Days that Remember: Feasts, Memory and Faith

"I remembered God and was glad."
– Psalm 76:4 (SAAS)

"It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another … Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?"
– Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, Act III

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Live in the present! It's a panacea for stress that resounds from virtually all corners of our culture. Yet anyone who has tried to put this advice into practice finds the task all but impossible. Even if we manage to still the distractions of our minds, the present is inconceivably finite, a point recognized long before modernity. "That which may be called present," wrote St. Augustine in the late fourth century, "flies so rapidly from future to past, that it cannot be extended" (*Confessions*, 11.15). Furthermore, neurological research indicates our perceptions are a fraction of a second behind the true present, because the brain requires time to process sensory information. As much as we may want to live in the present, it seems we are forever looking back on it.

Even in the Church, it is difficult to dwell in the present. It is hard enough to merely *notice* every feast that goes by, let alone make it a meaningful part of our lives.

Thanks be to God, the ecclesiastical calendar accounts for this reality. Much of the liturgical year happens in the wake of time—the track left behind by the feast days themselves. Built into the Orthodox calendar are three categories of festal periods that look back on major feasts and other liturgical commemorations. I call these seasons the "days that remember": synaxes, afterfeasts and apodoses. Each are associated with unique hymns and rituals that tease out important elements of the feasts they remember. Together, such seasons of commemoration occupy roughly a third of the year.

The Church, it seems, calls us to be people who remember—we devote more of the liturgical year to *remembering* the major feast days than to the feasts themselves. This is a mercy: given how difficult it is to live in the present, we are granted time to stay and linger after the feasts have passed.

I believe this mnemonic quality of the Church year affirms memory as a God-given faculty. Although human memory is far from perfect, in many ways it affords us a wider vision of reality than the finite present allows. This is as true of liturgical feasts as it is of human cognition in general. When we reflect on our lives, we see with a more expansive perception. We can more readily grasp the patterns and coincidences, the connections, the wayward turns, the mysterious mercies and details that eluded us at the time. We recall our lives not only as a long series of chronological events, but also as a single moment, cinched up like a tattered hem in the hands of eternity.

More importantly, biblical concepts of memory lie at the heart of our relationship with God. God wants us to remember

DAYS THAT REMEMBER

A **synaxis** (σύναξις) is any kind of meeting or gathering. However, in the context of liturgical time, a synaxis refers to the day following a major feast, when we commemorate people integral to the initial feast day. One illustration of this is the Synaxis of Righteous Joachim and Anna (September 9), which follows the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8). Not only did Joachim and Anna bring the Theotokos into the world as her parents, but they raised her piously, instilling a willing faith in their daughter that would impel her to accept her role as the Mother of God.

An **afterfeast** is an extended period of festal remembrance that occurs after a feast day. Some afterfeasts last only a few days, as in the case of the Nativity of the Theotokos and the Entrance of the Theotokos. Pascha enjoys the longest afterfeast, lasting thirty-nine days and culminating in the Feast of the Ascension.

An **apodosis** (ἀπόδοσις, "leavetaking") is the final day of an afterfeast (or the day following a feast, when there is no afterfeast or synaxis). On this day, we effectively bid farewell to the feast, offering it back to God, the giver of all good things.

Him, a more intimate sentiment than we tend to realize. It's the kind of thing a man says to his beloved before heading off to war: *forget me not.* Cognitive impairments notwithstanding, when we forget God, we break off our relationship with Him.

Perhaps this is why, in Scripture as in liturgy, forgetting is synonymous with death. "If you by any means forget the Lord your God ... you shall surely perish" (Deuteronomy 8:19). Remembering, on the other hand, is tied to faith and eternal Life. In the Holy Anaphora during the Divine Liturgy, the priest says:

> *Remembering* ... all that has been done for our sake: the Cross, the tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand, and the second and glorious coming again (emphasis added).

Following these words, the priest lifts the Holy Gifts heavenwards to signify our communion with God through Christ, proclaiming: "Your own of Your own we offer to You, in all and for all." It is only in remembrance of God (ἀνάμνησις, anamnesis) and His philanthropic acts that we offer ourselves to Him in faith.

In this same spirit of memory-laden faith, we supplicate God to remember us as well. The petition for God to remember—our own souls and those of others—runs as a leitmotif through all of Scripture and the Divine Liturgy. One particularly poignant example occurs in the prayers of Holy Communion: "Like the thief, I confess to You: Remember me, Lord, in Your Kingdom." Since God's memory knows no bounds, to be remembered by Him is to live, and to live forever.

Bearing all of this in mind, memory—in the biblical sense—is a life-giving force. One could even argue that faith in Christ consists much more of remembering rightly than living in the present, strictly speaking.

But this business of remembering rightly is hard work. The German language calls this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, i.e., the work of overcoming the negatives of memory and coming to terms with the past. Memory is like a garden in need of constant tending, lest the weeds of bitterness and cynicism choke out our memory of God:

> I remembered God and was glad;
> I complained, and my spirit became discouraged.
> (Psalm 76:4, SAAS)

When I read this verse, the two faces of Janus come to mind. In Roman mythology, Janus was the god of beginnings, transitions and time. The namesake of the month of January, he was said to have two faces, one looking to the past and the other to the future. In the above verse, however, I imagine the two faces of Janus divided not between past and future, but between joy and despair—one face remembering and glad, the other complaining and bitter. Just like anything else, memory can become tarnished by the brokenness of sin. Remembering can be painful, dredging up reminders of our failings or those of others. We might even recollect instances when God Himself appeared to fail us, when He seemed invisible or nonexistent.

This, I think, is where the liturgical calendar and its days that remember help to resurrect the fallen state of our memory. So often, it is not God who is absent, but we ourselves, hastening as we do through endlessly distractible lives. Sometimes, we can perceive God's presence more clearly through the eyes of memory, even in cases when He initially seemed absent. Far from an illusion of the mind, this is a gift memory gives us: the ability to see that to which we were once blind.

Observing the days that remember, we train our souls to tarry around the loving acts of our Creator. Hopefully, we start to see things a bit more through the eyes of God, the Existing One, untethered to the strictures of past, present and future. Ironically, in Christ, memory is simply another mode of being present—by remembering God, we make ourselves present to Him. Our weak and transient memory gets bound up with His, which is eternal and loving.

And in all these things, we can begin to recover our capacity to remember God and be glad.

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