



## FROM THE FATHERS

“TODAY the Virgin giveth birth to Him  
Who is transcendent in essence;  
and the earth offereth a cave to Him  
Who is unapproachable.  
Angels with shepherds give glory;  
with a star the Magi do journey;  
for our sake a young Child is born,  
Who is pre-eternal God.”

CONTAKION OF THE NATIVITY, THIRD TONE  
SAINT ROMANOS THE MELODIST, + 556 A.D.

“THE VIRGIN gave birth to her First-Born, but the signs of her virginity remained. He begot us through Baptism and made us first-born children by His gift. For there is neither older nor younger in the womb of Baptism, since we are all first-born in faith (see Heb. 12:23). For it is with regard to us that Scripture is fulfilled: *Every first-born that openeth the womb is holy unto the Lord*” (Num. 8:16-18; Luke 2:23).

VEN. EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN, + C. 373 A.D

“THE MAGI came from the east guided by a star to show that the One born was Lord of heaven and earth. And this star was not one of the stars of the firmament, but it was a power sent from above that completely abolished the deception of astrology and annihilated the darkness of such ignorance, for its path was not like that of the other stars, but it went slowly according to the pace of those whom it was leading. And sometimes it moved, and sometimes it stood still; and sometimes it appeared to them, and sometimes it was hidden. And its path was from north to south, for so is the route from Persia into Judea. And it did not appear in the heights, but it went close to the earth up to a small village, and it appeared at a small cave. And what is greatest of all, it shone not only at night but even in the day to the extent that it covered the light and disc of the sun, not for a day or two but until the Magi came from Persia to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Nevertheless it appeared to them not at the birth of Christ but much earlier, so that by it those who were predicting the times of the Nativity were silenced. That is why it appeared a long time before. And it made their hearts faithful concerning the birth of the King, and led them to follow a long route. And so it determined when they travelled and when they made camp so that they would find the King of Glory lying in a manger. All this is neither the nature nor character of a star, but it is clear that it was a rational power that understood every detail and was guiding them deliberately by the power and command of the Creator and Caretaker of all things.”

VEN. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, + 662 A.D.

“IT (the star) caused them (the Magi) considerable distress by concealing itself from them when they approached Jerusalem. Why did it hide from them while they were there? To make them, through their enquiries, unsuspecting heralds of Christ Who was born at that time according to the flesh. Because they presumed they would learn from the Jews where Christ was to be born according to the sacred prophecies, the divine star left them, teaching us that we should no longer seek to find out about the law and the prophets from the Jews, but rather seek after the teaching that comes from above.”

SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS, + 1359 A.D.

Saint Gregory the Wonderworker,  
Bishop of Neo-Cæsarea, + 266 A.D.

# *Discourse on the Nativity of Christ*

BRETHREN, we now behold a great and wondrous mystery. Shepherds with cries of joy come forward as messengers to the sons of mankind, not on their hilly pastures with their flocks conversing, and not in the field with their sheep frolicking, but rather in the city of David, Bethlehem, exclaiming spiritual songs. In the highest Angels sing, proclaiming archangelic hymns. The heavenly Cherubim and Seraphim sing out praises to the glory of God: *Holy, Holy, Holy...* Together all celebrate this joyous feast, beholding God upon the earth, and earthly man amid the heavens.

By Divine providence those who were afar off are uplifted to the highest, and the highest, through the love of God for mankind, have bent down to those far off, wherefore the Most High, through His humility, *is exalted through humility*. On this day of great festivity, Bethlehem has become like unto heaven; taking their place amidst the glittering stars are Angels singing glory, and taking the place of the visible sun is the indefinable and immeasurable Sun of Truth, Who has made all things that exist. But who would dare investigate so great a mystery? *When God so willeth, the order of nature is overturned*, and its laws cannot impede this. And so, that which was impossible for mankind to undertake, God aspired to, and He descended, effecting the salvation of mankind, since the will of God is life for all mankind.

On the present joyous day God has come to be born; on this great day which has arrived God is become that which He was not:

being God, He has become Man, so to speak as though removed from Divinity (though His Divine Nature was not set aside). In being made Man, He has remained God. Wherefore, though He grew and flourished, it however was not by any human power to attain Divinity nor by any human ability to be made God. But rather as the Word, by a marvellous sufferance, He was incarnated and manifest, not being transformed, not being made something other, not deprived of that Divine Nature which He possessed aforetime. In Judea the new King is born; but this new and wondrous nativity which pagan nations have come to believe, the Jews have eschewed. The Pharisees interpreted the Law and the prophets incorrectly. That which therein was contradictory for them, they erroneously explained away. Herod too strove to learn of this new birth, full of mystery; yet Herod did this not to reverence the newborn King, but to kill Him.

The One, Who left the Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions and all the unwavering and radiant spirits, He alone having taken a new path issues forth from a virginal womb, inviolate of seed. The Creator of all comes to enlighten the world, in truth not leaving His Angels orphaned, and He appears also as Man, come forth from God.

