

HOMILY ON THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

BY OUR FATHER AMONG THE SAINTS GREGORY,
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“SOUND THE TRUMPET at the new moon,” says David, “even in the notable day of your feast.” The commandments of Divinely-inspired teaching are assuredly a law for those who hear them. Therefore, since the notable day of our feast is at hand, let us, too, fulfill the law and become heralds of the solemnity. The trumpet of the law, as the Apostle bids us understand, is the word. For the sound of the trumpet, he says, should not be uncertain, but its notes should be distinct so that the hearers may clearly perceive it. So let us produce a clear and audible sound, brethren, one that is no less noble than that of the trumpet. For the Law, prefiguring the truth in the shadowy types, enjoined the sounding of the trumpet at the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, the theme of the present Feast is the mystery of the true Tabernacle. For on this day did He Who vested Himself with humanity for our sake pitch His human tabernacle; on this day our tabernacles, which had disintegrated through death, are reconstituted by Him Who constructed our habitation from the very beginning. Let us utter the words of the Psalm, joining in chorus with the loud-voiced David: “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” How does He come? He crosses over into human life, not by boat or by chariot, but through the incorruption of a Virgin.

This is our God, this is our Lord, Who appeared to us to ordain a Feast with thick branches, even unto the horns of the altar.

We are assuredly not unaware, brethren, of the mystery contained in these words: that all of creation is a single temple of the Master of creation. But since, when sin intervened, the mouths of those overcome by evil were stopped, the voice of rejoicing fell silent and the harmony of those who keep festival was interrupted, as human creation no longer celebrated with celestial Angel-kind, for this reason there came the trumpets of the Prophets and the Apostles, whom the Law calls horns, because they are formed from the true Unicorn (*See Numbers 23:22*). By the power of the Spirit they made the word of truth resound with piercing clarity, so that the ears of those who had been made deaf by sin might be opened up and so that there might be one harmonious celebration, echoing in unison through the thick covering of the tabernacle of the lower creation with the sublime and preëminent Hosts that stand around the Heavenly Altar. For the horns of the noetic Altar are the sublime and preëminent Powers of the noetic nature, the Principalities, Authorities, Thrones, and Dominions, to which human nature is joined by participation in the Feast through its resurrected tabernacle, which is “thickly covered” by the renewal of our bodies. For “to be thickly covered” means the same as “to be adorned” and “to be encompassed,” as those who understand these matters interpret it. Come, then, let us rouse our souls to spiritual rejoicing, and let us appoint David the head and leader of our chorus; and let us say with him that sweet verse which we have just chanted.

Let us repeat it yet again: “This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” On this day darkness begins to diminish, and the duration of the night is contracted by the waxing of the sun’s rays. Not fortuitously or arbitrarily did God ordain, in connection with this Feast, that the Divine life should now be made manifest in human life. For those who are more discerning, the creation describes a certain mystery through natural phenomena, well nigh giving utterance and teaching those capable of hearing what is meant by the waxing of the day and the waning of the night at the advent of the Master. For it seems to me that I hear the creation setting forth an explanation of this kind: “When you see these phenomena, O man, understand that hidden mysteries are disclosed to you through things that are apparent. Do you see the night advancing to its greatest length, stopping in its course, and again receding? Reflect that the evil night of sin, having increased as much as it could and having reached the utmost magnitude of wickedness through the contrivance of every kind of vice, is today prevented from spreading any further, and is henceforth driven to eclipse and extinction.

Do you see how the light shines more clearly and how the sun sits higher in the sky than usual? Ponder on the Advent of the true Light, Who illumines the entire inhabited earth with the rays of the Gospel. One might perhaps reasonably suppose that the reason why the Lord did not manifest Himself at the outset of creation, but bestowed the revelation of His Divinity upon human life in the latter times, is that He Who was going to unite Himself to human life in order to cleanse it of evil was bound to await the blossoming of all the sin planted by the enemy. Thus, it was then that He laid the axe to the root, as the Gospel says. For those physicians who are eminent in their art, while the fever is still consuming the body from within and gradually being aggravated by those factors that cause the disease, yield to the malady, until the suffering has reached its acme, giving no relief to the sufferer by way of food. But when the evil comes to a halt, when the entire disease has been exposed, then they bring their skill to bear. Thus, He Who heals those who are ill in soul waited for the evil from the disease which held the human race in its grip to become manifest in its entirety, lest any hidden evil remain unhealed, which would be the case if the doctor cured only what was visible. For this reason neither in the times of Noah, when all flesh had become corrupted by unrighteousness, did He apply the remedy of His own appearing, because the shoot of Sodomite vice had not yet budded, nor did the Lord reveal Himself in the time of the destruction of Sodom, for many other evils were still lurking in human nature. Indeed, where was the God-fighting Pharaoh? Where was the indomitable wickedness of the Egyptians?

Not even then—in the era of the Egyptian wickedness, I mean—was it opportune for the Corrector of all things to associate with our life. No, for it was necessary for the iniquity of the Israelites to be exposed. It was still necessary for both the kingdom of the Assyrians and the smouldering arrogance of Nabucodonosor to be made manifest in human life. It was necessary for the foul murder of the righteous ones to spring up like some wicked and thorny plant from the Devil's evil root. It was necessary for the raging fury of the Jews against the Saints of God to be revealed: they slew the Prophets and stoned those sent by God, and finally perpetrated the murder of Zacharias between the Temple and the altar. Add to this list of enormities the slaughter of the children by Herod. When, therefore, the full force of evil had emerged from its wicked root and had proliferated, running riot in a variety of ways in the behavior of those in every generation notorious for their depravity, it was then, as Paul says to the Athenians, that God, overlooking the times of ignorance, came in the latter days, when there was no one who understood Him or sought after Him, when

all had gone astray and had alike become good for nothing, when all things had been enveloped in sin; when iniquity had multiplied, and when the darkness of evil had increased to the highest degree. Then did Grace appear, then did the radiance of the true Light dawn. Then did the Sun of righteousness appear to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death; then did He crush the many heads of the dragon, stepping on him with His foot, through His human flesh, dashing him to the earth and trampling on him. Let no one, looking at the present state of the world, suppose that we are speaking falsely when we say that the Lord has shone upon our life in the latter times.

