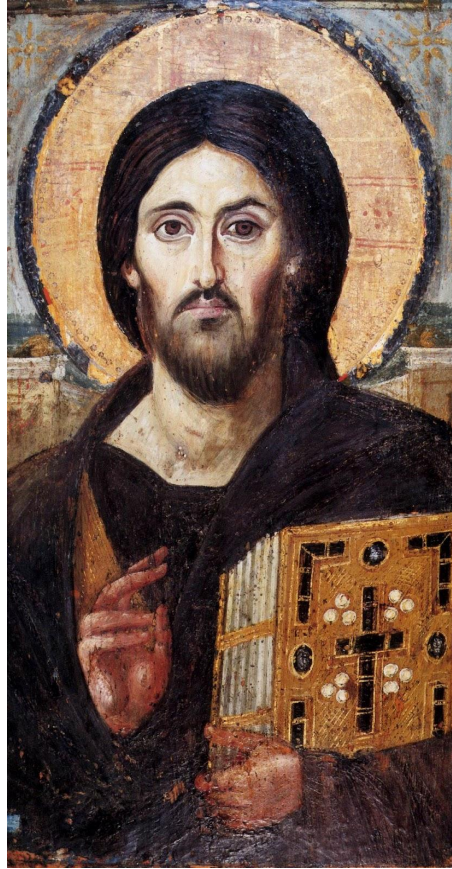




Sunday School of the American Dioceses
of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

5th Grade Journey of Faith



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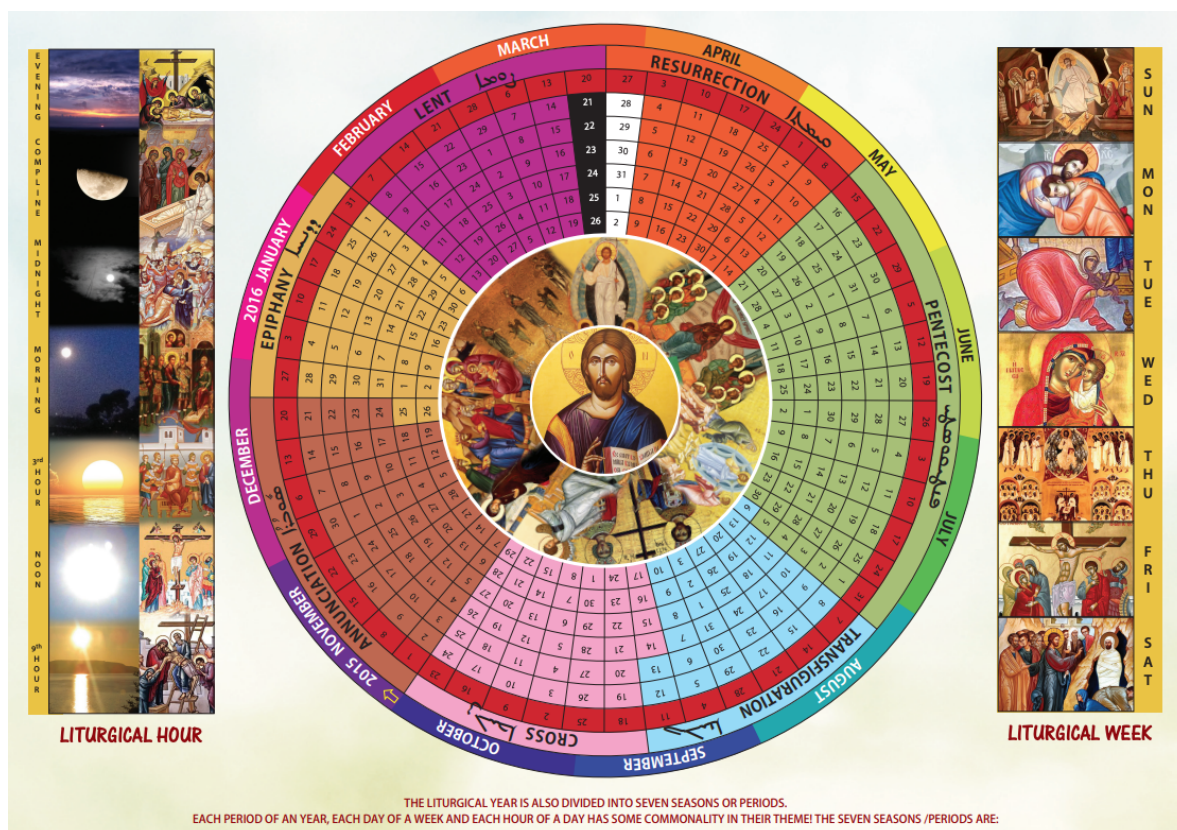
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Lesson 1: Seasons of The Church

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand that the Liturgical Calendar is a tool for a deeper focus on the life of Jesus Christ, the Saints, and the Church.*
- *I can understand the differences between the major and minor Feasts.*
- *I can identify the similarities and differences between the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (MOSC) Liturgical Calendar and those of other Orthodox Churches.*
- *I can understand the significance of the Liturgical Calendar and the different seasons in the calendar.*

The Liturgical Calendar helps us to know and follow the life of Christ. Our Church calendar celebrates the earthly or incarnate life of Christ and is divided into seven seasons.