And I, though I see neither trumpets (nor other musical instruments), nor sword, nor bodily adornments, neither lamps nor lanterns around the New-Born, yet I see the choir of Christ composed of those humble of birth and without influence. This persuades me to praise Him. I see speechless animals and choirs of youth, like some sort of trumpet, songfully resonant, as though taking the place of lamps and as it were shining upon the Lord. But what shall I say about what those lamps would illumine? He is the supreme Hope and Life Itself, He is Salvation Itself, Blessedness Itself, the cynosure of the Kingdom of Heaven. He is Himself born as an offering, so that the proclamation of the heavenly Angels, *Glory to God in the Highest*, would come to pass in power, and the joyous song: *And on earth peace, good-will among men!*

would be rehearsed among the shepherds of Bethlehem. Born of the Father, in His Person and in His Being passionless, now in a manner dispassionate and incomprehensible He is born for us. Of the pre-eternal birth, He alone Who was born dispassionately knows. The present birth, is supernaturally known only by the grace of the Holy Spirit; but in both the first birth truly, and in the present birth in kenotic humbling, actually and immutably God was born from God, but He is also Man, having received flesh of the Virgin. In the highest, He is One from the One Father, the Only-Begotten Son of the One Father. In kenotic humbling He is the unique One of the unique Virgin, the Only-Begotten Son of the one Virgin. God suffered no passion in being begotten God of God; and the Virgin did not suffer corruption, since the Spiritual One was born in a manner spiritual. The first birth is inexplicable, and the second is beyond conjecture. The first birth was without travail and the second was without impurity. We know Him Who now is born of the Virgin, and we believe that it is He that is born of the Father before eternity. But what manner of birth it was we cannot hope to explain. Neither with words would I attempt to speak of this, nor in thought would I dare to approach it, since the Divine Nature is not subject to observation, nor approachable by thought, nor containable by hapless reasoning. It is only necessary to believe in the power of His works. The laws of corporeal nature are evident: a married woman conceives and gives birth to a son in accord with the purpose of marriage; but when the Unwedded Virgin gives birth to the Son miraculously, and after birth remains a virgin, then a higher than corporeal nature is manifest. We can comprehend what exists according to the laws of corporeal nature, but confronted with that which is beyond the laws of nature, we fall silent, not through fear, but more so through sin-wrought fallibility. We must needs fall silent, in silent stillness to reverence virtue with a worthy reverence and, not straying beyond the furthest limits (of reason), to be vouchsafed heavenly gifts.

What can I say and what shall I proclaim? To speak more concerning the Virgin Birth-Giver? To deliberate more on the mi-

raculously new birth? It is possible only to be astonished in contemplating the miraculous birth, since it overturns the ordinary laws and order of nature and of things. About the wondrous works (of God) one might say in brief, that they are more wondrous than the works of nature, since in nature nothing begets itself by its own will, though there is freedom therein: wondrous therefore are all the works of the Lord, Who hath caused them to be. O, immaculate and inexplicable mystery! The One, Who before the very creation of the world was the Only-Begotten, without compare, the Singular, Incorporeal One, is incarnated and descends (into the world), clothed in a perishable body, so that He is visible to all. For if He were not visible, then in what way would He teach us to keep His precepts, and how would He lead us to the invisible reality? It was for this therefore that He became manifestly visible, to lead forth those of the visible world to the invisible.

People reckon their eyesight a far more credible witness than mere hearsay; they trust that which they see, and doubt that which they do not see. God willed to be visible in a body, to resolve and dispel the doubts. He willed to be born of the Virgin, not to initiate through her something unnecessary and whereof the Virgin knew not the reasons of the matter, but rather that the mystery of His birth might be that immaculate act of goodness, whereof the Virgin herself asked Gabriel: *How can this be, since I know not a man?* To this she received the reply: *The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee* (Lk 1:34-35). But in what manner did the Word, Who was God, therefore issue forth from the Virgin? This is an inexplicable marvel. Just as a goldsmith, having obtained the metal, makes of it something suitable for use, thus did Christ also: finding the Virgin immaculate both in spirit and in body, He assumed of Her a spirit-fashioned body conformable to His intents, and was arrayed in it, as in apparel.

On this wondrous day of the Nativity, the Word was neither afraid nor ashamed to issue forth from the virginal womb, nor did

He consider it unworthy of Himself to assume flesh from His creation, this so that creation, made the attire of the Creator, should be esteemed worthy of glory, and so that mercy should be made known when revealed from whence God, through His goodness, has descended. Just as it would be impossible for an earthen vessel to be manifest before it had been clay in the hands of the potter, so likewise would it be impossible for the perishable vessel (of human nature) to be renewed otherwise, before it was made the attire of the Creator, Who is garbed in it.

