

the

ORTHODOX EVANGELIST

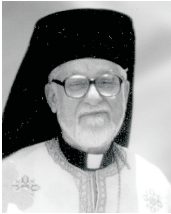
“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5



Winter 2017

www.stsymeon.org

Vol. 51, No. 4



The Orthodox Emphasis in Christmas

By Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou Th.D

Christmas marks neither the beginning nor the end of the observance of Christ's advent into the world. In the Orthodox Church the birth of Christ is always viewed between two other

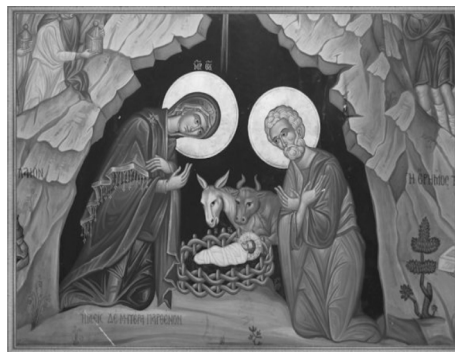
feast days. The one precedes and the other follows: the Annunciation (Evangelismos) of the Theotokos (March 25) and the Epiphany (January 6).

We very often forget that Christ had been present in the world for nine months before the Nativity. The incarnation of the Son of God is the real mystery of man's redemption, not Christ's exit from His mother's womb. His birth is incidental to His total human growth and development. The “Logos became flesh” not on Christman Day, but on the day of the Annunciation. On this holy day Orthodox Christians chant in the Matins service: The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin... The Logos of God is now come down upon the earth!”

There is need for both clergy and laity in the church to rediscover the meaning of the Annunciation and to see the Nativity as the extension of that feast day. Especially since it falls in Lent, too many are prone to observe the Annunciation as just another feast of our Lady. With our observance of Greek Independence falling on this holy day, much temptation is there for shifting the emphasis of

the day to the anniversary of the Greek uprising against the Turkish Empire.

We must recognize anew that the Annunciation is much more than a beautiful and stirring story of the archangel's visit to the Maiden of Nazareth and his announcement that she would become the mother of the



Savior. God has already sent His only-begotten Son into the world. The mystery of God's infinite condescension takes place at that time. God's love is so boundless for man that He accepts to be conceived as a man in the womb of a woman. In the words of the liturgical text, Mary's womb became a new throne of God. The wonderful and inscrutable happening takes place that no human intelligence is capable of fathoming: God

condescends to the level of man, not in mature manhood, not even at the stage of birth, but at the very beginning of human existence: at conception inside a woman's body.

In the Orthodox Church the emphasis is on the incarnation of the Son of God. This is why it is customary to have the mural of the Platytera, or “Broader than the Heavens” in the most prominent place in an Orthodox temple of worship: high above the sanctuary. The Blessed Virgin, so to speak, became as extensive as God Whom she bore. The impossible occurred: she contained Him Who in essence is uncontainable and uncircumscribed.

Whether the Logos is inside or outside of His mother's womb is not important. Even as a new born babe, Jesus does not yet embark on His earthly ministry. The crucial fact is that God became man already prior to Christmas. The Holy Spirit descended into the Virgin's womb where Jesus was conceived in His human nature. The Logos became the hypostasis of the soul of the New Adam in the place of the male seed.

The mystery of the incarnation took place the moment Mary assented to the divine will as announced by the archangel: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done according to thy word”. The text of the church hymnology reads: “The Theotokos heard a voice she knew not, when the Archangel brought her the glad tidings of the Annunciation; and accepting the salutation with faith, she conceived Thee, the pre-eternal God”.

The Papal dogma of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin is rejected by the Orthodox as an erroneous and heretical innovation. It was rather at the moment of Jesus' conception that she was made immaculate. In the dialogue which we find in the liturgical text, Mary speaks to the archangel: "For thou has come as an angel messenger, bringing joy to all. Since, then, I am purified in soul and body by the Spirit, be it unto me according to thy word. May God dwell in me!" Obviously there is only one immaculate-conception: that of Jesus.