Perhaps someone will say, by way of objection, that it is natural for one who waits some years for evil to manifest itself, so that he can pull it up by the roots once it is fully developed, to destroy it completely, so that no remnant of it will survive. Now, however, people dare to commit murders, thefts, adulteries, and all manner of villainy. But let him who observes this state of affairs dispel his doubt with a familiar example. For, just as when we kill a snake, we can see that the hinder part of its coil is not immediately deadened along with its head, but whereas the head is dead, the tail still pulsates with its own life and is not deprived of vital movement, so also He Who slew the dragon, when the beast had become large enough, increasing in size with each generation of mankind, destroyed its head, that is, its power to ruin what is good—which itself possesses many heads—, but took no account of the rest of its body, allowing the motion that lingered in the dead beast to serve as a means of training for future generations. What, then, is the head that is crushed? The head that brought death into the world by an evil counsel, injecting deadly venom into man through its bite.

Therefore, He Who destroyed the might of death, crushed the power contained in the serpent's head, as the Prophet says. The rest of the beast's body, dispersed in human life, as long as mankind is motivated by evil, always roughens life with the scales of sin. The serpent's power is now dead, since its head has been rendered useless, but as time passes and things endowed with motion come a standstill at the awaited consummation of this life, then the tail, the enemy's last remaining part, that is, death, is annulled. In this way evil will completely disappear, when all are recalled to life through the resurrection: the righteous will immediately be transported to celestial bliss, while those held in the grip of sins will be consigned to the fire of Gehenna.

But let us return to the present joy, which the Angels proclaim to the shepherds, which the heavens declare to the Magi, which the spirit of prophecy announces through many and sundry utterances, so that the Magi become her-

alds of Grace. For He Who makes the sun rise on the just and on the unjust, Who sends rain on the evil and on the good, has brought the ray of knowledge and the dew of the Spirit even to the mouths of foreigners, so that the truth is confirmed all the more for us by the testimony of our adversaries. You hear the soothsayer Balaam declaring to the foreigners by a higher inspiration that “a Star shall rise out of Jacob.” You see the Magi, who derive their ancestry from him, observing, according to the prediction of their forefather, the rising of the novel star, which, contrary to the nature of all other stars, alone partook of motion and rest, proceeding according as it had need of either of these states. For whereas, among the other stars, some stand fast once and for all in the sphere of the fixed stars, having obtained an immovable position, while others never cease from moving, this one both moved, preceding the Magi, and stood still, indicating the place.

You hear Esaias exclaiming that “unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.” Learn from the Prophet himself how the Child was born, how the Son was given. Now, was it in accordance with the law of nature? No, says the Prophet. The Master of nature is not a slave to the laws of nature. But how was the Child born? Tell us. “Behold,” says the Prophet, “a Virgin shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” O the wonder! The Virgin becomes a mother, and yet remains a virgin. You see the innovation in nature. Among other women, as long as one is a virgin, she is not a mother. But when she becomes a mother, she no longer possesses virginity. But in this case, the two names coincide. For the same woman is both a mother and a virgin; and neither did her virginity prevent her childbirth nor did her maternity annul her virginity. For it behoved Him Who was to enter human life in order to make all things incorrupt that He should receive His beginning from the incorruption that served His birth. Men are in the habit of calling one who has no experience of wedlock incorrupt. It seems to me that the great Moses understood this in advance through the light wherein God appeared to him, when the fire touched the bush and the bush was not consumed: “I will pass over and see this great sight.” By “pass over,” he means, I think, not a local movement, but the passage of time; for that which was then prefigured in the flame and the bush was, with the passage of intervening time, clearly revealed in the mystery of the Virgin. For, just as there was a bush there, and the fire touched it and it was not burned, so here, too, there is a Virgin, who gives birth to the Light and suffers no corruption. If a bush prefigures the God-bearing body of the Virgin, do not be ashamed of the type. For all flesh, on account of our acceptance of sin, by the very fact that it is

only flesh, is sin; and sin in Scripture is called by the name “thorn.” Now, provided we do not digress too far from our subject, it is perhaps not inopportune to adduce Zacharias, who was slain between the temple and the altar, as a witness to the incorruption of the Mother of God. This Zacharias was a priest; and not only was he a priest, but he was also endowed with the gift of prophecy, his power of prophecy being declared expressly in the Book of the Gospel. When the Grace of God was preparing the way for men not to think that birth from a Virgin is incredible, it set the stage for the assent of unbelievers by means of lesser miracles: a child was born of a barren woman advanced in years. This was a prelude to the miracle of the Virgin Birth. For, just as Elizabeth became a mother not by the power of nature—for she had grown old in barrenness—but the birth of her child is ascribed to the Will of God; so also, the incredibility of a virginal parturition gains credibility with reference to the Divine.

Since, therefore, he who was born of the barren woman preceded Him Who was born of the Virgin, and, in response to the salutation of her who was carrying the Lord, leaped in his mother’s womb before he saw the light of day, as soon as the Forerunner of the Word was born, the silence of Zacharias was thereupon loosed by prophetic inspiration. All that Zacharias recounted was a prophecy of the future. Therefore, guided to the knowledge of hidden things by the spirit of prophecy, and perceiving the mystery of virginity in the incorrupt birth, he did not exclude the unwedded Mother from that place in the Temple allotted by the Law to virgins, thereby teaching the Jews that the Creator of existing things and King of all creation has human nature subject to Himself, along with everything else, guiding it by His own Will as He sees fit, not being Himself mastered by it, so that it is in His power to create a new birth, which will not prevent her who has become a mother from remaining a virgin. For this reason, he did not exclude her, in the Temple, from the place of the virgins; this place was the space between the Temple and the altar. When the Jews heard that the King of creation, by Divine Economy, was about to undergo human birth, fearing lest they become subject to a king, they murdered the priest who bore witness to this birth as he was serving at the altar itself.

