



# Fire & Light

## St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 854-4235

Visit [stsymeon.com](http://stsymeon.com) &  
[birminghamorthodox.com](http://birminghamorthodox.com)

✠ January 1, 2012 ✠

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Forefeast of Theophany

**Circumcision of Christ**

St. Basil the Great (379)



*Christ is Born! Glorify Him!*

The 12 Days of Christmas ~ *Fast-Free* - thru January 4

🔔 *Happy and Blessed New Year!* 🔔

### Feast of Theophany

< Note: Thursday, January 5 is a fast day >

- ✠ Thurs. January 5 ~ 6:30pm Theophany ~ Vespers and Great Blessing of Water
- ✠ Fri. January 6 ~ 10:00am Theophany Divine Liturgy and Great Blessing of Water
- ⇒ House blessings – January 6 to Feb. 19
- ✠ Sat. January 7 – Old Calendar Nativity Liturgy –10:00am
- ⇒ Sunday, January 8 - Children's Play (Life of the Theotokos) & Visit from St. Nicholas
- ⇒ Sunday, January 22 - Ice Skating Party
- ⇒ An all-time record in Giving for December - \$23,450!

*May the Lord abundantly bless  
you in the New Year! + Fr. Alex*

### Thoughts for the New Year

✠ Oh, how unfathomable are the depths of God's Providence! A man's thought extends from today until tomorrow, but the thought of God extends to the very end of time. St. Nikolai of Serbia

✠ **God is kind. He wants all of us to be saved** (1 Tim. 2:4). If only a few were saved, why then was Christ crucified? The gate into Paradise is not narrow. There is room for those who bow humbly, and are not puffed up with pride, as long as they repent, and give the burden of their sins to Christ; then there is plenty of room to pass through the gate. We also have an excuse that we are earthen vessels; we not purely spirit like the Angels. But we are inexcusable when we do not repent and do not approach our Savior humbly. The thief on the cross simply said, "Forgive me" and he was saved.

Elder Paisios

### From St. Basil:

✠ "Since then, as says the Lord in the Gospels, he that hath seen the Son sees the Father also; on this account he says that **the Only-begotten Son is the express image of His Father's person**. That this may be made still plainer I will quote also other passages of the Apostle in which he calls the Son 'the image of the invisible God,' and again 'image of His goodness;' not because the image differs from the Archetype according to the definition of indivisibility and goodness, but that it may be shown that it is the same as the prototype, even though it be different. For the idea of the image would be lost were it not to preserve throughout the plain and invariable likeness. He therefore that has perception of the beauty of the image is made perceptive of the Archetype."

St. Basil the Great

## Pearls of the Holy Fathers 4:2

The blessings for which a seeker of the Kingdom of Heaven hopes are no trifle. You desire to reign with Christ through ages without end; will you not then readily welcome the conflicts and labors and temptations of this short span of life, even unto death?  
St. Macarius the Great

A brother asked an elder, "How is it that in these days some afflict themselves in their manner of life and do not receive grace as the ancients did?" The elder said to him, "In those days there was love, and each one caused his neighbor to make progress, but now that love has grown cold, each one pulls his neighbor back, and that is why we do not receive grace.  
Apophthegmata Patrum

Just as the demons recognize that it is very important for them to hide themselves from a person, so also for a person himself it is important to understand that they are the original committers of sin, the source of our temptations, and not our neighbors, not we, when we lead a life of service to God— by accident.  
St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (1867)

Human life extends cyclically through years, months, weeks, days and nights, hours and minutes. Through these periods we should extend our ascetic labors— watchfulness, our prayer, our sweetness of heart, our diligent stillness— our departure from this life. St. Hesychios the Priest

The flesh revolts when prayer, frugality and blessed stillness are neglected. ~ St. Thalassius

The more closely attentive you are to your mind, the greater the longing with which you will pray to Jesus; and the more carelessly you examine your mind, the further you will separate yourself from Him. Just as close attentiveness brilliantly illumines the mind, so the lapse from watchfulness and from the sweet invocation of Jesus will darken it completely. All this happens naturally, not in any other way; and you will experience it if you test it out in practice. For there is no virtue — least of all this blessed light-generating activity — which cannot be learnt from experience.

St. Hesychios the Priest

To the Lord a single repenting sinner is more pleasing than ten self-satisfied righteous men.  
Holy New Hieromartyr Barlaam

Fire makes iron impossible to touch, and likewise frequent prayer renders the intellect more forceful in its warfare against the enemy. That is why the demons strive with all their strength to make us slothful in attentiveness to prayer, for they know that prayer is the intellect's invincible weapon against them.