The Epiphania of the redemptive mystery, consequently, begins with the union of the divine and the human on the Annunciation. Epiphany or Theophany Day marks the culmination of the manifestation of the Godhead. In earlier times Christmas and the Epiphany were observed on the same day, January 6. Even today the emphasis in Orthodox worship on the day of the Nativity is the incarnation, the reality that God assumed human nature in all its fullness and appeared in the world as man. The mystery of this unfathomable event of divine condescension is extolled and hymned over and over again in the liturgical texts of Christmas: "The Logos Who is in the bosom of the

Father has come forth without seed from the Virgin." "Lo, the Virgin, as it was said in days of old, has conceived in her womb and brought forth God made man." Like the Cherubim, the Virgin makes a throne, carrying in her bosom God the Logos made flesh." "The Logos became flesh and the Virgin bore God made man."

"How shall I tell of this great mystery? He Who is without flesh becomes incarnate. The Logos puts on a body. The Invisible is seen. He Whom no hand can touch is handled. He who knows no

of the Epiphany. The one leads to the other. In Orthodox countries abroad the real festive joy of the holy season is felt on the Epiphany. There are no Christmas carols sung. Orthodox sing St. Basil's and Epiphany carols. Gifts are exchanged between January 1, (feast of St. Basil) and January 6, not on Christmas day.

Too many Orthodox in America, however, are being carried away by the commercial spirit of modern day Christmas celebration. Everything around us pulls our attention to December 25,

as a single isolated holy day. . The days before Christmas are "shopping days" and the days that follow are oriented to New Year's Day. There is need not only to put Christ back into Christmas, but also the Epiphany back into Christmas. We need to reaffirm and experience anew the Orthodox emphasis on the total holiday season known as Dodecaameron, which simply means in Greek a twelve-day period (from December 25 to

January 6). The Orthodox sequence of holy days must be rediscovered, but Orthodox in America must be reeducated in this regard. It could be an effective way of counteracting the materialism and secularism that has completely paganized this holy season of the year.



beginning now begins to be. The Son of God becomes the Son of man!"

The total mystery of God's appearance to man is capitulated in the Epiphany. This is why Orthodox always observe the Nativity with profound anticipation

THE ORTHODOX EVANGELIST Winter 2017 Vol. 51 No.4

A Newsletter for the promotion of Orthodox Renewal, Published quarterly by the Orthodox Brotherhood of St Symeon the New Theologian, Inc. St. Symeon Office: 329 N. Holiday Road, Miramar Beach, Florida 32550 Phone: (850) 654-2771. Past issues available upon request.

Email: st-symeon-nt@cox.net Web site: www.stsymeon.org.

Feast of the Nativity

by John Kaniaris / Vice President

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign; Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

The signs of seasonal change are upon us. With each revolution of the earth, night becomes day, summer became fall, and now the winter season is upon us. These are the days of Advent, days of anticipation, rejoicing and many rich traditions and Feast days.

For many faithful Christians this is the time of worship, fasting, family gatherings, gifts and celebration. Yet, I wonder if we really acknowledge the wonder and miracle of the Incarnation of Christ (Logos). On the eve of the Nativity of Christ this matins Fore-feast is chanted:

The Creator of all comes to be born in Bethlehem; the King of all ages opens the gates of Eden; the wall of partition shall be destroyed; the fiery sword shall turn back! The powers of heaven join with the dwellers of earth; Angels with men shout for joy and clap their hands. Let us in purity conduct ourselves with upright hearts! Let us behold the Virgin as the glorious throne of the cherubim! She holds in her arms the immortal God, who comes to bestow great mercy to the world.

How do we participate and enter intimately into this mystery of the Incarnation and Nativity of Christ?

We are a people that can be so

preoccupied and forgetful. Our time is consumed on preparation for the holidays,

traveling, and finding the perfect gifts. The words that we confess in our Creed, they declare what we believe clearly;

“Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man“

We are encouraged to keep the



Nativity Fast, and remember the poor, disenfranchised, widows and orphans. To give of our gifts, our time and resources. Then we can become more aware and enter into the light, peace and joy of the Nativity of Christ. It is incumbent on us to remember that for 300 years the Church of Christ was hiding underground.