We have, however, wandered far from our subject, and must return to Bethlehem in the Gospel account. For if we are truly shepherds and keeping watch over our flocks, the voice of the Angels which proclaims these good tidings of great joy is assuredly directed to us. Let us, therefore, look up to the heavenly host, behold the choir of Angels, and hear their Divine hymnody. What is the sound of these who keep feast? “Glory to God in the highest,” they cry. Why do the Angelic voices glorify the Divinity beheld in the highest?

Because they say “and on earth peace.” The Angels have become exceedingly joyful at the spectacle: “and on earth peace.” That which was previously accursed, which brought forth thorns and thistles, the place of conflict, the exile of the condemned, has received peace. Oh, the wonder! “Truth is sprung out of the earth, and righteousness hath looked down from heaven.” Such is the fruit that the earth of men yielded. And these things come to pass for the sake of God’s good will towards men. God is mingled with human nature, in order that humanity might be raised up to the height of God. Having heard these tidings, let us go to Bethlehem and behold the new spectacle, how the Virgin exults in childbirth, how she who knew not wedlock suckles her infant. But let us first hear from the stories related about her who she was and whence she came.

I have heard a certain apocryphal account, which presents the following narratives concerning her. Her father was distinguished for his scrupulous observance of the Law and was well known for his virtues. However, he had reached old age without having sired any offspring, for his wife was unable to bear children. Now, there was a certain honor ascribed to mothers on the basis of the Law, an honor in which barren women had no share. His wife replicated the story of the mother of Samuel. Having entered the Holy of Holies, she besought God that she not be deprived of the blessing that comes from the laws, since she not sinned against the Law in any way, but that she become a mother and dedicate to God the child that she would bear. Strengthened by Divine assent to the favor that she requested, she conceived. When she brought forth the child, she named her “Mary,” so that through the similarity of the name it might be indicated that the favor was granted by God. When the little girl was sufficiently mature, so that she no longer needed to cling to the breast, her mother made haste to give her back to God, in fulfillment of her promise, and conduct her to the Temple. The priests brought up the child in the Holy place for some time, just like Samuel, but when she was grown up, they took counsel as to what they could do about that holy body without sinning against God. To subjugate her to the law of nature and enslave her through marriage to one who would take her to wife was utterly unacceptable. Indeed, it was regarded as absolute sacrilege for a man to be master of something consecrated to God, for it was decreed by the law that a man should be master of his spouse. However, it was not lawful for a woman to consort with priests in the Temple or to be seen in the Holy place, and besides, such a thing was improper.

As they were deliberating on these matters, they received advice from God that they should betroth her nominally to such a man as would be apt to guard her virginity. Joseph, the kind of man they were looking for, since he

was of the same tribe and family as the Virgin, was found, and on the advice of the priests he was betrothed to the girl. Their affinity extended only as far as betrothal. The Virgin was then initiated into the mystery of the Divine Will by Gabriel, the words of his mystagogy being themselves a blessing. "Rejoice, thou that art full of Grace," he said, "the Lord is with thee." The words now addressed to the Virgin are the antithesis of those addressed to the first woman. The latter was condemned to the pangs of childbirth on account of sin; in the case of the former, sorrow is expelled through joy. In the latter case, sorrows precede parturition; in the former case, joy is the midwife of parturition. "Fear not," says Gabriel. Since the expectation of travail arouses fear in every woman, that fear is banished by the promise of an agreeable childbirth. "Thou shalt conceive in thy womb," he says, "and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins." What does Mary say? Hear the voice of a pure Virgin. The Angel proclaims the glad tidings of the birth; but she cleaves to virginity, judging incorruption to be preferable to the appearance of the Angel, and neither does she disbelieve the Angel nor will she relinquish her resolve. "I have refrained from knowing any man," she says: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" This utterance of Mary is proof of the narrative that I have drawn from the aforementioned apocryphal work. For if she had been taken in marriage by Joseph, how would she have been surprised by him who announced that she was to bear a child, for in that case she would surely have expected to become a mother according the law of nature? "Since it behooved me to preserve inviolate, as a holy offering, the flesh that I have consecrated to God, for this reason," she says, "although thou art an Angel, although thou hast come from Heaven, and although this phenomenon surpasseth human nature, it is nonetheless impossible for me to know a man. How am I to be a mother without a man? For I know Joseph as my betrothed, but do not know him as a husband." Now, what does the bridal escort Gabriel say to this? What manner of bridal chamber does he present for a pure and undefiled marriage? "The Holy Spirit," he says, "shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee."

Oh, that blessed womb, which on account of its exceeding purity attracted to itself the good things of the soul! For in the case of all other human beings, a pure soul would with difficulty receive the presence of the Holy Spirit; but in this case, the flesh becomes a vessel of the Spirit. "And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee." Now, what do these ineffable words mean? "Christ" is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God." Thus, the Wisdom of the Most High God, which is Christ, takes form in her virginity through the

coming of the Holy Spirit. For, just as a shadow assumes the same shape as the body that precedes it, so also the character and the traits of the Divinity of the Son will be manifested in the power of Him Who is to be born, the image, seal, adumbration, and effulgence of the Prototype being shown through His display of miracle-working.

But the glad tidings of the Angels exhort us to bring our discourse back to Bethlehem and to behold the mysteries in the cave. What is this? A Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger; and she who remains a Virgin after giving birth, the incorrupt Mother, cares for her offspring. Let us, the shepherds, utter the cry of the Prophet: “As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God.” Surely these things that are related about Christ did not happen fortuitously or accidentally, and surely there is some reason behind this story. What does it mean for the Master that He dwells in a cave and lies in a manger? That He became involved with our life at the time of the whole world was being registered for taxation? Is it not clear that, just as He delivers us from the curse of the Law, becoming a curse for our sake, and transfers our stripes to Himself, so that by His stripes we might be healed, so also He submits to taxation in order to free us from the evil fetters of the tax which death has been exacting from humanity? When you see the cave in which the Master is born, understand the lightless and subterranean life of mankind, into which He enters, appearing to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. He is bound in swaddling clothes Who wraps Himself in the bands of our sins. The manger is the abode of irrational animals, in which the Word is born, that the ox may know his Owner and the ass his Master’s crib; the ox stands for him who is subject to the Law, while the ass, that beast of burden, stands for him who is weighed down with the sin of idolatry. But whereas the food and sustenance suitable for irrational animals is grass—“He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle,” as the Prophet says—the rational animal is nourished with bread. For this reason, therefore, the Bread of Life, which descended from Heaven, is set forth in the manger, which is the dwelling- place of irrational animals, so that those irrational animals might partake of rational food and become rational. Thus, the Lord of both mediates, in the manger, between the ox and the ass, in order that, having “broken down the middle wall of partition,” He might “make in Himself of twain one new man,” both removing the heavy yoke of the Law from the former and relieving the latter of the burden of idolatry.