These seven seasons are as follows: (1) Annunciation, (2) Epiphany, (3) Great Lent, (4) Resurrection, (5) Pentecost, (6) Transfiguration, and (7) the Holy Cross.

As described in the annual Liturgical calendar published by the Ahmedabad Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the seven seasons are arranged in a very meaningful and significant way by the Fathers of the Church. This is “to lead us in a meaningful Christ centered spiritual life and for personal meditation. Every year we begin from the beginning of the Creation of the World to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we grow with Him to become His disciples. We follow Him in His Public Ministry - His suffering, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, descending of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the Church. Finally, we are looking forward to the Last Judgment and His Second-coming. The same pattern and sequence can be seen in both the meditation theme of each day in a week and also in each canonical hour of a day!”.

We celebrate the seven seasons with important feasts and fasts in a prescribed manner as we go through the year. The focus is to help us grow in Christ as we re-enact and live the life of Christ. Not only are there seven seasons but there are also seven canonical hours each day and seven days a week. Seven is a symbolic and significant number and a pattern seen throughout Scripture and in the life of the Church as it represents a sense of “fullness” or “completeness”.

Fixed and Movable Feasts

Fixed and movable feasts are seen throughout the calendar for celebrations linked directly to the life of Christ, as well as for other important events. An example is the Feast of the Holy Cross. These feasts are not directly tied to the life of Christ between Incarnation and Ascension but are undoubtedly important to us.

Fixed feasts are celebrated on the same date every year. These include the Feast of the Nativity or Yeldho which is celebrated on December 25th and the Epiphany or Denaha (January 6).

Movable feasts are celebrated on different dates each calendar year and are formulated based on ancient calculations. What’s important to remember is that there is a significant reason why these feasts change each year and it does help us to understand the reason for the placement of the feast in the calendar for both fixed and movable. Movable



feasts include the Resurrection of our Lord (Qyamtha), subsequent Feasts of Ascension (Zuloko, forty days after the Resurrection) and Pentecost (fifty days after the Resurrection).

Feast days are often preceded by fasting periods, and therefore some fasting days are fixed and some are movable.

Seven Seasons of the Liturgical Calendar

The Liturgical Calendar has seven seasons, with some like Great Lent and Resurrection, being seven weeks and others, like Annunciation and the Holy Cross, having more than seven weeks.

1. *Season of Annunciation (Suboro)*

This is the first season of our liturgical Calendar. This season teaches us all about the mother of our Lord, St. Mary's obedient role in the Incarnation. During this season, we fast for 25 days prior to the Feast of the Nativity (Yeldho) and clean our hearts to receive our Lord.

The weeks in this season are as follows:

- The first Sunday is 'Kudhosh-Etho' (Sanctification of the Church) celebrated on the first Sunday after October 29th or the 8th Sunday before the feast of the Nativity of our Lord.
- The next Sunday is 'Hudoth Idto' (Dedication of the Church), where we rededicate ourselves.

The remaining six Sundays before the feast of the Nativity of our Lord represents the events that happened before the birth of our Lord:

- Annunciation to Zachariah
- Annunciation to St. Mary
- St. Mary's visit to Elizabeth
- The birth of St. John the Baptist



- Revelation to St. Joseph
- The Sunday of Genealogy (Sunday before the Nativity of our Lord).

- ***Season of Epiphany (Denaha)***

This season is seven weeks long during which we remember those who witnessed Jesus Christ to the world through their life and deeds.

We remember the Martyrs, Saints, departed priests, and our beloved departed ones. This period covers the 30 years, from birth to the public ministry of Jesus Christ.



- The day after the Nativity of our Lord (Yeldo or Christmas) the Church celebrates a feast in honor of **St. Mary**, the Mother of Jesus Christ and for her role in the Incarnation.
- On December 27th, the Church remembers the **infants of Bethlehem**, who were killed by Herod.
- On January 1st, the **Circumcision/Naming of our Lord (Gazurthe)** is celebrated.
- On January 6th we celebrate the feast of the **Baptism of our Lord (Denaha)** as when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. This is also the time of the revelation of the Holy Trinity (God, the Father- heard a voice from above, Son-Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, who came down like a dove). This is also called **Theophany** (God revealed) or **Epiphany** (the true Light revealed). The word **Denaha** means divine Light.
- February 2nd, we celebrate the **Presentation in the Temple (Ma'altho)** to the temple on the 40th day after the Nativity of our Lord.
- The 3-day Nineveh fast begins 18 days before the Great Lent begins.
- The sixth Sunday during this season is dedicated to all the departed clergy.
- On the seventh and last Sunday of this season we remember all the departed faithful.

- **Season of Great Lent (Zawmo Raabo)**

This period represents the three years and six months of the public ministry of Jesus Christ.

This season begins with Kothne Sunday (Wedding at Cana) and ends with Holy Saturday. It is seven weeks long and is divided into these 2 parts.