What more to say, what shall I expound on? The new wonders strike me with awe. The Ancient of Days is become a Child, to make people children of God. Though enthroned in glory in the Heavens, because of His love for mankind He now lies in a manger of dumb beasts. The Passionless, Incorporeal, Incomprehensible One is taken up in human hands, in order to expiate the savagery of sinners and the iniquitous, and to free them of their slavery. He is wrapped in swaddling bands and nourished on the knees of woman, so that shame be transformed into honour, the impious to be led to glory and be granted a crown in place of thorns. He has taken on my body, so that I be made capable to have within myself His Spirit. He has appropriated unto Himself (my nature), being garbed in my body, and gives me His Spirit, so that I, giving and in turn receiving, might discover the Treasure of life.

What shall I say and what proclaim? *Behold, a Virgin in her womb shalt conceive and she shall give birth to a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God with us* (Mt 1:23). The saying now deals not with something for the future so that we might learn to hope, but rather it tells us about something that already has occurred, and it awes us with something that already has been fulfilled. What formerly was said to the Jews and fulfilled amidst them, is now thus realised as accomplished among us, which we have received and adopted and believed. The prophet tells the Jews: *Behold, a Virgin shall conceive* (Es. 7:14); for Christians however, the saying refers to the

fulfilment of the actual deed, the full treasure-trove of the actual event. It was in Judea that a Virgin gave birth, but all the lands of the world accepted Her Son. There was the root of the vine; here the vine of truth. The Jews squeezed the wine-press, and the nations have tasted of the sacramental Blood; those others planted the ear of wheat, and these thrive on the grain harvest of faith. The Jews were pricked to death by the thorns, the nations are filled by the harvest; those others sat beneath the tree of desolation, and these beneath the tree of life. They expounded the precepts of the Law, but the nations reap the spiritual fruits. The Virgin gave birth not herself of herself, but as He willed as He needed to be born. Not in corporeal manner did God act, nor to the law of the flesh did God subordinate Himself, but the Lord of corporeal nature manifested Himself to appear in the world by a miraculous birth, in order to reveal His power and to show, that in having been made Man, He is born not as a mere man, but that God is made Man, since nothing is difficult for His will.

On the present great day He is born of the Virgin, having overcome the natural order of things. He is higher than wedlock and free from defilement. It sufficed that He, the preceptor of purity, should shine forth gloriously, to emerge from a pure and undefiled womb. For He is that same One, Who in the beginning created Adam from the virgin soil, and from Adam without wedlock brought forth for him his wife Eve. And as Adam was without a wife before he had a wife, and the first woman then was brought into the world, so likewise on the present day the Virgin without a man gives birth to the One, about Whom the prophet spake: *He is Man, who is he that doth know Him?* The Man Christ, clearly seen by mankind, born of God, is such that womankind was needed to perfect that of mankind, so that perfectly man would be born for woman. And just as from Adam woman was taken without impairing and without diminishing of his masculine nature, so also from woman without man it was necessary to bring forth a man, like the bringing forth of Eve, so that Adam not be alone extolled in that without a woman he had brought forth woman.



Therefore the Virgin without cohabitation with man gave birth to God the Word made Man, so that in equal measure it was by the same miracle to bestow equal honour to both the one and the other sex, man and woman. And just as woman was taken from Adam without his diminishing, so likewise from the Virgin was taken the body (born of her), and thereby too the Virgin did not undergo diminishing, and her virginity did not suffer harm. Adam lived on well and unharmed when the rib had been taken from him: and likewise the Virgin lived without defilement, when from her God the Word was brought forth. For just such a reason the Word assumed of the Virgin her flesh and her (corporeal) garb, so that He be not accounted unacquainted with the sin of Adam. Since man, stung by sin, had become a vessel and instrument of evil, Christ took upon Himself this receptacle of sin into His Own flesh so that, the Creator having been co-united with the body, it should thus be freed from the foulness of the enemy, and man thus be clothed in an eternal body, which would neither perish nor be destroyed for all eternity. Moreover, He that is become the God-Man is born, not as ordinarily man is born; He is born as God made Man, manifestly by His Own Divine power, since if He were born according to the general laws of nature, the Word would seem something imperfect. Therefore, He was born of the Virgin and shone forth; and therefore, having been born, He preserved unharmed the virginal womb, so that the hitherto unheard of manner of the Nativity should be for us a sign of great mystery.

Is Christ God? Christ is God by nature, but not by the order of nature did He become Man. Thus we declare and in truth believe, calling to witness the seal of intact virginity: as Almighty Creator of the womb and virginity, He chose an unshameful manner of birth and, as He willed, was made Man.

On this great day, now being celebrated, God has appeared as Man, as Shepherd of the nation of Israel, He Who has enlivened all the universe with His goodness. O dear warriors, glorious champions for mankind, who proclaimed Bethlehem as a place of

Theophany and of the Nativity of the Son of God, who have made known to all the world the Lord of all, lying in a manger, and manifested God contained within a narrow cave!

