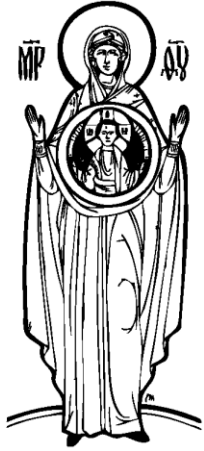




The Nativity Fast in the Home



The Nativity Fast Introduction

THE AMERICAN SHOPPING SEASON is at hand. Some people will spend it jostling for bargains; others will pass the time lamenting the commercialization of Christmas. The Eastern Churches, on the other hand, encourage their faithful to prepare for this feast by increasing their involvement with the things of God.

The Nativity Fast is a joyous one, celebrating the immanent coming of Christ. Since at least the fifteenth century the Byzantine Churches have observed the Nativity Fast for forty days. As St Simeon of Thessalonika explained, “The Nativity Forty-day Fast represents the fast undertaken by Moses, who—having fasted for forty days and forty nights—received the Commandments of God.” As Moses received the Law after his forty-day fast, we will welcome the living Word incarnate at the end of this Fast.

How Eastern Christians keep this season varies. People in Greece and the Middle East, for example, divide the season in two parts. In November and early December they focus on a number of feast days of the Theotokos and the saints. During the second part they emphasize fasting and the liturgical preparation for the feast of the Nativity.

In the Melkite Church today actual fasting formally begins on December 10. Since the Christmas shopping season begins earlier each year, however, you may wish to join those Eastern Christians who

have found the 40-day Fast a refuge from the commercial pressures of our culture.

Many contemporary Eastern writers have encouraged the observance of the Nativity Fast in contrast to the popular Western pre-celebration of Christmas, which focuses on decorating, spending, and partying, and distracts us from celebrating the coming of our Savior. They emphasize preparation for the feast in quietness and a simplified way of life. Instead of a harried pursuit of gifts and cards, the Fast enables believers to focus on the mystery of the Incarnation, the “reason for the season.”

Many see this Fast as essential for us at this time of the year, to shift our focus from ourselves to others, spending less time worrying about our appearance, our cuisine and our home decor in order to use our time in increased communion with God through prayer and caring for the poor.

As with all the Church’s Fasts we are called during these days to make a concerted effort to put God first in our lives through increased *prayer*. We seek to serve our neighbor through more intense *almsgiving*, sharing our time as well as our resources. Through *fasting* we try to distance ourselves from self-indulgence and open more of ourselves to God and to others.

Use the following prayers and reflections every day, as much as you are able, *preferably the evening before the day indicated*. Family meal times are considered the most accessible time to read and discuss the day’s idea. Living out the season day by day is particularly important in families with children, who always need frequent reinforcement of any action or idea we wish to convey.

The hands-on activities included for use with children involve making ornaments out of the symbols associated with the season. Encourage the children to design their own ornaments but know that the discussions and prayers led by their parents will have the most lasting effect making this a memorable season in your family.

This packet contains some material for use on specific days. Other pages reflecting on the Scriptures or the theology of the incarnation may be interspersed throughout the season. These two sets are listed on the following page.

In November you may wish to use these pages every other day or even twice weekly to prepare for the more intense period in December. Adjust the program for use in your parish and your family.

Use these pages on the dates indicated:

November 15 – First Day of the traditional Byzantine Nativity Fast
November 21 – Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple
November 22-25 – After-feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos
Fourth Thursday in November – Thanksgiving Day
November 27 – Our Lady “of the Sign”
December 4 – The Holy Great-Martyr Barbara
December 5 – St Saba the Sanctified
December 6 – St Nicholas the Wonderworker
December 9 – The Maternity of St Anne
December 10 – The Seed Blossoms
Sunday after Dec. 10 – The Holy Prophet Daniel
December 17 – The Three Young Men in the Furnace
Sunday after Dec. 17 – The Genealogy of Christ 1
The Following Day – The Genealogy of Christ 2
December 20 – The Fore-feast of the Nativity 1
December 21 – The Fore-feast of the Nativity 2
December 22 – The Fore-feast of the Nativity 3
December 23 – The Fore-feast of the Nativity 4
December 24 – The Paramony of the Nativity
December 25 – The Nativity of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ
December 26 – After-feast of the Nativity 1
December 27-31 – After-feast of the Nativity 2
January 1 – Feast of the Circumcision
January 2-5 – The Fore-feast of the Theophany

Use these pages as you can throughout the season:

A Time for God 1 – Prayer
A Time for God 2 – Fasting
A Time for God 3 – Sharing
A Time for God 4 – Confession

The Old Testament 1 - The Time Before Christ
The Old Testament 2 - The Prophets

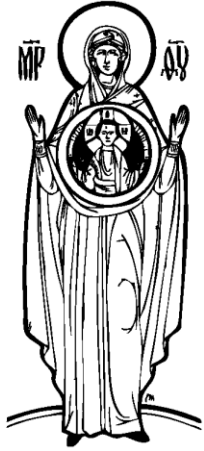
The Incarnation 1 – The Unseen God Revealed
The Incarnation 2 – The Promised Hope Fulfilled
The Incarnation 3 – God Becomes Man
The Incarnation 4 – That Man Might Become God

Behold, the time of our salvation draws near: let the cave be ready, for the Virgin is about to give birth; and you, Bethlehem of Judah, rejoice and be glad, for the Lord will soon shine forth from your midst. Listen, all you mountains and you hills, and all you country of Judah: Christ is coming to save the human race, His creatures, for He is the Lover of mankind. (*Vespers, Sunday before the Nativity*)

The sayings of the Prophets have now been fulfilled, for our God shall be born tomorrow of the Virgin Mary in a fashion past words, and yet shall remain what He was as God before His birth. The Magi come together bearing gifts; the shepherds abide in the fields, and we also sing: “O Lord, born of a Virgin, glory to You!” (*Matins, Sunday before the Nativity*)

Rejoice, O Bethlehem! Make ready, Ephrata! Behold, the Ewe is coming to give birth to the Most High Shepherd, which she bears in her womb. Seeing this, the God-bearing Fathers rejoice and sing with the shepherds, “The Virgin nourishes the Creator with her own milk!” (*Matins, Sunday before the Nativity*)

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



First Day of the Nativity Fast

“Christmas is for the children,” many people say. And, to be sure, there are many aspects of this Great Feast that appeal to children. In our society, however, it seems safe to say that Christmas is for the retailers. Extravagant spending on gifts, decorations, party food and drink – as well as the resulting debt – have become the hallmark of a “good” Christmas for too many in our society.

Christmas is also for the divorce lawyers. In 2007 a British newspaper reported that one in five couples inquire about divorce in January due to the stresses of the holidays. What is wrong with this picture?

Celebrating the Nativity is about remembering the birth of our Savior. Period. The gifts, the decorations, and the rest should point to the spiritual meaning of the feast, not detract from it.

All of the Apostolic Churches spend time before this feast to help people focus on its true meaning. The Western Church has the season of Advent; all the Eastern Churches have a Nativity Fast to help us “lay aside all earthly cares” and look to the things of God. Even in our society Christians can take steps to avoid being trapped in the pre-Christmas frenzy which distracts from this feast for so many:

- Observe this season by a deeper commitment to prayer, fasting and almsgiving according to your circumstances in life.
- Do your Christmas shopping well in advance of the day. Or wait until after Christmas when many things are on sale.

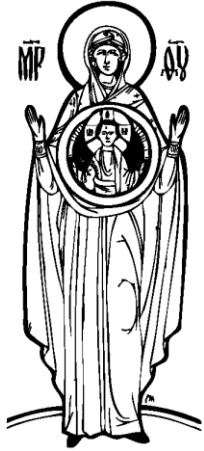
- Defer Christmas parties to the actual time of the feast, Christmas week, rather than before it. Can’t escape an office party? Show up, greet everyone warmly and leave.
- At the least set aside the day before Christmas as a no-shopping day. If it’s not done by the 23rd, leave it for next year.

Because the days before Christmas are so stressful for so many people, the Nativity Fast is essential in keeping us balanced and focused at this time of the year. It invites us to shift our focus from ourselves to others, spending less time worrying about our appearance, our cuisine and our home decor in order to use our time in increased communion with God through prayer and caring for the poor. In the words of the hymn, “Behold, the time of our salvation has drawn near! For Christ is coming, that He might save those whom He had created, in His love for mankind!”

- Reflect on or discuss the things which you usually do in the days before Christmas. Are any of them contrary to the spirit of the Nativity Fast? How can you adjust your schedule and/or expectations to reflect our Church’s practice during this time?
- Every community mounts programs to aid the needy at this time. Learn about the programs in your area. Can you participate in them as part of your Nativity Fast?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament ask them to suggest symbols of the season which they could draw, cut-and-paste or photograph. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray this verse from the fore-feast:

Keep the feast, O Sion! Be glad, O Jerusalem, city of Christ God! Receive your Creator, who is contained in the cave and the manger! Open your gates to me, and, entering therein, I shall behold as an infant wrapped in swaddling-bands Him who holds creation in the palm of His hand, to whom the angels sing with unceasing voices: the Lord and Bestower of life, Who saves our race!

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



A Time for God 1 - Prayer

The greatest Christmas gift the world has ever received is the recovery of intimacy with God. The Bible begins with the story of our first parents who were created in God's image and capable of this intimacy – for 'walking in the Garden' with God, as the Book of Genesis describes it.

Being created in God's image, our ancestors were free to choose God's way or to strike out on their own. They lost their fellowship with God when they disregarded His warning and attempted to become "like God" on their own (the Ancestral Sin of Adam).

Mankind was, in one sense, disconnected from God, having lost the intimacy with Him which we were meant to have. Fasting is our way to express our sorrow at man's loss of familiarity with God in our hearts.

The process of recovering this intimacy with God would climax with the Incarnation our Lord Jesus Christ, but was prepared for centuries as God slowly led our forefathers to discover Him again. Thus one theme running through this Fast is the **remembrance of the time before the Incarnation**. During this liturgical season we celebrate the memory of several Old Testament prophets. Throughout the Old Testament we hear them calling mankind back to a relationship with God.

As the season progresses and we draw closer to the Feast of Christ's Nativity our prayers begin to speak of the great mystery of the Incarnation: that God became man in order that we might become divine. Delighting in this restored communion with God is the heart of our Christmas observance. In the words of the revered Archimandrite Sophrony, "His Being now for us is the first reality, incomparably more evident than all the transient phenomena of this world" (*His Life Is Mine*, p. 22).

- Read the story of life in "God's Garden" (Gen 2:4-25). Reflect on how the image of a garden speaks of familiarity with God.
- Elsewhere in Genesis we are told that "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:28). Explore what being "in the image of God" might mean. How can our life reflect being in His image?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a tree or a garden and/or a man and woman. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray these verses from the Triodion:

In Your abundant compassion and mercy, O Fashioner of the creation and Maker of all, You took me from the dust and gave me life, commanding me to sing Your praises with Your angels.

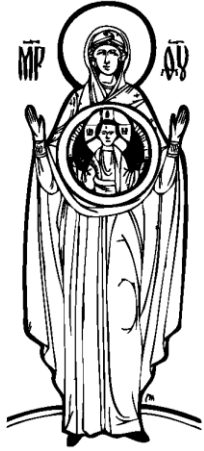
Glory to You, O our God: Glory to You!

~In the wealth of Your goodness, O Creator and Lord, You planted in Eden the sweetness of Paradise. You directed me to take my delight in fair and pleasing fruits that never pass away.

Glory to You, O our God: Glory to You!

~Virgin and bearer of God, by descent you are a daughter of Adam, but by grace the Mother of Christ our God. I am an exile from Eden: call me back again!

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



A Time for God 2 – Fasting

The Book of Genesis continues with a catalog of sins. In chapter 4 we read of jealousy and murder in the story of Cain and Abel (“*Am I my brother’s keeper?*”) and vengeance in the threats of Lamech (“*Wives of Lamech, listen to my speech! For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*”)

By chapter 6 the situation was critical. “*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart... But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD*” (Gen 6: 5, 6, 8).