But let us now gaze upon the celestial wonders. For behold, not only do Prophets and Angels announce the glad tidings of this joy to us; the heavens, too, proclaim the glory of the Gospel through their own marvels. Christ “sprang

out of Juda” for us, as the Apostle says, but the Jews are not illumined by Him Who thus sprang forth. The Magi were strangers to the promise of the Covenants and without a share in the blessing of the Fathers; yet they surpass the people of Israel in knowledge, for they recognized the heavenly luminary and were not ignorant of the King in the cave. The Magi bring Him gifts, but the Jews plot against Him. The former worship Him, but the latter persecute Him. The former rejoice at finding Him Whom they were seeking. The latter are perturbed at the birth of Him Who was announced. For, when the Magi “saw the star” over the place where the Child was,” “they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” “When Herod...had heard” the report, “he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” The Magi offer frankincense to Him as God, honor His regal dignity with gold, and through myrrh, by prophetic Grace, allude to the Economy of His suffering. The Jews, however, condemn the entire infant population to slaughter, which, it seems to me, convicts them not only of cruelty, but also of the utmost folly. For what did they intend by this act of infanticide? And to what end did the murderers dare to perpetrate such a heinous crime? A certain new and marvellous celestial sign, it says, indicated to the Magi the appearance of the King.

What, then? Do you believe in the truth of the sign that announces Him, or do you suspect that what is rumored about Him is groundless? For if He is such a nature as to have the heavens under His control, is He not obviously above your control? But if He makes His living or dying dependent on you, in vain do you fear such a one. For what purpose do you plot against one who acts in such a way as to be under your control? Why do you issue that dire mandate, your wicked decree against the infants, that hapless babes be slaughtered? What wrong did they do? What cause of punishment and death did they bring upon themselves? Their sole crime is that they were born and saw the light of day. Because of this it was necessary that the city be filled with executioners and that a throng of mothers and infants be assembled, with people accompanying them and parents and all their kinsfolk gathering together, as one might expect, to witness their plight. Who could describe this calamity in words? Who could bring before our eyes through narratives their torments? their mingled lamentation? the mournful dirge of children, mothers, relatives, and fathers crying out piteously at the threats of the executioners? How could one portray the executioner standing beside the infant with bared sword, with a grim and murderous look on his face, uttering words to match his expression, dragging the infant towards him with one hand, and stretching out his sword with the other, and the mother on the other side pulling the child towards herself

and holding out her own neck under the edge of the sword, so as not to see with her own eyes the hapless child being destroyed by the hands of the executioner? How could one recount the reactions of the fathers? their exclamations, their lamentations, their final embraces of their sons, and many other such things that occurred at the same time as these? Who could set forth the various kinds of torment, the twofold pangs of the mothers who have recently given birth? the bitter searing of their feminine nature? how the hapless babe clave to its mother's breast and at the same time received the mortal blow through its vitals? how the unfortunate mother held out her breast to the mouth of the infant and received the blood of her child on her bosom? At times, with the swing of his hand, by a single stroke of his sword, the executioner would thrust through both mother and child, and a single stream of blood would flow, mingled together from the wound of the mother and the mortal blow dealt to the child. And since, by Herod's abominable decree, not only was the death sentence to be meted out to newborn infants, but also any child who had reached his second year was to be carried off and slain (as Scripture says, "from two years old and under"), the account quite naturally foresees yet another predicament: that the intervening time had made the same woman mother of two children. What a spectacle it was in such situations, with two executioners busying themselves with one mother! The one would be dragging towards him the child that was running back to his mother, while the other would be tearing the suckling away from his mother's bosom. What suffering the poor mother must have undergone in these cases! Her instincts are split between two children, each of whom kindles the flames of maternal affection in equal measure, for she does not know which of the wicked executioners to follow: the one dragging her infant off to slaughter from one side, or the other doing the same thing from the other side. Is she to run to her newborn, who is emitting what are as yet indistinct and inarticulate laments? But she hears the other, who is already able to speak, tearfully calling out to his mother in a faltering voice. What is she to do? Who is it to be? To whose cry will she respond? In response to whose lamentation will she lament in turn? Which death will she mourn, being stung by the goads of her maternal nature equally for each?

But let us avert our hearing from threnodies for the children and direct our minds to themes more cheerful and more suitable for the Feast, even though Rachel, in accordance with the prophecy, bewails the slaughter of the children with loud cries. For on a day of celebration, as the wise Solomon says, it is fitting to forget evils. What could be more auspicious for us than this Feast, whereon the Sun of Righteousness, having scattered the evil darkness of the Devil, shines

upon creation through this our nature, whereon that which was fallen is raised up, that which had become hostile is brought to reconciliation, that which had been outlawed is recalled, that which had fallen away from life returns to life, that which had become enslaved to captivity is restored to the dignity of the Kingdom, and that which had been bound by the fetters of death and runs back, liberated, to the land of the living? Now, according to the prophecy, the brazen gates of death are crushed and the iron bars are shattered, whereby the human race was formerly confined in the dungeon of death. Now, as David says, the gate of righteousness is opened. Now the sound of those who keep festival is heard in unanimity throughout the inhabited earth. Through man came death, and through man salvation. The first man fell into sin, but the second raised up him who was fallen. A woman came to the defense of a woman: the former afforded an entrance to sin; the latter ministered to the entrance of righteousness. The former accepted the counsel of the serpent; the latter brought forth the Destroyer of the serpent and gave birth to the Author of light. The former introduced sin through a tree; through a tree the latter introduced good in its place. By “tree” I mean the Cross; the fruit of this tree is evergreen and amaranthine life for those who taste thereof. And let no one suppose that such thanksgiving belongs only to the mystery of Pascha. Let him reflect that Pascha is the end of the Divine Economy. How could the end come about if the beginning had not preceded it? Which is prior to the other? The Nativity of Christ, of course, is prior to the Economy of His Passion.

