



The Orthodox Emphasis in Christmas

by the Rev. 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 Christmas Day – but on the day of the Annunciation. On this holy day Orthodox Christians chant 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 the feast day. Especially since it falls in Lent, too many are prone to observe the Annunciation as just another feast of our Lady. With the 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 Ottoman 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 becomes 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 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. Obviously there is only one Immaculate Conception: that of Jesus.

The Epiphania of the redemptive mysterium, 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 the di-

vine 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 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 a profound anticipation 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. There is not only the need to put Christ back in Christmas, but also Epiphany back into Christmas. It could be an effective way of counteracting the materialism and secularism that has completely paganized this holy season of the year.



A Message of Rebirth for a New Year

by Alex Kourtesis / Vice President

Every year we celebrate the ‘Church New Year’ in September. The weather gets colder, the kids return to school and most return to church and make a commitment to attend church as often as possible. We pray that this year we will become better Christians and focus our efforts to be more ‘Christ’ like. Little do we realize the church puts the importance of the Bible readings in order to follow that path that you are seeking. Starting with the first few weeks in September discussing the way to get to heaven and being born again.

My fellow brothers and sisters in Christ the beginning of the path to become closer to God and live through His Spirit starts with the experience of being born from above, the renewing of your mind, a transformation of the heart, the realization that we all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God. During the Charismatic Renewal that my Uncle Father Eusebius Stephanou often talked about, He used the term being ‘born again’. Whatever term you use,

this is an event that must occur in a Christians life to begin the process of truly living through Christ. It is literally impossible to change one’s behavior, thoughts, actions without first realizing that we must change our Hearts first. Christ speaks of this with Nicodemus in the book of John which is one of our Gospel readings in September. Nicodemus a scholar, well versed, respected rabbi in the community did not know what Christ meant when He said you must be born from above. Christ knew Nicodemus’s heart was troubled and He was still unsure if He was in God’s favor. When Christ said unless a man be born from above, He cannot see the kingdom of heaven, Nicodemus was baffled. He knew the scriptures; He knew everything intellectually. These are things that He never heard before. But it also explained the doubt in Nicodemus’s heart. His heart had not been changed.

We see later in September that the Gospel readings tell us the ways to become come closer to our Lord.

For example, ‘take up your Cross and follow me’, or when Christ calls His first disciples. We are reminded of the challenges or the obstacles that are put in our way once we receive Christ and decide to follow Him. We are also reminded that we see more clearly now that we have accepted Christ and the path is much easier knowing that we have been baptized in the Holy Spirit and the spirit reigns within us. Our thoughts our decisions, our actions, they are all notions that Christ is in control of our lives and no matter what the challenge, we know He is with us. Once the believer Has been born from above, He becomes a new creature and the old things have passed away. All your sins have been wiped out by the blood of Jesus. God cannot remember your sins, it is not of His nature. God is sinless. Your sins have been forgiven, ‘if you believe in Him, you shall not parish but have eternal life’.

This was the focus and still is the focus of Father Eusebius’s min-

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istry for His Orthodox people that He loved so much. His mission in His ministry was to show the Orthodox people that you can have that assurance that Christ is with you, He lives in you, and He will take you to His kingdom one day, you can be assured of this. You don't have to wonder. When the jailor said to Paul what must I do to inherit eternal life. Paul said, 'believe in Him and you shall be saved, you and your household'. When the thief said to Christ on the cross 'Lord, remember me in your kingdom'. Christ said today you will be with me in paradise'. The thief acknowledged Christ as 'Lord'.

Do you have that blessed assurance that you are going to heaven? Ask the Lord today for Him to fill you

with the Holy Spirit, rekindle the infant baptism you once had, repent of your sins, acknowledge that you cannot change without Him. My brothers and Sisters do this, and Christ will guide you through the remainder of your life with a new understanding a new purpose. He did that for me back in 1993 at a renewal conference held in Florida with Father Eusebius and He can do the same for you.

I want to thank you for your continuous support and as a reminder You can view videos and receive reading materials on this topic and many others at our website we created in memory of my uncle, Father Eusebius Stephanou. He speaks extensively on the meaning of the new birth and how it is a requirement for

salvation. You can also simply type in Eusebius Stephanou and see videos from Him on 'You-Tube' on your computer or phone. We invite you to visit us and see How my uncle's works are still alive and still impacting lives of our Orthodox believers. I am forever in His debt for showing me the pathway to true salvation and for this we will continue to promote His work and His writings throughout the church and for anyone who is willing to lend us their ear. Next time someone asks my uncle's favorite question, 'Tell me how the Lord has blessed you today', you will have an answer. Because 'Out of the abundance of the Heart the mouth speaketh". May God Bless you and keep you safe.

The Star of Bethlehem and the Un-Wise Men

by Charles B. Ashanin, Ph.D.

The Gospel story about the birth of Christ includes a very inspiring narrative about the wise men from the East, who, guided by a star, journeyed in quest of the newly born Messiah in order to do him homage. They perceived in Him the One through whom mankind could be delivered from fear of the future. They believed that with the adoration of the Messiah His friends and followers would receive of His Spirit and look to the future with anticipation and willingness to be co-workers with Him and contribute to it. In this expectation the Messiah Jesus did not disappoint. His followers received through faith in Him the power which made them dedicate themselves so completely to the vision of the world made new by the Messiah that they worked tirelessly to prepare mankind for the world filled with the knowledge and the Spirit of the Messiah.

