

## Social Conventions

It's October, which means "the eighth month". Of course, we know that it's not the eighth month, but rather the tenth. Actually, the problem begins with September, and the rest of the months of the year get pushed "out of order" in their turn: the months designated in Latin as the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth are really the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth.

Isn't that a silly thing? How did it happen? If memory serves, I seem to recall that it all goes back to Roman imperial egos: the months got shoved out of their proper order by self-important Roman emperors, Julius Caesar and his nephew Augustus, who inserted and named July and August after themselves. We have been living with the resulting confusion ever since – that means, for two thousand years! Some mistakes and wrong-headed meddling have very long-lasting effects!

Ukrainian seems to make more sense in this regard. October is *Жовтень*, which seems to come from the adjective *жовтий*, which means yellow. At first glance, this name seems to fit the month of changing leaves pretty well. Perhaps this correspondence can best be seen by the parishioners of our Denver parish, surrounded as they are by the aspens with their golden fall foliage. This correspondence is not as easy to see as one moves northeast within the eparchy and sees more and more maples, whose fall foliage is regal red rather than yellow. Then there are places like Phoenix and Tucson and Honolulu, where parishioners must regard even the Ukrainian nomenclature with mystification since, I imagine, it has little in common with their surroundings. And what about the Ukrainian Catholics in places like Brazil, Argentina, and Australia? They are south of the equator, and this is their springtime! Such confusion! What makes sense for some seems utter foolishness to others.

The poet muses, "What is in a name? A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet." A name is a mere social convention. True, it must be familiar to and accepted by the members of a linguistic group, but the fact remains: it is an artificial construct. Even the name of our beloved *Україна* is an artificial construct: people tell me that it means "the borderland". When I think about this state of affairs, it seems that the name in itself can be seen as a slap in the face, as our very national identity is marginalized, relegated to a bit part on the world stage by a hegemonic *prima donna*. Nonetheless, this ostensibly offensive term has been embraced, even shouted by crowds in a hearty "*Слава Україні!*" Go figure! Language in general is a social convention. Listen to someone say "ninety" in Ukrainian: the choice an individual makes between *дев'ятдесят* and *дев'яносто* can tell you a lot about the speaker and that person's group identity.

Language is not the only social convention; such things are all around us. We do things because we've always done them that way, not because it makes sense to do them that way – and often it does not. Not everything is important, not every detail has to be clung to for dear life. My former provincial used to tell us: a difference that makes no difference is no difference at all. Thomas Jefferson would tell us: in matters of style, go with the flow; in matters of principle, stand firm like a rock. Use your reason, listen to your conscience, and choose what is important.

For some people, Christianity is merely a social convention, something we do because we've always done it that way. I disagree: Christianity is a choice, the most important choice individuals can make – a choice for God, a choice for the good. It makes a difference. So can you.

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