The glories of Pascha, therefore, belong to the laudations of His Nativity. If one enumerates the benefactions recorded in the Gospels and reviews the miraculous healings, the provision of food amid scarcity, the return of the dead from the tombs, the extemporaneous production of wine, the expulsion of demons, the transmutation of various illnesses into health, the saltations of the lame, the fashioning of eyes from clay, the Divine teachings, the ordinances of the new Law, the mystagogy, through parables, towards higher things—all of these are a gift of the present day. Therefore, “let us rejoice and be glad in it,” not fearing the reproach of men, as the prophet exhorts, nor being overcome by the contempt of those who deride the rationale of the Economy, saying that it is not seemly that the Lord should assume bodily nature and mingle with human life through birth, ignorant, it seems, of the mystery involved in this matter, how the Wisdom of God wrought our salvation. We had voluntarily sold ourselves to our sins and were in bondage to the enemy of our life like bought slaves. What, indeed, would you like the Master to have done? Is it not to have delivered you from calamity? Why do you quibble about the manner of your deliverance? Why

do you lay down the law for your Benefactor, as if you receive no benefit from Him? It is as if one were to spurn his doctor and reprove him for doing good, because he effected the cure not in this way, but in another way. If you inquire, out of curiosity, into the magnitude of the Divine Economy, it is sufficient for you to realize that the Divinity is not just one good thing among others, but is whatever good we can conceive: powerful, just, good, and wise, whatever names and concepts possess a meaning that befits God. Consider, therefore, whether all the attributes that I have mentioned—goodness, wisdom, power, and justice—coincide in the benefaction wrought for us. As good, He loved the apostate; as wise, He devised a means for the return of those in bondage. As just, He did not coerce him who had enslaved mankind, who had justly acquired him by purchase; rather, He gave Himself in exchange for those held fast, in order that, transferring the debt to Himself like a guarantor, He might set the detainee free from those detaining him. As powerful, He was not held fast by Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. For it was not possible that the Author of life should be held fast by corruption. But was it not disgraceful for Him to undergo human birth and undergo the experience of sufferings in the flesh? You are speaking of His exceeding beneficence. For since it was not possible for humanity to be delivered from so many evils in any other way, the King of all dispassion suffered to exchange His own glory for our life. His purity descended to our filth; but our filth had no effect on His purity, as the Gospel says: “And the light shone in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.” Darkness is disappeared by the presence of light; the sun is not dimmed by darkness. Mortality is swallowed up by life, as the Apostle says; life is not consumed by death. That which is corrupted is saved along with what is incorrupt. Corruption does not affect incorruption. For this reason, there is a common symphony of all creation, all things sending up unanimous doxology to the Master of creation, every tongue of those in Heaven, on earth, and under the earth crying that the Lord Jesus Christ, in the glory of God the Father, is blessed unto the ages of ages. Amen.

*Taken from the **Synod in Resistance Website**, Theology Section, & found under the heading Calendar, and then Feasts. Because of the shortage of space in this magazine, we have omitted the Scriptural references and footnotes, but these may be found on the website.*

***Saint Gregory of Nyssa** is the brother according to the flesh of **Saint Basil the Great**. **Saint Gregory** died in the last decade of the fourth century, and his feast day is on 10th / 23rd January*



TEACHING
OF THE VENERABLE SERAPHIM OF SAROV
ON THE PRAYER OF JESUS

A CERTAIN BROTHER, by the name of John, approached the holy and great father Philemon, and falling at his feet, said: “What need I do, father, to be saved; I see that my mind wanders and hovers hither and yon, where it should not.” The Venerable Philemon, after remaining silent for a while, said: “This weakness derives from exterior things and stays with you because you do not have perfect love for God, for as yet you have not achieved the warmth of the love and knowledge of Him.” The brother says; “What must I do?” He (Philemon) said: “Go and have hidden in your heart the teaching which is able to cleanse your mind of it.” The brother, not understanding what was said, because he was inexperienced, asked the elder: “Father, what is this hidden teaching?” And he, the Elder, said to him: “Go, keep watch in your heart, and soberly in your thoughts say with fear and trembling, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” And the Blessed Diadochus teaches beginners the same. The brother came away from him, and through God’s working with him and the prayers of the father, abiding in quiet, he, in a little while, found delight in this occupation. But soon he weakened and could not do it soberly or pray. Again he came to the Elder and asked him about what had happened. The Elder replied to him: “Look, you have already recognized the way of silence and its action, and have experienced the sweetness which derives from this, then constantly hold in your heart the following: whether you are eating or drinking, whether you are conversing with anyone, whether you are in your cell, or on the road, with sobriety of thought and with a mind untempted do not leave off this prayer or chanting, and you will be granted through the prayers and psalms that even in the most extreme necessity your mind will not be left void, but in a hidden manner it will be instructed and will pray. And through this you will be enabled to understand the depths of the Divine Scriptures and the power hidden

in them, and to give the mind constant activity, so that you will thus fulfil the Apostolic injunction, Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:16). Thus pray strict attention and guard your heart lest it receive evil, or any kind of vain or unprofitable thoughts. But always, whether you sleep or get up, whether you eat or drink, whether you are conversing, your heart must in a hidden way be instructed through the psalms, that it pray thus: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. And when you are chanting verbally, watch lest you are saying one thing with the lips, but quite another in your thoughts.”

... to be continued in the next issue.



The Coming Month

DECEMBER is naturally fully devoted to the celebration of the **Saviour's Nativity in Bethlehem**. The first twenty-four days of the month fall within the fast in preparation for the festival, and for the last seven days we are celebrating the Great Feast itself - a week in which no fasting is appointed. Furthermore, on the two Sundays that precede Christmas Day, we have celebrations of the **Old Testament righteous ones** who prepared the way for, and prophesied the coming of, the Saviour. This year, the first of these will also coincide with the commemoration of **Saint Spiridon of Trimythus in Cyprus** and of **Saint Herman of Alaska** (12th 25th).

