more out of the river as a new creature, regenerate and reconciled.

In Christ's baptism at the hands of John, our own baptismal regeneration is already accomplished by anticipation. The many celebrations of the Eucharist are all a participation in the single and unique Last Supper; and in a similar way all our individual baptisms are a sharing in the baptism of Christ—they are the means whereby the 'grace of Jordan' is extended, so that it may be appropriated by each one of us personally. As an indication of the close connection between Christ's baptism and our baptism, it may be noted that the prayer at the Great Blessing of the Waters on Theophany is almost identical with the prayer of blessing said over the font at the sacrament of baptism.

But Christ's descent into the river has also a further significance. When Christ went down into the waters, not only did He carry us down with Him and make us clean, but He also made clean the nature of the waters themselves. As the troparion of the forefeast puts it, 'Christ has appeared in the Jordan to sanctify the waters'. The feast of Theophany has thus a cosmic aspect. The fall of the angelic orders, and after it the fall of man, involved the whole universe. All God's creation was thereby warped and disfigured: to use the symbolism of the liturgical texts, the waters were made a 'lair of dragons'. Christ came on earth to redeem not only man, but—through man—the entire material creation. When He entered the water, besides effecting by anticipation our rebirth in the font, he likewise effected the cleansing of the waters, their transfiguration into an organ of healing and grace.

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If water acts as a means of grace pre-eminently in the sacrament of baptism, it is also used as a means of sanctification on many other occasions as well. That is why Orthodox are encouraged to drink from the water that has been blessed at Epiphany and to sprinkle themselves with it; they take it also to their homes, and keep it there to use from time to time. In all this they are not guilty of superstition. If they act so, it is because they are convinced that in virtue of Christ's Incarnation, of His Baptism and Transfiguration, all material things can be made holy and 'spirit-bearing'. 'At Thine appearing in the body, the earth was sanctified, the waters blessed, the heaven enlightened' (Compline on 5 January, Canon, Canticle Four). This, then, is part of the meaning of Theophany: in the eyes of one who is a Christian, nothing should ever appear trivial or mean, for the redemptive and transforming grace of the Saviour extends to all things, however outwardly despicable.

At Theophany there is the same emphasis as at Christmas upon Christ's self-emptying—upon the contrast between the inward glory which as God He never ceased to possess, and His entire humility as man. God by nature, in His self-abasement He did not refuse baptism from John: 'As a servant Thou dost bow Thy head beneath the hand of the servant' (Compline on 5 January, Canon, Canticle One); 'One of the Trinity bowed His head and received baptism' (Mattins of the feast, First Canon, Canticle Nine). To emphasize the point more vividly, constant references are made to the bewilderment and hesitation of the Baptist: 'The Forerunner was seized with trembling and cried aloud, saying: "How shall the lamp illuminate the Light? How shall the servant set his hand upon the Master? O Saviour, who takest away the sin of the world, sanctify both me and the waters"' (Blessing of the Waters). This theme is specially developed on the day following the feast, which is observed as the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist.

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(vi) *The Meeting of Our Lord* (2 February). This festival, known in the west as the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the east bears the title 'Meeting' (Gk. 'Υπαπαντή; Slavonic, *Srétenie*)—the meeting, that is, of Christ with His people. Our Lord, brought to the temple by His mother and by Joseph, now meets His chosen people in the persons of Simeon the Elder and Ann the Prophetess. This feast forms the conclusion of the Nativity sequence, which opened some eighty days earlier with the beginning of the Christmas fast.

At the Meeting, as at Christmas and Theophany, the Church thinks about the *kenosis*, the deep self-emptying of the Incarnate Word. He who is Giver of the Law is Himself obedient to the Law: 'Today He who once gave the Law to Moses on Sinai submits Himself to the ordinances of the Law, in His compassion becoming for our sakes as we are' (Vespers, Lity). The texts for this day are based for the most part upon Simeon's Song, *Nunc Dimittis*: they speak of the salvation that Christ has come to confer, of the glory and light of revelation that have been granted through His Incarnation.

(vii) *The Annunciation* (25 March). 'The Incarnation', it has been rightly said, 'was not only the work of the Father, of His Power and His Spirit: it was also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin.'¹ On the feast of the Annunciation, therefore, Orthodoxy commemorates not only the divine initiative, whereby God in His lovingkindness took flesh from a Virgin; it commemorates also the human response, whereby Mary freely accepted the vocation set before her. God always respects human liberty; and so, when He elected to become man, He desired to do so with the willing agreement of her whom He chose as His mother. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according

¹ Nicolas Cabasilas, *On the Annunciation*, 4 (*Patrologia Orientalis*, XIX, Paris, 1926, p. 488).

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to thy word' (Luke 1:38): Mary's answer to the angel was not a foregone conclusion. She could have refused: she was not a passive instrument but an active participant, with a free and positive part to play in God's scheme of salvation.

