

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



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31st Sunday after Pentecost-Nativity of Christ

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On this glorious day where heaven and earth meet, we celebrate God's Incarnation in-the-flesh. In so doing, we do more than commemorate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. Through our worship, we call into the present all those glorious and life-saving events surrounding Christ's miraculous birth. This is the day on

which God has fashioned all things new and given hope to all mankind to be renewed in the image and likeness of our Creator.

This is the day on which the whole universe is filled with light and all creation with joy. Through the Divine Services of the Feast we have become witnesses of the communion between those in heaven and those on earth, the angels and shepherds who glorify Him in heaven and on earth join together with one voice, celebrating the greatest of God's gifts: the gift of Himself, His humble condescension to us sinners, God with us! In His great love and mercy, the Creator of all, the Giver of Life, becomes one of His own creation to enter into our human nature and make it new!

Dwell for a moment on this awesome mystery revealed: As we hear in
(continued p. 3)

+ 31st Sunday after Pentecost +
+++ Nativity of Christ +++

Epistle: Galatians 4:4-7

Gospel: Matthew 2: 1-12

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ's commandment to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

Living an Orthodox Christmas by Evangelos Sotiropoulos

Christmas is before us. How will we choose to celebrate it? And what, by the way, are we actually celebrating?

For Christians, Christmas is the Great Feast of the Nativity according to the flesh of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. With inspiring eloquence, St. John the Theologian writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1).

The Word Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God and the door to the mys-

tery of His Incarnation is opened by the Church's beautiful hymnology. St. Joseph the Hymnographer chants: "The Son of the Father...has appeared to us...to give light to those in darkness and to gather the dispersed. Therefore, the far-famed Theotokos do we magnify."

From St. John of Damascus: "A most glorious mystery is accomplished today: nature is renewed, and God becomes Man. What He was, He has remained; and what He was not, He has taken on

Himself without suffering commingling or division."

Using Orthodox theology as a springboard, we can harness the celebration of Christmas to live a more fulfilling life — to live in the spirit (cf. Gal 5:25).

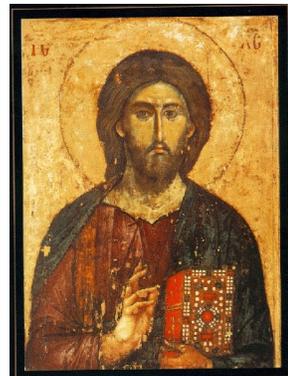
Let us begin with a central tenet which has been experienced by, and passed down from, the Church Fathers: that God became man in order that man may become god — through grace and adoption (cf. Eph 1:5). The
(continued on p.2)

We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please

call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





Troparion to St. George

As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. We are also happy to announce that coffee social has resumed following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth, Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Bill, Carol, Pam, Gladys, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

The Christian Faith

Our religion is love, fervent love, enthusiasm, madness, divine longing. All of that's within us. The acquisition of this is something demanded by the soul. For many people, religion's a struggle, worry and anxiety. This is why so many 'pious' people seem so miserable, because they're in such a sad state.

That's really how things stand. Because if we don't realize the depth of religion and don't experience it, religion degrades into a sickness and a terrible one at that. So bad that people lose control over their actions, become supine and weak, overcome with worry and stress and behave under the influence of the evil spirit. In reality, the Christian religion transforms people and cures them. But the basic requirement, if we're going to discern the truth and recognize it, is humility.

It's important for us to understand the truth. What's most essential is that we should abandon form and proceed to substance. Whatever we do should be done with love. Love always entails making sacrifices. Christ doesn't love us if we aren't worthy of love. For him to love us, he has to find something special within us. You want, you ask, you try, you beg but you receive nothing. You prepare yourself to obtain what Christ wants: that divine grace should come upon you. But it can't enter when what you should have is missing.

Living Christmas, continued from p.1

Incarnation of Christ invites us to be holy; it is not only to be experienced by a small number of people, beyond the grasp of regular folk — it is for everyone, in every part of the planet.

Orthodoxy is not an ideology, a philosophy or a legalistic, rigid set of rules. Moreover, God is not an abstract idea, a faceless Person with Who we have no possibility of communication.

The Orthodox Faith preaches a personal God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit — Three Persons, One Kingship. God reveals Himself to us through the God-Man (Theanthropos, in Greek) Jesus Christ.

In a 1990 sermon delivered by the Abbot of the Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios of Mount Athos, the late blessed Archimandrite George echoes the Church Fathers: "The unapproachable God becomes approachable. The unknown God becomes known. The strange God becomes familiar and a friend."