This is why the Christian religion came down to us, the Christians of this century. Whether it will come down to our descendants will depend largely on whether we Ortho-

dox Christians of America act as the wise men or not. Whether we will be guided by the star which leads to Bethlehem where the Messiah came to His own, or by some other star which leads away from the Messiah.

I have grave fears that many of my Orthodox coreligionists are no longer guided by the star that leads to the Messiah. Such an awareness compels me to write this letter to them – I who am but the least of the brethren – simply because I am apprehensive for their future as Christians and for the Orthodox Church here in America, because it is filled in all ranks with the unwise men who follow other stars than the one which points to the new born Messiah in the cave of Bethlehem.

Why do I say this? Because when I compare the vision and the attitudes of the wise men who followed the Messiah, I discover that by and large we Orthodox do not share these attitudes. Let me give an example of what the wise men say the attitude of the followers of Christ should be. Here is what one of them,

St. Paul, says: "Brethren, this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3.13 ff).

No. We must honestly say that we are not forgetting the past and reaching forward toward Jesus Christ. On the contrary we are turning back upon Him and looking backwards to some mythological past of Holy Mother Russia, Serbia, Romania, Greece, etc. We are in the most part guided not by Christ but by the secular and selfish interests of foreign governments which use the Orthodox jurisdictions in America for the promotion of their own ethnic and national interests. The fact that they achieve this is not a great surprise, for most of the Orthodox do not know much about the authentic religion of Christ. They only know it in that subverted form in which it has become a captive to ethnic chauvinism which Orthodox emigrants brought with them and perpetuated.

This, however, is not a fault of their own. They are what they are, but, and this is where the great puzzle and the great tragedy lies – this perverted image of Orthodoxy is officially, sanctioned as the norm even for those generations of Orthodox in America whose education and critical study of Orthodoxy tells them that the Orthodox Church is the catholic reality ordained by God to be Mother of all men. This catholic spirit of Orthodoxy so painfully rediscovered is irreconcilable with the exclusiveness of ethnic religious cults of various Orthodox ethnic religious cults of various Orthodox ethnic jurisdictions which promote first and foremost their own tribal concerns rather than the spiritual concerns of Christ.

When the ancient Israelites left Egypt in order to free themselves from the pollution of Egyptian paganism in order to become the people of God. They were given a fiery pillar of cloud to guide them. But as this light took them farther from Egypt, many turned looking backward to Egypt for they remembered that the religion of the Egyptians was easier to practice – none of that serious stuff that they were given in the Ten Commandments. The Egyptian gods were immoral and their cult was a practice of immorality. The Israelite flesh itched for Egypt and lost sight of the fiery pillar of cloud which led them toward the Promised Land. So they spent forty years wandering through the wilderness.

We orthodox wander in the wilderness too, because we do not follow the star which leads to the Messiah. This star will appear again on the spiritual horizon of mankind this Christmas. Its special significance for us is that it may guide the Orthodox of America toward the Messiah who alone should be listened to as to what the Orthodox Church in this land must do to fulfill His mandate of mission and service. Let us not miss this

chance. We have spent more than a century of voyage never reaching our destination. We have been listening too much to the voices of sirens and like Odysseus have lost our way, for we have not followed the star pointing to the place where the Messiah may be found.

We beg all those in America who call themselves Orthodox Christians and who even in the smallest degree care for the Orthodox Church to wipe off the dust from their watches and see what hour of the day this is, and what is equally important to wipe off the film of dirt from their glasses which obstructs the vision of their eyes, and realize what place this is and what demands it makes upon us as Orthodox Christians to fulfill



God's will for us. When we have removed the dust from our watches and film of dirt from our glasses – perchance we will behold the star pointing where the Messiah was born.

Like the wise men we too must go and see the Messiah and offer Him our worship and our gifts – the greatest of which would

be our resolve to be His disciples. There are too few among us Orthodox who are dedicated to being disciples of the Messiah. How do I know this? Because by and large we show greater loyalties to the race we belong to, to the tribe from which we have descended, etc., than to Christ. The time for the unwise men among the Orthodox has come to become truly wise. This wisdom is found in the adoration of the Messiah Whose Birth we celebrate this month. But this adoration must be complete and not partial, sincere and not hypocritical, obedient and not self-willed, dispelling ignorance with knowledge of His truth, destroying tribal prejudice with the catholicity of Christ's love for His church through which we are freed from the tyranny of pagan gods in whose thralldom the Orthodox have allowed themselves and their Church to fall.

On behalf of the Brotherhood I invite all Orthodox of America to join us in following the star of Bethlehem and go into the cave of the nativity and worship Him, who for our sake was born. For this gift of our worship He will bestow upon us the gift of His wisdom and what better gift than this could be given to us, whose history at present speaks so loudly that we are not wise for we are of other stars and other gods, instead of the Star of Bethlehem and the new born Messiah. But He alone can make the foolish wise and in following Him alone lies the salvation for us Orthodox Christians in America and for the Orthodox Church. But in order to receive His gift we must heed His warning: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God (Exodus 20.5). Thou shall have no other gods beside me" (Exodus 20.3). Wise and unwise men: CHRIST IS BORN – Let us rejoice, for He alone is the light to guide us into the future. Let us follow Him as He demands.