St. John of Karpathos

Take heed to yourself, child; if you wish to be saved, take care that you not talk during the services; that you not go from cell to cell. Become as one that is invisible; guard your mind so that it does not wander here and there; rather, have it think on your sins and eternal damnation.

St. Symeon the Pious

The vain desires of this world drive us away from our homeland; love of them and habit clothe our soul as if in a hideous garment. The Apostles called it the external man. We, travelling in the voyage of this life and calling on God to help us, ought to be divesting ourselves of this hideous garment and clothing ourselves in new desires, in a new love of the age to come, and thereby to receive knowledge of how near or how far we are from our heavenly homeland. St. Herman of Alaska

Be true to God always and in everything. If you say the prayer "Our Father. . ." pronounce each word sincerely, with reverence, fixing your mind and heart upon God alone, not paying attention to anything or anybody around you. If you say any other prayer, say it also with all your soul, not with your heart divided, not paying undue attention to anything or anybody.

St. John of Kronstadt

God comes to him who blames himself and does violence to himself in everything. ~ Abba Or

## *Saint Cyril of Alexandria on the Feast of the Circumcision*

Very numerous indeed is the assembly, and earnest the hearer -- for we see the Church full -- but the teacher is but poor. He nevertheless Who giveth to man a mouth and a tongue, will further supply us with good ideas. For he somewhere says of Himself, *Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.* Since, therefore, ye have all come together eagerly on the occasion of this joyous festival of our Lord, let us with cheerful torches brightly celebrate the feast, and apply ourselves to the consideration of what was divinely fulfilled, as it were, this day, gathering ourselves from every quarter whatsoever may confirm us in faith and piety.

But recently we saw the Emmanuel lying as a babe in the manger, and wrapped in human fashion in swaddling bands, but extolled as God in hymns by the host of the holy angels. For they proclaimed to the shepherds His birth, God the Father having granted to the inhabitants of heaven as a special privilege to be the first to preach Him. And today too we have seen Him obedient to the laws of Moses, or rather, we have seen Him Who as God is the Legislator, subject to His own decrees. And the reason of this the most wise Paul teaches us, saying, *When we were babes we were enslaved under the elements of the world; but when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem them that were under the law* (Galatians 4:3). Christ, therefore, ransomed from the curse of the law those who being subject to it, had been unable to keep its enactments. And in what way did He ransom them? By fulfilling it. And to put it another way: in order that He might expiate the guilt of Adam's transgression, He showed Himself obedient and submissive in every respect to God the Father in our stead; for it is written, *That as through the disobedience of the one man, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the One, the many shall be made just.* (Romans 5:19). He therefore yielded His neck to the law in company with us, because the plan of salvation so required; for it became Him to fulfill all righteousness. For having assumed the form of a slave, as being enrolled by reason of His human nature among those subject to the yoke, He once even paid the half shekel to the collectors of the tribute, although by nature free, and as the Son, not liable to pay the tax. When, therefore, thou seest Him keeping the law, be not offended, nor place the free-born among the slaves, but reflect rather upon the profoundness of the plan of salvation.

Upon the arrival, therefore, of the eighth day, on which it was customary for the circumcision in the flesh to be performed according

to the enactment of the law, He receives His Name, even Jesus; which by interpretation signifies, the Salvation of the people. For so had God the Father willed that His Son should be named, when born in the flesh of a woman. For then especially was He made the salvation of the people, and not of one only, but of many, or rather of every nation, and of the whole world. He received His name, therefore, on the same occasion on which He was circumcised.

But come, and let us again search and see, what is the riddle, and to what mysteries the occurrence directs us. The blessed Paul has said, *Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.* (I Corinthians 7:19) To this it is probable that some may object, Did the God of all then command by the all-wise Moses a thing of no account to be observed, with a punishment decreed against those that transgress it? Yes, I say: for as far as regards the nature of the thing, of that, I mean, which is done in the flesh, it is absolutely nothing, but it is pregnant with the graceful type of a mystery, or rather, contains the hidden manifestation of the truth. For on the eighth day Christ rose from the dead, and gave us the spiritual circumcision. For He commanded the holy Apostles: *Having gone make ye disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* (Matthew 28:19) And we affirm that the spiritual circumcision takes place chiefly in the season of holy baptism, when also Christ makes us partakers of the Holy Spirit. And of this again, that Jesus of old, who was captain after Moses, was a type. For he first of all led the Children of Israel across the Jordan; and having halted them, immediately circumcised them with knives of stone. So when we have crossed the Jordan, Christ circumcises us with the power of the Holy Spirit, not purifying the flesh, but rather cutting off the defilement that is in our souls.