- The first part of this season is the 40 days of Lent (from the Sunday of the wedding at Cana to the 40th Friday), followed by Lazarus Saturday. We remember all the important miracles Jesus performed during the first part of this season.
 - First Sunday of Holy Lent: Turning of water into wine at the wedding of Cana
 - Second Sunday of Holy Lent: Healing of the Leper (Garbo)
 - Third Sunday of the Holy Lent: Healing of the Paralytic (M'shariyo)
 - Fourth Sunday of the Holy Lent: Healing of the daughter of woman from Canaan (Knanoytho)
 - Fourth Wednesday of Holy Lent: Mid-Lent (Holy Cross will be elevated in the midst of the Church)
 - Fifth Sunday of the Holy Lent: Healing of the crippled woman (K'piptho)
 - Sixth Sunday of the Holy Lent: Healing of the blind man (Sam'yo)
 - Fortieth Friday
 - Saturday before Ooshana: Raising Lazarus from death
- The second part of this season starts with the Triumphant Entry of our Lord into Jerusalem (Ooshana or Palm Sunday), followed by Passion Week and it ends on Holy Saturday (Saturday of Annunciation to the dead or Shabtho d'sbartho). We commonly refer to this second part of the season as the 'Holy Week.'

- ***Season of Resurrection of our Lord (Qyamtha)***



This season is also seven weeks long. It covers the period that our Lord was with us after resurrection and the period of waiting for the Holy Spirit.

- Forty days after the Resurrection (Qyamtha) we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord (Zuloko). The Feast of Ascension will always be on a Thursday.
- Ten days later we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. This is when the disciples received the Holy Spirit (Spirit of Truth).

In this season, we celebrate the risen Christ who was crucified for our sins. He promised us paradise and eternal life with him. He gave us His body and blood as medicine for remission of our sins.

- ***Season of Pentecost (Siom Boorke)***

Pentecost (Siom Boorke) is celebrated 50 days after the Resurrection. This season refers to the period of the growth of the Church. The Holy Spirit guided the Apostles as they spread the Gospel and established new churches.

The thirteen-day Apostles Fast is June 16th through June 29th. This fast is in remembrance of the 12 Apostles and St. Paul (who preached to the



Gentiles). The Church celebrates the Feasts of St. Peter and St. Paul on June 29th.

- ***Season of Transfiguration (M'tale)***

This season refers to the belief that those who suffer for the Kingdom will be glorified. On August 6th, the Church celebrates the Feast of Transfiguration (M'tale) of Christ. On the festival of Transfiguration revelation of the Holy Trinity is also remembered. This festival is also known as the festival of Booths, where St. Peter offers to build three booths, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah, is remembered.

The Dormition of the Theotokos (Shoonoyo) Fast is from August 1-15th, ending with the Feast of Dormition of the Theotokos on August 15th.



- ***Season of the Holy Cross (Sleebo)***



This season refers to the future as we await the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On September 14th, the Church celebrates the **Feast of the Holy Cross (Sleeba)** as a commemoration of finding the true Cross on which Jesus was crucified. The Holy Cross represents victory of every baptized individual over sin.

The Liturgical Calendar Helps us Grow as Christians

The Liturgical Calendar helps us in our spiritual growth. Holy feast days are not just to remember the past. In fact, if we pay attention to the prayers and hymns of the feast days, we see that we are actively present in the feast as if it is happening in front of us!

Participating in these feasts helps us come closer to the Church and to understand the life of Jesus. Following the Liturgical Calendar allows us to have a blessed and fulfilling church life. Each year we participate in the Liturgical Calendar of our Church. Every Scripture reading - both Old and New - on a given Sunday, as well as through the entire year, has great meaning in our path towards being like Christ. Every Sunday the Gospel reading builds on both the previous readings, as well as the Feasts for the year. This experience brings us closer to God, and we can see His presence in our lives.



Summary

The calendar of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is based on the West Syriac tradition where the liturgical year is centered on the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (Qyamtha). Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese, Professor of Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, India reflects in his book "West Syrian Liturgical Theology" that "each Sunday is in fact called Qyamtha, for it is a weekly celebration of the Resurrection of Christ."

All Orthodox Churches have Christ at the center of everything and this includes their Liturgical Calendar. As such, we can always find similarities in terms of importances given to the major Feasts like the Nativity of our Lord as well as the Resurrection of our Lord.

However, unlike the Roman Catholic Church that has a central authority in the Vatican, the Orthodox Church always from the beginning had diversities in practices and customs and therefore, we see variances. There are different emphasis within each of our sister Orthodox Churches on particular feasts and fasts. One very unique aspect of our calendar is the 3-day Nineveh Fast which is also given significance in other Oriental Churches but not so much in the Byzantine Churches. There is no right or wrong argument in these differences. It is rather a celebration of the diversity and power of the Holy Spirit.

As an example, the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Churches begins with the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos in September and ends with the Dormition of the Theotokos in August.