And so, we now glorify joyfully an annual feast. Just as henceforth the procedures of feasts will be repeated, so now also shall the laws of birth be wondrous. On this great day now celebrated, - chains shattered, Satan shamed, all demons put to flight, - all-destroying death is replaced by life, paradise is opened to the thief, curses transformed into blessings, all sins forgiven and evil banished, truth is come, and tidings have been proclaimed filled with reverence and love for God, traits pure and immaculate are implanted, virtue is exalted upon the earth, Angels are come together with people, and people make bold to converse with Angels. Whence and why has all this happened? From this, that God has descended into the world and raised mankind unto Heaven.

There is accomplished a certain transposition of everything: God Who is perfect hath descended to earth, though by Nature He remains entirely in the Heavens, even at the very time when in His wholeness He is situated upon the earth. He was God and was made Man, not negating His Divinity: He was not made God, since He was always such by His very Nature, but He was made flesh, so that He be visible to everything corporeal. He, upon Whom even the dwellers in Heaven dare not gaze, chose as His habitation a manger, and when He came, all around Him became still. And for naught else did He lie in the manger, but for this: that in giving nourishment to all, He should for Himself extract the nourishment of infants from maternal breasts and by this bless wedlock.

On this great day people, leaving off their arduous and serious affairs, come forth for the glory of Heaven, and they learn through the gleaming of the stars, that the Lord has descended to the earth to save His creation. The Lord, sitting upon a swift cloud, in the flesh will enter Egypt (Es. 19:1), visibly fleeing from Herod, the very deed which inspires the saying by Esaias: *On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt* (Es. 19:24).

People entered into the cave, having never thought of this beforehand, and it became for them an holy temple. God entered into Egypt, into a place of age-old sadness, there to bring joy, and in the place of dark gloom to shed forth the light of salvation. The waters of the Nile had become defiled and noxious after the infants had perished therein by an untimely death (Ex. 1:22). He appeared in Egypt, Who once upon a time turned the water into blood and Who thereafter transformed these waters into well-springs of the water of rebirth, by the grace of the Holy Spirit cleansing away sins and transgressions. Chastisement once befell the Egyptians, since in their errors they defied God. But Jesus now is come into Egypt and has sown in it reverence for God, so that in casting off from the Egyptian soul their errors, they were made pleasing unto God. The river waters concurred worthily to encircle His head, like a crown.

In order not to stretch out in length our discourse and briefly to conclude what is said, we shall ask: in what manner was the passionless Word made flesh and become visible, while dwelling immutably in His Divine Nature? But what shall I say and what declare? I see the carpenter and the manger, the Infant and the Virgin Birth-Giver, forsaken by all, weighed down by hardship and want. Behold, to what a degree of humiliation the great God has descended. For our sakes He *became poor, Who was rich* (2 Cor. 8:9). He was put into pitiable swaddling cloths, not on a soft couch. O poverty, source of all exaltation! O destitution, revealing all treasures! He appears to the poor, and the poor He makes rich; He lies in an animal manger, and yet by His Word He sets in motion all the world. He is wrapped in tattered swaddling cloths, and yet tears asunder the bonds of sinners, having called the entire world into being by His Word alone.

What still should I say and proclaim? I see the Infant, in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger; Mary, the Virgin Mother, stands before it together with Joseph, called her husband. He is called her husband, and she his wife, only in name so, and seemingly wedded, though in fact they were not spouses. She was betrothed to Joseph, but the Holy Spirit came upon Her, as about

this the holy Evangelist speaks: *The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee* (Lk. 1:35), and He to be born is holy and is of the seed of Heaven. Joseph did not dare to speak in opposition, and the righteous man did not wish to reprove the Holy Virgin; he did not want to believe any suspicion of sin, nor pronounce against the Holy Virgin words of slander; but the Son to be born he did not wish to acknowledge as his, since he knew, that He was not of him. And although he was perplexed and had doubts Who such an Infant should be, and pondered it over, he then had an heavenly vision, an Angel appeared to him and encouraged him with the words: *Fear not, Joseph, thou son of David; He that shall be born of Mary is called Holy and the Son of God; that is: the Holy Spirit shalt come upon the Immaculate Virgin, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow her* (see Mt. 1:20-21; Lk. 1:35).

Truly He was to be born of the Virgin, preserving unharmed her virginity. Just as the first virgin had fallen, enticed by Satan, so now Gabriel bears new tidings to the Virgin Mary, so that a virgin would give assent to be the Virgin, and to the Nativity by birth giving. Allured by temptations, Eve once uttered words of ruination; Mary, in turn, in accepting the tidings gave birth to the Incorporeal and Life-Creating Word. By the words of Eve, Adam was cast out of Paradise; the Word, born of the Virgin, revealed the Cross, by which the thief entered into the Paradise of Adam. Though neither the pagan nations, nor the Jews, nor the high-priests would believe that from God could be born a Son without travail and without man, this now is so, and He is born in the body, able to endure suffering, while preserving inviolate the body of the Virgin.