Humanity’s distance from God inevitably leads to society’s decline and eventual demise. St Paul summarized the process in his epistle to the Romans: separation from the true God leads to idolatry and immorality: “*Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts...*” (Rom 1:21-24).

Many feel that modern society has gone the same route, moving further and further away from God and asserting their independence in

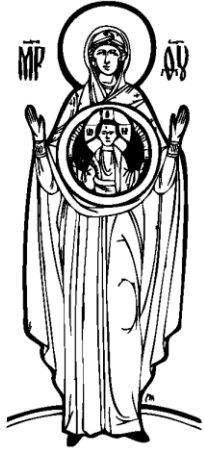
ever more perverse ways. The same may be true of each of us. When we drift away from God we become increasingly susceptible to all the disordered cravings of our fallen nature: the worst being greed, lust, gluttony, envy, wrath, pride, idleness, and boredom with the things of God.

In our tradition fasting is the dynamic we employ to distance ourselves from the allure of these cravings, called the passions. When we fast we are not saying that certain foods are wrong or unlawful. We are rather echoing by our actions the words of Christ when He was tempted: “*It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’*” (Mt 4:4).

- As we prepare for Christmas consider making some time for fasting from excess (parties, gifts, etc.) to defend yourselves against the passions (greed, gluttony, lust, envy, etc).
- Read the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-15). Note that Abel offered the *firstborn* of his flock and God accepted it. Cain offered “*some of his crop*” but God was not pleased with Cain’s offering. What do we learn from this passage about what we offer to the Lord: is it the first-fruits (off the top) or some of what we have gathered, as an afterthought?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a loaf of bread or other food (e.g. a hamburger) with the words of Christ (Mt 4:4). Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray this verse from the Triodion:

It is true that the Lord, my Creator, took dust from the earth and, with His life-giving breath, gave me a soul and life, honoring me and setting me on the earth as the king of all visible things, enjoying the life of angels. But Satan, the Deceiver, in the guise of a serpent, induced me to eat of the forbidden fruit, separating me from God’s glory, delivering me to the earth through death. But since You are my compassionate Lord, O God, call me back to You!

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



A Time for God 3 – Sharing

Christmas, they say, is a time for gift-giving. In practice our focus is often more on *gift-getting*. The commercial society in which we live barrages us with images of things, which the advertisers tell us we *must* have in order to live the good life. This onslaught feeds our egos: it leads us to believe that if we have all this stuff we will be happy.

Our weekly and seasonal Fasts help us to put our egos in a better perspective. By refraining from satisfying every whim through fasting and almsgiving, we are reminded that, if we have been blessed with more than we actually need, it is not so that we may outshine our friends and relatives but use it for doing good. As St Paul writes, “*God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work*” (2 Cor 9:8).

Almsgiving is the dedication of our “abundance” for good works. In the early Church this meant helping the poor in one’s local community and in sister Churches in other parts of the world. Those same concerns still exist today, particularly in the Churches of the strife-torn Middle East and the countries of the “third world.” Instead of spending an inordinate amount of money on Christmas decorations, parties and gifts, consider devoting some of that money to almsgiving in the spirit of the Nativity Fast.

Our holiday will not be as lavish as we might wish, but will surely be more in the spirit of Christ who “*though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich*” (2 Cor 8:9).

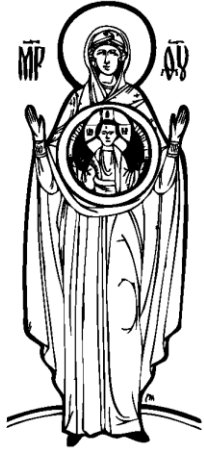
- Humorist Will Rogers said back in the 1920s, “Too many people spend money they haven’t earned, to buy things they don’t want to impress people they don’t like.” Is there anything in your way of life that reflects Will Roger’s comment?
- Many people of all faiths today have been drawn to what they call “voluntary simplicity”: living in a way that is outwardly simple but inwardly rich. In what does your family find its “riches” – outward possessions or the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts?
- Read Mt 25:31-46. Discuss on which “side” your family members think they would be placed.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a wrapped Christmas gift inscribed “For the poor.” Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray these verses from the Triodion:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: let us feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, visit those in prison and the sick. Then the Judge of the earth will say even to us: “Come, you whom My Father has blessed, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you!”

v. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

Through the action of the Holy Spirit, you contained within your womb the Creator of all, your God and your Maker, O pure Virgin. While remaining virgin, you gave birth to Him. We exalt Him as we sing your praises, O Palace of the King of Glory and pledge of the world’s redemption!

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



A Time for God 4 – Confession

The observance of the Fast is about curbing the ego so that we can focus more on the mystery of Christ's coming to the world. We pray, fast and give alms to curb our inclination to satisfy our wants at every turn. But if we are deciding on our own how we will do these things are we not simply feeding the ego we seek to curb?

Doctors are always warned not to treat their own illnesses; the same is true for every sincere believer. We need the help of a spiritual guide because making spiritual decisions on one's own can be dangerous. As the revered twentieth-century Greek elder St Paisios of the Holy Mountain advised, "Do not believe your thoughts, neither when they tell you that you are terrible, nor when they tell you that you are a saint."

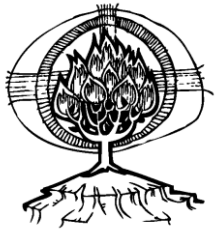
The ideal spiritual guide is a person who knows God, lives our Church's Tradition and knows you deeply. By opening our lives to Christ in Holy Confession in the company of a priest we avoid the delusion of spiritual self-reliance. Receiving the blessing of absolution we approach the feast with a clean heart and a renewed spirit.

As children we may have been taught that confession was a matter of "saying your sins" so that they can be erased. Going to confession is not like paying a parking ticket: get it done and forget about it! It is meant to be a sharing of one's inner life with Christ through the person of the priest so that we may experience Christ's love in every aspect of our lives.

- Reflect how you love God "*with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*" and how you "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mt 22:37, 39).
- Consider this confession from the Armenian Liturgy. How much does it reflect your understanding of human sinfulness:
"I have sinned by the seven transgressions of the deadly sins and all their forms, namely by pride, envy, anger, laziness, covetousness, gluttony and lust. I have sinned against God. I have also sinned against all the commandments of God, both positive and prohibitive; for I have neither performed the positive commands, nor abstained from those things that are prohibited. I accepted the laws, but was slothful in keeping them. I was called to the profession of Christianity but was found unworthy of it by my deeds. While knowing the evil, I willingly gave in to it, and I purposely kept away from good deeds."
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a hand in blessing and the words "I confess to God." Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray these verses from the rite of confession:
Have mercy on us, O God: have mercy on us. At a loss for any defense we sinners offer this prayer to You, the Master: have mercy on us.

Lord, have mercy on us, for we have put our trust in You. Rise not in anger against us; remember not our transgressions, but in the depth of Your mercy look upon us now and save us from our enemies, for You are our God and we are Your people. We are all the work of Your hands and we constantly call upon Your name.

Lord, have mercy!



The Old Testament 1

The Time before Christ

The entire Old Testament period was a preparation for Christ and helps us focus our attention on how we are called to be ready for His ultimate triumph. The Nativity Fast is a good time to reflect on what the Scriptures say preceded the Incarnation.

Page through your Bible using the following timeline as a guide. If there are children in your family help them design appropriate tree ornaments for these periods. Note that all the dates older than 1000 BC are approximate.

1 - ***Before Time*** – The Word was with God before anything material came to be (John 1:1-4). It is through this eternal Word that our material creation comes into being.

2 - ***The Pre-History of the Israelites*** – The creation of our universe... the human race falls away from communion with God, life on earth as we know it begins (Genesis 1-3) . . . sin prevails and increases until Noah and the Flood, (Gen 4-9) . . . the rise of Middle Eastern peoples (Gen 10, 11) . . . Abraham and his sons Isaac and Jacob (Gen 12-36).

3 - ***Israel in Egypt (1900-1446 BC)*** – Joseph sold into slavery by his jealous brothers brings them into Egypt (Gen 37-50)... the Israelites prosper, then are enslaved (Exodus 1, 2).

4 – ***The Exodus from Egypt (1450-1400 BC)*** – The call of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, beginnings of Judaism: the Ten Commandments, the establishment of the priesthood and erection of the tabernacle (Ex 2-40, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). This is the formative experience of Israel.

5 – ***The Promised Land 1400-1050 BC*** – The Israelites conquer (Joshua) and settle more and more of the Promised Land, governed by tribal elders or Judges (Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1-7).

6 - ***The United Kingdom (1050-931 BC)*** – under Saul, David and Solomon. This is the Golden Age of the Israelite nation. (1 Sam 8-31; 1 Kings 1-11, 1 Chronicles).

7 – ***The Kingdom Divided (931-590 BC)*** – The kingdom is divided in two: north and south, Israel and Judah... increased squabbling and pagan influences (1 Kings 12- 17, 2 Chronicles, Prophets) Israel is conquered by Assyria and then Judaea by Babylon.

8 - ***The Babylonian Captivity (588-537 BC)*** –The Jews are deported to Babylon until the Persians defeat the Babylonians and allow the Jews to return to their country and rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1-6). Many Jews remain in Babylon and prosper there (Esther).

9 – ***Judaea Restored (535-330 BC)*** – the Old Testament is compiled and Jewish life is revived (Ezra, Nehemiah) under Persian rule.

10 - ***Greek Rule (333 – 164 BC)*** – Alexander the Great defeats the Persians and extends Greek rule throughout the Middle East. In 175 the Greek ruler of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, tries to abolish the Jewish religion. The Jews revolt and recover Jewish Independence (1 to 4 Maccabees), which lasts until 63 BC.

11 – ***Roman Rule (63 BC on)*** – The Romans seize control of Syria. The Jewish kingdom becomes the Roman province of Palestine.

- Pray this verse from the canon of the Nativity:

You have shone forth from the tribe of Judah, O Christ. You are the expectation of the nations whom Jacob foretold of old. You have come to overthrow the power of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria, transforming falsehood into godly faith. Glory to Your power, O Lord!

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



The Old Testament 2: The Prophets

During the Nativity Fast we commemorate the prophets **Obediah** (11/19), **Nahum** (12/1), **Habakkuk** (12/2), **Zepheniah** (12/3), **Daniel** and the **Three Young Men** in the Furnace (12/17). On the second Sunday before the feast we remember all those in sacred history who came before Christ and prepared the way for Him – His forefathers and ours.

Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, begins with the stories of the creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. Genesis concludes their tragic story with these words addressed to the serpent: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head while you strike at his heel”* (Gen 3:15). Many Fathers saw this as the first heralding of the Messiah’s victory over sin and death (the “proto-gospel”). Satan’s apparent defeat of Christ on the cross is but a striking of His heel while Christ’s striking at his head is His ultimate defeat of Satan. It would take countless generations – from the beginning of humanity, through the years of both Old and New Testaments and the subsequent history of this age – for this event to be fulfilled.

The prophets described in the Old Testament were active chiefly at the time of the divided Hebrew kingdoms (the six or seven hundred years before Christ). Despite conflicts with the Philistines or the Assyrians, and even in the midst of defeat and exile by the Babylonians and occupation by the Romans, the prophets encouraged the people to trust in God who would provide a deliverer.