From 20th December / 2nd January, we incorporate special hymns in our services anticipating the Nativity, and this period of five days is known as the **Pre-festival** or **Forefeast**. This year, Christmas Day falls on a Saturday, and on the day before, we have a particularly beautiful service, which begins with the **Royal Hours**. There are four of these, the First, Third, Sixth and Ninth, and on each one of them there are three Scriptural readings, one from the Old Testament prophecies, one for the

Epistles, and one from the Gospel. The Hours are followed immediately by the **Typica**, and earlier in the day than usual we have **Vespers**. During Vespers there are a further eight readings of prophecies regarding the Nativity from the Old Testament. After the third and the sixth, the sequence is broken by the chanting of specially appointed verses and refrains, during which the Royal Gates are opened. During the Scriptural readings from the Old Testament themselves they are closed, representing that the fulness of the revelation was then veiled. At the end of the readings, there is a Little Litany and this is followed by the Trisagion Hymn and we then continue with the **Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great**. In the evening, the **Christmas Vigil** begins with Great Compline, which is otherwise only used on the eve of Theophany and during the Great Lent. On the day of the feast itself, we have the **Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom**. After receiving the Holy Mysteries or the antidoron at this service, we then break our forty day fast, and in fact keep the next eleven days without any fasting prescribed. The day before the Theophany (5th / 18th January) we do fast, and have a series of services which in form copy those of Christmas Eve, in preparation for this second great celebration.

The day after Christmas Day is kept as a festival of the **Most Holy Theotokos**, and as it falls on a Sunday this year, it is also observed as a feast of the **Kinsmen of our Saviour**: His ostensible father, St Joseph the Betrothed, His ancestor, the Prophet, King and Psalmist David, and His brother, the Holy Apostle James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem. This Saint James is not one of the two Apostles of that name, numbered among the Twelve, but was counted among the Seventy. He was, however, the first Bishop of Jerusalem. The feast of the Nativity ends on the last day of the month.

Among the Saints this month, we have:-

The **Venerable Nilus of Stolben** (7th / 20th) whose feast day thus falls on the same day as that of **St Ambrose of Milan**. Saint Nil was born into a peasant family in a small village of the Novgorod diocese. In the year 1505, he was tonsured as a monk at the monastery of the Venerable Sava of Krypetsk near Pskov. After ten years in ascetic life at the monastery he set out to the River Sereml', bordering the city of Ostash-

kova; here for a further thirteen years he led a strict ascetic life in incessant struggle against the snares of the devil, who, as in the case of Saint Antony the Great, manifested himself in various apparitions – reptiles and wild beasts. Many of the inhabitants of the surrounding area started coming to the Saint for instruction, but this became burdensome for him and he prayed God to point out to him a place where he could struggle in stillness. Once after long prayer he heard a voice: “Nilus, go to Lake Seliger. There upon the island of Stolben thou canst be saved!” From people that came to him the Saint learned the whereabouts of the island; it was covered over by dense forest, and on it St Nilus found a small hill and dug out a cave, and after a certain while he built himself an hut, in which he lived for 26 years. Struggling in strict asceticism and stillness, he accomplished another and unique feat – he never lay down to sleep, but permitted himself only a light nap, leaning on a prop set into the wall of the cell. The father’s pious life roused the envy of the enemy of mankind, which evidenced itself through the spiteful action of the local inhabitants. Once someone set fire to the woods on the island where his hut stood, but the flames upon reaching the hill went out in miraculous manner. Another time robbers forced themselves into the hut. The saint told them: “All my treasure is in the corner of the cell.” In this corner stood an icon of the Mother of God, but the robbers began to search there for money and, for not heeding the saint, they were struck blind. Then with tears of repentance they begged the monk for forgiveness. Saint Nilus would quietly refuse an offering if the conscience of the one offering it to him was impure, or if they were in bodily impurity. Fore-knowing his end, the Saint Nilus prepared his own grave. Providentially an hegumen from one of the nearby monasteries visited him as he was about to die, and communed him with the Holy Mysteries. Before the hegumen left, the St Nilus said a prayer and censed round the holy icons and the cell, and then immediately gave up his soul on 7th December, A.D. 1554. His holy relics (now venerated at the Znamenie Icon of the Mother of God church in the city of Ostashkova) were taken up in A.D. 1667, and feast days established both on the day of his death and on 27th May.



POINTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE

“In your recent piece about the Western Rite you mentioned striking ‘pious’ poses as something negative, and yet in the services we hear ‘pious and Orthodox Christians’ being prayed for frequently. So is there something intrinsically wrong with piety, or is it intrinsically alright? - M. L. Mansfield, Notts.

I THINK this question arises because almost every word carries different connotations and is coloured by the context in which it is used. This is true of the word piety, and of its adjective, pious. True piety is reverent, modest, unpretentious, and is an expression of lowliness of heart, and yet at the same time it is enlivened with diligence, faithfulness and firmness. It does not seek to make a show of itself, but is nonetheless an expression of an inner integrity and depth.

The “piety” which is negative is the very opposite of these things and is essentially shallow, and its purpose is to draw attention to itself. In actuality, because we are all fallible, we find ourselves veering between these two extremes time and again.

It is for this reason, that in Orthodox worship, the movements and actions of the celebrants should be restrained, and in no way intended to draw attention to themselves, understated. It seemed to me, and maybe I am prejudiced or wrong, that the Western Rite promotes the exact opposite. I must, in fairness, add, that even in Eastern Rite services, one can see a similar wrong spirit, but that is because the people have failed to see the inner character of the rite, whereas I believe the Western Rite itself appears to promote such a wrong spirit.

Just as the church music can easily become concert, especially when Westernized music is used, so the liturgical actions can simply become pageant. People can even become proud of their singing or of the splendour of their services! I remember a report about the visit of a famous choir from Russia visiting the ROCA-MP churches in America shortly after the rapprochement. One commentator, with perhaps more enthusiasm than understanding, exclaimed exuberantly (everything from “Russia” was then in vogue), that the choir sang so well, that the walls of their church seemed to shudder. But does God want us to shake buildings? Is this the way we find Him? Surely the very opposite: *“Be still and know that I am God”* (Ps. 45:10). Even our services should guide us to being still.