Another reason for variance of the Liturgical calendars is that there are two systems: the Gregorian calendar (or “new calendar”) and the Julian calendar (or “old calendar”). All Orthodox Churches had their calendar based on the Julian system. However, there were problems with the Julian Calendar as it did not correctly reflect the actual time it takes the Earth to circle once around the Sun and therefore there were frequent “leap days” that had to be added for correction. The Gregorian calendar was introduced in October 1582 by commission of Pope Gregory XIII. It was generally not adopted by Orthodox Churches and therefore the majority of other Oriental and Byzantine Orthodox Churches still base their Liturgical Calendar on the Julian calendar. Our Church in India switched entirely to the Gregorian calendar in 1953 soon after the Independence of India. The Feast of Resurrection was on the same Sunday for both the Julian and Gregorian Calendar in that year, which helped this transition to be smooth and seamless. HH Baselios Geevarghese II, Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan issued necessary orders in agreement with the Holy Episcopal Synod for this transition. Through his Encyclical No. 620/1952 Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem I, dt. December 1952 made the same system to follow in the Syriac Orthodox Church as well.

Although these differences exist in the calendars across the Orthodox Churches, it does not in any way suggest that one or the other calendar is “wrong”. Rather, it is a reflection of differences that came about during the history and life of the Church in those geographic regions, while the theology behind the Orthodox Faith remains as is.

Reflection Questions

1. How can the Liturgical calendar help us to organize our spiritual life?
2. What are the seven seasons in the Liturgical calendar and why do we celebrate some feasts on different dates each year?
3. What season of the Liturgical calendar are we in now?
4. Find a prayer during Holy Qurbana that changes based on the Liturgical calendar.

Lesson 2: She Who Carries the Whole Creation

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain the significance of the Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos*
 - *I can understand why St. Mary is considered the New Eve*
 - *I can reflect on St. Elizabeth's announcement that St. Mary is the God Bearer*
-

The Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos

The Feast of Annunciation to the Theotokos (Suboro) is the only Feast in the Orthodox Church, which is celebrated twice a year. This feast celebrates the visitation by the Archangel Gabriel and his announcement to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the Son of God. St. Luke 1: 26-39 gives a detailed report of the event.

In Greek, the word **Theotokos** means God Bearer. In Syriac it is **Yoldath Aloho**. St. Mary is honored with this title because God chose her to give birth to the Son of God (Jesus Christ) by the Holy Spirit. The Feast of the Annunciation is first celebrated on March 25th, exactly nine months before the Feast of the Nativity (Yeldho).

This Feast is so important to the Orthodox faith that Holy Qurbana must be celebrated on this day even if March 25th falls on Holy Friday. The Feast of the Annunciation is also celebrated on the fifth Sunday before the Feast of the Nativity as part of the Season of Annunciation.

It is a season of hope and expectation. It is a time when the Church members reflect on how we can prepare ourselves for Christ's birth in our hearts. As a Church, we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation to honor the Theotokos because she is the model of what we are to become in Christ.



Blessed Among Women

When we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, we celebrate two very important aspects about St. Mary:

- 1) Her character: the perfect example for all Christians to follow. She was pure, humble, and always obedient to God. This is the reason why she was chosen to fulfill God's plan.
- 2) Her response: is a humble example for all Christians to follow.

Because of her faithfulness, God chose St. Mary to be the vessel by which He would take humanity for our salvation. In St. Luke 1:28, the Angel Gabriel says to Mary: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" In St. Luke 1:35, the Angel affirms to St. Mary and teaches us about Christ's divine nature by saying: "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you; therefore, also, the Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." As the Son of St. Mary, Jesus is both fully human and fully eternal God. St. Mary is the source of Jesus's humanity. That is why we honor her as the Mother of God as well as the mother of all faithful people. We also seek her guidance, protection, and intercession.

Remember

*Theotokos (Greek)
Yoldath Aloho (Syriac)
Daiva Maathavu (Malayalam)*

These are all names in various languages that refer to St. Mary.

The Feast of the Annunciation to St. Mary reminds us of how we are to respond to God's will. In St. Luke 1:38 St. Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." Her response (acceptance) was important for God's plan to be completed. She is considered the first Christian and first member of the Holy Church because she freely accepted what God called her to do. She gladly accepted her role in God's plan of salvation, even though she knew it would be very difficult and even dangerous.

The New Eve

In addition to calling St. Mary the Theotokos, the Church also refers to her as the New Eve. The first Eve breached the commandment of God in the garden of Eden when she disobeyed God's will. Death and decay entered the world because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. In Genesis 3:16, Moses writes, "To the woman He said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain and your groaning, and in pain you shall bring forth children.'" The first Eve was cursed because of her disobedience. Since St. Mary respectfully and positively responded to God, she was blessed and highly favored. She happily gave birth to her Son. St. Mary

reversed the first Eve's curse for all people. It was because of St. Mary's obedience that the Savior of the human race entered the world to defeat death. St. Mary is the New or Second Eve (the perfect woman) through whom Jesus entered the world as the New Adam (the perfect man). Church Fathers, especially St. Ephrem and St. Severus of Antioch (see Thubden V), repeatedly use this title to affirm the importance of St. Mary.