After the death and resurrection of Christ the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit came to see these prophecies fulfilled in a decisive way by

Jesus Christ, who delivers all mankind – not just the Jewish people – from its ultimate enemies, sin and death, not just foreign oppressors. As the following quotations show, the apostles considered these prophecies as clearly pointing to the coming of Christ:

- *His Conception* (Isaiah 7:14, cited in Mt 1:23) - “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.”
- *The Place of His Birth* (Micah 5:2, cited in Mt 2:6) - “Bethlehem...out of you shall come a ruler...”
- *The Flight into Egypt* (Hosea 11:1, cited in Mt 2:15) - “Out of Egypt I called my son.”
- *The Slaughter of the Infants* (Jeremiah 31:15, cited in Mt 2:18) - “A voice was heard in Ramah...”
- *His home in Nazareth* (possibly Judges 13:5, cited in Mt 2:23) - “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Other prophecies were frequently cited as pointing to Jesus as the Messiah:

- Numbers 24:17 - “a star shall come forth out of Jacob...”
- Isaiah 11:1 - “There shall come forth a shoot from the root of Jesse...”
- Isaiah 60:5-6 “...they shall bring gold and frankincense”

These citations, and others throughout the Gospels, reflect the early Church’s belief that the entire Old Testament prepared the Jewish people and us to see Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

- Read some of the following prophecies and reflect on how they are fulfilled in Christ: Isaiah 2:3; 6:8; 7:14; 8:8; 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 43:11; 45:21-25; 53:1-10.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste icons of the prophets listed on this page along with their names and the dates of their feasts. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the same verse as yesterday from the canon of the Nativity.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



November 21

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

The Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, the Great Feast we celebrate today, rests on a story found in a second-century work, *The Protoevangelion of James*. This work tells of the birth and infancy of the Theotokos and was revered by the Christians of their day but not considered canonical Scriptures because their content was not at the heart of the apostolic proclamation or the early Creeds.

The prayers and icon of this Feast focus on two elements of the *Protoevangelion* story. In the first, Mary at the age of three is presented to God in the temple at Jerusalem accompanied, as the text reads, “by the daughters of the Hebrews that are undefiled.” There “the priest received her, kissed her and blessed her.”

After describing the scene, the *Protoevangelion* continues: “And Mary was in the temple of the Lord like a dove that is being nurtured: and she received food from the hand of an angel” (8:1). The image of the Virgin receiving food from an angel, often represented in our icon of the Feast, points to the sacred environment in which Mary was raised and which prepared her for her future role as Theotokos.

The second vignette is usually shown in the upper right hand corner of this icon. There Mary sits in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Holy of Holies, ministered to by an angel. According to Jewish Law, “only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year...” (Heb 9:8). It is unthinkable that a child would be not only allowed there but actually live there as the *Protoevangelion* avows.

By placing Mary in the Holy of Holies, the *Protoevangelion* is saying that the way into the Holy Place – the presence of God – now is disclosed. It is Christ, who would be incarnate in the womb of the Theotokos. For this reason the story and its celebration have been embraced by the Tradition as affirming the truth of the Gospel.

God’s people will no longer reach heaven via Jerusalem; rather the heavens have been opened to us and God’s temple, the Theotokos, is become for us the way to heaven through her childbearing. Mary is now the temple of the incarnate God, the one for whom the Jerusalem temple was only a prefiguration.

- The kontakion summarizes the theology of the feast. Mary is proclaimed by the angels as “the heavenly tabernacle.” The tabernacle was the portable holy place which the Hebrews brought with them in the desert until they reached the Promised Land. It was rendered into a more permanent form as the temple. She, not a building, is the holy place where God dwelled.
- Secondly we are told that Mary entered the temple “bringing with her the grace of the Most Holy Spirit.” People went to the temple to encounter God, to receive His blessings. Mary, instead, brings God’s grace with her. She is proclaimed as “full of grace,” even as a child, by the angels themselves. This feast is thus a celebration of the holiness of Mary, sanctified from her earliest days by the Most Holy Spirit who dwelt in her.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a temple with the words “Mary is the Temple who held God.” Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the kondakion of this feast:

The most pure Temple of our holy Savior, and the most precious and bright bridal chamber, the Virgin, sacred treasury of the glory of God, openly appears today in the Temple of the Lord, bringing with her the grace of the Most Holy Spirit. Wherefore, the angels of God are singing: “This is the heavenly Tabernacle!”

Most holy Theotokos, save us!



November 22-25

After-feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos

Each of the Great Feasts in our Church Year has a “fore-feast,” one or more days of preparation, and an “after-feast” which continues the celebration for several days. This after-feast gives us the opportunity to learn more about the feast and its meaning for us.

As we have seen, the birth and early years of the Virgin’s life were described in the *Protoevangelion of James*, a 2nd-century “prequel” to the Gospel events, as we might call it today. We know that in the first and second centuries AD a number of books were written about Christ and His Mother. Some were accepted by all the local Churches as presenting a true portrait of the Messiah. Others were rejected because the Christ they portrayed was not the one who had been preached by the apostles. In some He was a Gnostic philosopher, in other a magician. We call these “apocryphal gospels” and do not see them as the voice of the Holy Spirit to us.

Still other books, *The Protoevangelion of James* among them, were revered by the Christians of their day but not considered canonical Scriptures because their content was not at the heart of the apostolic proclamation or the early Creeds. Their subject matter treated things like Jesus’ physical appearance or the early periods of Christ’s life not covered in the Gospels. They may be true, but not central to our faith.

The birth and early years of the Theotokos are important for us because they point to the simple fact that the mother of the Savior is at last with us, beginning our journey to Bethlehem and the celebration of Christ’s birth. The feasts of Mary’s Nativity (Sept 8) and her Entrance

into the Temple tell us that Christ’s coming is at hand. They are preludes to the coming of Christ who took flesh in her womb.

Add some verses from the canon of this feast to your prayers during these days saying “*Most holy Theotokos, save us*” after each verse:

~He who holds all things by His Word heard the prayers of the Just. In His goodness, He delivered them from barrenness and granted them the Cause of our joy.

~Wishing to make His salvation known among all nations, the Lord has chosen the unwedded Virgin from among mankind to be a sign of reconciliation and to re-create the human race.

~Being the dwelling-place of grace in which are stored the treasures of the ineffable plan of God for salvation, O pure Virgin, you partake of the most pure delights in the Temple.

~When it received you as a royal diadem, O Bride of God, the Temple shone with splendor and gave way to the higher things, seeing the prophecies being fulfilled in you.

~Let us keep this spiritual solemnity, O faithful, reverently celebrating the Theotokos who is truly more holy than the heavenly powers.

~O faithful, with spiritual canticles let us sing of the Mother of Light, for today she is seen entering into the Temple of God.

~The spotless Ewe-lamb, the dove without blemish, was presented to the Temple of the Lord, to dwell therein and become the all-pure Theotokos.

~The Temple of God makes her entrance into the Temple of the Law. She is the heavenly Tabernacle from whom the Light of God shines upon us who are in darkness.

~A child in the flesh, but mature in spirit, the holy Ark enters into the Temple of the Lord where she is to be nourished by the grace of God.

~By your prayers, O Woman worthy of our hymns, deliver us who have recourse to you from all temptations endangering our souls, O Mother of Christ our God.

Most holy Theotokos, save us!



November 26
Thanksgiving Day

Since the time of the American Revolution various states, the Continental Congress and later the federal government have declared national days of thanksgiving. Since the time of Abraham Lincoln it has become customary to observe an annual Thanksgiving Day at the end of November. The current date, the fourth Thursday in November, was set in 1941.

The principal reason cited for proclaiming the first national day of thanksgiving was because “it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor” (Pres. George Washington, 1789).

Specific blessings mentioned by various Presidents over the years include the “opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for [the people’s] safety and happiness” (1789), the treaty ending the War of 1812, and the maintenance of the Union despite the Civil War (1863).

President Lincoln affirmed in very Biblical language that God is the source of any blessings we enjoy: “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”

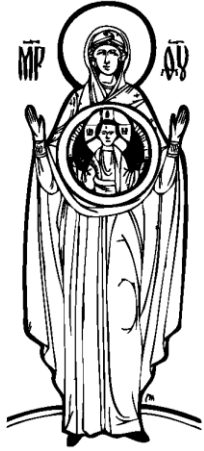
Lincoln then added two dimensions to the observance: repentance and intercession. He asked that Americans “...also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or

sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and union.”

In our time Thanksgiving Day has lost this spiritual outlook. Repentance and even God have no mention in modern presidential proclamations. Rather the day has become a feast of commerce, symbolized by the Macy’s Parade. Consequently there have been anti-Thanksgiving Day protests by those who would focus on the needy in our nation rather than promote consumerism, or by atheists who reject the idea of thanking a God they do not acknowledge.

- Every Divine Liturgy is at heart a Service of Thanksgiving. This is particularly expressed at the beginning of the anaphora when the priest prays: “Out of nothing You brought us into being, and when we had fallen, raised us up again; and You have left nothing undone until You brought us to Heaven and graciously gave us Your future Kingdom. For all these things, we thank You and Your Only-Begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit: for all these blessings, known and unknown, manifest and hidden, that were lavished upon us. We thank You also for this Liturgy which You are pleased to accept from our hands, though there stand before You thousands of archangels and myriads of angels...”
- Attend the Divine Liturgy if it is served in your parish today.
- Write a Thanksgiving Prayer listing the specific blessings of the past year “known and unknown, manifest and hidden” for which you are thankful.
- In the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, ask forgiveness for any signs of “our national perverseness and disobedience” which come to mind and pray also for those who have suffered as a result in the past year.

Glory to You, O our God, glory to You!



November 27

Our Lady "of the Sign"

The icon of the Theotokos depicted on many of these pages is particularly honored today in the Russian Church. It shows the Holy Virgin with her hands raised in prayer and the Lord Jesus in her womb. Because she holds the Creator of all things within her she is described in our Church as "More spacious than the heavens."

The Russians called this icon "of the Sign," recalling the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the coming of a leader who would deliver Israel from the Assyrians: "*The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*" (Is 7:14). The early Church believed that this prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in the conception of Lord Jesus, son of the ever-virgin Mary. The Theotokos pregnant with Christ is the definitive sign of God's love for His creation.

The image of Christ in this icon represents Him, not as a fetus, but rather robed in divine glory, and often holding a scroll, symbolic of his role as teacher. His face is depicted as that of an old man, indicating that He is at one and the same time both fully human and fully the eternal God, one of the Trinity. His right hand is raised in blessing.

Christ is depicted within a *mandorla*, an ancient design of two circles coming together and overlapping one another, symbolizing the

interactions and interdependence of opposing worlds and forces. The early Church adopted this symbol to describe the coming together of heaven and earth in the Incarnation.

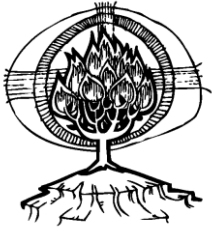
This icon has become a "sign" of something else in the modern world: the sanctity of life in the womb. That Christ is depicted in the womb as an adult reminds many that there is no difference in being between an embryo, a fetus or a neonate. Life is human and sacred from the first moment of conception.

- Read the introduction to Matthew's description of Christ's nativity: Mt 1:18-25. Note that Matthew cites Isaiah's prophecy of the "Sign" as fulfilled in the Incarnation.
- The name *Immanuel* is translated as "God with us." In many churches the hymn from Great Compline, "God is with us," is sung on this feast. The verses of this hymn are taken from Is 8:8-10 and 9:2-7. Read the entire prophecy in its original context.
- If you have an icon "of the Sign" display it prominently, adorned with flowers, for the rest of this Fast. If not, use any icon of the Theotokos.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. Today they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of the Theotokos along with the phrase, "A Virgin shall conceive."
- Pray this hymn from the Octoechos:

In you, O full of Grace, all creation rejoices: the orders of angels and the human race as well. O sanctified Temple, spiritual Paradise and glory of virgins, from whom our God, who exists before all eternity, took flesh and became a little child.

He has taken your womb as His throne, making it more spacious than the heavens! Therefore, O Full of Grace, in you all creation rejoices. Glory to you!

Most holy Theotokos, save us!



The Incarnation 1

The Unseen God Revealed

Many people today describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” They may recognize a “Higher Power” in the universe but not the personal God worshipped in traditional religions. For some this Higher Power is an impersonal energy force that imbues all life.

Peoples in the ancient world believed in personal gods and goddesses, each with their own sphere of responsibility: a tribe, a city, a family or a clan. The Israelites were the only ones to see that their personal God, the God of Israel, was the One who imbues all creation with His own life. *“I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God.... You are My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one”* (Is 44:6, 8).

The Israelites revered their God as the one who appeared to Moses at the Burning Bush and identified Himself as *Yahweh*. This name has been translated in various ways attempting to capture the idea that God is the source of all being. As one version has it, *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM [Yahweh] has sent me to you’”* (Ex 3:14).

