

It's About Time

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Happy New Year! The ecclesiastical year, that is – the most ancient calendar of the Church begins, not on January 1, but on September 1.

Our times are a gift from a loving God who seeks our communion. He wants to spend time with us; and not someday in the pie-in-the-sky by-and-by time, but now time, in our daily lives.

He has given us the gift of time so that we can make sense of our lives in this physically bound universe. We live through moments that add up to days and weeks and years; and we superimpose months and parse our moments and days into seconds, minutes, hours.

But the most fundamental unit of time isn't a chronological division, but simply "NOW." All of our lives is a series of "NOW." Tomorrow isn't tomorrow when we get there; it's just "NOW" again. If you're not living life "NOW," you'll never live it.

Jesus told us that eternal life is to know him and his father. That's not something that might happen someday. That's something that happens "NOW," or it never happens.

The Kingdom of God isn't "THEN" when we die and go to heaven. It's "NOW." The Kingdom is an eternal "NOW" in which God is given glory and the Lamb stands before the throne appearing as a slain offering, from before the beginning of time. All of God's self-offering is present "NOW." It's not a past historical event or a future expectation; it's "NOW."

Time is a created reality. There is nothing beyond or above God that imposes time on God. He chooses to operate within the time he created in order to commune with his creatures, but he is only subject to time when he chooses to be. Time is his servant, not his master.

In our created order, the rotation of the earth causes a cycle of light and dark that we call "days." The revolution of the earth about the sun causes a cycle of growth and stasis that we call "years."

Within each "day" we have the rising of the sun and it's setting. In between, we have the zenith we call "noon" and the nadir we call "midnight." Historically, the day was further divided into "watches" of about 3-hour duration that defined the "hours."

"From the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, the name of the Lord is to be praised." "Seven times a day will I praise you!" sang the prophet and king David. "I will rise at midnight give thanks to you."

Our forebears knew the wisdom of punctuating the day with prayer. While we should pray "without ceasing," the practice of setting aside certain times within the day to commune with God, interrupting our otherwise-tyrannical pursuit of our daily bread in order to pursue the bread that came down from heaven, the One who is truly worth the pursuit, makes us live our professed priority of the life in Christ.

The prayers of the "hours," generally around 6 and 9 a.m. and noon; 3 and 6 p.m.; again at 9 p.m. before retiring; and at "midnight" (which was really about 2 a.m. in a society before chronological precision)

fulfilled the intention of David. Acknowledging the difficulty of praying so often during a busy workday, we often enjoin the faithful to pray in the morning upon arising and in the evening before sleeping, and to pray over meals. And if you have to visit the facilities in the middle of the night, what better way to occupy the mind than communing with God: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Our days accumulate into weeks, reflecting the wisdom of our Creator who rested on the seventh day. On that day, we withdraw from the frenetic pace of our participation in God's creative act to worship him and reflect on his glory and goodness.

The Church in its scripture teaches us that the Jewish sabbath is fulfilled and consummated in the rest of Christ in the tomb, when his body awaited the resurrection while his soul went down to Hades and kicked open its gates, leveling its walls so that they could never be reconstituted for human bondage. His body was raised from the dead on Sunday, bringing to an end the age of sin's domination and ushering in the *eschaton*, the end of all things.

It is a day outside time, neither the first nor the seventh day of the week, but the "eighth day." Sunday is the day of resurrection, the day of fulfillment, the day on which the end of the former age is remembered and on which the coming of Christ the King is announced and the new age of the Kingdom of God is instituted.

Within the week, Wednesday is remembered as the day humans, in the person of Judas, betrayed our God and sought his death. Friday is remembered as the day we killed the God who came to deliver us from sin and death. Appropriately, these are days on which we abstain from satiety and gaiety. We fast in humility and repentance for our own sins and seek grace to turn from them to the life and love of God.

Our years cycle through the feasts of the Church, when we celebrate God's goodness and self-outpouring. Christmas, Pascha or Easter, Christ's ascension to glory, Pentecost – the descent of the Holy Spirit – and the celebrations of the great events of our salvation and the promise of our glorification are remembered as they recur in our circuit around the sun.

These make present to us events that occurred in the historical past or that we await in the historical future. But because the Kingdom of God is the eternal "NOW," the Body of Christ resonates with their immediacy (as in, "not mediated" – nothing in between) and reveals to the faithful particular aspects of the self-outpouring of God with the concomitant grace to live in the light of these realities. Christ is Risen! Christ is Born! Christ is Ascended! Our mother the Church encourages the faithful to live the reality of the life of the Kingdom "NOW."

Time is racing by. Each moment that flits past is irretrievably gone. Each beat of our heart is a singular occurrence, never to be repeated, never to be regained. What I did with it is over and done, indelibly inscribed in the Book of Life. I can repent, change direction, and proceed differently in the next moment that lies before me, but I cannot alter the inscriptions on my own heart and the heart of God.

The God who is love draws near to me and gives me his love. I can receive that love and reciprocate it, or I can spurn it and treat it as if it did not exist. Or I can presume on it and use its life-giving force as if it were my own, using God for my ends.

He allows any of these, in his desire for us, his yearning that we freely and hungrily draw near to him and open ourselves to his love, receive it and return it, and allow it to spill out of us to those around us. How will I respond? Will I treat this gift as treasure or trash? Will I hear “well done, good and faithful servant”; or will I hear “depart from me – I never knew you”? It’s up to me.