Icon of the Feast

The Icon of the Feast of the Annunciation beautifully illustrates how the Archangel Gabriel visited St. Mary. Bright colors were used to illustrate the joyous event in salvation's history.

The Angel Gabriel is shown with his feet spread apart and his clothing flowing behind him. This shows that he was likely running eagerly to share the Good News with Mary. In his left hand, he carries a staff which, in iconography, is a symbol of a messenger. His right hand reaches out towards Mary.

St. Mary is seated in an elevated seat to show her exalted position. In her left hand, she is holding purple and scarlet yarn. In the Protoevangelium of St. James (a 2nd century text), it is written that Mary was making the colorful veil for the Temple in Jerusalem. This is important for two reasons - it shows Mary's willingness to serve God, and also reminds us that St. Mary is the true Temple of God.



Her right hand is raised close to her chest showing her acceptance of God's plan. The three stars on her forehead and shoulders tell us that she remained pure and a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ. This icon shows us how St. Mary, although startled at the greeting of the Angel, still accepted the will of God. We are encouraged to follow this path of St. Mary the God-Bearer.

At the top of the icon, we see part of a bright circle which represents the heavenly arena. The divine light which shines down on St. Mary represents the Holy Spirit.

St. Elizabeth recognizes St. Mary as the Mother of God

After Archangel Gabriel announces to St. Mary that she will be the God Bearer, he also tells her that her cousin Elizabeth will have a son in her old age.



When St. Elizabeth is six months pregnant, St. Mary visits her. St. Luke 1:41-45 tells us "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For indeed as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.' "

St. Elizabeth makes reference to St. Mary as "mother of my Lord". What more an affirmation do we need to know that St.

Mary is the Mother of God? In the icon here you see how both the children in the womb take postures for themselves. Jesus in the icon stretches His right hand to bless St. John and St. John bows his head, folds his hands and legs humbly to receive the ultimate blessing. It must have been right after this event that the babe in the womb of St. Elizabeth leaped for joy!

The Magnificat

St. Mary's response to St. Elizabeth is known as the **Magnificat** (taken from the first word of the song in Latin). It is found in St. Luke 1: 46-55 and we read it every Sunday as part of the **Matins** (Morning prayer) of the Qyamtha season. Almost entirely this song is sung by Hannah, mother of Prophet Samuel (I Kingdoms/I Samuel 2:1-10) and it says how much St. Mary was being prepared from the Old Testament times for this very moment. We also read it every day during **Lilio** (Night prayer). The Magnificat is St. Mary's hymn of praise to glorify the Lord for the blessing that He has set upon her. She sings,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me.
And Holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength in His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones.
And exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich He has sent away empty.
He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever."*

Connection between Annunciation and the Divine Liturgy

The Annunciation to the Theotokos is found several times in our Divine Liturgy. We venerate St. Mary and honor her special role in salvation in both song and prayer throughout our services. Two examples, the Pre-Qurbana Hymn and the Quqlion, are described below.

There are many events in the Old Testament that tell us about things to come in the New Testament. For example, in the Old Testament, God spoke to Moses from a burning bush (Exodus 3).

This tells us about St. Mary in the New Testament because the fire of Christ dwelt inside her womb, but she remained unconsumed (St. Luke 1:26-39).

God spoke to Moses through the bush just as He became man through St. Mary.



The Pre-Qurbana Hymn has two stanzas that describe this fulfillment of the Old Testament by the Theotokos. We sing:

***From the ranks of fire, a watcher flew to Mary
And announced to her saying, "The Lord is with you.
And from your womb shall come forth,
The Savior of creation."***

***As fire rested on the bush, and it did not burn,
So God descended and rested in the Virgin.
He chose to take flesh from her,
Guarding her virginity.***

The Quqlion (Intercessory prayer) to the Theotokos reminds us of the power of St. Mary's acceptance of God's plan. St. Mary's obedience untied the knot of Eve's curse that was upon all people. It also describes Christ's fully divine and fully human nature. We raise our voice in song and sing:

*Virgin, chosen to
Be the Mother of God
Through whom the curse was
Uprooted- from Earth
Pray to your Son that
Peace and concord may be
Poured upon His Church
Throughout all the world.*

*Glory to the Pow'r
Who left the Cherubim
And the Seraphim,
Descending to dwell
In the Virgin's womb;
And He took flesh from her
To save Adam's sons
From Death and Satan.*

How does this Feast relate to our daily lives?

The Feast of the Annunciation is a Feast of redemption and salvation. It reminds us of God's endless love for us and our responsibility to be obedient to God, like St. Mary has been. St. Mary was the first person to receive Jesus Christ. She is a role model of courage, obedience and faithfulness for all Christians. She is the source of Jesus' human nature. We have the privilege of knowing God spiritually because of her. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ physically lived in St. Mary's body. She was the true Temple of God. We are all called to be temples of God. In I Corinthians 6:19, St. Paul says "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" Here, St. Paul is referring to the individual Christian as a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.



The Feast of the Annunciation is a Feast of redemption and salvation. It reminds us of God's endless love for us and our responsibility to be obedient to God, like St. Mary was.