To make abundantly clear the voluntary character of her choice, the Canon for the Annunciation takes the form of a dialogue between the Virgin and Gabriel. Mary's doubts are set forth with the utmost directness, we see all her incredulity and her embarrassment; and this is done in order to make clear that she acted in full freedom, consciously and deliberately accepting the will of God. When, on this and other feasts, the Orthodox Church shows honour to the Mother of God, it is not just because God chose her but also because she herself chose aright.

(viii) *The Transfiguration* (6 August). This is a feast that enjoys far greater prominence in Orthodoxy than in western Christendom. In the Roman rite, the Transfiguration is merely a 'double of the second class', while the Anglican Prayer Book of 1662 does not even provide a special Collect, Epistle, or Gospel for this day.¹ But in the Orthodox tradition 6 August is reckoned as one of the Twelve Great Feasts, of such importance that it supplants the Sunday office entirely.

The Transfiguration is *par excellence* the feast of Christ's divine glory. Like Theophany, it is a feast of light: 'Today on Tabor in the manifestation of Thy Light, O Word, Thou unaltered Light from the Light of the unbegotten Father, we have seen the Father as Light and the Spirit as Light, guiding with light the whole creation' (exapostilarion). Nor is this the only parallel between the two feasts. Like Theophany,

¹ This omission has been rectified in the 1928 Book, as also in the revisions of the Book of Common Prayer used in many parts of the Anglican Communion overseas. One of the best studies in English on the Transfiguration is in fact from the pen of an Anglican: A. M. Ramsey (Archbishop of Canterbury), *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London, 1949).

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although less explicitly, the Transfiguration is a revelation of the Holy Trinity. On Tabor, as at the baptism in Jordan, the Father speaks from heaven, testifying to the divine Sonship of Christ: and the Spirit is also present, on this occasion not in the likeness of a dove, but under the form of dazzling light, surrounding Christ's person and overshadowing the whole mountain. This dazzling light is the light of the Spirit.¹

The Transfiguration, then, is a feast of divine glory—more specifically, of the glory of the Resurrection. The ascent of Mount Tabor came at a critical point in Our Lord's ministry, just as He was setting out upon His last journey to Jerusalem, which He knew was to end in humiliation and death. To strengthen His disciples for the trials that lay ahead, He chose this particular moment to reveal to them something of His eternal splendour, 'as far as they were able to bear it' (troparion of the feast). He encouraged them—and all of us—to look beyond the suffering of the Cross to the glory of the Resurrection.

The light of the Transfiguration, however, foreshadows not only Christ's own Resurrection on the third day, but equally the Resurrection glory of the righteous at His Second Coming. The glory which shone from Jesus on Tabor is a glory in which all mankind is called to share. On Mount Tabor we see Christ's human nature—the human substance which He took from us—filled with splendour, 'made godlike' or 'deified'. What has happened to human nature in Christ can happen also to the humanity of Christ's followers. The Transfiguration, then, reveals to us the full potentiality of our human nature: it shows us the glory which our manhood once possessed and the glory which, by God's grace, it will again recover at the Last Day.

This is a cardinal aspect of the present feast, to which the

¹ See Mattins, Second Canon, Canticle Six, third troparion.

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liturgical texts frequently revert. At His Transfiguration, it is said, the Lord 'in His own person showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the Image' (Great Vespers, aposticha). 'Today Christ on Mount Tabor has changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness He has made it godlike' (Small Vespers, aposticha). 'Thou wast transfigured upon Mount Tabor, showing the exchange mortal men will make with Thy glory at Thy second and fearful coming, O Saviour' (Mattins, sessional hymn).

The feast of the Transfiguration, therefore, is not simply the commemoration of a past event in the life of Christ. Possessing also an 'eschatological' dimension, it is turned towards the future—towards the 'splendour of the Resurrection' at the Last Day, towards the 'beauty of the divine Kingdom' which all Christians hope eventually to enjoy.

(ix) *The Dormition of the Theotokos* (15 August). Although the western title of this feast—the 'Assumption'—is sometimes employed by Orthodox, in the service books it is simply designated 'Falling Asleep' or 'Dormition' (Gk. *Κοίμησις*; Slavonic, *Ouspénie*).

As with the Nativity (8 September) and the Entry of the Mother of God (21 November), the texts for 15 August are based primarily on non-Biblical material.¹ At the time of her death, so it is believed, the Mother of God was living in the house of St. John on Mount Zion. The Twelve were preaching the Gospel in different parts of the world; but so that they might see the Virgin once again before her death, all of them except Thomas were carried miraculously on clouds to the Holy City. Besides the Twelve, the Apostle Paul, together

¹ For an analysis of the early tradition concerning the death and assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, see P. Voulet, S.J., *S. Jean Damascène: Homélie sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 80: Paris, 1961), pp. 24–36.