Deep in the catacombs, worshiping in secret the one true God for which they suffered unheard of tortures and martyrdom. You will read in the Daily Readings @GOARCH.ORG of these

Christian martyrs who were persecuted for their faith under Diocletian (284-305) and many other tyrants. For centuries January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany, was the day chosen to celebrate three foundational events. The Incarnation of the Logos (the Birth of Jesus Christ), The

Baptism of Jesus, and the appearance, or manifestation, epiphaneia, of the Father and the Holy Spirit. This day is known also as "The Feast of Lights" as Christians held candles when catechumens were baptized. We still light candles today and remember the sacrifices endured for so many centuries of Christians who suffered and continue to suffer violence today.

So many are searching in our contemporary world for this light, for this peace that passes all understanding. It is only through the Prince of Peace that we are transformed, our Spirit is renewed and we have the love of God as our solace and peace.

“The creator of all comes to be born in Bethlehem “ so it is that our Saviour born of the Virgin (Parthenos) enters into the world. Jesus Christ is born to bring redemption and eternal Life to all mankind! The Lord God Jesus Christ humbled himself and condescended to be born in a lowly manger. On that midnight clear, a

bright star shone over a stable in Bethlehem. Perhaps you might hear the cry of an infant, and see shepherds gazing upon him, and wise men bearing gifts seeking to worship him. Great illumination and light has entered into the world that humanity may see clearly the way to salvation. "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." Matthew 4:16. How great is the love of God the Father to send His son that he might bear our sins and redeem us from our iniquities.

You see, beloved of God, without the Love of God, the intervention of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, The Incarnation, there can be no redemption for mankind. That is why the Annunciation of the Theotokos, which we celebrate on March 25, A

full nine months before Christmas Day, is so important. For the moment Mary said "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to*



thy word." it was accomplished. The Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Highest Overshadowed her.

The Incarnation of the Logos is a monumental miracle, a defining event for the salvation of humanity. This is the beginning of many

extraordinary events and miracles celebrated in the life of Christ .The Orthodox Church reminds us to continue celebrating these important Feast Days. On His Birth, the Nativity, on to the Presentation in the Temple and to the Feast of Epiphany and beyond to His life, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Brethren, by now, as we approach the Nativity, Christ has been in the womb of the Virgin Mary many months. He is ready to be born. As we gather to celebrate this

Holy Feast of the Nativity, may the Incarnate Logos fill our hearts with his divine presence. May the Holy Spirit also speak to our hearts in the quietness and stillness of that Holy Night, to confess and sing with Joy.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him !

The End of 49 Years. Reason to Celebrate!

by Joseph Abbate / President

Christmas is always a special time of the year. Christmas demonstrates God's love for every man and woman. The King of kings was not born in a palace, but in a cave where animals were kept. His mission was to free mankind from the bondages of sin, and reveal to everyone God's plan for us. His love eventually led Him to the suffering on the cross. "God demonstrates His own love for us in this: that while we were still in sin, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

We are also celebrating another milestone, the end of 49 years of

ministry. It is nothing short of a miracle! If you only knew the difficulties we have suffered in this ministry through the years. Just look at the hardships that Father Eusebius had shared with you in his previous articles. Renewal in the Church had not been a popular message. Just as St. John the Baptist, the message of repentance was never in vogue.

49 years of ministry could never have been possible without your prayers and support. There can be no human factor which can explain the existence of this ministry for so many years. There is no other explanation.

It has been a direct move of the Lord! Father Eusebius had often said that he entered into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Through all of these years it has also been because of your love for your fellow Orthodox Christians and concern for our Church that this ministry continues.

Those of us on the Board of Directors, John Kaniaris, Alex Kourtesis, Symeon McKnight and myself want to wish you a Blessed Christmas and New Year 2018. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.