Thus did He manifest His Almightyness, being born of the Virgin and preserving the virginity of the Virgin intact, and He was born of God with neither complication, travail, evil nor a separation, not forsaking the immutable Divine Essence, born God from God. Since mankind abandoned God, worshipping graven images

of humans in place of Him, God the Word thus assumed the image of man, so that in banishing error and restoring truth, He should consign to oblivion the worshipping of idols, and that He Himself might be accorded Divine honour, since to Him belongs all glory and honour unto ages of ages. Amen!



## Teaching on the Divine Services of the Orthodox Church

BY ARCHPRIEST ALEXANDER RUDAKOV  
PUBLISHED IN 1890 IN SAINT PETERSBURG

*Note: In what follows we have expanded on Fr Alexander's original text to make things clearer for contemporary readers, and this month we return to the section on the services at the Nativity of Christ.*

**§ 74. Services appointed for the Feast of Christ's Nativity.** According to our numbering of the years, Jesus Christ was born of the All-holy Virgin Mary in the year 5,508 from creation, and the Christian Church celebrates this great event on 25th December. So that they might try worthily to celebrate the festival, the faithful keep a fast from the 15th November until and including 24th December (forty days). This fast is called the Nativity Fast or sometimes the St Philip's Fast, as it begins on the day after St Philip's day. The day before the feast is kept by Orthodox Christians as a very strict fast, and among the Russians is popularly referred to as *sochel'nik*, because it was the custom to eat lentils (*sochia*) on that day. Sometimes this was augmented with boiled wheat and honey. On the day of the eve of the feast, unless it happens to fall on a Saturday or Sunday, in the morning the Royal Hours are read, and thereafter the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is celebrated combined with Vespers. On the day of the feast, we celebrate the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. The Royal Hours themselves are distinguished by the fact that they include an Old Testament prophecy concerning the feast, an Epistle Reading and a Gospel reading. They are called Royal, because in Byzantine

times, the Emperor attended them in Constantinople. At the end of the Liturgy, the icon of the feast is placed in the centre of the church and the Troparion of the feast chanted: *Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath shined the light of knowledge upon the world; for thereby they that worshipped the stars were instructed by a star to worship Thee, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know Thee, the Day-spring from on high. O Lord, glory be to Thee.* This is followed by the Contakion (see page 1 of this issue). Some count the placing of a candle before the icon as the appearance of the Bethlehem star, and keep a complete fast until this is done; others wait until they see the first star in the sky. In other uses, the icon is in fact brought out during the chanting of *Today He is born of the Virgin, Who holdeth the whole creation in the hollow of His hand* during the Ninth Hour, so that it is there throughout the Liturgy. (If the eve falls on a Saturday or Sunday, the Royal Hours are read on the Friday. On the eve, we then have the Liturgy of St John and afterwards Vespers. On such a day the fast is relaxed a little, and a small meal is permitted after the Liturgy.) The Vigil for the Great Feast begins, not as usual with Vespers (except it be on Saturday or Sunday evening) but with Great Compline, a service which other than on this feast and Theophany is only used during Great Lent. This reminds us that the real joy of the feast (rather than mere “celebration”) will only enter our hearts through repentance. The service also contains the hymn of triumph from the Book of the Prophet Esaias: *God is with us, know, ye nations, and be vanquished, for God is with us.* The triumphant last phrase is repeated many times, bearing witness that the spiritual joy of the believers is founded on the fact that God, Emmanuel, is with us through His incarnation and birth. This assurance is emphasized in the other hymns: *Christ is born, give ye glory! Christ from heaven, meet ye Him. Christ is on earth, exalt ye Him. Sing unto the Lord, and sing praises in gladness, O ye people, for He hath been glorified.* The feast is kept for seven days, and is followed by the one day festival of the Lord’s Circumcision, and then we begin the forefeast for the celebration of the Lord’s Baptism, Holy Theophany. All the days of the feast and the following days until the eve of Theophany itself are kept as fast-free days. The eve of the Theophany (5th/18th January) is kept as a fast day.

# A Visit to the Holy Monastery of Esphigmenou

*By Matias Fagerlund*

ON A RECENT trip to Greece I was blessed to visit the Athonite Monastery of Esphigmenou, which is known for its uncompromising defence of the Orthodox Faith, along with two of my nephews. Having collected our *diamontiria*, the visas required for entry to Mount Athos, at Ouranoupoli and sailed on the beautifully named *Axion Estin* along the western coast of the peninsula, we disembarked at the *arsanas* of Hilandar. From here we proceeded not by foot, as I had hoped, but by minibus. While I had already learnt that there are now roads on the Holy Mountain I could not have imagined just how far this new development, anathema to previous generations of monks, has gone. Numerous zigzagging roads cut glaring yellow scars in the otherwise pristine wooded hillsides. Judging by my map – which describes itself as a “hiking” map – the concentration of roads on Mount Athos is, if anything, greater than elsewhere in Greece, and the sight of several diggers along our route suggested that this work of construction, or destruction, is still ongoing. Gone are the days, it would appear, when pilgrims travelled by foot.