Over the centuries that followed the descendants of Moses and the Israelites came to see that this God was neither a tribal protector or an impersonal life-force. God was a living and life-giving Person, but One whom they glimpsed from afar. It was only with the coming of Christ that their picture of God became clearer.

The Lord Jesus identified Himself with the One who revealed Himself to Moses: *“Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”* His

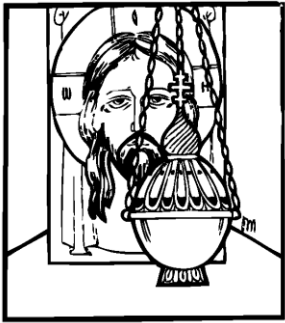
hearers clearly knew what He meant: *“Then they took up stones to throw at Him”* (Jn 8:58, 59).

The One who was revealed dimly through Moses came into our world as one of us in Jesus, making God present as never before: As St John would express it, *“No one has seen God at any time. The only-begotten who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him”* (Jn 1:18).

- Teenager Marjorie Corbman wrote, “My atheism crumbled away as soon as I realized how beautiful Creation is.” What aspects of creation have drawn you to God?
- The Greek translation of Yahweh (ὁ Ων) is used in our Church to refer to Christ. It is written around the image of Christ in our icons. Our services of vespers and orthros end with the priest exclaiming, “Christ our God, the EXISTING ONE (ὁ Ων), is blessed...” Reflect on how these practices echo Jn 1:18 quoted above.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste the head of Christ with the words “I AM” in His halo. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the following verses from the feast of the God-seer Moses:
In the storm, you contemplated the Bodiless One insofar as it was possible. In the cloud, you saw the Immaterial One; the divine glory made you radiant in God, and that enabled you to penetrate the mysteries of God, given by grace to those who wish the things above.

You entered into the darkness with your senses, and learned ineffable things, O God-seer: that God the Savior would be born in the flesh of the Virgin.

Glory to You, O our God — glory to You!



The Incarnation 2

The Promised Hope Fulfilled

After Jesus' resurrection He spent time helping His disciples understand that His death fulfilled what the Old Testament had prophesied about Him. In St Luke's Gospel we read that the Lord said, "*These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.*" And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Lk 24:45).

When the apostles began preaching the Gospel to Jews they used these Scriptures to speak of Jesus, saying that He fulfilled all their promised hopes. Among other things, they taught that He was:

The Prophet Foretold: At the end of his life Moses had promised, "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear*" (Dt 18:15). St Peter taught that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus (see Acts 3:22).

The Promised Messiah: The title Messiah (Christ in Greek) means "Anointed One." The "Anointed One" in the Old Testament was another way of identifying the king. Thus Micah prophesied, "*Out of [Bethlehem] shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel*" (Mi 5:2). This prophecy was quoted to Herod when the Wise Men came seeking the One "*who has been born King of the Jews*" (Mt 2:2).

The Anointed Priest: Some Jews taught that the Anointed One would be a priest, as prophesied in Psalm 110: "*You are a priest forever*

according to the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). The first Christians believed that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy and taught that "*Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come*" (Heb 9:11).

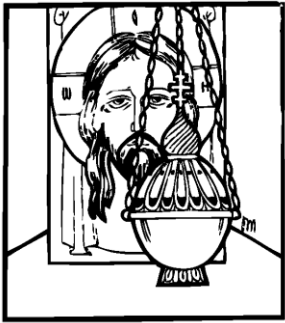
The New Testament cites over 350 Old Testament prophecies which the apostles saw fulfilled in Christ.

- Read the story of the beginning of the Lord's public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-22). Note how He read the prophecy of Isaiah (61:1, 2) then said, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (v. 21).
- Read the following prophecies which the apostles saw as fulfilled in Jesus: Is 53: 1-8; Zech 11:12-13; 12:10. Notice how the Gospel narratives of Christ's passion were influenced by these prophecies.
- Fulfilled prophecies show us that God is faithful to His promises. What is your record of keeping promises? How can you be more God-like in this matter?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a scroll or open book with the words "PROPHET – PRIEST – KING." Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the following verses from the fore-feast of the Nativity:

Let us sound the cymbals and shout aloud in songs. The revelation of Christ is now becoming manifest: the preaching of the prophets has received its fulfillment. For He about whom they spoke, foretelling His appearance in the flesh to mortals, is born in a holy cave and is laid as a baby in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Let us come and worship Him.

The sayings of the prophets are now fulfilled; for our God shall be born of the Virgin Mary in a manner surpassing words, and yet shall remain what He was as God before His birth. The Magi come together bearing gifts; the shepherds pass the night in their fields; and with them, we sing, "Lord, born of a Virgin, glory to You!"

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



The Incarnation 3 God Becomes Man

The Lord Jesus not only fulfilled the hopes of the Jewish people; He exceeded them. They looked for a prophet – He was that and more. They looked for a king – He was that and more. They looked for a High Priest – He was that and more.

What Christ is was expressed by St Peter when Jesus asked him, “‘Who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven’” (Mt 16:15-17).

As the faith of the apostles deepened after Pentecost their view of Christ deepened as well. Toward the end of his life St Paul would write, “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence*” (Col 1:15-18).

It has been the faith of the Church since the first century that Jesus is the One who created all things. He is the only-begotten Son and Word

of God, fully God, become truly human without any loss to His divinity. We believe it, but can we understand it?

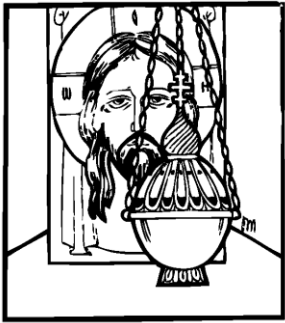
In the seventh century St Maximos the Confessor addressed this question. He wrote, “The great mystery of the divine incarnation remains a mystery forever. How can the Word made flesh be essentially the same person that is wholly with the Father? How can he who is by nature God become by nature wholly man without lacking either nature, neither the divine by which he is God nor the human by which he became man? Faith alone grasps these mysteries. Faith alone is truly the substance and foundation of all that exceeds knowledge and understanding.”

St Maximos says that Christ is “by nature God become by nature wholly man.” In the Creed we say the same thing: Christ is “Light from Light, true God from true God... of one substance with the Father.” We can never understand how Christ is both God and man; but our faith goes beyond both knowledge and understanding. As the Lord told Peter, “*Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 16:17).

- Making the sign of the cross we hold three fingers together to represent the Trinity and the other two fingers together to represent Christ as truly God and truly man. Notice that, when we do this carefully, we are making a wordless act of faith in the incarnation.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a hand making the sign of the cross with the words, “True God – True Man.” Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the following verse from the Octoechos:

The mystery which was hidden from eternity and unknown to the angels has been revealed through you, O Theotokos, to those on earth; for God took flesh in a union without commixture and willingly took up the cross by which He elevated the first man and saved our souls from death.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



The Incarnation 4 That Man Might Become God

Why did the only-begotten Son and Word of God have to become human to deliver us from death? Could not God have empowered a prophet like John the Baptist to accomplish this task? Could not a king like David or Solomon have been raised up in order to be the Messiah for whom Israel longed? What made it necessary for the Word of God to become incarnate if we were to be made whole again?

Human nature could only be made whole by God working in our midst, fully sharing in all that we are. In taking up our humanity the Word of God penetrated it with His own divinity. He became a man imbued with the nature of God. In Christ the holiness of His nature as God permeated His human nature. As a result the carpenter of Nazareth could say that He was one with the Father just as the eternal Word of God was one with God.

St Paul teaches that after Christ's death and resurrection He "*became a life-giving spirit*" (1 Cor 15:45). He could communicate to us by grace the union with the Father which was His by nature. If God's Word had not taken on our nature it could not have been sanctified. No one expressed it with greater clarity and simplicity than the fourth-century Church Father, St Gregory the Theologian: "That which He has not assumed He has not healed." Now, however, our humanity, united with His humanity-penetrated-with-divinity, can share in His union with the Father.

Another early Father, St Irenaeus of Lyons, described it this way: the eternal Word of God "became what we are in order to make us what he is himself." Christ penetrates our humanity with His when we are baptized and fortifies it when we receive His Eucharistic body and blood. He who assumed our human nature to transform it enters *my* human nature in these mysteries and progressively transfigures it.

This life-long process is called *theosis*, the deification of our humanity by our union with the incarnate Word.

- Read 2 Pt 1:3-4, the Scriptural basis for the Fathers' teaching of *theosis*. Reflect on some of the "things that pertain to life and godliness" which you are conscious of having received and offer a prayer of thanks.
- God's work to transform us requires that we work along with Him. The Fathers called this *synergy*. Today this word describes any process in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. How can this word apply to the Church and to the process of *theosis*?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw or cut-and-paste a hand making the sign of the cross with the words, "True God – True Man." Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- The Jesus Prayer is a favored companion on the journey of *theosis*. Continually repeating it until it is rooted in our subconscious is one of the ways in which we cooperate with God in His striving to transform us. If you are not yet familiar with the Prayer, sit quietly and repeat it in a low voice for a few minutes until it communicates God's peace to you.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me the sinner."

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 4

The Holy Great-Martyr Barbara

EVERYONE WANTS TO CLAIM St Barbara as their own. Middle Eastern sources record that Barbara was from Heliopolis in present-day Lebanon. Some sources describe her as a native of Heliopolis in Egypt or of Nicomedia (in Turkey today). All the stories say that she was the daughter of a rich pagan named Dioscoros who, after his wife's death, kept her locked in a tower to keep her from the eyes of strangers.

After a certain time Dioscoros relented and allowed his daughter a measure of freedom. She became acquainted with the Gospel through some young Christian women who befriended her and through a priest fleeing persecution in Alexandria who ultimately baptized her.

Dioscoros had commissioned the construction of a bath house on his estate. In his absence Barbara had altered the plans to include a third window, to represent the Trinity. When Dioscoros learned of this he flew at her in a rage. She escaped, and lived on the run, adopting a series of disguises, but was later captured and severely beaten.

When Barbara would not renounce her faith, Dioscoros handed her over to the prefect of the city, Martian, who subjected her to public humiliation and torture. Juliana, a Christian woman in the crowd reproached Martian for his cruelty. In return he condemned Juliana to die with Barbara. Both were beheaded. Tradition relates that Barbara's own father was here executioner. A pious man named Galentain recovered the bodies of Barbara and Juliana, buried their remains and erected a shrine in their memory.

In the Middle East her feast is observed by the preparation of sweets, including the "Barbara." This is the traditional boiled wheat dish made for memorials of a saint or of the deceased. In this case it is sweetened with pomegranate seeds, raisins, anise and sugar. It is frequently brought to homes by children singing a traditional carol about this saint. They are often costumed to recall the disguises St Barbara used to elude her father.

- Christ foretold that faith in Him would divide houses. Read Mt 10:34-38 and reflect on how this prophecy was fulfilled in St Barbara's case.
- The traditional Middle Eastern sweet for this day is called by various names but especially on this occasion "Barbara." Plan on enjoying it at a parish or family gathering. There is a recipe at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/recipes/view.cfm?id=1528>
- Other sweets associated with this celebration are *atayef* (dough stuffed with cream or nuts), *maakaroun* (flour and semolina fried cookies bathed in sugar syrup), and *zlebyeh* (fried dough with sugar or honey). Discuss making these for a parish celebration.
- The traditional song associated with St Barbara celebrations in the Middle East, *Heshli Barbara*, can be found in several versions on YouTube. An English translation/adaptation by GK Chesterton, *The Ballad of St Barbara*, may also be found on line. Play it, sing it or read it as part of your celebration.
- In parts of the Middle East this day is a cross between Halloween and a Christmas caroling party. Children sing *Heshli Barbara* from door to door wearing costumes (Barbara was disguised when she fled home). Celebrate this in your parish.
- Pray the following verses from the canon to St Barbara:
A most beautiful rose sprang forth from a thorny root and has perfumed the Church of Christ: the glorious Barbara, who dyed her garments in the blood of her suffering. We rightly sing her praise.
Your prophecy has clearly been fulfilled, O Christ; for the father gives his own child over to death, the wretched parent becoming the instigator of Your martyr's slaughter. Wherefore, he was destroyed by fire from heaven.