Reflection Questions

1. The New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. Read the following passages and discuss how you think they relate to Annunciation to the Theotokos.

Genesis 3:1-19
Proverbs 2:1-22
Isaiah 7:10-15

2. Mary is literally the God Bearer. How are we called to bear God in our daily lives?
3. We are challenged to say yes to God in every aspect of our lives. Can you think of an instance where you had to make a difficult choice and chose to say "Yes" to God's will?
4. Read the following passages. Compare and contrast them to each other.

Genesis 17:15-22
St. Luke 1:5-25
St. Luke 1:26-39

5. In the Service Book of the Holy Qurbana read the Pre-Anaphora prayer:

May Mary, who bore You
And John, who baptized You
Intercede for us, O Lord
Have mercy on us all.

Why do you think we start Holy Qurbana referring to St. Mary?

Lesson 3: God Became Man

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand the importance and mystery of the Incarnation especially as it relates to our salvation.*
 - *I can understand that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, was fully divine and fully human.*
 - *I can understand the importance of the Feast of Nativity and how it relates to our lives*
-

The Nativity of our Lord (or Yeldo) means the birth of Christ. In St. Luke 1:31, the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus”.

This good news was foretold many times in the Old Testament. Isaiah, the son of Amos, said that this Child will be born of the Holy Virgin (Isaiah 7:14). Ezekiel also preached that He would rightfully appear to the world to restore the crown (Ezekiel 21:32). Jeremiah said that Jesus would be from the lineage of King David (Jeremiah 33:27).

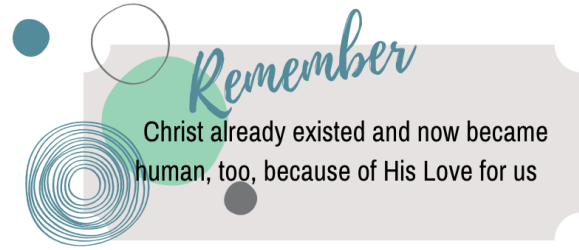


Incarnation: God Took Flesh

The word “incarnation” means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh. So, we understand that the Incarnation of Christ simply means that Christ, our God, became man. The “birth of Christ” does not mean that the Son of God did not exist before the Nativity. As God, Jesus is eternal because He is God. As we confess during the Nicene Creed, Jesus Christ is “the One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds”. Christ already existed and now became human, too, because of His Love for us.

Kenosis means to self-empty oneself. The Incarnation was a form of self-emptying by the Son of God because as God He *lowered* Himself to become a human and then emptied Himself entirely to die for us.

As St. John the Apostle and Evangelist tells us, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,"* (St. John 1:14) and *"every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,"* (1 John 4:2). The fact that God became man was preached and taught by the Apostles and their successors. Later, it is confirmed and established in the Ecumenical Councils and we confess all this in the Nicene Creed.



There are heretics like the Nestorians who say that there are two persons in Jesus Christ (a divine person and human person). Monophysites believe that Jesus had only a divine nature, even though He had become human too. The Church disapproved of such false teachings and instead, taught that Christ is both perfect God and perfect man. His divinity and humanity both continue without confusion or mixture. As St. John 1:14 says, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."*



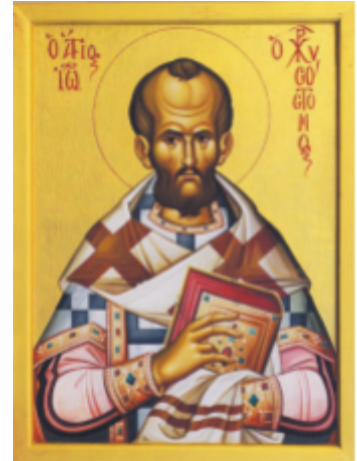
Early Church Fathers, such as St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory the Theologian of Nazianzus and St. Severus of Antioch defended the Church's teachings and understanding: the Son of God is a human (incarnate) as Jesus of Nazareth and is truly divine with the same divinity as God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Additionally, Church

Fathers like St. Cyril of Alexandria defended the Church's understanding that the Son of God really became human in the full meaning of the word. Jesus Christ was and is a real human being, having and being everything that every human being has and is. As St. Cyril said, "The Son of God and the Son of Man - one Son!"

Incarnation: The Act of Salvation

"Incarnation" means more than just the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary and His birth. It also includes all of His earthly life events, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord. According to St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Jesus Christ was a real human with a real mortal human body. Since it was also the Word of God who died, "death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished." St. Athanasius explained that Jesus Christ became a real human and died like a real human. However, because He was fully divine, death actually had no control over Him.

In his homily on the Nativity, St. John Chrysostom says: “He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.” Here St. John Chrysostom tells us that Jesus Christ took on our fallen flesh in order to save us. His death becomes even more meaningful when we understand that He willingly “put on” flesh, flesh that was fallen because of the sin of Adam and Eve, and willingly and truly died on the Cross. By His physical rising from the dead, He redeemed us fallen humans - in body, spirit, and soul.