After a brief visit to Hilandar, where a friendly Serbian monk invited us to enter the inner section of the catholicon to venerate the precious relics, I was determined to avoid the roads and continue to Esphigmenou by foot along the old mule tracks which used to be the sole transport routes on the peninsula. This idea aroused no particular enthusiasm from my two teenage co-pilgrims, who grudgingly obliged, climbing the atmospheric but now rarely trodden trail with the expressions of two Russian conscripts who have just been ordered to march from Moscow to Vladivostok.

As Esphigmenou came into view we were startled by the sight of a police car approaching the monastery on the road below us. Having read about the harassment and persecution to which the monks of Esphigmenou are subjected on account of their refusal to commemorate the Patriarch of Constantinople, I had imagined that the monastery existed in a siege-like state of constant surveillance and that we would have to devise some clever stratagem to get past the police cordon. This proved to be somewhat of an exaggerated view of the state of affairs. There were no police when we arrived at the gate, only a youngish, good-humoured monk who wondered if we had come to stay or just visit.

The next monk we encountered, who was tasked with registering visitors, seemed suspicious of my Orthodox credentials. Where was I from? “Finland.” “But Finland is not an Orthodox country.” After explaining, using my nephew as interpreter, that while Finland does in fact have an Orthodox Church I am not a member of that (liberally oriented) Church, but of the Greek Old Calendar Church under Archbishop Kallinikos, the ice finally broke: “Bravo!”

We were then assigned to a guestroom, and to specific beds in the room. On a walk around the monastery we noticed that immediately below the windows of our room a large black and white banner had been hung, with the words “*ORTHODOXIA I THANATOS*” (“*ORTHODOXY OR DEATH*”). Somewhat disconcertingly, I discovered on returning to the room that the bed assigned to me was located immediately behind “*DEATH*.”

Adjusting to the daily cycle of services on Mount Athos can be a challenge for someone who is used to going to bed at midnight. At Esphigmenou Matins begins at the eighth hour of the night according to the Byzantine reckoning, which is still followed on Mount Athos – 2 a.m. our time. One hour before that a bell is rung and shortly before the service the semantron is sounded. On entering the church one is immediately struck by how dark it is. I at first wondered where all the monks were, noticing only after a



while that they were seated all around the walls, scarcely visible in the general darkness. The large internal space of the catholicon is lit only by vigil lamps and a few candles, which are put out and relit at certain points during the service, and all readings are done by the light of a single candle or vigil lamp. What peace did I not experience in this place! Here, at least, the recent trend in Orthodox churches of replacing lampadas and candles with artificial light has not caught on. To some sensitive souls this intrusion of harsh modernity shatters the perception, if not the reality, of the church as a place set apart from the world, where the heavenly realm meets the earthly. On Mount Athos, where I gather none of the twenty monasteries use electrical light in church, no such obstacle exists. The gentle natural light and absence of any technology make it much easier to concentrate on the one thing needful: prayer.

Another striking aspect of the services is the sobriety with which they are conducted. All readings are done in a plain, monotonous voice, without emphasis or emotion. On weekdays almost nothing is chanted; nearly everything is read. On Sundays the reverse applies: most of the service is chanted, but always in a true Byzantine style, without a trace of sentimentality. The monks do the readings, light lampadas and move across the church with a certain measured haste. Those who serve do so with great seriousness and concentration, including the monk who monitors that the pilgrims hold one hand under the cup when drinking holy water. Not one drop of holy water or one of crumb of prosphora must be allowed to fall to the floor. Everything betokens a deep reverence for that which is holy.

Matins is followed immediately by the Liturgy, which on weekdays is served in a small side chapel, and ends just as the first dim rays of light begin to penetrate the church. As far as I could tell, no one approached the chalice on either of the days we were there. I was told afterwards that the monks follow the Rule of Saint Sabbas, which means that they commune fortnightly, and twice a week in Lent.

The service takes about five hours, nearly six on Sundays, and is followed by *trapeza*. Here, like in church, absolute silence reigns, apart from the reading from the Lives of the Saints, and woe betide any pilgrim who dares to utter so much as a syllable. At *trapeza* it became apparent that Esphigmenou is somehow managing to cope, despite the patriarchally instigated blockade under which they live. Generous portions of (very tasty) food are served and I was struck by the large number of pilgrims present. Although Esphigmenou is today the largest monastery on Mount Athos, numbering 115 monks, the lay visitors seemed to be in the majority.

Having initially encountered a certain scepticism on account of my obviously non-Greek appearance – can this man really be Orthodox? – I was fortunate later on to become acquainted with some of the monks. One of these was Fr Elias, a Pontic Greek of noble countenance and graceful bearing who spoke fluent Russian. On our second day he approached us to ask if we would like to venerate the relics. These proved to be no ordinary relics: one of the largest pieces of the True Cross, the skull of Saint James the Apostle, the left foot of Saint Mary Magdalene, a piece of the dried blood of Saint John the Baptist, a fragment of a garment worn by the Mother of God, a part of the sponge held up to Christ while He was on the Cross, and many other extraordinary treasures whose presence here no doubt imparts a special grace to this holy site.

