

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

LEAFLETS IN THIS INTRODUCTION TO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY SERIES:

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IN THE UK
"IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME!"
LITURGICAL YEAR
MONKS AND NUNS
MUSIC OF LITURGIES
ORTHROS
OTHER CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONS
PRAYER AND WORSHIP
RELIGIONS
REPENTANCE AND CONFESSION
SAINTS
SOCIAL MEDIA
SOME FOODS
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WHEN WE COME TO CHURCH
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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

Fr.Nikitas - frnikitas@hotmail.com

"The Orthodox Church.....has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from
"Encountering the Mystery."*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.
www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk

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www.thyateira.org.uk

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Οικουμενικόν Πατριαρχεῖον.
www.ec-patr.org



Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: The Liturgical Year



The text in this leaflet is taken from **The Year of Grace of the Lord**; chapter one, first section – The Significance of the Liturgical Year.

By a Monk of the Eastern Church.
Published by Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press.

English translation © Deborah Cowen 1980.

"Each year, at the beginning of September, the Orthodox Churches lead their congregations into a cycle of prayers and commemorations that constitutes the 'liturgical year' or the 'church year'. What does this liturgical year mean, exactly?

One could think of the liturgical year as if it were a picture of the services and feast days during a cycle of 365 days, from September to September: in short, the liturgical year could be reduced to a practical diagramme, to a calendar. The liturgical year is, in fact, expressed as a calendar, but simply to identify it with a calendar would be totally inadequate. One could also say that the purpose of the liturgical year was to bring to the minds of believers the teachings of the Gospel and the main events of Christian history in a certain order. That is true, but this educational, pedagogical, function does not exhaust the significance of the liturgical year. Perhaps we could say that its aim is to orient our prayer in a particular direction and also to provide it with an official channel which is objective, and even, in a certain way, artistic. This, too, is true, but the liturgy is more than a way of prayer, and it is more than a magnificent lyric poem. The liturgy is a body of sacred 'signs' which, in the thought and desire of the Church, have a present effect. Each liturgical feast renews and in some sense actualises the event of which it is the symbol; it takes this event out of the past and makes it immediate; it offers us the appropriate grace, it becomes an 'effectual sign', and we experience this efficacy to the extent that we bring to it a corresponding inclination of our soul. But still, this does not say everything.

The liturgical year is, for us, a special means of union with Christ. No doubt every Eucharist unites us intimately with Christ, for in it he is 'both he who offers and who is offered', in the same way that every prayer, being the prayer of the members of the

mystical body, shares in the prayer of him who is the head of the body and the only one whose prayer is perfect. But, in the liturgical year, we are called to relive the whole life of Christ: from Christmas to Easter, from Easter to Pentecost, we are exhorted to unite ourselves to Christ in his birth and in his growth, to Christ suffering, to Christ dying, to Christ in triumph and to Christ inspiring his Church. The liturgical year forms Christ in us, from his birth to the full stature of the perfect man. According to a medieval Latin saying, the liturgical year is Christ himself, *annus est Christus*.

It is not just the commemoration of the events in the life of the Lord Jesus that forms Christ in us. In addition to the cycle of feasts that bear directly on our Lord, the liturgical year includes the cycle of feasts of the saints. These two cycles, however, should not be thought of as two strands that run parallel to, or separate from, each other, for the saints are the glorified members of the body of Christ. Their sanctity is but an aspect, a shining ray of the holiness of Christ himself. To celebrate the feast of a saint is to celebrate a special grace that flows from Christ to that saint and so to us; it is to celebrate that aspect of our Lord which is specially evidenced by the saint, it is to enter (for our profit) into the relationship of prayer which unites that saint to Christ. It is still more. In the same way that the feasts of our Lord in a mysterious way renew the events of his life, so the feasts of the saints make their lives, their merits and their deaths mysteriously actual, in as much as they participate in the life, the merits and death of the Lord Jesus. Thus commemorations of the martyrs somehow renew the grace of their violent deaths, so that, as these were a participation in the passion of Christ, it is this passion which is relived in remembering the martyrs. The liturgical year has but one and the same

object, Jesus Christ; whether we contemplate him directly, or whether we contemplate him through the members of his body.

Great graces and great spiritual opportunities are offered us during the course of the liturgical year. It provides a frame and support for Christian piety; it gives it a style which is sober and objective; it maintains a bond of unity among believers. And, above all, it communicates an inspiration, it transmits a life. One should, however, beware of excessive 'liturgicalism' which would seek to enclose prayer in ritual frames. The liturgical way is not the only way. Saints and mystics have sometimes reduced outward forms to a minimum; solitaries have done without them altogether. Liturgical life is not an end in itself; it is but a means – among other means – of reaching the kingdom of God which is 'within us'. Our taking part in the liturgical year is empty and illusory if the outward cycle is not matched by an inner cycle, and if the events in Christ's life that each feast represents do not find themselves mysteriously renewed in our soul. The liturgical year acquires its true meaning to the extent that it becomes an adoration in spirit and in truth."

So then the purpose of the liturgical year is to bring to the mind of believers the teaching of the Gospel and the main events of Christian history in a certain order. Also the Church's liturgical year aims to orient our prayer and to affect our lives now, in the present. It has been said that the Orthodox liturgical year is a sermon on the mystery of the Divine love.

Series leaflet – *The Calendar* – has more about how the Liturgical Year is ordered.