Holy Great-Martyr Barbara, intercede for us!



December 5

St Saba the Sanctified

Reflecting about the leaders of their Church St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – each one’s work will become clear...” (1 Cor 3:11-13). If anyone can be said to have built with gold it is St. Saba (439–532). The monastery which he founded in the sixth century still exists in the Kedron Valley near Jerusalem. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited monasteries in the world.

St Saba is called “Sanctified” from his childhood: “set-apart” to be an abode of the Holy Spirit. The son of a military officer in Cappadocia, he was given into his uncles’ care when his father was sent to Egypt. Entrusted for his education to some nearby monks at the age of eight, he came to love their way of life and remained with them throughout his childhood. When his parents later urged him to return to the world and marry, he refused.

As a teenager Saba continued to live with the monks and entered into their way of life but was not tonsured a monk until he was seventeen. He remained in this monastery for ten years, then was blessed to continue his monastic life in the Holy Land with St Euthymios the Great, who was the elder of an important “lavra” (a collection of individual cells clustered around a church) near Jerusalem. Saba remained there until he was thirty years old and so impressed St Euthymios that he nicknamed him a “child-elder.”

When St Euthymios died (c. 473) Saba began living as a solitary in a cave near the Monastery of St Gerasimos. Over the next ten years other ascetics gathered around him and in 484 he established a

lavra like that of St Euthymios. This would become the Great Lavra, called today the Monastery of Mar Saba. Over the next few years St Saba established several other lavras for monks. Finally in 491 the Patriarch of Jerusalem ordained him a priest. In 494 the patriarch appointed him archimandrite of all the monasteries in Palestine. He died in the year 532.

St Saba composed a rule of church services for his monks, which would develop into the so-called *Jerusalem Typikon*. This order of services would influence all Byzantine monasteries and, in time, all the Byzantine Churches. Now called the *Typikon of Mar Saba*, it is the arrangement of services we use to this day.

Over the centuries many notable monks inhabited St Saba’s monastery. Perhaps the most famous are the hymnographers St John of Damascus and his foster-brother St Cosmas of Maiuma as well as their nephew, St Stephen the Wonderworker.

- St Saba learned to love monastic life as a child. Encourage your children’s interests and involvement in the Church.
- On December 5 every year hundreds of pilgrims descend on the Mar Saba Monastery for the feast day of this saint. Visit a nearby monastery to experience the monastic life in his honor.
- On December 4 the Church remembered St John of Damascus who lived in the Mar Saba Monastery in the eighth century. He personifies St Saba’s golden legacy. Research this saint today.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. Today they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of the saint along with his name and the date of his feast.
- Pray the kondakion for St Saba:
Since your youth you were like an offering of incense in God’s presence, O glorious Saba. You were called the adornment of hermits and a builder in the wilderness. Wherefore we cry out to you, “Hail, O Father worthy of all praise!”

Holy Father Saba, intercede for us!



December 6

*St Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of
Myra in Lycia*

A WORLD-WIDE SYMBOL OF GIFT-GIVING and love, St. Nicholas (270-343) is more revered by the Church as a Wonderworker, both in life and in death.

Nicholas was born to wealthy Christian parents in Patara, on the southwest coast of the Roman province of Lycia in Asia Minor. He was orphaned in an epidemic while he was still young and raised by his uncle, another Nicholas, the bishop of Patara.

Of a religious disposition, Nicholas was tonsured as a reader by his uncle while quite young and eventually was ordained a priest. Obeying Christ's words to "*sell what you own and give the money to the poor,*" Nicholas used his own inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering.

As a prominent Christian, Nicholas was imprisoned during the persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius, which ended in 311. In response to his deliverance, Nicholas traveled to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. While there he reportedly lived with a group of monks in what is today Beit Jala. However Nicholas was not called to the monastic life and returned to Patara.

On the return voyage the ship was threatened by a powerful storm. The terrified sailors were amazed to see the storm suddenly subside at

Nicholas' prayers. This gave rise to the custom of praying to St Nicholas as protector of seamen.

In 317 Nicholas was chosen as archbishop of Myra the provincial capital of Lycia. He was neither a great ascetic nor a martyr. His reputation rests on his pastoral concern for the people under his care, particularly the poor and the defenseless.

The tenth-century life of St. Nicholas by Symeon the Translator tells of secret gift-giving to save an impoverished man's daughters from penury. St. Nicholas secretly left money to provide a dowry for each of the daughters in turn. Another tells how, after the emperor had levied a heavy tax on the people of Myra, St Nicholas went to Constantinople and pleaded successfully with the emperor to have the taxes reduced. These stories and more became known in the West and Nicholas became a favorite saint throughout Europe.

Nicholas died in Myra on December 6, 343 and was buried in his cathedral. His tomb became famous for many miracles.

- In many parishes "St Nicholas" visits on his feast day with gifts for the children and/or to collect gifts for the needy. For ideas see www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/st-nicholas-day-events. Support – or initiate – this activity in your parish.
- Many ethnic groups have traditional pastries for this feast which you can make for your St Nicholas Day meal. For ideas see www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/recipes/breads.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of the saint along with his name and the date of his feast. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray the kondakion for St Nicholas:

In Myra you proved yourself a real priest, O saint; for, fulfilling the Gospel of Christ, you lay down your life for your people, O venerable one, and saved the innocent from death. Wherefore, you have been sanctified as a great initiate of the grace of God.

Holy Father Nicholas, intercede for us!



December 9

The Maternity of St. Anne

THE CHURCHES OF EAST AND WEST generally commemorate the saints on the day of their death, their “heavenly birthday,” as some describe it. In addition the Church remembers three conceptions: those of Christ (the Annunciation, March 25), of His Mother (December 9), and of St John the Forerunner (September 23).

The conceptions of Christ and the Forerunner are recorded in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Luke. The story of Mary’s conception is not found in the canonical Scriptures but in the mid-second century *Protoevangelion* (or Pre-Gospel) of St James. This text tells that, for many years, Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anne, were childless and the couple suffered much reproach as a result. Both spouses gave themselves to fervent prayer, and the Archangel Gabriel announced to each of them separately that they would be the parents of a daughter who would bring blessings to the whole human race.

The icon of the feast shows Saints Joachim and Anne embracing after each had run to share the news of their daughter-to-be. The icon also very prominently displays a bed to indicate that this conception took place by the usual physical means, unlike the conception of Christ.

In the East this feast has always been called “the Conception (or Maternity) of St. Anne,” stressing Anne’s conceiving of the Theotokos, just as the conception of Christ is revered as “the Annunciation to the Theotokos.” In the West the feast came to be called “the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary” and later “the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”

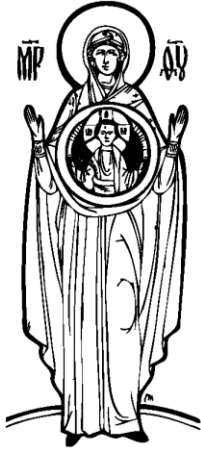
All the Churches of East and West have always believed that the Virgin Mary was, from her conception, filled with every grace of the Holy Spirit in view of her calling as the Mother of Christ our God.

- This hymn from vespers uses four Biblical images as symbols of the Virgin Mary. Find the references in your Bible and reflect how they are fitting images of the Holy Virgin. “Behold! The promises of the prophets are realized, for the **Holy Mountain** (*Psalm 48:1-3*) is planted in the womb, the **Divine Ladder** (*Gen 28:12*) is set up, the great **Throne of the King** (*Isaiah 14:13*) is ready, the place for the passage of the Lord is prepared. The **dry bush that fire cannot consume** (*Ex 3:1-4*) is blossoming and the treasure-house of sanctifying grace is like an abundant flow of blessings that heal the barrenness of Anne, whom we glorify with faith.”
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of Saint Anne along with “Mother of the Virgin Mary” and the date of this feast. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Pray these verses from the services of the feast:

In the womb of Anne, a new heaven is created at the hand of God the Creator. From it will shine forth the Sun which knows no setting, illuminating the whole world with His divine rays in His love for mankind and His abundant mercy.

Adam, behold your renewal! Eve, exult with joy! A barren, waterless wasteland has produced the most beautiful fruit. She will bring forth the Bread of Immortality for the world, bringing all barrenness to an end. Today, let us also exult in joy together with them.

St Anne, Mother of the Theotokos, pray for us!



December 10

The Seed Blossoms

Today for Christians in Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East this is a day for planting. Fourteen days before Christmas people “plant” sprouted beans and seeds such as chickpeas, broad beans, lentils, oats and wheat on damp cotton wool. They water the seeds lightly each day until the feast by which time the seeds have brought forth new life.

The custom has its roots in the prophecy of Isaiah. The Hebrew text reads, “*There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots*” (Is 11:1). Jesse is, of course, the father of King David, from whose family the Messiah was expected to come. The idea of depicting the ancestors of Christ as branches of the “Jesse Tree” became common in both Eastern and Western art as far back as the eleventh century.

In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, however, we find Isaiah’s prophecy rendered this way: “*There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a blossom shall come up from his root.*” The idea of a rod that blossoms recalls the following story of Moses and Aaron from the Torah: God promised, “*And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom... Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds*” (Num

17: 5-8). The rod that blossomed was a sign that God had chosen Aaron; the rod from the stem of Jesse brought forth a chosen blossom as well.

- In a small pie tin “plant” sprouted beans and seeds such as chickpeas, broad beans, lentils, oats and wheat on damp cotton wool today. Keep this planter in your icon corner or other prominent place as a symbol of the Life who is coming.
- Add these verses to your prayers during these days:

Isaiah, dance for joy: receive the word of God. Prophecy to the Virgin Mary that the bush burning with fire will not be consumed by the radiance of our God. Let Bethlehem be prepared! Let the gates of Eden be opened! Let the Magi come forth to see wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger of beasts the salvation which the star has pointed out from above the cave, the life-giving Lord, who saves mankind!

Bethlehem, receive Mary, the City of God: in you will be born the Light that never sets. Let the angels stand in wonder in Heaven, and let mankind glorify the Lord on earth! O Magi from Persia, prepare your illustrious gifts! Shepherds who pass the night in the fields, sing a hymn to the thrice-holy God. Let everything that has breath celebrate the Creator of All.

Behold, the time of our salvation is drawing near. Prepare yourself, O cave, for the Virgin is coming to give her Child to the world. Rejoice and exult, O Bethlehem of Judah, for the Lord shall shine forth from you. Listen, O mountains, hills, and all you regions around Judah; Christ is coming to save the human race which He created, for He is the Lover of mankind.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



Sunday after December 10

The Holy Prophet Daniel

The highpoint of God's plan for us is the Incarnation of the Word. Everything leading up to the coming of Christ is in some way a preparation for this event. The saga of Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites in Egypt, their exodus to the promised land and their subsequent history are all aspects of this plan which St Paul calls "*the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ*" (Eph 3:9).

One particular moment in the story of Israel figures prominently in our celebration during the Nativity Fast: the exile of the Jews to Babylon described in the Book of Daniel. The prophet Daniel and the three young men cast into the furnace are remembered on December 17 each year, as well as on the two Sundays before the Nativity, because of the accomplishments of their faith.

In 605 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and made its king a vassal. In 597 BC he destroyed the temple built by Solomon and deported the king and his nobles to Babylon. Their exile would end in 538 BC when the Persian king Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home.

The story of the exile and captivity of the Jews forms the background of the Book of Daniel. It is generally considered an apocalyptic book offering its readers consolation that their present troubles (Greek and Roman occupation) would one day end as the Babylonian exile had ended: with the liberation of the Jews and the restoration of true worship.

Daniel was a highly placed Jew, extremely regarded for his faithfulness to the Law in an era when the Law was largely neglected. The prophet Ezekiel, who lived through the Babylonian exile, puts Daniel in the highest company in this prophecy: "*The word of the LORD came again to me, saying: 'Son of man, when a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it... Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness,' says the Lord GOD*" (EZ 14:14).

Among Jews Daniel is honored for his unsurpassed piety and his firm adherence to the Law despite being surrounded by enemies who sought his ruin. Christians honor him as a prophet because of his visions (Dn 7-12) which speak of the Messiah and the end-times.