St. John Chrysostom

The hymns from the Nativity liturgical services also proclaim the importance of the Nativity to God’s plan to save us! For example, the Communion hymn:

*The Creator has been revealed
Today He put idols to shame
Today has come the Physician
To grant healing to all the sick
Today the fortress of Satan
Has been destroyed and abandoned
Today, the Son of the Virgin
Became the Savior of the world
We cry aloud, Lord and sing praise
“O Blessed Child Glory to You.*

And this example from the Sedro of the Evening Worship of Nativity:

*Today, a Child is born to us and a Son has been given to us.
Today, the virgin gave birth to Almighty God, and His name was called the Wonderful.
Today, God manifested on earth and enlightened the world for all time.*

Why is this so Important?

First, it is important for us to understand whom we worship. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 instructs us that there is only one Lord our God and that we shall “love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.” Essentially, we offer up our entire selves to God. Second, we have to admit that our salvation is only possible through the love and

action of God Almighty. No one else can save us - only God. When He died for us, He did it willingly, and it is only God who could willingly rise from the dead for us.

Every action of Christ on Earth was meant for our salvation. From His Incarnation through His ministry, He showed mankind who He really was. He was born to die for us, to save us. His miraculous birth, His wondrous signs, His suffering and death on the Cross, His rising from the dead, His ascension into Heaven and His promised Second Coming are all part of God's ongoing plan for the salvation of humankind. All of these life acts took place in the flesh. These acts of salvation show that God has concern for the whole person - body, spirit, and soul.

Remember

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How does the Feast relate to our Lives?

The Incarnation is one of the most powerful events in all of human history. In the Church, we spend so much time discussing that God has become man. We must also remember that while Jesus became man we should become like God. We should be a reflection of our Savior. How can we become like God?

This is a hard concept to understand but Christ explains it in St. Matthew 5:48, i.e., *"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."*

Christ's life was spent speaking about God and helping people. It is really quite simple; He showed us His love and mercy. Whenever we speak to our friends about the love of God, help the poor, spend time with someone who is lonely, or pray for someone, we are being like Christ.

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The Nativity of Our Lord Icon



Coptic Orthodox icon of the Nativity (or birth) of Jesus Christ.

Do you notice the way in which the infant Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes?

The symbolism in this icon as well as most icons that show the Nativity is very deep. It doesn't just show Him wrapped as a baby in swaddling clothes, but looking closer, the actual manner of how He is wrapped is a traditional burial shroud. This is to indicate that Christ was born to die for us.

Also, in other icons, rather than depicting St. Mary holding Christ, He is many times shown lying in a manger which is shaped to resemble a tomb. This has the same symbolism as the "burial shroud" to immediately remind us that our Savior was born to die for us.

Reflection Questions

1. Find Scriptural verses that support that Jesus Christ is eternal but born in the flesh through St. Mary
2. Why was it important for the Church Fathers to defend the Church's teaching that Christ was fully God and fully man?
3. Reflect on what it means to you that Jesus Christ was incarnate of the same fallen human nature as you.

Lesson 4: Jesus comes to Fulfill the Covenant

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand the concept of circumcision from the Old Testament.*
 - *I can understand the relationship between the Old Testament practice of circumcision and the New Testament practice of baptism.*
 - *I can discuss the meaning and historical implications of Jesus's name.*
-

Circumcision began in the Jewish tradition and was based on a direct conversation Abraham had with God. On the eighth day after birth, all Jewish males were brought to the temple for circumcision and naming. During this ritual, a small piece of skin is cut off from the body of newborn males. Circumcision is the symbol of the covenant and not the actual covenant itself.

Circumcision as a Symbol of the Covenant

A covenant is a promise between God and His people. A covenant is more than just a contract. A contract is an agreement between two people. A covenant is an agreement with God. In Genesis 17, God appears to Abraham and says that He will establish a covenant with him and extend it to his descendants. The covenant promises three things to Abraham and his descendants:

- Abraham will be the father of many nations
- He and his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan and it will be theirs forever
- Abraham's descendants will always be God's people

Circumcision also granted admittance into Abraham's lineage, as each individual is under God's authority. In the Old Testament, circumcision symbolizes the removal of sin from one's life to be closer to God.

Jesus' Circumcision

St. Luke 2:21 says, *"And when eight days were completed for the Circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."* God (Jesus Christ) first gave the Law of Circumcision to Abraham. Now, Christ Himself is being subjected to this law. His example shows us how important it is to follow God's Law faithfully. Genesis 12:1 says, *"The Lord said to Abram,"* so it shows Abram and Christ speaking. St. John 8:56 and 58 has Jesus saying, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad. Most assuredly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." This assures us that Christ is present in the Old Testament. Genesis 17:6 says that Abram's name was changed to Abraham for the Lord made him father of many nations. Abraham, the name, means 'father of many'.

There are three instances where we see Christ shed his blood for us. The first is during His circumcision, the next during His prayer in Gethsemane, and lastly His death on the Cross. We can see Christ's love for His creation in these examples. He willingly bleeds to save us from our sins.

