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The Holy Archangel Gabriel

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"O leader of Angels, wise Gabriel, minister of the glory of God, and divine defender of the world" (Kontakion)

On July 26 on the Gregorian calendar (which is July 13 on the Julian Calendar) we celebrate a Feast which seems to just come out of the blue. It is the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel. Usually a Synaxis follows a major feast day as a liturgical assembly in honour of the Saint or Saints involved in the primary celebration. Such is not the case here. Why it is celebrated on this day is a bit of a mystery.



There are sources that say that the reason is that July 13/26 gives the faithful an opportunity to celebrate the angelic person and ministry of Gabriel more fully than could be the case on the day after the Feast of the Annunciation (Mar. 24/April 7) which usually coincides with the Great Fast before Pascha. And in fact the day after that Feast *is* celebrated as the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel, so that the summer date is a second Synaxis. But why choose this date in July rather than any other?

Other sources say that this day was chosen in honour of the dedication of a particular Church in Constantinople, and add that the original date of this celebration was October 16/29.

Perhaps a clue to this mystery of the origin of this second Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel may be found in the miraculous event which occurred on Mount Athos near Karyes, the administrative centre of this monastic colony, sometime around 980. A monk who identified himself as Gabriel paid an unexpected visit to another monk, whose name is known only to

God, and together they sang the Vigil Service in that monk's cell.

The mysterious visitor added these words to the familiar prayer: "More honourable than the Cherubim": "It is truly meet to bless you, O Theotokos ever blessed, and most pure, and the Mother of our God". The delighted monk asked his guest to write out these words so that he might remember them. As there was no paper, Gabriel inscribed them on a roof tile with his finger, writing upon it as though it were warm wax. The monk realized that his visitor must be the Archangel himself. The Icon before which they sang glowed with uncreated light and was given the beginning words of this prayer as its name: "Axion estin" ("It is truly meet"). This Icon remains to this day in the Protaton, the Church of the Dormition, at Karyes. Its feast day is celebrated on June 11/24.

The celebration of the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel is said to date from this time. It falls exactly 32 days after the feast day of the Icon. Does this number, consisting of eight times four – the number of eternity multiplied by the four points of the compass – represent the universality and timelessness of the ministry of Archangel Gabriel, whose name means "Mighty Man of God"?

This "divine defender of the world" as the Kontakion calls him is the first Angel mentioned by name in the Holy Scriptures. We find this in the Book of Daniel, chapters 8 and 9. He becomes very prominent in New Testament history, announcing to Zechariah the birth of St. John the Forerunner, and to Mary the birth of the Messiah, the Mighty Man of God, which Gabriel's very name proclaims.

The Archangel Gabriel is also much honoured in Islam since Muslim tradition credits him with revealing the Qu'ran to Muhammad and links other important events in its sacred history with him as well.

By the way, it may be Gabriel who introduced the smile on to faces depicted in Western Art. The most widely known portrait with a smile is the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci completed in 1519. However it is preceded by more than two and a half centuries by this statue of a smiling Archangel Gabriel erected in the Reims Cathedral in France (1240).



A number of contemporary films presenting Gabriel in a whole spectrum of relationships to God, his brother Angels and humans show that this "minister of the glory of God" continues to capture the interest and imagination of the people of this world which he sustains, enlightens and defends.

May we find cause to smile in hope and in joy at the recollection of this wonderful Friend and Angelic Brother who continually sees and serves God with joy, obedience and love. May we, too, be inspired to do as he does. Amen.