- Chapters 2, 5 and 6 of the Book of Daniel tell how the Prophet proclaimed the true God in the midst of a pagan society. Read these passages and summarize them for your family. Who today is doing the same in a secular or anti-Christian society? How can we be like the Prophet Daniel in our society today?
- If there are children in your family, help them design a paper tree ornament for the Prophet Daniel. They might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of Daniel along with "Prophet of God" and the date of this feast.
- Pray these verses from the services of the feast:

The wondrous Daniel, whose heart was the pure abode of the Spirit, was enlightened by His rays and clearly revealed the coming of Christ; splendidly endowed with the gift of prophecy, he was able to interpret the mysterious dreams of impious kings who governed the country.

Seeing You, O Lord, as a stone which was not quarried by human hand, Daniel, the man of great spiritual desires, announced You as a new-born Infant, the Word Incarnate of a Virgin without seed, the God inaccessible to change, the Savior of our souls.

Holy Prophet Daniel, intercede for us!



December 17

The Three Young Men in the Furnace

Our liturgical preparation for Christmas revs up today with the commemoration of the “Forerunners of Christ,” those men from the Old Testament whose efforts kept the Israelites focused on the one true God in the midst of every circumstance.

These Forerunners are embodied on this day by three young Jewish nobles taken to Babylon with the prophet Daniel. They were taken into their captor’s service and given Babylonian names. “Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name *Beltshazzar*; to Hananiah, *Shadrach*; to Mishael, *Meshach*; and to Azariah, *Abednego*” (Dan 1:6-7). The book of Daniel uses these names indiscriminately, which sometimes confuses readers.

From the first these young Jews refused to violate the Law. They would not eat the meats given them – they were perhaps unclean according to the Torah – and would only eat vegetables. Nevertheless they rose to positions of responsibility in the Babylonian Empire.

When Nebuchadnezzar erected a golden idol on the plain of Dura, the three young men refused to worship it as the king had commanded, even though he had stipulated: “*whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace*” (Dan 3:6).

When confronted by the king the three Jews insisted, “*Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up*” (Dn 3:17-18). They knew that God

could deliver them and believed that He would. But if that was not His will, they would not lose faith: they would still not worship the idol.

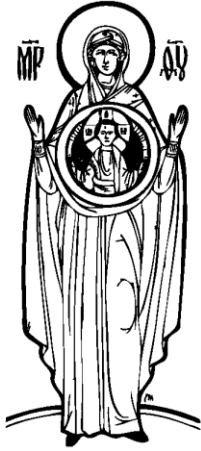
“And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar ... rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, ‘Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?’ They answered and said to the king, ‘True, O king.’ ‘Look!’” he answered, ‘I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like a Son of God’” (Dn 3: 23-25).

The angel of God who protected these young Jews is seen by the Church as a type of Christ, the One who walks among His people at all times, in the midst of every circumstance, even when God seems absent. It is He whose coming in the flesh we are about to celebrate.

- The One “like a Son of God” accompanied the trio and kept them from harm. In the popular poem *Footprints in the Sand* a man, walking along the beach with the Lord complains that God has left him alone in the trials of his life: there is only one set of footprints in the sand. The Lord replies, “Yes, I was carrying you.” Reflect on your own life: have you been conscious of God’s presence with you or have you felt alone in your life’s journey?
- If there are children in your family, help them design a paper tree ornament for today’s feast. They might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of the Three Young Men in the furnace and the date of this feast. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray this kondakion of the feast:

Armed with God’s invisible power, you shunned the adoration of man-made idols, O thrice-blessed young men. Strengthened with this power beyond words, you stood in the midst of a devouring fire and called upon God, saying: “Hasten, O merciful One, and speed to our help, for You are good and have the might to do as You please.”

Three Holy Youths, intercede for us!



Sunday after December 17

The Genealogy of Christ 1

St. Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy of Christ (Mt 1:1-16); it is the passage we read each year on the Sunday before Christmas. The first words of the passage – *biblios geneseos Iisous Christos* – translated literally as “the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ” – reminds the reader of the entire sweep of salvation history by harkening back to Genesis, the first Book of the Torah. The reader realizes that Christ is both the beginning and the climax of God's dealing with the human race, starting in the Garden.

Matthew's genealogy portrays Christ as descended from David through the house of Joseph, His adoptive father. Since the time of King David (tenth century BC) Jewish rulers had based their authority on their connection to David. The awaited Messiah was portrayed in Jewish tradition as the “son of David” for a similar reason: to show that he, like David, was anointed by God to be Israel's deliverer.

In this passage Jesus' ancestry is traced back another millennium to the patriarch Abraham with whom God had made His first covenant with the ancestors of the Jewish people. For the first Christians, portraying Jesus as the son of Abraham meant that He was the personification of the nation, heir to the promises made by God to Abraham and to his seed, “*who is Christ*” (Gal 3:16).

In this listing of fathers and sons we find two foreign women. By including Rahab and Ruth in the genealogy, St Matthew shows that

Jesus, the son of Abraham and David, is son of all mankind: Jew and Gentile, male and female, truly one of us in the flesh.

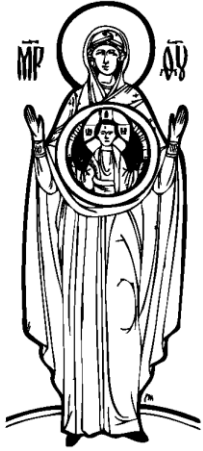
- Many people in our country neither know nor care about their roots. They are individualists who base their identity on their own accomplishments. In more traditional societies one's family tree may be a source of pride or amusement, but it is always an object of interest. They base their identity on their relationships within the larger family. How far back can you trace your roots? What does that say about where you look for your identity?
- The ancestry of Christ is conveniently divided into three groups of fourteen, the numerological equivalent of “David.” Pope Benedict XVI called this passage “interpreted history”: based on events that actually happened, but as they were “interpreted and understood in the context of the Word of God.” How can we understand and interpret our family history in terms of our faith journey?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste a “family tree” for Jesus. Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray these verses from the fore-feast:

The Son was born ineffably of the Father before all ages. And in these last days, He has willed to be incarnate of the Virgin Mary without seed. Let us lift up our voices to the Lord and say: “You have lifted us up from our fallen state. Holy are You, O Christ our God!”

The Son was born ineffably of the Father before all ages. We sing to Him! And in these last days, He has willed to be incarnate of the Virgin Mary for He willed to lift up the human race which fell through the deadly advice of the serpent.

From the Canon of the Fore-feast

Holy Ancestors of Christ, intercede for us!



The Following Day

The Genealogy of Christ 2

On the Sunday before the Nativity we read the genealogy of Christ from St Matthew. St Luke's Gospel also contains a genealogy: one with a different emphasis. While Matthew connects Jesus' lineage with the story of His birth, Luke places it in the context of His hearer's idea of Him. "Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed), the son of Joseph, the son of..." (Lk 3:23). And while Matthew emphasizes the connections between Jesus, David and Abraham, Luke traces Jesus' lineage back to "Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Lk 3:38). Luke, of Gentile origin, traces Christ back to the beginnings of the human race, stressing His connection with all mankind. Jesus is not only a son of Israel but of the entire human race.

Many commentators have noted other differences between these genealogies which would be contradictory if these passages were not "interpreted history." Thus St. Ambrose sees Matthew showing Christ's royal family heritage and Luke stressing His priestly connection. "We should not consider one account truer than the other," he writes, "but that the one agrees with the others in equal faith and truth. According to the flesh, Jesus was truly of a royal and priestly family, King from kings, Priest from priests" (*Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Luke*, 87-88).

Fr John Custer summarizes another theological message in this passage. "Adam has no other 'father' but God and no 'mother' but the virgin earth from which he was taken. Adam became a 'living being' when God breathed into him (Gen 2:7). All this resembles the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Virgin Mary in the conception of Jesus, whose only true father is God" (*The Holy Gospel, a Byzantine Perspective*, p. 408).

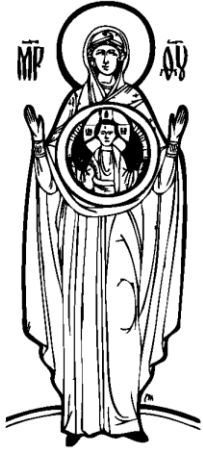
- Read the opening of St John's Gospel (Jn 1:1-14). How can this be called a genealogy of Christ?
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today's ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of Christ inscribed "Son of Adam, Son of God.". Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray these verses from the fore-feast:

~He who is enthroned in the highest Heaven with the Father and the Holy Spirit saw the humiliation of the human race. The Son of the Father, without beginning, enters into time. Behold, He allows Himself to be born in the flesh as man!

~The All-Holy One who surpasses the angels and all creation in holiness now gives birth in the flesh to the Messenger of the Father, the Angel of His Great Counsel, in order to lift up those who ceaselessly sing, "Holy are You, O Christ our God!"

From the Canon of the Fore-feast

Holy Ancestors of Christ, intercede for us!



December 20

The Fore-feast of the Nativity 1

There are only five more Praying Days until Christmas!

From December 20 to 24 we observe a five-day “holy week” during which Christ’s birth seems ever closer. This fore-feast of the Nativity culminates on December 24, the *Paramony* of the feast. During these days we focus on how the birth of the long-expected Messiah is at hand. As we sing during those days, “Today the Virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth to the eternal Word of God in an ineffable manner.”

The hope that One would come to deliver God’s people from their enemies is found throughout the Old Testament. In Numbers 24 we read a prophecy of Balaam, “*I see a star that rises out of Jacob, a stem that springs from Israel’s root; one who shall lay low the chiefs of Moab, shall bring devastation on all the posterity of Seth*” (v.17). The star rising out of Jacob is a way of saying “a descendant of Jacob.” As we read in Matthew’s genealogy, Jesus was a descendant of Jacob.

This expected one was clearly a military leader who would deliver the Israelites from their enemies. Jewish people expected this kind of savior throughout their history. Some Jews, however, looked for more. They read God’s promise to David to mean that the kingdom of Solomon would endure forever: “*When your days are ended, and you are laid to rest beside your fathers, I will grant you for successor a son of your own body, established firmly on his throne. He it is who shall*

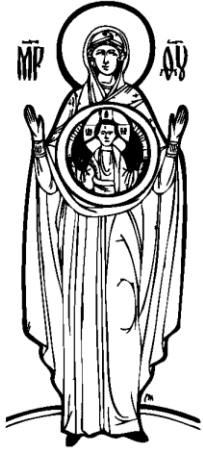
build a house to do my name honor. I will prolong forever his royal dynasty” (2 Sam 7:12-13). As we read in Matthew’s genealogy, Jesus was a descendant of David.

The prophets deepened the Jews’ understanding of just who the Messiah would be. We read in Isaiah 40, “*Tell the cities of Juda, See, your God comes! See, the Lord God is coming, revealed in power, with his own strong arm for warrant; and see, they come with him, they walk before him, the reward of his labor, the achievement of his task, his own flock! Like a shepherd he tends them, gathers up the lambs and carries them in his bosom*” (vv. 10, 11). The promised One is the Lord Himself, our Good Shepherd.

- Read Is 9:1-6. You will hear these words many times in our Nativity and Theophany celebrations. They use titles for the Messiah used elsewhere for Yahweh. They proclaim the promised Messiah to be the Mighty One.
- When John the Baptist heard what Jesus was doing he sent two disciples to ask, “*Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?*” (Lk 7:19). See Lk 7:22, 23 to see Jesus’ answer.
- If there are children in your family, help them design paper tree ornaments, with a design for each day of the Fast. For today’s ornament they might draw, download or cut-and-paste an icon of Christ inscribed “The Coming One.” Be sure they can explain their ornament to others.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray this verse from the fore-feast:

Behold, the time of our salvation draws near: let the cave be ready, for the Virgin is about to give birth; and you, Bethlehem of Judah, rejoice and be glad, for the Lord will soon shine forth from your midst. Listen, all you mountains and you hills, and all you country of Judah: Christ is coming to save the human race, His creatures, for He is the Lover of mankind.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 21

The Fore-feast of the Nativity 2

The modern Christmas tree as we know it is more a symbol of holiday cheer than a commemoration of the nativity of Christ. Long before the Germans introduced it into their holiday observances, however, the tree was a symbol of Christ. It not only says that Christ has come; it proclaims what His coming means for us.