St. Paul writes in Colossians 2:11, *"In Him, you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ."*

The Names of Christ

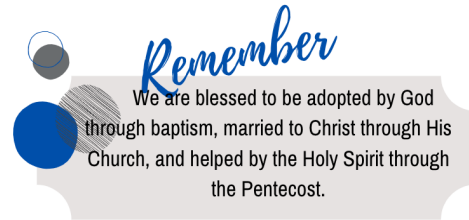
Our parents and elders play many different roles in our lives. They gave birth to us. They provide us with clothes, food, shelter, and love. They teach us discipline, and pray for us. Each of the roles they play in our lives has a title. The same is true with Christ. He plays a role in everything we do. Many of the labels associated with Christ have deep historical meaning. The name Jesus was given to St. Mary directly by the Angel Gabriel in a vision before His birth (St. Matthew 1:21).

Did You Know?

In the Old Testament days, Circumcision was done on the 8th day. Today in the Sacrament of the Holy Baptism there is a Liturgical act where the infant's name is written in the Book of Life. It is this name which is literally recorded in the Baptismal Register at the time of the Baptism and is representative of spiritual circumcision.

Immanuel

Immanuel means “God is with us.” This is a very accurate description of Christ because Christ came and dwelt with us through the Incarnation. Immanuel was the title expressed by Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14), who lived 700 years before the time of Christ. It is important to remember that God with us does not simply mean He dwelt with us during His earthly ministry. It includes everyone from the past, present, and future. As you sit and read this, God is with you, and as you go to school, God is with you. The main theme of this title is that Christ is with us. It should be comforting to all of us that no matter what we are experiencing in life, Christ is with us.



Alpha and Omega

The Alpha and Omega are titles Christ uses to describe Himself in Revelation 1:8, 21:6 and 22:13. He tells us that He is the beginning (Alpha) and the end (Omega). This would be like Christ saying He is the A and the Z of today’s alphabet. For us, as Christians, this should be a comforting title. Our friends and family play roles in our lives, but we know at some point they will pass on and will not be with us physically. We can always rely on Christ in our lives as He will always be there. He never ceases to exist. In St. Matthew 28:20, Jesus says: “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”. The central theme of this title is that Christ has been and will always be with us.

Bridegroom

Another prominent name associated with Christ is the true bridegroom. The obvious next question would be, “Who is the bride?”. The bride is the Church (Ephesians 5:25-27). As members of the Church, we are the body - the Church. In the story of the ten virgins (St. Matthew 25), Christ is the bridegroom. In St. Luke 5, Christ is questioned about why His disciples do not fast. His response is, “*Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?*” We are blessed to be adopted by God through baptism, married to Christ through His Church, and helped by the Holy Spirit through the Pentecost.

Marriage Service Hymns

HYMN 3 – QOLO (eno no nuhro shariro – pathivrathayaam)

When the hea-venly Bridegroom betrothed the – Faithful – and Holy Church
He then called – Simon and John and entru-sted her – to both of them

He made Simon the steward
And He made John the preacher
Calling and instructing them

To guard – the Church that He had purcha-sed with His – own precious blood

HYMN 4 – SUGITHO (omro ‘idath qudsho – sabhayaam thiru sabhayaam)

I the Church am the true bride
Of the Most Exalted One.

“I am bless’d,” exclaims the Church,
“Who has truly betrothed me?
I worship the True Bridegroom
Who came down and betrothed me.”

‘EQBO (yawmono – manavaraye mel)

The Bridegroom – has prepared – a bridal chamber – for His Church
He has raised and – placed her above – the rulers and – heavenly hosts
In the heights, as He – had promised

The Feast of the Circumcision is celebrated on January 1st. This is an important feast of the Lord. There is a misunderstanding that the Divine Liturgy celebrated on January 1st is only for the New Year’s Day. It is also important to note that the feasts of St. Basil and St. Gregory the Theologian are on January 1st too.

In the icon, we see Christ on His eighth day of earthly life being brought to the temple. We see two high priests, St. Mary and St. Joseph. St. Mary is holding Jesus because she is aware of the pain of circumcision that He is about to experience. St. Joseph is shown with a bowl to carry the



foreskin as it is removed. St. Joseph is depicted with gray hair because tradition holds that St. Joseph was much older than St. Mary.

The Relevance of Circumcision to us

Circumcision was a necessary tradition in the time of Abraham. His descendants had to participate in the tradition to be considered part of his lineage. The Old Testament covenant symbol of circumcision has been replaced in the New Testament Church with baptism. Circumcision is no longer mandatory in the Christian Church, and it is a personal choice. Even if one chooses to have circumcision, one has to get baptized. Through the sacrament of baptism, we are adopted into Abraham's lineage. Baptism heals the body and soul that the Holy Spirit may live within us. Christ is the link between the Old Testament and New Testament as He was circumcised by the Jewish priests and baptized by John the Baptist.

Reflection Questions

1. Why does Christ take on the human tradition of circumcision if He is God?
2. Which is more important: physical circumcision or spiritual circumcision? Why?
3. What were the similarities between Christ and Abraham?
4. What are some other titles that you can think of for Jesus Christ? What do these titles mean?