On Christmas, we celebrate the destruction of the barrier that separated

man from God. And how do we know that this barrier has indeed been destroyed? Well, for one, through the Saints of the Church. The Saints show us that man can personally see and communicate with God.

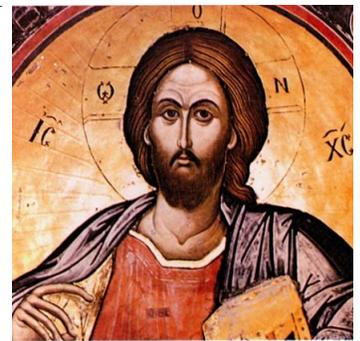
"Saints," according to the renowned 20th century theologian Fr. John Romanides, "is the name given to those who, through purification and illumination, reach glorification [theosis] and share in the glorifying energies of God."

Thus, Orthodoxy is a positive science, the experience of revelation and not speculation. It is the experience of communicating with God through prayer, especially noetic prayer. It is the experiencing of communicating with God by doing His will, by fasting, giving alms, being humble and loving one another. It is the experiencing of communicating with God by living a Christ-centered life in the Church and by participating in the Holy Sacraments, especially confession/repentance and communion.

It is the experience of having true

freedom, not the pseudo-freedom and trappings conferred by the world. Contrary to many critics, authentic Christianity does not restrict man but the opposite, it gives man his freedom to live. It gives light to those in darkness.

This is a life-long challenge, a ladder to climb one step at a time. And how do we know if we are making progress, if we are in fact living in the spirit? Well, for one, if we cultivate the fruits of the Holy Spirit:



love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (cf. Gal 5:22-23).

This is all made possible because of Christmas. Let us choose to celebrate it correctly.

(Homily on the Nativity cont'd from p.1)

the Royal Hours of the Feast, “Today, He who holds the whole creation in His hand is born of the Virgin.” God, whom the universe cannot contain, has become a tiny babe to inaugurate the new race of Adam. On this day, we sing with the angels in heaven, who rejoice with the shepherds, who, in turn, worship with the magi. On this day, those in heaven and those on earth are joined in one chorus. In Vigil we sang, “today, heaven and earth are united.” “Today, God has come to earth and man ascends to heaven.”

God has destined us for glory, for communion with Him for all eternity. We're co-heirs with Christ, the Father's adopted children through the new birth of baptism and Christ in the center of our lives. As St. Athanasius (4th century) declares, “God became man, that we may become divine.” This is God's loving desire for us—no matter who you are or what your past. Christ's Incarnation fills all of humanity with this potential: to find healing from sin-sickness through repentance, to conquer sin and death through His victory over sin and death, to be made anew, in the likeness of Christ, the new Adam, for, “as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive,” (I Cor. 15:22).

Christ's Nativity is then an invitation to new life, to renewal of life. Christ has become incarnate to give us new identity and self-worth as adopted children, His peace which surpasses all comprehension—the fruit of communion with God the Father in Christ by the Holy Spirit's indwelling. This is the good news, announced to the shepherds and, indeed, today, for a world suffering under so much sin, disobedience, and violence.

St. Gregory Palamas says of the Mystery revealed: “He who defines all things and is limited by none is contained in a small, makeshift manger. He who holds the universe and grasps it in the hollow of His hand, is wrapped in narrow, swaddling bands and fastened into ordinary clothes.” He who is the King of Kings is worshiped by the Persian kings and receives their gifts. The Only-Begotten One has become incarnate for our sake and reversed and renewed that human nature fallen into sin, despair, and death. “The Word has become flesh

without leaving His Father,” as we sing in the Vespers of the Feast. The one who anoints is now the anointed. The one who offers is now the one who is offered.

Gold, a fitting gift for a king, is given to the King of Kings. Frankincense, the gift befitting God, is given to Christ who is God Incarnate. Myrrh is prophetically offered by the Magi in preparation for His life-saving death, when He will defeat sin and death for all. The One who could, by His own words, call down a thousand angels to destroy the wicked, instead submits Himself in His love and humility to the vulnerability of a new-born babe to call the those who do evil, all of us, to new life, to holiness. The One who loved us into being, now accepts love from his Virgin Mother and adopted

father. “He who rained manna on His people in the wilderness is fed on milk from His Mother's breast.”