Every day during the fore-feast of the Nativity we sing the following troparion: *Bethlehem, make ready for Eden has been opened for all. Ephrata, be alert for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb had become a spiritual Paradise, wherein the divine Fruit was planted – and if we eat of it we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning.*

Like much of our liturgical hymnody, this troparion incorporates a theme drawn from the writings of the Church Fathers: *“The Fruit of righteousness and the Tree of Life is Christ. He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness. And with His own underived life He has brought forth the fruits of knowledge and virtue like a tree, whereof they that eat shall receive eternal life, and shall enjoy the tree of life in paradise, with Adam and all the righteous”*(St Hippolytus of Rome, Commentary on Proverbs).

In the Genesis story of creation the Tree of Life was the source of immortality from which fallen man was not be allowed to eat (see Gen

3:22). Were he to do so, Genesis suggests, sin would remain forever. In the Scriptures Christ is revealed as the ultimate source of our immortality. He is the Tree of Life and through him mankind is offered forgiveness of sin and invitation to the gift of eternal life.

We also find the Tree of Life in the last chapter of Revelation. There the Tree is in the center of the New Jerusalem, the ultimate Paradise. For St Augustine and other Fathers, “Paradise is the Church, as it is called in the Canticles...the Tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ...” (St Augustine, *The City of God*). Christ, at the heart of the Church, gives us life through the Holy Spirit who works in the Church.

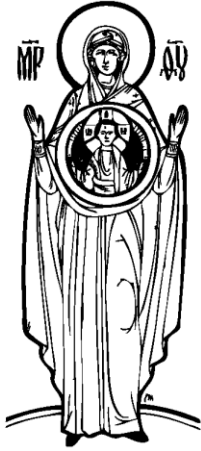
In our troparion Christ is called the Fruit planted in the spiritual paradise of the Virgin’s womb. As Mary’s cousin Elizabeth proclaimed – with countless generations after her – *“Blessed is the Fruit of your womb!”* (Lk 1:42)

If they knew the Christmas tree as the symbol of Christ, the Tree of Life, secularists might happily welcome the mangers and cribs and shepherds and animals of the crèche in the public sector and strive to banish Christmas trees instead!

- The Jesse Tree is a modern image based on the genealogy of Christ. How can you share your new understanding of the Jesse Tree with others?
- The fore-feast is a time to increase your observance of the Nativity Fast. Review your practices over the course of the Fast and see if there are some ways you can intensify them this week.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray the troparion of the fore-feast:

Bethlehem, make ready for Eden has been opened for all. Ephrata, be alert for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb had become a spiritual Paradise, wherein the divine Fruit was planted – and if we eat of it we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 22

The Fore-feast of the Nativity 3

The troparion of the fore-feast which we began to look at yesterday employs the imagery in Genesis to give us the spiritual purpose of Christ's incarnation. *"Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning."*

Many Fathers saw in Gen 1:26 a key to understanding the mystery of our existence. There God resolves, *"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."* They saw in the word *image* the range of qualities that set us apart from the lower creation: a resemblance to God in our nature. This remained in us after the fall, although in a damaged or scarred way.

In the term *likeness* they saw the resemblance to God by our behavior, which had been lost through sin. We may still "look" somewhat like God (the image in us) but we surely don't act like Him.

In His own person Christ is the perfect likeness to God. *"He who sees me sees the Father,"* we read in Jn 14:9. He is the new Adam, who starts humanity anew in Himself and gives us a share in His renewed nature. In His incarnation He assumed our human nature so that we might share in His divine likeness. In the words of the patristic adage, *"God became man so that man might become God."*

He does so by taking on our human nature completely. He is incarnate in a specific time and place, as we are. He lived the same kind of life

as others in His society did. He experienced joys, frustrations and sorrows – the whole range of human emotions as we do. Finally He died as do we all. There is nothing in our humanity that He has not assumed. "He is like us in all things except sin" (Heb 4:25).

By taking on our humanity the Word of God assumed all that we are, except sin, so that we can become by grace what He is by nature, children of the Father. Our nature is transfigured in Him. It is divinized or deified. As St Gregory the Theologian boldly expressed it, "He took our flesh and our flesh became God, since it is united with God and forms a single entity with Him" (*Third Theological Oration*).

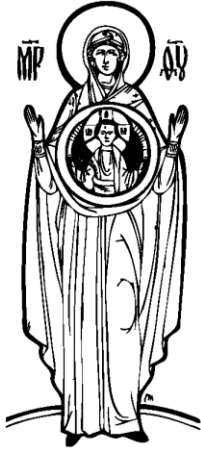
God does not heal us in a superficial or external way, He does not wave a magic wand over us; He heals us from within, as one of us. He entered our world and so transformed it. He took on our nature and thus transformed it. This realization prompted St Gregory to assert: "that which He has not assumed He has not healed."

- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray the troparion of the fore-feast and verse that follows:

Bethlehem, make ready for Eden has been opened for all. Ephrata, be alert for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb had become a spiritual Paradise, wherein the divine Fruit was planted – and if we eat of it we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning.

The Creator is coming down to earth to lift up the human race, renewing the image of the King. Sing out your joy, O powers on high! The wall of enmity has been cast down. The Awaited One is here, for God has become man. Christ, the King of Israel, is coming.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 23

The Fore-feast of the Nativity 4

Before any of the Creeds we know were written, the early Christians had popular statements on the core of their faith. One of them, embedded in St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, is of particular interest to us in these days. It begins, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men*" (Phil 2:5-7).

First of all, it asserts, the Lord Jesus was equal to God (the Father) and, since He was "*in the form of God*" – Himself divine – "*did not consider it robbery*" to claim such a position. Nevertheless (and this is what is so meaningful for us on this feast) He emptied Himself in order to take "*the form of a bondservant,*" to become like us – "*in the likeness of men.*"

In the Greek original the verb translated here as "to make Himself of no reputation" is *ekenosen*. The corresponding noun, *kenosis*, has come to mean the humility and self-sacrifice of Christ in becoming one of us which is put forth as a model for us – "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*"

In becoming man the Lord did not cease to be God. In the words of St. Leo the Great, "He Who was true God was born, complete in His own nature, complete in ours." The glory of His divinity, however,

was hidden from even His closest followers, except for a few moments at His Transfiguration.

The great symbols of this self-emptying are found in many Christian homes during this season: the cave used to stable animals and the feeding-trough (the manger) pressed into service as His crib. We are comforted to see that this Child is truly one of us, even as one of the neediest. At the same time we hear the song of the angels and see the star, proclaiming that this newborn Child is both God and man, "complete in His own nature, complete in ours."

- Putting oneself out for another, especially at this busy time of year, is one way we can imitate the kenosis of Christ. Consider visiting parish shut-ins or other isolated parishioners during this festal season to enrich their celebration of the feast. Encourage children to make Christmas cards to give to older members of the parish on the feast.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?
- Pray the kondakion of the fore-feast and the verse that follows:

Today the Virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth to the eternal Word of God in an ineffable manner. Rejoice, therefore, O Universe, when you hear this news and glorify with the angels and the shepherds Him who shall appear a newborn child, being God from all eternity.

Exult, O Sion! Make glad, O Jerusalem, city of Christ our God! Receive the Creator who is to be contained in the manger in a cave. Open your gates to me, that I may enter and see a Child wrapped in swaddling clothes, Him who upholds all creation in the hollow of His hand, whose praises the angels sing with unceasing voice, the Lord and Giver of Life who saves mankind.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 24

The Paramony of the Nativity

Usually translated as vigil or eve, *paramony* actually refers to the *uninterrupted* nature of the Church's prayer on this day. During the day the lengthier Great Hours or Royal Hours are chanted, followed by the Typika and a more elaborate than usual Great Vespers, to which is attached the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. A special service of Great Compline with a Litia for the feast ends the day. Sometimes this leads directly into the Orthros and Divine Liturgy of December 25. The same cycle of uninterrupted prayer is also prescribed for the Feast of the Theophany on January 5.

The Paramony is a strict fast day. Many people don't eat anything until after the Vesper-Liturgy. In some countries of Eastern Europe the Paramony culminates with a Holy Supper of twelve vegan courses representing the apostles. In the Balkans wheat pies and kutia (boiled wheat) are popular on this day.

- A good part of our Church's worship in this day consists in reading the Old Testament prophecies. If you cannot attend these services, make time to read some of these Scripture readings:
Royal Hours: Micah 5:2-4, Baruch 3:36-4:4, Isaiah 7:10-16, 9:6-7.
Vespers: Genesis 1:1-13, Numbers 24:2, 3, 5-9, 17-18, Micah 4:6-7, Isaiah 11:1-10, Daniel 2:31-36, 44-45, Isaiah 8:1-4, 8-10.
- Check the progress of your planter; are your seeds coming to life to honor the One who is our Life?

- Pray some of the verses from today's services in preparation for the feast:

A flower issues forth from the root of Jesse, as foretold by the radiant prophet; for we see the Virgin giving birth in the cave in a manner transcending nature to the lovely Rose, who is equally enthroned with the Father in the highest. O people, let us say: Blessed art You Who have come! O our God, glory be to You!

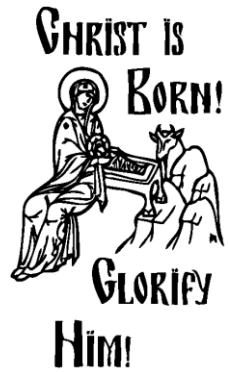
Come, O Bethlehem, and prepare a birth-place with the most precious manger and the God-bearing swaddling-bands, in which our Life was wrapped. Come, O Joseph, and register yourself with Mary! Christ our God breaks asunder the bonds of death, enfolding men in incorruption.

Prepare yourself, O Bethlehem! Adorn yourself well, O manger! The Truth has come! Receive Him, O cave! The shadow has passed away, and God hath appeared to men through the Virgin, assuming our form and deifying our flesh. Wherefore, Adam is restored, and cries out with Eve: Blessing has appeared on earth to save our race!

Now has come to fulfillment that which was spoken by the prophet, who said: "And you, O Bethlehem, land of Judah, shall not be called least among its princes," preparing the cave beforehand; for from you shall Christ God, the Leader of the nations, come forth in the flesh from the Virgin Maiden. He it is who shall shepherd His people, the New Israel! Let us all magnify Him!

Today He who is God intangible in essence and who holds all creation in His hand is born of the Virgin and wrapped as a mortal in swaddling-bands. He, who established the heavens by His word in the beginning, lies in a manger. He, who rained down manna upon the people in the wilderness, is fed at the breast with milk. The Bridegroom of the Church summons the magi; the Son of the Virgin receives their gifts. We worship Your nativity, O Christ! We worship Your nativity, O Christ! We worship Your nativity, O Christ! Show us also Your divine Theophany.

Glory to Your holy Nativity, O Lord!



December 25

*The Nativity of Our Lord,
God and Savior Jesus Christ*

OUR NATURE HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED in Christ... our nature is being transformed in Christ... our nature will be transformed in Christ. At first glance this may seem like a grammar exercise about verbs. In fact it is a summary of theology: exploring the magnitude of the mystery which is Christ in us.

The focus of our Christmas celebration is most often on the Gospel narratives of Matthew and Luke. They speak of the trip to Bethlehem, the angels and shepherds, the magi and the star. But from the earliest days of the Church believers have seen the birth of Christ containing, as it were, the whole life and death of Christ as a seed. His acceptance of our human nature necessarily includes His acceptance of the cross and death, and His renewal of mankind by His resurrection.

For many religious people, when something holy comes into contact with something profane the holy thing becomes defiled. This principle is found in Judaism and Islam and accounts for the frequent ritual washings and similar practices in these religions. The message of the Gospel, however, is that when the Holy One, the Son of God, comes into contact with something profane it is the profane thing which is changed. It is sanctified by contact with the holy. God is not defiled by His fallen creation; His creation is transformed when He enters into it

in Christ. As described by St Gregory of Nyssa, “The Word in taking flesh was mingled with humanity, and took our nature within Himself, so that the human should be deified by this mingling with God: the stuff of our nature was entirely sanctified by Christ, the first-fruits of creation” (*Against Appolonarius*, 2).