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with the bishops Dionysios the Areopagite, Hierotheos, and Timothy, were also present at her bedside. As they stood round her, the Holy Virgin commended her spirit into the keeping of her Son and God: and He Himself descended from heaven and took her soul up with Him in His arms.¹ Led by Peter, the apostles sang funeral hymns in her honour, and carried her body down to the valley of Cedron, close to Gethsemane, where she was laid in a tomb specially prepared for her. The Jews tried to interrupt the funeral procession, one of them even attempting to upset the bier: his hands were cut off by an angel, but he was subsequently healed. Thomas arrived on the third day after the burial. Since he was anxious to look for a last time on the Theotokos, the apostles opened the tomb—and found it empty.

Without insisting on the literal truth of every element in this account, Orthodox tradition is clear and unwavering in regard to the central point: the Holy Virgin underwent, as did her Son, a physical death, but her body—like His—was afterwards raised from the dead and she was taken up into heaven, in her body as well as in her soul. She has passed beyond death and judgement, and lives wholly in the Age to Come. The Resurrection of the Body, which all Christians await, has in her case been anticipated and is already an accomplished fact. That does not mean, however, that she is dissociated from the rest of humanity and placed in a wholly different category: for we all hope to share one day in that same glory of the Resurrection of the Body which she enjoys even now.

Indeed, so far from being separated, Our Lady remains always most intimately linked to mankind—linked through her urgent and unceasing intercession on our behalf. ‘Lady, behold thy Son . . . Behold thy mother’ (John 19:26–27).

¹ In icons of the Dormition Christ is seen standing above the bier, while Mary’s soul rests in His arms, in appearance like a small child wrapped in white.

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The Church has long seen, in these words of Our Lord from the Cross, the giving to Mary of a universal motherhood: she is mother not to John only, but to all the children of God. Dwelling in heaven with Jesus, her care as mother remains undiminished, and embraces the universe: ‘In giving birth, O Theotokos, thou hast retained thy virginity, and in falling asleep thou hast not forsaken the world’ (troparion of the feast). In heaven, as on earth, the Mother of God continues ‘ever watchful in her prayers, and in her intercession lies unfailling hope’ (kontakion of the feast).

The preceding pages have indicated only a very small part of the rich and many sided teachings to be found in the liturgical texts for the Great Feasts. These texts are not to be approached simply as pieces of ‘devotional’ poetry, designed to move and edify the worshipper. They are, on the contrary, intensely *theological*—a primary and essential source for any understanding of the faith. No real insight into Orthodox theology is possible without a proper knowledge of Orthodox worship. It is no coincidence that the very word ‘Orthodoxy’ should mean not only ‘right belief’ but ‘right praise’ or ‘glory’. The core of Orthodox tradition is to be found in the service books: *lex orandi lex est credendi*—we express our faith in our prayers. In 1950, when Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Our Lady, members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in France approached Metropolitan Vladimir, Russian Exarch in Western Europe for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, inquiring what the belief of the Orthodox might be on this matter. In answer the Metropolitan urged them to read the Orthodox office of the Dormition, used on 15 August; and he said that he had nothing to add to what was written there.

Those unfamiliar with Orthodox worship may at first be surprised at the large amount of repetition that occurs in the services. They will find that things are appointed to be said or

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sung three or more times, while throughout the canons and other hymns the same basic ideas, in varying images and terminology, are repeated again and again. This constant reiteration, so far from indicating poverty of thought or a liturgical garrulousness, is designed to serve a definite purpose. Orthodoxy makes little or no use of that form of spiritual recollection known in the west as 'meditation', when a period of time is set aside each day for systematic thought upon some chosen theme. Its place is taken in the Orthodox Church by corporate liturgical worship. As an Orthodox Christian stands in church, hour by hour, during the vigil of some Great Feast or at the services on an ordinary day, he hears the same necessary and saving truths continually underlined, now in one way and now in another. In this fashion the theological significance of the different mysteries of the faith is deeply and indelibly impressed upon his mind, becoming almost second nature; and if he prays with attention during his time of corporate worship, he has no need for a special period of discursive meditation to emphasize their meaning still more. The words that are read and sung in church are by themselves sufficient to provide him with abundant nourishment for his life in Christ.

In the true Orthodox tradition there is no divorce between theology and worship, between private meditation and public prayer. All genuine worship, while embracing the emotions, must also be reflective, intelligent, and essentially theological; for, as the Fathers expressed it, we are the 'logical sheep' of Christ. And at the same time all genuine theology must be a living theology—not an abstract exercise of the reasoning powers, but a vision of God's kingdom, attained first and foremost through liturgical celebration.

Such is the viewpoint from which the texts in this present volume must be understood.