Concert and pageant have no place in Orthodox worship, only prayer. In that music and liturgical rites are used in our services, they are, as it were only the setting for the jewel, which is prayer. The setting should not obscure the jewel.

May I tell you of two incidents which I found edifying, and which have, perhaps, if only obliquely, a bearing on what I have been trying to say?

Many years ago, when I was still serving at the Russian Church in Exile in London, a youngish man came to see me and said he wanted to become Orthodox. I had no recollection of ever having seen him before, and so, after talking to him for some while, I suggested he start by attending church. He replied that he had been coming for years (about ten, I seem to remember). I asked why, then, I had never seen him in church, and he told me that he went to the Patriarchal Cathedral at Ennismore Gardens, because they used more English. My next question was naturally why then did he not approach them about becoming Orthodox. And what he told me was very instructive. He said that at the Patriarchal Church, the person who stood out was Metropolitan Antony (Bloom), and he seemed to him to be holy, but that it also appeared to him that whatever charisma the Metropolitan might have had was not shared by anyone else there. On the other hand, he told me, when he had, on occasion, gone to Emperor's Gate, the Exile Church, there was a very elderly Bishop there, whose name he did not even know (it was in fact the late Archbishop Nikodem of Richmond). However, he observed that whatever gift or spirit the Bishop there had was shared by all the clergy and people. This, he felt, and I am sure he was not mistaken, was an indication of the genuineness of their faith and piety, and it was this church that he wanted to join.

The second incident happened more recently, when Abbess Elisabeth at the Convent was still alive. I had gone there to serve with the monk, who is now our deacon, Fr Sabbas. At that time, he was our "choir" at Brookwood, and had not had the opportunity to train properly but had only managed to pick up a few things which kept us going. That evening there was to be a Vigil or some special service at Brookwood, and as she bade us farewell, Mother Elisabeth mentioned this to Father. He remarked that it would not be very splendid as he would be the only chanter. And she told a story; whether it was an actual event or a parable, I do not know. But she said that in Old Russia there had been an isolated, small monastery, with a rather ropey choir. One evening there were tremendous storms and travellers called at the monastery asking for shelter, as they could not continue their journey in such weather. It turned out that they

were a professional choir from Petersburg, and the monks were delighted. They gave them hospitality, but asked them to sing for the Vigil that night. Never had they had such a service! When they had all retired, the abbot was woken from his sleep by an Angel, who rebuked him: “You have neglected the Vigil tonight, call the monks to church to chant it!” The abbot was dumbfounded, and protested, “But tonight we had the most beautiful Vigil ever and a magnificent choir.” The Angel replied, “That is not what the Lord desires. He desires that you pray.” Mother Elisabeth’s words encouraged the deacon, but they are also instructive in bringing us all back to the basics of Orthodox liturgical life.



NEWS SECTION

“SURETY OF SINNERS” ICON BROUGHT TO ENGLAND

THE wonderworking Icon of the Mother of God “Surety of Sinners” was recently brought to England from Moscow by a delegation headed by **His Grace, Bishop Tikhon of Podolsk**, rector of the church of St Nicholas at Khamovniki in Moscow where the icon resides. It arrived on 23rd November, and before being taken to the **Russian Orthodox Cathedral at Ennismore Gardens, Knightsbridge**, it was taken to the **Russian Embassy**. While in Britain, the icon was present at services in the two Moscow Patriarchal churches in London and at their church of St Nicholas the Wonderworker in Oxford. On Thursday 24th November, at 10.30 am, a *moleben* was chanted before the icon in presence of the hierarchs of the Local Orthodox Churches in the British Isles, who had gathered for 4th meeting of the **Pan-Orthodox Assembly of Bishops in the UK**. The icon was taken back to Moscow on 28th November.

BIRTHDAY GREETINGS !

SENDING greetings and giving awards on birthdays appears to have become quite a significant part of the rôle of the present **Patriarch of Moscow, Kyrill**. Hierarchs, leaders of other denominations and state officials all

receive greetings and often awards. On 15th November this year, His Holiness greeted on his sixtieth birthday **General Alexander V. Bortnikov**, the director of the F.S.B., the successor of the infamous K.G.B. His Holiness writes: “For a long time you have diligently laboured for the good of Russia, taking care to establish a peaceful and quiet life for our fellow citizens.... It is gratifying that you pay special attention to matters of a spiritual-moral character in organizing the activities of your fellow workers. I am convinced that the constructive working together of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Federal Service will prosper the strengthening of the moral-patriotic spirit of the defenders of the Fatherland” (*Translated from the official site of the Moscow Patriarchate*). So, just as under duress the pre-perestroika Patriarchal administration collaborated with the K.G.B., the present Patriarch, in a new “free” Russia, rejoices in his collaboration with its successor organization. *Plus ça change!*

A MUCH MORE WELCOME STATEMENT ON POLITICAL AFFILIATION

ANYONE who knows anything about contemporary Russia knows that as an understandable, if fatally misguided reaction, against Soviet oppression, many, both at home and abroad, and in all the various church jurisdictions, are tempted to be drawn to extreme right-wing politics. In view of this, the Synod of the **Russian Orthodox Church Abroad**, under the presidency of **His Eminence Metropolitan Agafangel**, issued the following declaration on 28th October / 10th November this year: “Recently among members of our Church in the Russian Federation, a tendency has manifested itself to justify the Third Reich, to express sympathy to its leaders and the ideology of German Nazism. This tendency arose in connection with the debate over nationalistic-Bolshevism. Nevertheless, it cannot be justified. The ideology of Nazism with its elements of racism and its adoption of the anti-Christian theories of Nietzsche and Darwin contradict the dogmatic teachings of the Orthodox Church, its anthropology and soteriology. The pagan, aggressive nature of the Third Reich is hostile to historic Russia and the ideals of Holy Russia. If the plans of world domination by the Third Reich had been realized, it would have led to the extermination and the enslavement of the Russian nation and the destruction of the Russian land. That is why Orthodox-minded Russian patriots who fought the Soviet regime during the years of World War II were not counting on Hitler and the Nazi party, but on the conservative, anti-Nazi forces of Germany which were opposed to

the Nazi regime. Anyone who wishes to be a part of the Russian traditions of the ROCA should better acquaint themselves with the works of its founders and ideologues and understand that the White, Russian, way is fundamentally different from the brown, Nazi, way. Those who do not wish to understand this and do not wish to accept the ideology of the ROCA and even openly express their agreement with Nazism in the guise of supposed religious teachings cannot be considered members of our Church.” This strong and welcome denunciation of such folly was signed by the Metropolitan and seven of his hierarchs.



