The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, celebrated by the Church on September 14/27, commemorates two events in church history. The first occurred when thousands of Christians flocked to Jerusalem to venerate the precious relic found by St. Helen. As the Patriarch of Jerusalem raised the cross for all to see, the people fell to the ground and sang, “Lord, have mercy.”

The second event took place in 628, when the Greek Emperor Heraclius joyously returned the cross to Jerusalem, after it had been captured (along with many Christians) and taken to Persia fourteen years earlier.

The icon of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross shows Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem standing on a raised platform holding up the True Cross of Christ, which he is showing to the people. Supporting the bishop are deacons, and at his side are Saints Constantine and Helen.
St. Anna is shown reclining on a bed after giving birth. She has the help of another woman who appears to be waiting to serve her. Mary’s father, St. Joachim, appears to be speaking to his wife. Another woman is shown in the icon holding the infant. St. Anna gazes at her newborn daughter.

It is believed that St. Anna was beyond childbearing age and considered barren. The birth is wondrous. The feast day calls us to remember that with God all things are possible. In addition, we marvel at the fact that the coming of the Son of God was not a random event, but rather planned carefully and orchestrated through the centuries by the many who sought to fulfill God’s will in their lives. The feast day is celebrated September 8/21.
When she was three years old, Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna, brought Mary to the temple to be consecrated, a common practice for Jewish families of that time. After the high priest Zachariah greeted Mary in the temple, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to lead her into the Holy of Holies. Everyone was amazed at this, because only the high priest was allowed to enter this sacred dwelling place of God, and then only once a year. This sacred event is celebrated on November 21/December 4, when the faithful sing, “The all-pure temple of the Savior today entered the temple of the Lord; for she is the heavenly tabernacle.”
Nativity of Our Lord
December 25 / January 7

In the Nativity icon, we often see the child Jesus wrapped in white swaddling clothes with the darkness of the cave behind Him. The contrast of light (white) with dark reminds us of the light of wisdom that Jesus brought into a world darkened by sin. In one corner, we see Satan, disguised as an old man, casting doubts in Joseph’s mind about the virgin birth. In the other corner, we see women bathing the infant Jesus, teaching us that He was truly human.
In the months before Jesus began His ministry, His cousin John the Baptist was urging people to repent of their sins and accept baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus was baptized, although He was sinless.

The icon shows us Jesus submerged in the water, with small creatures representing evil spirits fleeing from Christ. John the Baptist, in crude clothing, is performing the baptism. Angels stand nearby with bowed heads, indicating that they will serve Jesus. The heavens are open, indicating God’s presence, and the Holy Spirit is pictured as a dove. The event is celebrated as the first manifestation of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mark 1:9–13).
Forty days after His birth, Jesus was presented to the Temple as was the custom. Joseph and Mary offered two young pigeons as a sacrifice. Simeon and Anna were prophets in the temple at Jerusalem. Simeon represents all that is good in the Old Testament. He was promised that he would not see death until he beheld the anointed of the Lord (Luke 2:26). Anna is shown in the icon as well. Joseph holds the offering, and Mary is handing the child to Simeon. Simeon holds the child as if on a throne. The hymn, “Now, O Master, You can dismiss Your servant in peace,” is taken from the words of Simeon. The event calls us to discover our Lord as the awaited Messiah, and to accept Him as Savior.
The Lord is with thee.
The Theotokos, hail, o full of grace. Wherefore, go we shout with him to son of the Virgin, and Angel proclameth the Annunciation of the mystery from and the manifestation of our salvation, Today is the beginning of our salvation.
Troparion

Annunciation
March 25 / April 7

God took on flesh within the womb of Mary. We celebrate this event as the Annunciation, or “announcing.” In the icon, the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she has “found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). Although Mary did not know how she could conceive since she did not know a man, she had faith in God, and replied, “Let it be to me, according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

We call Mary the Theotokos, or God-bearer. For us, this feast is a reminder that we, too, are called to “bear God,” or “carry God” to others.
The day before Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, He raised Lazarus from the dead. The crowds were anxious to see Jesus and lined His route with palm branches and their cloaks. Children are pictured as small adults around the event. The event stands as a symbol of triumph, just before Holy Week.

Palm branches are blessed on this Sunday. In the regions where palms do not grow, pussy willows are blessed. For us, the event is a call to recognize Jesus as our King.
Pascha

In the icon of the Resurrection, Jesus steps on two planks that represent the doors of Hades, the place of the dead. In the dark area are locks and keys, symbols of bondage, indicating that man is no longer bound by sin and death. Jesus has burst the doors of dark Hades and stands victorious in glorious garments of white. He pulls from their tombs Adam and Eve, who represent all the righteous who lived before Christ.
As Jesus blessed them, He spoke these words: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

In the icon, you see the disciples with the Theotokos lifting her arms to point to her son, Jesus Christ, enthroned as ruler of all. “Ruler of all” is Pantocrator in Greek and is the name of the icon we see in the center dome of many Orthodox churches. For us, the Feast of the Ascension is the assurance of Christ’s living presence with us, and his sitting at the right hand of the Father in glory. The feast calls us to recognize Him as Lord and Master of all that exists.
Descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost)
50 Days After Pascha

“And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

In the icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, twelve apostles are gathered despite the death of Judas. The twelfth, seated to the right of the center, is the apostle Paul, who was not at the event His place in the icon teaches us that Paul was equal to the original apostles. The little man in the center is Cosmos, or “the world.” He sits in darkness and holds twelve scrolls as if ready to receive the teaching of the disciples, who will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, enlighten the world.
Jesus led Peter, James, and John to Mount Tabor. He was transfigured, or changed, before their eyes. His face became as dazzling as the sun. His clothes were radiant. A voice came from heaven: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Matthew 17:5)

Though Christ was truly God, He shielded His divinity in His humanity. On the mount, He revealed His divine nature. On this feast we celebrate the divinity of Christ. We celebrate the fact that we are called to be transformed into an ever-closer likeness of Christ through Holy Spirit.
As with other feast days of the Theotokos, we find the event described in sources other than Scripture. We know that Jesus, as He hung on the cross, commanded St. John the Evangelist to take care of the Theotokos.

In the icon, her death is portrayed as peaceful. She is surrounded by the apostles. Christ is shown holding the soul of the Theotokos, ready to transfer her to life eternal. God’s plan for the salvation of mankind is completed with the bringing of the Theotokos, truly a human being, into heaven. Mary’s entry into heaven paves the way for our own. We celebrate the event on August 15/28.
Troparion

O Foremost in the ranks of Apostles, and teach-

The Great Mercy:
all to grant safety to the world and to our souls
ers of the world, intercede with the Master of
For the saintly Peter and Paul,

Troparion

Saints Peter and Paul
June 29

When Jesus was still on earth,