

## CELEBRATING NAMEDAYS



our name is important. Nothing sounds as pleasant to us as our own name. A child will beam with pleasure when his name is recognized; the adult may conceal his delight, but usually feels it just the same.

Today people choose names for children on a far different basis than in the past. Parents often pick a name because they like the sound of it; so we find people of Middle Eastern background with names like Scott, Kimberly or Odette. Others even name their children after sports or entertainment personalities of the moment.

Traditionally, on the other hand, people chose names for more substantial reasons: to express continuity with their family they would 'recycle' the names of parents, grandparents or other relatives. Thus the family of John the Baptist was surprised when his mother chose a name that was not common among them: *"None of your relatives has this name"* (Luke 1:61).

Christians have long chosen the names of saints from the liturgical calendar to proclaim their link with their spiritual family, the Church. This was often a costly kind of witness for believers living in a non-Christian society, as their very names (Nicholas or George, Elias or Barbara) labeled them automatically as Christians. Rather than conceal their minority status behind ambiguous names, these believers proclaimed their identity with the Church of Christ by choosing saints' names.

The Church calendar lists a number of saints whose memory may be observed each day of the year. Persons who bear the name of these saints have traditionally kept their memorial with special observances in honor of their patron. One's 'Nameday' is an occasion to honor the memory of the saint whose name we bear and to give thanks for his or her daily intercession on our behalf. In the Byzantine tradition people whose names are not found on the calendar of saints would keep the Transfiguration of Christ (August 6) or the Dormition of the Theotokos (August 15) as their namedays, depending on whether they were men or women

## OBSERVING NAMEDAYS



A number of popular customs are practiced among Byzantine Christians on namedays. Commonly a service would be celebrated in the parish community. Sometimes it would be a service of intercession in the saint's honor or the Divine Liturgy itself, especially if it were a major saint's day. The persons named after the saint or the family celebrating the feast would offer the bread for the Liturgy and sweet bread or wheat for the artoklasia which would be shared by the worshippers.

The celebration would normally conclude with a festive party. Often favors or token gifts would be part of the day, but with this significant difference. The person whose name day it is gives the gifts rather than receives them. Giving is, after all, the best sign of gratitude for Christians.

In the family much can be done to initiate children into this custom of celebrating namedays. In earlier years the child will simply delight in being the center of attention yet again. In building up a child's sense of self worth, his own name is his primary identification. He sees the saint as therefore someone like himself, and a hero at that!

Soon, however, children begin to ask questions about death, heaven and hell. Having a relationship with those who have died in Christ (the saints) can help to conquer the child's natural fear of death. Later the idea of children giving gifts or favors on their namedays would be another weapon in the parents' arsenal against possessiveness and materialism, cravings which affect every child.

In the home, icons of the patrons of family members should be obtained and placed in the family icon corner or in the rooms of the individual family members. On the nameday these icons could be placed in a special setting surrounded by candles and flowers. The family could go to church for the Liturgy or arrange for a special service preceding a festive gathering in the home. The life of the saint could be read or related at mealtime and special treats served. The gathering could be capped with the singing of *"God grant you many years"* to the one whose nameday it is. Inventive families have planned skits, made mini pilgrimages to local churches named for the saint followed by a trip to the child's favorite restaurant, or created banners and other home decorations about the patron. The child

can help prepare the liturgical or party foods, make or pick out favors to give to friends or relatives or otherwise help with the day's preparations.

The Church is one body in Christ: one household of all the baptized living or dead with Christ as its Head. Maintaining and celebrating our association with one of the great saints of Christian history helps us to see this Church, not as an impersonal institution, but as it is truly meant to be: one family under the lordship of its Head.

## COMMON NAMES AND NAMEDAYS



very day of the year between five and ten saints are remembered on Byzantine calendars alone. Some of the more popular ones are listed below.

**Andrew** – November 30  
**Ann** – July 25  
**Anthony** – January 17  
**Barbara** – December 4  
**Basil** – January 1  
**Catherine** – November 25  
**Christina** – July 24  
**Christopher** – May 9  
**Cyril** – June 9  
**Daniel** – December 17  
**David** – Sunday after Christmas  
**Dimitri** – October 26  
**Elias** – July 20  
**Elizabeth** – June 25  
**Gabriel** – July 13  
**George** – April 23  
**Gregory** – January 25  
**Habib** – November 15  
**Helen** – May 21  
**Ignatius** – December 20  
**Irene** – May 5  
**James** – October 23  
**John (the Theologian)** – May 8  
**John (the Baptist)** – June 24  
**John (of Damascus)** – December 4  
**Joseph** – Sunday after Christmas  
**Jude** – June 19  
**Julia** – December 21  
**Julian** – February 6

Lawrence – August 10  
 Luke – October 18  
 Mark – April 25  
 Martha – July 5  
 Martin – April 14  
 Mary – August 15  
 Matthew – November 16  
 Maximos – January 21  
 Michael – November 8  
 Natalie – August 26  
 Nicholas – December 6  
 Paul – June 29  
 Peter – June 29  
 Philip – November 14  
 Romanos – October 1  
 Samuel – August 20  
 Simon – May 10  
 Stephen – December 27  
 Theodore – February 17  
 Thomas – October 6  
 Timothy – January 22  
 Victor – November 11

## FAMILY FESTIVALS

**M**any Eastern Christians have the custom of observing “family feasts”. On these occasions they would celebrate in a particularly solemn way one of the major Church festivals (one of the Great Feasts or major saint's days) as their family's patronal feast. Generally this means that the extended family (brothers, cousins, etc.) would participate in the Church services of the feast together, usually offering the bread, wheat, wine and oil for the artoklasia service and the bread for the Divine Liturgy. Thus we find a petition in the artoklasia service for *“those who are offering these oblations and celebrating this feast.”*

In many places those who had the means would offer refreshments to those attending this celebration in gratitude for the blessings the family has received. This custom is not so frequently practiced in this country but would seem to be especially well suited to supporting both the natural family's sense of unity and its commitment to the parish family as well.

*Brief notices about their lives can be found in the liturgical calendar available in many parishes. There are several sources for fuller versions of the Lives of the Saints. Here are a few:*

- *Orthodox Saints: Spiritual Profiles for Modern Man* in four volumes by the Very Rev. Father George Poulos. Each volume gives over 100 two-page biographies of saints as they appear on the church calendar.
- *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints* in twelve volumes from [Chrysostom Press](http://www.chrysostompress.com). Each volume contains numerous biographies of varying lengths for the saints commemorated during a given month (as of this writing, seven volumes are available: September through March).

# CELEBRATING NAMEDAYS

St. George



**HAPPY NAME DAY!**

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