SIR-UK NEWS

FIVE BAPTISMS AT SAINT EDWARD'S CHURCH

HIS GRACE, **Bishop Sofronie of Suceava**, visited Saint Edward's on the feast of the Holy Apostle James, the Brother of God, 23rd October / 5th November. The Bishop was accompanied by **Archimandrite Athanasius** from the **Monastery of the Transfiguration, Slatioara, Moldavia**, and our guests were brought to Brookwood by **Dimitri Mihai**. They celebrated the Baptism of **Elizabeth**, the infant daughter of **Vasile** and **Florentina Bud**, whose godparents were **Georghe** and **Veronica Prodan**. After the Mysterion, refreshments were served for all who participated, and Fr Athanasius, who was visiting our community for the first time, was shown round the grounds and visited the candle factory. While here he met **Fr Milun Kostic** of the **St Sava Serbian Orthodox Church in London**, who happened to visit at the same time.

The following day, the Sunday, His Grace and Fr Athanasius celebrated the Divine Liturgy here with **Fr Oeconomos Stephen Fretwell**, assisted by **Hierodeacon Sabbas**. (Fr Alexis was serving that day at the Convent.) During the Brookwood service, the Romanian faithful, who filled the church, chanted the antiphons and other parts of the Divine Liturgy.

In the afternoon, our second Baptism this month was celebrated by Bishop Sofronie, assisted by Fr Athanasius. **Alexandru**, the son of **Constantin & Adriana Munteanu** was baptized, with **Petru Lupa** standing as his sponsor.

On Saturday, 30th October / 12th November, **Thomas**, the infant son of **Stuart** and **Elena Matthews** of Newbury was baptized at Saint Edward's, the Brotherhood clergy officiating. **Matias Fagerlund** and **Panagiota Romano** stood as sponsors to Thomas, and, after the ceremonies, the family laid on a celebratory meal in the hall of the Old Mortuary.

On Saturday 6th /19th November, the feast of St Paul the Confessor, we had two further Baptisms at Brookwood. **Malachi**, the infant son of **Martin** and **Christine Smith** of East Cowes, Isle of Wight, was baptized with **Benjamin Waterhouse** standing as his godfather. The Smiths provided a **beautiful antique chrim robe** for their son, an heirloom handed down in Christine's family, and they were joined at the ceremony by several parishioners who had travelled up from the Island. Again, afterwards, the participants enjoyed refreshments together.

A little later, catechumen **Peter Bartlett** was baptized, with **Benjamin Waterhouse** again standing as his godfather. Because he is anticipating a serious operation, Peter's Baptism had been brought forward, and we are grateful to **Elaine Waterhouse** for making a chrim robe for him at very short notice, despite the fact that she was preparing to visit her relatives in New Zealand at the time.

At both of these Baptisms, the Brotherhood clergy served, and at the end of Malachi's Baptism, the churching prayers were read for him and he was imparted the Holy Mysteries. Peter received the Holy Mysteries at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday 7th / 20th November, which very appropriately for a convert from the Western confessions, was the feast of the **New Three Hierarchs, Sts Photius the Great, Gregory Palamas and Mark of Ephesus**, which this year coincided with the new celebration of the hierarch who blessed the foundation of our community, **St Philaret the New Confessor of New York**.

Many Years to the newly illumined servants of God, **Elizabeth, Alexandru, Thomas, Malachi and Peter**. May they ever be kept in the confession of the saving Faith, and make progress therein.

VISITORS

WOKING WALKING GROUP, about a dozen people in all, visited the church on 25th November. Their visit had not been planned, but they were walking in the cemetery and took time out to visit Saint Edward's.

BLESSING OF GRAVES

THE grave cross of **Milanka Novakovic** in the Serbian section was blessed by **Protopresbyters Milun Kostic** and **Radomir Acimovic** in the company of a group of relatives and friends, on Saturday 12th November, the nearest Saturday to the anniversary of her repose. Also, on the feast of the Holy Angels, 8th / 21st November, after the Divine Liturgy, the grave crosses of **Susanna (Sue) Rawlinson** and of **Vera Mocquard** were blessed in the Saint Edward's section. Vera had provided her own cross and left it with us many years before she died, and, as the family of Sue was unable to provide for a cross, our Brotherhood donated one for her in recognition of her support for us over so many years.

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PRACTICAL TIP

WHEN ASKING OTHERS to pray for loved ones, always be sure to pray for them yourself as well. One has the impression that sometimes people think they can just commit the praying to the clergy or to the monastics and leave the matter there, but your own prayers are also effectual, and may indeed be more effectual. Also, one does not need, in asking for prayers for someone, to explain how good, nice, generous, kind, sweet or even pious they are. Lately we have had so many of these "recommendations" here at Brookwood, that the compiler of this magazine is seriously worried, wondering, as he is undoubtedly one of them, who prays for or asks prayers for the *nasty* people! You need only give their Christian, or other first, name, the reason, in brief, why you are asking prayers, and to state whether or not they are Orthodox Christians. This last is particularly important if you are asking prayers of the clergy, so that they know whether or not they may remember them in the commemorations made at the proskomidi of the Divine Liturgy.

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WE GREET ALL OUR READERS AND SUPPORTERS ON THE
APPROACHING GREAT FEASTS OF THE SAVIOUR'S NATIVITY AND
THE HOLY THEOPHANY. MAY THE LORD GOD GRANT THAT THE
GRACE OF THESE FEASTS MAY LIGHTEN YOUR PATHS ALL THOUGH
THE COMING YEAR. PRAY FOR US!