

Why Do We Do That? Liturgical Colors

It is always my hope and goal to increase our parish education, and to periodically ask the question, “why do we do that?” in regards to various aspects of parish and liturgical life. It is my hope that we, as a parish, can gain a deeper understanding of our own tradition, and understand why we, as Orthodox, do what we do. In this installment, I’m discussing the question of liturgical colors, which has been asked of me several times over the last few months. I hope that what follows is educational and edifying!

Worship in the Orthodox Church has sometimes been called a “sensory experience,” because it interacts with all five senses. We hear the chanting, we smell the incense, we taste Holy Communion, and we touch the icons. We do all of these, but the Liturgy is also a feast for the eyes. The Church building itself is filled to the brim with images and symbols, imagery which draws deep theological truths to mind.

One very important way that the Church conveys meaning is through Her use of color. Liturgical colors have been in use by the Church for many centuries and have varied from place to place and over time. The current color scheme that the Russian Church utilizes (white, red, gold, blue, green, purple, and black), is an adaptation of the Roman Catholic color usage, and was adopted during the 17th and 18th centuries.

This was a time when the Seminaries in Russia were largely controlled by Roman Catholic Jesuit Priests, and the Church Herself was under the direction of the Tsars, many of whom had very western influences and ideas. The colors were introduced and they stuck! This color scheme was, and is, a prominent difference between the Russian and Byzantine (Greek) traditions. The older Byzantine tradition does not specify specific colors for certain days, but rather only that the color on a certain day be “light” or “dark.”

In liturgical use, colors are assigned certain meanings, and thus are then assigned to different Feasts and Seasons throughout the year depending on what that commemoration is meant to convey. In modern Russian practice, colors correspond to the time of year and the Feast(s) being celebrated and are changed at the After-feast. The practice of leaving colors for months at a time, or “block colors” is actually a Carpatho-Russian practice, and not strictly a “high” Russian one.

The Meaning of the Liturgical Colors

WHITE



The original color for vestments was white, and this practice of only wearing white vestments can still be prominently seen in the Coptic (Egyptian) tradition. White is the color of purity, cleanness, glory, light, salvation and resurrection. Thus, white is worn on all Great Feasts of the Lord (Epiphany/Theophany, Christmas, Transfiguration, Pascha, Ascension), as well as funerals. White is also intended to remind us of our baptism, which is why the under-robe (sticharion) of a priest is usually white.

GOLD



Gold is the color which we see the most in the Russian liturgical color scheme. It is worn on Sundays for most of the year because each Sunday is a “little Pascha,” and should be joyous and bright. Other times when gold is specified are: Feasts of Prophets, Feasts of Apostles, Feasts of Holy Hierarchs, or when no other color is specified.

PURPLE



Purple is a color with an interesting history. In the Old Roman world in which Christ lived, it was a symbol of great power, indeed royalty. One would only see members of the Royal Family or high officials wearing purple, as it was extremely expensive to make due to the costliness of the dye. Purple, however, also became a symbol of repentance. This is primarily because of the purple robe of mockery which was placed on the shoulders of Christ before His crucifixion. So, purple is worn during Great Lent, specifically on weekends of Lent.

BLUE



Blue is the color most often associated with the Virgin Mary, and denotes purity. Thus, is worn on Feasts of the Theotokos, Presentation of the Lord, Annunciation, Feasts of Bodiless Powers, and on the Feasts of Virgins.

GREEN



Green is the liturgical color seen the least often in the Russian Liturgical Calendar. Green is the symbol of life, springtime, and growth. Green, then, is worn Palm Sunday, Pentecost, Holy Spirit Day, Feasts of Monastic Saints, Feasts of Ascetics, and Feasts of Prophets

RED



Red is the color of blood and fire. It is worn on Feasts of Martyrs, Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Advent, Feasts of Angels, and Elevation of the Holy Cross

BLACK



Black has long been associated with mourning, loss, and deep solemnity. Black is a color that is historically particular to the Russian and Roman Catholic liturgical traditions, and, until recently, was not worn in any other local Churches. Black is worn on weekdays of Great Lent, and during Holy Week.

Liturgical Year Colors



September 1 – September 7 Beginning of Church Year	Yellow
September 8 – September 12 Nativity of the Theotokos (Sept 8)	Blue
September 14 – September 21 Elevation of the Cross (Sept 14)	Red
September 22 – November 14 OPEN	Yellow
November 15 – November 20 Nativity Fast	Red
November 21 – November 25 Presentation of the Theotokos (Nov 21)	Blue
November 26 – December 24 Nativity Fast (Dec 25)	Red
December 25 – January 14 Nativity of the Lord and Theophany (Jan 6)	White
January 15 – February 1 OPEN	Yellow
February 2 – February 9 Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Feb 2)	Blue
February 10 to Cheese-fare Sunday OPEN	Yellow
March 25 The Annunciation (Mar 25)	Blue

The Great Fast & Great and Holy Week

Great Fast and Great & Holy Week	White
Weekday Services of Great Lent	Black
Weekend Services of Great Lent	Purple
Weekend before Pascha Services of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday	Green
Great Thursday Morning Vespers Divine Liturgy	Red
Pascal Service through Saturday before Pentecost	White

Normal Liturgical Calendar

Pentecost through Leave-taking	Green
Apostles Fast and Feast of Peter and Paul (June 29)	Red
August 1 – August 15 Dormition Fast through Dormition of Theotokos	Black
August 16 – August 31 Normal	Purple