

# Meditation on the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

## The History of the Liturgical Celebration of Mary's Birth

The Churches of Constantinople in the East and Rome in the West celebrate liturgies in honor of Mary's birth from the sixth and seventh centuries on. The origin of the liturgy is traced to the consecration of the church in Jerusalem in the sixth century that has been traditionally known as St. Ann's Basilica. The original church built in the fifth century was a Marian basilica erected on the spot known as the shepherd's field and thought to have been the home of Mary's parents. After its destruction and reconstruction in the sixth century, the basilica was named in honor of St. Ann.

By the seventh century the liturgy was also celebrated in Rome where it had been introduced by monks from the East. From there, it spread throughout the West, and by the thirteenth century the liturgy had developed to a solemnity with a major octave (eight days of commemoration prior to the liturgy) and a solemn vigil which prescribed a fastday. Pope Sergius I (687-701) established a procession (a *litania*) from the Roman Forum to St. Mary Major for the feast.

During the reform of St. Pius X, the octave was simplified, and in 1955 Pius XII abolished it. The liturgy received the rank of feast.

The date, September 8, was chosen as the eighth day (an octave) after the former Byzantine New Year. Although Mary's birth was celebrated on various dates throughout the centuries, September 8 predominated. The feast celebrating Mary's Immaculate Conception, December 8, (a liturgy instituted later) was set to correspond to nine months before Mary's birth.

In the East, Mary's birthday is celebrated as one of the twelve great liturgies. The title for the liturgy in the East: "The Birth of Our Exalted Queen, the Birthgiver of God and Ever-Virgin Mary." Around 560, Romanos the Melodist wrote a Kontakion for the celebration. The oldest existing sermon for the liturgy was written by St. Andrew of Crete