The uncircumscribable God has become circumscribed in His humanity while simultaneously remaining God. And so, for us, humility now has a *face*; humility and love are known. The Wisdom and Word of God, *Logos*, who originally brought all things into being, has enlightened the whole universe by virtue of His incarnation. Humility becomes the means of our renewal, in imitation of our Savior born this day in a manger, in a cave, among dumb beasts.

This is our God! See His unsurpassed love and mercy for us. Rejoice with the angels! Be stirred by it, take it to heart for your renewal and salvation. At Vespers for the Feast we sing, “*The angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens, a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, a manger; and we offer Thee a Virgin Mother.*”

Let us also consider offering our faith and love as we celebrate with joy His holy Nativity. Let us receive Him inside ourselves in the Eucharist as the cave did of old, preparing Him room. As Christ God did not reject the humble cave for His birth, neither will He reject the room of a humble soul. In His love and humility, Christ comes to us too, He receives us, indwells and heals us, unites us with Him and all the faithful who have come before us or who will come after us. *Emmanuel* is here (God with us).



The recent political developments in Eastern Europe have revealed once again that, when men deny praise to God, they deify some man whom they worship as god. The idols though, are destroyed and those who deny praise to God are in chaos. Moreover, the man who denies praise to God is, in the end, surrounded by the misery of unspeakable passions and evil acts, instead of glory. Christians can contribute to the glorification of God, when they live a holy life. Let us bear in mind the Lord's words, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5, 16).

On the contrary, when we do not live according to God's will, in whom we believe, "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through us." (See Romans 2, 24). That is why the prayer "hallowed be Thy name", according to Saint Chrysostom means, "render ...us worthy to live purely, so through us all glorify you" (ibid, p. 672). According to the same Saint, to set our clean life as an example to all, is a perfect philosophy, so that everyone who sees us will ascribe to the Lord a glorification for that (ibid). The name of God is glorified when Christians, incessantly, mentally and in the heart cry, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me the sinner".

It has already been stated that the name of God is Jesus Christ. The invocation of the divine name sanctifies man. When man is sanctified, the heavenly Father is glorified. With this opportunity I would like to express the opinion that the "Jesus prayer", "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner", is a summary of the Lord's Prayer. The invocation and the three first petitions are summarized in "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God", while the three last petitions are summarized in "have mercy on me the sinner". In this way, the "Jesus prayer" expresses the spirit of the Lord's Prayer and so prepares the worshipper to say it with greater zeal and spiritual feeling.

THY KINGDOM COME

When God reigns in man, man is liberated, pacified, satisfied and sanctified. When God does not reign in man, man is exposed to the devil's tyranny which enslaves him to passions, to self-love and directs him to weariness, to

emptiness, to boredom and loneliness, turning his life into hell. The world today which denies the Kingdom of God is tormented by horrible, demonic situations, such as witchcraft, superstitions, drugs, terrorism, crime and the dissolution of the family.

The Lord teaches us to ask for His Kingdom to come. According to the holy Fathers, this Kingdom is the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite writes, "The Lord orders us to beg God to free us from the bitter tyranny of the Devil because human nature was voluntarily enslaved to the manslayer Devil. Otherwise, we will not be liberated, unless the Kingdom of God, that is to say the Holy Spirit, comes to us so as to expel from us

the tyrant enemy and reign in us..." According to St. Maximus, for this reason, we must say, "Let your Holy Spirit come to us, so as to cleanse us totally in soul and in body". That is to say, let the Holy Spirit come to cleanse totally our body and soul, so that we may be a residence suitable to welcome the Holy Trinity as a whole, so that God from now on reigns in us, in our hearts, as is written, "...the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17, 21).

In the book of Genesis we see that during the creation of the world, darkness covered the abyss and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The Holy Spirit banished darkness and chaos took shape. Darkness and chaos reign in man's inner self. Only when man allows the Holy Spirit to dwell within him, is he purified from passions, illuminated, and finds internal balance and unity. That is why in the prayer, "O Heavenly King", addressed to the Holy Spirit, which is an extension of "Thy Kingdom come", we say, "Come and abide in us and cleanse us from all impurity and save, O Good One, our souls". Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes on this subject, "So if we ask for the kingdom of God to dwell in us, let us beseech God, with all our strength for the following: To deliver me from decay, to liberate me from death, to loosen the chains of sin, to free me from the reign of death, to inactivate the tyrannical rule of malice. Furthermore, let me beseech God not to allow the enemy to defeat me and capture me through sin. Rather let Thy kingdom come, so that the passions may depart from me or even better, disappear, the passions that now dominate and rule."

(continued next issue)