On the eighth day, therefore, Christ is circumcised, and receives, as I said, His Name; for then, even then, were we saved by Him and through Him, *in Whom*, it saith, *ye were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands in the putting off of the fleshly body, with Christ's circumcision, having been buried together with Him in baptism, wherein also ye were raised with Him.* (Colossians 2:11). His death, therefore, was for our sakes, as were also His resurrection and His circumcision. For He died, that we who have died together with Him in His dying unto sin, may no longer live unto sin; for which reason it is said, *If we have died together with Him, we shall also live together with Him.* (II Timothy 2:11) And He is said to have died unto sin, not because He had sinned, *for He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth* (I Peter 2:22), but because of our sin. Therefore, just as we died together with Him when He died, so shall we also rise together with Him.

## HISTORY OF THE CELEBRATION OF THEOPHANY

The events of the Baptism of Jesus Christ and the appearance of the Holy Trinity, as they are recorded in the Bible, were held with reverence and admiration over a period of years in the early Church. With the end of the persecutions, the contents of these events were developed and celebrated in the observance of the Feast of Epiphany (the "Manifestation") or Theophany (the Manifestation of God") which is also called "The Feast of Lights."

The 6th of January was designated as the Feast day of Epiphany because on that day was the birthday of Aeon, the patron god of Alexandria. The Gnostics had designated Christ as one of the Aeons in their elaborate system. The fundamental principle of Gnosticism is the idea that individual salvation comes through personal knowledge, gnosis, secret spiritual insight, rather than through faith and works lived in the life of the Church.

In opposition to these heretics, it appears that the Church acted to protect its followers from this heresy and declared the Feast of Theophany to be the Feast of the revelation of God as the Holy Trinity during the Baptism of Christ. The Orthodox Church gave to this Feast its correct significance and meaning and celebrated it purposely on the same date to counteract the false celebration of the Gnostics

Some early evidence of this celebration is given by Ammianus Marcellinus, a pagan Roman historian who mentions that Julia the Apostate participated in this Feastday in Vienne of Gaul. In all probability, Epiphany was introduced to Gaul (France), by St. Athanasius (336), coming from Alexandria.

It is known that in the East, the Nativity of Christ was celebrated together with Epiphany on the 6th of January, while in the West the Nativity was celebrated before Epiphany was celebrated. This fact seems to account for the difference in the content of Epiphany as given by the East and the West. That is, in the East, the celebration centered in the Theophany of Christ witnessed by the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity and in connection with the Birth of Christ.

The Armenian Monophysites, who have preserved the ancient tradition of combining the Nativity with Epiphany, still celebrate the Nativity of Christ on the evening of January 5th and Epiphany with the Sanctification of the Waters on the 6th of January.

In the Western Church, Epiphany is dedicated to the commemoration primarily of the visit of the 3 Wise Men (Three Kings) to Bethlehem, and also to the miracle of Cana (the changing of the water into wine), by which the Western Church celebrated the manifestation of Christ to the world and His power to perform miracles, and it also recalls the Baptism of Christ, but not prominently.

In the East, the Nativity was designated to be observed also on December 25<sup>th</sup>. This happened about fifty years after Epiphany was designated. In fact, St. Basil and St. Gregory had attempted to differentiate between the two celebrations by imposing the name "Theophany" on the Birth of Christ, December 25th, and keeping the name "Epiphany" for the celebration on the 6th of January. However, they were unsuccessful.

In the Orthodox Church, in contrast to the heretics, the celebration of Epiphany took on an elaborate appearance for two reasons: first, in opposition to the corresponding celebrations of the heretics and pagans; and, secondly, due to the meaning of the Feastday itself, as the worship of the true God - the Holy Trinity. On this day, the catechumens came to be baptized. Severian, Bishop of Gavalon, remarks that in the Church there was great abundance of light on this Feastday because the Christians and catechumens carried lighted candles.

The same is mentioned by St. Ephraim the Syrian in his hymn to Epiphany (9th verse). Because of this abundance of light, the Feast of Epiphany became known as "The Feast of Lights".