Two other monks whom we were blessed to meet were the brothers in the flesh, Fr Niphon and Fr Gaius. Fr Niphon, who keeps the bees, is hoping one day to receive a blessing from Abbot Methodios to go into reclusion, this having always been his desire. Fr Gaius' obedience is wine-making. We asked, several times, if we could help with the work but this was never on the agenda. Did we want to drink gin, vodka or *tsipouro*? Having settled on the latter, we sat down at the edge of an olive grove and engaged in conversation amid the gentle humming of honeybees. "Are there other non-commemorators on Mount Athos?" I asked. "Not at the monasteries, but at the sketes and kellia." We also learnt that Esphigmenou

is not the sort of place where monks spend their time in front of a screen. Other sources inform me that many monks on Mount Athos now have WiFi in their cells and iPhones in their pockets but such infernal inventions have no place at Esphigmenou. Only two monks, who produce the monastery's online publication, have access to e-mail. After a discussion on the necessity of receiving heterodox converts by Baptism, the perfectly Orthodox nature of humour and the importance of bringing back the memory of the Western saints, Fr Gaius popped the inevitable question: What did I think of Brexit? "Wonderful news," I said. "I hope it leads to the collapse of the EU, which is a stepping-stone towards the one-world government of Antichrist". "Exactly!" This view perhaps explains why Esphigmenou has not chosen to exercise its final legal option of appealing the patriarchal eviction order hanging over the monastery to the European Court of Human Rights, but to rely solely on prayer and the protection of the Mother of God, in whose garden they live.

Even though we spent only two nights at Esphigmenou the experience was a profound one. The very fact that Mount Athos is cut off from the rest of Greece and not readily visitable owing to the visa régime helps to create a sense of being separated from the world and its preoccupations. The absence of electricity, or technology of any kind – and of women – removes every external source of distraction, so that monks and pilgrims alike are able to focus all their attention on their spiritual life. There is in fact nothing else to do. The room we stayed in was barren of everything, even books, leaving one with no other option than to pray. There is something to be learnt here.



“ESAIAS fittingly prophesied, saying, *There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a Flower shall rise out of his root* (11:1); for the root is the family of the Jews, the rod is Mary, the Flower is Christ.”

SAINT AMBROSE OF MILAN, + 397 A.D.

## POINTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE

*I WONDER if you might have a few minutes to help me with a small matter. I am searching information about the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury and have found several books and articles that are helpful. There are some points that I seem to not be satisfied with what I've found. Have you visited the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury? If not, do you know someone who has? What did you think of it? Or what did another person tell you? Do you know if the Holy Thorn begins to bloom during the Gregorian Calendar month of December? Or does it actually bloom just before "Old Christmas" as we observe it on January 7th Julian Calendar? (For some reason, none of the accounts I've found have been clear enough on this specific point.) My patron Saint is Saint Joseph of Arimathea ... In my search for information about the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury, I've learned to be very cautious about the stories and legends regarding St. Joseph of Arimathea and abide strictly according to the Church's Holy Tradition. As a result, I've amassed a modest library of books on early Anglo-Saxon England, King Arthur, the Saints, the Vikings, and the Celts. I thank you for any answers you might be able to provide to my questions above. - J.R. Iowa, U.S.A.*

HAVE I VISITED the Glastonbury Thorn? I used to be able to see Glastonbury Tor from the top of my mother's garden! I am from Somerset. My mother and grandmother are buried at Wedmore - where King Alfred treated with the Danes, - about eight miles from Glastonbury. Of course the original thorn was cut down by Cromwell's men, but there are now several successor thorns in the old abbey grounds there. I understand that it flowers twice a year - once at the normal spring time, and once at the end of the first week of January. It used to flower on Christmas Day but when they changed from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in the eighteenth century the thorn refused to change calendars. Apparently they send a sprig of the flowering thorn to H.M. The Queen when

it flowers in winter. So the thorn is an Old Calendarist! What is more problematic is whether St Joseph of Arimathea had anything to do with Glastonbury. It is clear that there was an ascetic community there from the very earliest centuries of Christianity, and that many saints are associated with it and the subsequent Monastery, but there seems to be no mention of St Joseph until the later Middle Ages, and some of the evidence adduced to back up the story is just silly. There is, for instance, in the parish church there, a very fine medieval tomb with the initials “JA” (not even IA!) on it, and this has been claimed as St Joseph’s! Also of course there is a tomb of the saint in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem - not the one he gave for the Saviour, but his own nearby. My stepfather farmed at Church Farm, Priddy, a village about ten miles from Glastonbury, and there is a legend that the church there was founded by the Saviour, when, as a boy, he visited Britain with St Joseph of Arimathea who came here trading tin. Well, it is true that tin from the British Isles was traded in those times, but I think we have no evidence that St Joseph was involved in that trade, or that he knew Jesus when He was a boy, or that the Boy Jesus founded any churches. Much as my family connections would induce me to want to believe some at least of these stories, I suspect that we can only assume that they are legends. Of course, what you must do, is come and visit England and then you can visit these holy places for yourself.



