

Moving Toward Unity

The Byzantine year starts in September

By MELISSA MUSICK NUSSBAUM

The Byzantine liturgical calendar begins on September 1. This date for a new year makes more intuitive sense than either the date on the Roman liturgical calendar—the first Sunday of Advent, which usually falls around the end of November—or the date on the civil calendar, which begins each new year on January 1.

The civil calendar year ends and begins in ice. We declare the change, but we can't see it in the world around us. Beginning the new liturgical year on the First Sunday of Advent makes theological sense to me, but not physical, human, enfleshed sense. The first of September, though, marks a shift, an end and a beginning that we know in our bones. We feel the change and see the change, would know it without the aid of a calendar. In the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the days are still warm, even hot, but they are shorter, and the nights are getting chilly. And there is a smell in the air, the smell of approaching cold—an odor like wood smoke and wet leaves—that is absent from the high days of summer. We are outside in early September, working in the garden, glorying in the sun on our faces when it brushes past—a breeze carrying the promise of longer nights and snow in its still soft breath. "There," one of us will say to the other. "Do you feel it? Feels like fall."

School around here now starts in late August, but its sense of beginning, too, is still tied to the first of September. And few things speak of new years and new starts like brand-new pencils and unbroken crayons and notebooks unmarked and books freshly covered. New shoes, new teacher, new year. The Byzantines, I think, have this right.

In the first months of the new liturgical year, the Byzantine calendar is loaded with Old Testament saints. St. Joshua and St. Moses lead the way, with feasts on September 1 and 4. It



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seems right that Joshua would be the New Year saint. He's the leader of the first generation to enter the Promised Land, a land Moses, and all those born in Egypt, could only glimpse from across the river. Joshua leads the Hebrews across a bridge of dry land spanning the Jordan River and takes them into Canaan. Joshua stands for a new generation in a new land, and he thus becomes a patron for every new start.

But Moses isn't forgotten. No generation is without ties of gratitude and grief to the ones preceding. They may cross into the new land, but they carry their history with them, baggage no one can check or stow. So, Moses, born of a slave, who led his fellow slaves to freedom, brings Joshua and his generation to the door they alone can open and pass through. But Moses' placement in the calendar speaks to this truth: Joshua opens the door, but without Moses and his generation, Joshua and the younger ones could never have even found the door. New years flow from the old. Present and

past days are linked.

Both Joshua and Moses make a way for the feasts to come in September and throughout the year. In this first month of the Byzantine year, East and West join in celebrating Mary's birth and the holy cross on which her son hung and through which we have our salvation. Mary and Jesus carry Joshua and Moses with them, if not in the family lineage laid out in Matthew, then in memory and worship, the ties of faith that bind us to one another more firmly than blood.

The liturgical calendar has been, and continues to be, a source of division between the Eastern and Western church. The old Julian or the new Gregorian, the 13 days stand like a wall between us. In 1923, some of the Eastern churches adopted the "new" calendar, while others did not. I doubt that we are going to be seeing a single calendar in my lifetime. But what if we answered the movement toward unity begun in the last century with one in this century? What if we took a simple step toward unity by integrating the Old Testament saints of the Byzantine calendar formally and officially and fully into our own?

A friend says, "Well, they weren't martyrs for Christ."

"No," I answer, "and neither was St. Martin of Tours, who opened the door for canonized saints who weren't martyrs. And neither was St. Ruth, who is in the Roman calendar, and whose memorial, on September 2, comes right between Joshua and Moses."

So we're not doing anything that isn't already provided for in our liturgical calendar. It's merely a matter of incorporating the many Old Testament figures the East acknowledges as saints into the few we acknowledge. We gratefully accept the riches of the East, bow to their wisdom in this, and so become richer and wiser ourselves.

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