St. Gregory the Theologian delivered his well-known homily "On the Lights" saying, "yesterday celebrating on the bright day of the lights...Today we shall speak on baptism."

St. Ephraim, St. Chrysostom and others relate that the faithful, before the Baptism of the catechumens, received some of the sanctified water which they took to their homes. This service took place on the evening or, rather, at about midnight, of January 5th. In the Church, the Vespers is always considered as the beginning of the next day. Until today the Orthodox Church retains this Vespers service with the Sanctification of the Waters on January 5<sup>th</sup>. In its fullness, it is done as a Vespereal Liturgy with a Baptismal emphasis, very similar to the Holy Saturday Vespereal Liturgy.

It was on this night of the 5th of January, in the early centuries of the Christian Church, when hundreds of neophytes were waiting their turn to step down, some five steps, into the water and to be baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Holding burning torches in their hands, men and women of various walks of life converted to Christ together.

Baptisms at midnight of January 5th has ceased to be practiced, but the sanctification of Water, has prevailed throughout the centuries. It is now a custom that, on the one hand, the people take Sanctified Water to their homes and on the other hand, the priests visit the homes of their parishioners and bless the homes or fields with the sanctified Water.

### **WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?**

A question that is often raised is why Jesus was baptized as we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. St. John the Baptist had been summoning people everywhere to repent, and Jesus amongst others, responds by being baptized. Even though Jesus had no sins to turn from, His baptism still marked a turning point in His life and ministry.

Jesus' Baptism was a public declaration of his commitment to the Father and it announced the beginning of His earthly ministry. Jesus taught His followers to be baptized and was an example for us to follow. The importance of the great Sacrament of Baptism is emphasized during this major Feast day. We witness on Theophany the manifestation of God as the Holy Trinity. While Jesus was being baptized in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father in Heaven was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "Jesus enters the sinful waters of the world and when He comes out, purifies the entire world with Him." St. Gregory also describes Jesus' Baptism as an act of purifying of water that was unclean with the filth of our sins. Jesus' baptism is necessary for us who sin daily and cannot find the way back to God on our own.

For this reason we bless waters on Theophany. The holy water is to purify and provide blessings to people as well as to different objects used in church or at home. It is the tradition of the Orthodox Church to have the holy water sprinkled on everything, so that all creation might receive the sanctification that the Jordan River received at the time of the Jesus' Baptism by St. John the Baptist.

The Church, through the Holy Spirit, by the hands of the priest, blesses the homes of its faithful members with the holy water. It is the responsibility of the Church to continue this sanctification of all creation that was begun by Christ at His Baptism. This holy water is a means by which we consecrate ourselves, our homes, and our possessions to the glory of God. The holy water is a way through which its purification cleanses evil. It is an opportunity to continue to dedicate ourselves and lives to be followers of Christ and the Orthodox Faith.

As the New Year begins, may we celebrate again and live in the relationship God has created with us in our Baptism. May we know and respond to the love God has offered us and in that love, may we find healing and hope.

## The Basil the Great: On the State of the Church

(The following words may be found in the concluding section of St. Basil the Great's (fourth century) treatise "On the Holy Spirit." They are particularly illuminating for us, as we live in a time when many harken back to a 'golden age' of Christianity. It has been said, "if only we had in our day, a St John Chrysostom, a St Gregory or even a St. Basil, and if only our Church membership was larger and the Faith was more well known, then perhaps many of our problems related to the Church and society could be solved." In light of these, and similar thoughts, the following words of St Basil serve, in a way as a reality check. They demonstrate that the Church and her faithful, in every generation, even at times when outstanding leaders are evident, are always engaged in a spiritual warfare, one that is difficult, manifesting itself frequently between members of the Body of Christ. Yet this battle is continually full of promise, for Christians affirm that Christ has "overcome the world" and has given His followers power to do the same.)

"To what can I liken our present situation? It may be compared, I think, to a baffle at sea which has arisen out of time-worn quarrels and is fought by people who cherish a deadly hatred against each other and have long experience in naval warfare and are eager for the fight. Look, I beg you, at the picture which I place before your eyes.