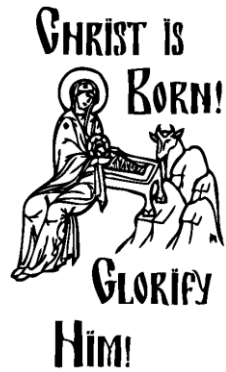
Our society, and contemporary culture in general, is committed to the value and freedom of the individual. We recognize that each person has worth in himself or herself and this is good. But a stress on individualism inevitably leads to the separation of peoples from one another. At worst, people are alienated from society, from God, from one another. And Christians may find it hard to see the communal dimension to the incarnation: that the entire human race is irrevocably changed because the Son of God has come into it.

- Pray these verses from the Christmas canon:

CHRIST IS BORN: GLORIFY HIM! Christ has come down from Heaven: go out to receive Him! Christ is now on earth: exalt Him! Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Praise Him in joy, O peoples, for He is gloriously triumphant.

Man fell from the divine life of grace. Though made in the image and likeness of God, he became completely subject to corruption and decay through sin. But now the wise Creator re-creates man again, for He is gloriously triumphant.

“Christ is born!” — “Glorify Him!”



December 26

*After-feast of the Nativity of Our Lord,
God and Savior Jesus Christ 1*

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). These final words of Christ to His disciples before His ascension affirm His continuing presence with us. His physical presence was limited in time; His spiritual presence will last as long as time itself.

The focus on Christ’s spiritual presence is His Body, the Church. It is the mystery or sacrament of the risen Christ, which – like all sacraments – reveals His presence behind a veil. The Church is the world being transformed in Christ; at the same time it is Christ transforming the world.

The faithful, insofar as they are living a life of repentance, seeking to model their lives on Christ, are the world being transformed. The faithful, insofar as they celebrate Christ’s presence in the Scriptures, in baptism, the Eucharist and the other mysteries – including the mystery of love for others – are Christ transforming the world. The saints are those who witness by their lives that we can be transformed and transform others in Him.

Christ’s presence in the Scriptures was at first practically limited to its public reading in the assembly. People would listen carefully so as to memorize what they heard. Only the wealthy could afford hand-copied Scriptures for their personal use. In addition Books of Scripture, particularly the Gospels, would be richly adorned, carried in

procession and offered for veneration, reminding believers that Christ was truly in them. Since the invention of printing the Scriptures have become increasingly available; as a result we may not be as quick to recognize the divine presence in a paperback Bible as in the Gospel on the holy table.

What enables us to experience the presence of Christ when we read the Scriptures – or, for that matter, when we assist at the Liturgy or other mysteries? St Isaac the Syrian offers the following advice: “Never approach the words of the mysteries that are in the Scriptures without praying and asking for God’s help. Say, ‘Lord, grant me to feel the power that is in them.’ Reckon prayer to be the key that opens the true meaning of the Scriptures” (*Ascetical Treatises*, 73).

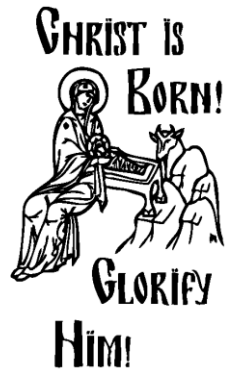
Even more hidden to us is the presence of Christ in others. This presence calls silently for us to acknowledge Him, a call that we often are too deaf to hear. Some, like Mother Teresa and others like her, can hear that call and they become the light and salt of the Gospel sayings. The presence of the saints with their acute hearing of Christ’s voice is one of the signs that Christ is transforming the world even now.

- The second day of Christmas is kept by our Church in honor of the Mother of God. If the Liturgy will be celebrated in your parish, make every effort to attend.
- Note that there is no fasting in our tradition until January 5. Every day until then is for feasting!
- Pray these verses from the Christmas canon:

When He saw man perishing, whom He had made with His own hands, the Creator bowed the heavens and came down. He took man’s nature from the pure Virgin and He truly became a man, for He is gloriously triumphant.

Christ our God is the Son and Brightness of the Father, the Wisdom, Word and Power of God. Unknown both to the powers above and upon earth, He was made man and has won us back again, for He is gloriously triumphant.

“Christ is born!” – “Glorify Him!”



December 27-31

*After-feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, God and
Savior Jesus Christ 2*

Christ's coming in the flesh is the principal focus of our celebration on this feast; but it is not our only focus. We also look forward to His coming in glory at the end of the age, what St Paul calls "the Day."

"Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tm 4:8). St Paul expresses here his hope in the final transformation of "all who have loved His appearing."

Like St. Paul we await our ultimate transformation at Christ's return. As the Church celebrates Christ's appearing in the flesh (the Nativity) and His appearing in power at the Jordan (the Theophany), we are reminded that Christ's first coming would find its ultimate fulfillment only in His second coming.

In his *Catecheses* St. Cyril of Jerusalem compares both comings of Christ – in the flesh and in glory – reminding us of what is to come:

"In His first coming He was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger. In His second coming He is clothed with light as with a garment.

"In His first coming He bore the cross, despising its shame; He will come a second time in glory accompanied by the hosts of angels.

"It is not enough for us, then, to be content with His first coming; we must wait in hope of His second coming. What we said at His first coming, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,' we shall repeat at His last coming..."

- There are several commemorations of note held during Christmas week. They are:

December 27 – the Archdeacon and Proto-martyr St Stephen

December 29 – the Holy Innocents slaughtered by order of King Herod

Sunday after the Nativity – The relatives of the Lord: the righteous Joseph, spouse of the Theotokos, James, the brother of the Lord and David the King, His ancestor.

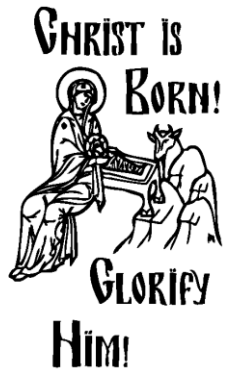
- Pray these verses from the Christmas canon:

As a stem came forth from Jesse and sprouted a flower, You, O Lord came forth as a Flower from the Virgin. O Christ our God, worthy of our praise, You came from the overshadowed mountain as You, the incorporeal God, were incarnate of the unwedded Virgin. Glory to Your might, O Lord!

O Christ, Jacob foretold You in days of old, calling You the Expectation of the nations. You have come forth from the tribe of Judah, and You have come to carry off the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria, as Isaiah says, turning their errors into a faith beautiful to God. Glory to Your might, O Lord!

O Master, You have risen like a Star out of Jacob, and You have filled with joy the astrologers who had wisely interpreted the prophecy of Balaam in the book of Numbers. As the first fruits of the Gentiles, they were brought to You, and You received them as they brought You acceptable gifts. Glory to Your might, O Lord!

"Christ is born!" – "Glorify Him!"



January 1

Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ

Our celebration of Christ's Nativity draws to a close today with the Feast of His Circumcision. In accordance with the Law of Moses, the Lord Jesus was circumcised eight days after His birth. It was also the time that He was formally given the name Jesus.

In the book of Genesis we read how circumcision was the sign of Israel's covenant with God: "*This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me*" (Gen 17:10-11).

At first glance we see that in this Jesus' family was simply doing what was customary among Jews. They were making the infant a part of the people of the Covenant. By His incarnation the Word of God became a human being, one of us by nature. By His circumcision He became a member of a specific people, a Jew. He would observe the Sabbath, study Torah and observe the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem. He would observe the traditions of Israel because it was through Israel, God's People, that the world would be saved.

The Church, reflecting on His circumcision, looked at it from other vantages as well. St. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, in his third homily on the Gospel of St. Luke, noted: "It seems to me that

circumcision achieved three distinct ends. In the first place, it *separated the descendants of Abraham* by a sort of sign and seal and distinguished them from all other nations.

"Second, it *prefigured in itself the grace and efficacy of divine baptism*. Formerly a male who was circumcised was included among the people of God by virtue of that seal; nowadays a person who is baptized and has formed in himself Christ the seal becomes a member of God's adopted family.

"Third, circumcision is the symbol of the faithful when they ... *cut away and mortify the tumultuous rising of carnal pleasures and passions* by the sharp surgery of faith and by ascetic labors. They do this, not by cutting the body but by purifying the heart. They do this by being circumcised in the spirit and not in the letter."

- St Cyril says that Christians are called to "the surgery of faith," With faith we cut away reliance on our own mind and submit to the teaching of the Gospel. Are there any Church teachings which you find difficult to accept? Give your doubt to God in a "spiritual circumcision."
- For St Cyril circumcision is also an image of Christian asceticism, the way we deal with our pride, our greed, our lust and the like: often particularly painful as it is a surgery we face daily. How does a commitment to Christian asceticism differ from New Year's Resolutions?
- Jan 1 is also the feast of St Basil the Great. In Greece and the Balkans people celebrate by baking *vasilopita* (St Basil's bread) and inserting a coin in it. Whoever gets the slice with the coin exchanges it for a gift. For a story and recipe see <http://www.antiochian.org/node/18684>.

The most merciful God did not disdain circumcision in the flesh. He offered Himself instead as a symbol and example of salvation to all. He made the Law, and yet submitted Himself to its commands and to what the prophets had foretold of Him. O our God, who hold all things in Your hands, and yet were wrapped in swaddling clothes: O Lord, glory to You! *Sticheron at Vespers*

"Christ is born!" — "Glorify Him!"



January 2-5

The Fore-feast of the Theophany

At the feast of the Nativity we celebrated Christ's manifestation in the flesh. At the feast of the Theophany we celebrate His manifestation in power at His baptism as He begins to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

In the thought of the Greek Fathers this event was the occasion of an even more momentous theophany: the New Testament's first revelation of the Holy Trinity. All three Persons were made manifest together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father's testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son. This is recalled in the troparion of the feast: "At Your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was revealed; ..."

Two images are traditionally associated with this feast. The first, naturally enough, is water. The Great Blessing of Water is conducted twice on this feast: once over the water intended to be drunk or distributed to the faithful and once over a nearby ocean or river. The cross is immersed each time as a proclamation that, as Christ entered into the Jordan, He sanctified it, all water and all creation.

The second image is light. The Feast of the Theophany has been called The Feast of Lights: "The Holy Day of the Lights to which we have come, and which we are celebrating today, has for its origin the Baptism of my Christ, the True Light that lightens everyone who comes into the world, and effects my purification..." (St Gregory the Theologian, Homily "On the Lights").

In our service of baptism the mystery is regularly called "Illumination." Thus, at the end of the service the priest prays, "Lord our God, who through the baptismal font bestows heavenly Illumination upon those who are baptized..." To be baptized is to be filled with Christ, the true Light.

As at the Nativity we celebrate the Theophany with a Fore-feast and a Paramony, our first fast day since Christmas.

- Plan to attend the services for this feast and to bring home a bottle of holy water (some parishes provide the bottles; in others you must bring your own).
- Once he has blessed the water the priest goes through the church and its environs blessing them with this water. Be sure that your home is included in his journey through the parish in celebration of this feast.
- It is customary on this feast to prepare *zalabieh* (also called *awaymat*), deep fried batter dipped (immersed) in simple syrup. At home or in the parish participate in a *zalabieh* celebration to recall Christ's baptism.
- Pray the following verses from the services of the Fore-feast:

O angelic powers, come from Bethlehem to the streams of the Jordan. Forerunner, go before Him and leave the wilderness. O River, prepare yourself with happiness! Let the whole earth exult with joy: in His mercy, Christ comes to take away the fault of Adam.

Leaving Bethlehem in spirit, and turning to the Jordan with Christ, come, all you families of the nations, let us sing to Him with a pure heart and lips. Let us say in faith, "Blessed is Your coming, O our God: glory to You!"

A great and awesome mystery in truth! Our God becomes like men. He, the faultless One, a stranger to sin, asks to be baptized today by holy John in the streams of the Jordan. Blessed is Your Theophany, O our God: glory to You!

Glory to Your holy Theophany, O Lord!