“CHRIST was, as I said, God even in His humanity, allowing the nature He had like ours to proceed according to its own laws, while preserving in the midst of this the purity of His Divinity. For thus and not otherwise it would be perceived both that He that was born was by nature God, and that which the Virgin Mother brought forth would be called not simply flesh and blood, as is the case with us, of course, and our mothers, but rather Lord and God clothed in our likeness.”

SAINT CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, + 444 A.D.

# NEWS from the Richmond Diocese of the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece

## ***BISHOP ANTONIE'S VISIT***

ON SUNDAY 31st October / 13th November, **His Grace Bishop Antonie and Archdeacon Glicherie** from Romania celebrated the Parish Liturgy at Saint Edward's, assisted by **Fr Borislav Popov**. (On that day, Frs Alexis and Sabbas were appointed to serve at the Convent). His Grace served according to the Romanian typicon and preached at the end of the Divine Liturgy, and the church was packed to capacity for the occasion. After the service, Bishop Antonie joined the worshippers at the Parish Breakfast, which was still being served in the open air, as the Mortuary was still out of commission. We only learned later that while Bishop Antonie was pastorally visiting the faithful here, his mother, **the nun Agapia**, had died in Romania. May she be granted ***Memory Eternal***, and the bishop, who showed us the most excellent way by putting his pastoral responsibilities before his personal concerns, be richly rewarded and comforted in his bereavement.

## ***INTERMENT AT BROOKWOOD***

A parishioner of the **Russian Cathedral Church in Ennismore Gardens**, London, **David Atkins**, was laid to rest in the Orthodox cemetery here on Tuesday, 8th November, n.s. The funeral service was led by **Archpriest Joseph Skinner**. David was well-known to the older members of our own parish community, having converted to Orthodoxy in the nineteen-sixties and having been a member of the former **Russian Church Abroad**

**parish at Emperor's Gate.** May he now find mercy from our Saviour and be granted **Memory Eternal.** Our condolences to his widow, **Olga,** and his daughter, **Catherine,** whose mother, David's first wife, **Ursula,** is also laid to rest here.

### ***BABY NAMED***

THE BABY daughter of **Ionel and Alexandra Strunel** of North London was named **Maria** on her eighth day at the family home. She was named after the All-holy Theotokos. We ask that the faithful pray that in time she receive the grace of Holy Baptism and be fully united to the flock of the elect.

### ***VISITORS***

Thursday, 10th November: **Kim Lowe** and **Margaret Hobbs** of the **Brookwood Cemetery Society** brought a group of about forty people from the **Surbiton area,** who were having a conducted walk through the cemetery, to see our church. They stayed with us about forty-five minutes to learn about our faith and practices.

Friday, 18th November: **Yvonne Craven** visited us to see the church and learn more about our Brotherhood and its history. Yvonne is one of the editors of the **Brookwood News** magazine and is hoping to put something about us in there.

On the same day: **Matthew Dell** of **Saint Peter's Roman Catholic School in Guildford,** brought four trainee Religious Education teachers to visit the church and ask about our faith and worship.

Friday 25th November: The Guildford branch of the **University of the Third Age (U3A)** visited Saint Edward's, a group comprising about thirty-five people in all. They stayed about an

hour and a half, and before leaving were offered coffee and refreshments, and a further chance to ask questions.

Monday, 28th November: **Jim Fitzgerald** and **Chris Taylor** brought the **1st Horsell Scout Troop** to visit Saint Edward's. The scouts, both boys and girls, arrived after Vespers and spent an hour and a half in the church, being given a talk about Orthodox faith and worship and then asking many questions. There were about two dozen scouts in the group.

## ***MORTUARY RESTORATION***

The Mortuary Restoration continues! One bright note is that the Cross was eventually permanently erected on the turret of the Mortuary building on 4th / 17th November, the feast day of the Venerable Ioannikius the Great. In the past two weeks we have at least been able to use the main hall for the Sunday Breakfasts, rather than eating outside - a blessing in an English November!



## ***PRACTICAL TIP***

A LITTLE MORE about confession, following on from last month: There is no need to cry theatrically and show histrionic displays of emotion during confession (Remember we **are** British!). Tears and weeping are great blessings, but are best done when we are alone, saying our prayers. As St John of the Ladder tells us: "Hidden treasure is safer from robbery than that exposed in the market." And in speaking specifically of tears during confession, he says modestly that, if possible, sprinkle the feet of your confessor with your tears; he does not recommend a great spectacle.