The rival fleets rush in dread array to the attack. They engage and battle with a burst of uncontrollable fury. Imagine the ships tossed to and fro by a raging storm, while thick darkness falls from the clouds and blackens all the scene so that the signals cannot be heard in the confusion and all distinction between friend and enemy is lost. Fill in the picture by imagining violent storms, with raging winds and terrible waves beating the boats against each other. Some of the combatants are turning traitors. Some are deserting in the very thick of battle. Some have, at one and the same time, to urge on their comrades and to advance against their assailants. Jealousy of authority and the lust of individual mastery divides the sailors into parties which deal mutual death to one another. As the fighters express their varying emotions in all kinds of wild screaming, the voices of the admirals and pilots cannot be heard and are not heeded. The disorder and confusion is indescribable. All are in hopeless despair which gives way to every kind of wickedness. In their mad love of glory some begin to fight against their own comrades, to get the better of the other while their own ship is sinking into the deep.

And what storm at sea was ever so wild as the present tempest of the churches? In it every landmark of the Fathers has been moved. Every foundation, every bulwark of opinion has been shaken. Everything buoyed up on the unsound is dashed about and shaken down. We attack one another. We are overthrown by one another. If our enemy is not the first to strike us, we are wounded by our comrades at our very side. If an enemy falls, he is trampled upon by his own fellows. No sooner is the enemy gone by than we find enemies in each other. Who can make a complete list of all the wrecks? Some fall by the hand of the foe. Others are stricken by the unexpected treachery of their fellows. Still others perish from the blundering of their own leaders. We see, as it were, entire churches, crews and all, dashed and shattered upon the sunken reefs of disingenuous heresy, while others are seized at the helm by enemies of the Spirit of Salvation who make shipwreck of the Faith. And then the disturbances caused by the civil rulers cause the downfall of the people with a violence unmatched by that of hurricane or whirlwind. The luminaries of the world which God set up to give light to the souls of the people are driven from their homes and a darkness, gloomy and disheartening, settles upon the churches. The terror of universal ruin is already imminent, and yet their mutual rivalry is so unbounded as to blunt the sense of danger. Individual hatred is of more importance than the common warfare by men for whom the immediate gratification of ambition is more highly

esteemed than the rewards of the future Kingdom which awaits us, as they prefer the glory of getting the better of their foes than of securing the common welfare of the human race.

Harsh cries resound in all the churches. All the Church is filled with inarticulate screams. Unintelligible noises arise from the ceaseless agitations that divert the right rule of the doctrine of the True Faith, first in the direction of excess, then in the way of defect. Between the parties the inspired Scriptures are powerless to provide mediation. The traditions of the Apostles fail to suggest terms of arbitration. Plain speaking is fatal to friendship. Disagreement in opinion is all that is needed to start a quarrel. Everyone is a theologian though his soul be covered with more spots than can be counted. The result is that the innovators find a plentiful supply of people ready for faction, while self-appointed leaders reject the government of the Holy Spirit and divide the chief pastors of the churches. The institutions of the Gospel are everywhere thrown into confusion by want of discipline. There is an indescribable competition for the chief places while every self-advertiser tries to force himself into high office. The result of this lust for ordering is that our people are in a wild state of confusion for lack of being ordered. The exhortation of those in authority are rendered wholly without purpose and void of meaning since there is not a person but who, out of his ignorant impudence thinks that it is as much his duty to give orders to other people as it is to obey anyone else.

The love of many has grown cold. Brotherly concord is destroyed. The very name of unity is ignored. Fraternal admonitions are heard no more. Nowhere is there Christian pity. Nowhere falls the tear of sympathy. There is no one to care for the weak in faith. Mutual hatred has blazed so high among fellows that they are more delighted in their neighbor's fall than in their own success. For all these reasons I ought to have kept silent, but I was drawn to speak these words by love which "seeks not her own" (1 Corinthians 13) but desires to overcome every difficulty placed in her way by time and circumstance."

*(Taken from the March 1987 issue of The Orthodox Church newspaper. An English version of On the Holy Spirit is available from St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York. This was re-printed in the Dawn.)*

---

**Each member of the Body of Christ is remembered by name at every Liturgy in the Proskomedia Service before the Liturgy, and we are united together with Our Lord and with each other on the discos (plate) and then all placed in the chalice at the end of the Liturgy.**



***"During the oblation the whole Church – in heaven and upon earth, the Church of the first-born inscribed in the heavens and the Church militant fighting against the enemies of salvation upon earth – is represented typically as assembled around the Lamb, who took upon Himself the sins of the world. What a great spectacle, enrapturing and moving the soul! It is possible that I too am a joint heir with the saints, if I remain faithful to the Lamb until death. And are not all my brethren, too, members of the future kingdom? ...We are the children of God... heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." (St John of Kronstadt)***