

Fire & Light **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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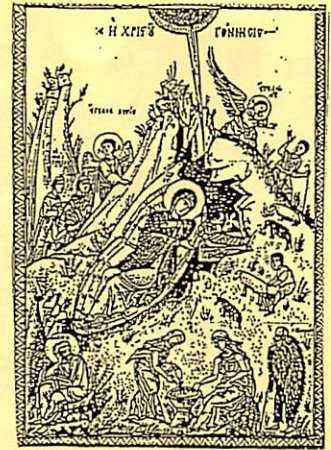
Sunday before Theophany

The Circumcision of Christ

St. Basil the Great,

Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (379)

St. Emilia, Mother of St. Basil (375)



**С РОЖДЕСТВОМ
ХРИСТОВЫМ!**

Christ is Born! Glorify Him! ~ A Happy and Blessed New Year!

- ✠ **Thurs. January 5, 6:30pm Feast of Theophany ~ Great Vespers & Blessing of Water**
- ✠ **Friday, January 6, 10:00am Feast of Theophany ~ Divine Liturgy & Blessing of Water**
- ✠ **Saturday, January 7, 10:00am Divine Liturgy ~ Old Calendar Nativity**
{Note: One year anniversary, + Archpriest Demetrius Edwards}

Theophany ~ St. Gregory the Theologian

✠ "As man our Lord was baptized, but He absolves sins as God; He needed no purifying rites Himself - His purpose was to hallow water. As man He was put to the test, but as God He came through victorious - yes, He bids us be of good cheer, because He has conquered the world. He hungered - yet He fed thousands. He is indeed "living, heavenly bread" (Jn. 6:51). He thirsted - yet He exclaimed: "Whoever thirsts, let him come to Me and drink (Jn. 7:37). Indeed He promised that believers would become fountains (Jn. 7:38). He was tired - yet He is the "rest" (Mt. 11:28) of the weary and the burdened. He was overcome by heavy sleep - yet He goes lightly over the sea, rebukes winds, and relieves the drowning Peter."

Theophany ~ St. Gregory of Nyssa

✠ "There have been delivered to us in the Gospel three Persons and names through Whom the generation of the birth of believers takes place, and he who is begotten by this Trinity is equally begotten of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit - for thus does the Gospel speak of the Spirit, that 'that which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (Jn. 3:6), and it is 'in Christ' (I Cor. 4:15) that Paul begets; and the Father is the 'Father of all.'"

Thoughts for the New Year ~ St. Cyril of Alexandria:

✠ " 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you' (Jn. 6:53). For those who do not receive Jesus through the sacrament will continue to remain utterly bereft of any share in the life of holiness and blessedness and without any taste of it whatsoever. For He is Life by nature, seeing that He was born of a living Father. And His holy Body is no less life-giving, for it has been constituted in some way and ineffably united with the Word that gives life to all things."

✠ The aim of all those who live in God is to please our Lord Jesus Christ and become reconciled with God the Father through receiving the Holy Spirit, thus securing their salvation, for in this consists the salvation of every soul. If this aim and this activity is lacking, all other labor is useless and all other striving is in vain. Every path of life which does not lead to this is without profit."

St. Symeon the New Theologian

Our Mother

✚ O, if we might only know the love of the Most Holy Mother of God for all who keep the commandments of Christ, and how she pities and sorrows over sinners who do not reform!... Verily is she our advocate before God, and alone the sound of her name rejoices the soul. But all heaven and earth, too, rejoice in her love. Here is a wondrous thing which passes understanding: she dwells in heaven and ever beholds the glory of God, yet she does not forget us, poor wretches that we are, and spreads her compassion over the whole earth, over all peoples. And this most pure Mother of His, the Lord has bestowed on us. She is our joy and our expectation. She is our Mother in the Spirit, and kin to us by nature, as a human being, and every Christian soul leaps to her in love.

✚ What could I give our Most Holy sovereign Lady for coming to me and bringing enlightenment, instead of turning away in loathing from my sin? I did not behold her with my eyes but the Holy Spirit gave me to know her through her words, which were filled with grace, and my spirit rejoices and my soul leaps to her in love, so that the mere invocation of her name is sweet to my heart.

St. Silouan the Athonite (+1938)

More Thoughts for the New Year...

Helpful Enemies

✚ Let us be just, and acknowledge that our enemies are of great assistance to us in our spiritual development. Were there no enmity on the part of men, very, very many of those pleasing to God would not have become His friends. Even the enmity of Satan is of assistance to those who are zealous for the holy things of God and the salvation of their souls. Who was more zealous for the holy things of God, or had greater love for Christ, than the Apostle Paul? This same Apostle, however, speaks of how, when God revealed many mysteries to him, He allowed the wicked demon to be with him and trouble him: 'Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure' (2 Cor. 12:7). **-St. Nikolai Velimirovich**

Will there be Progress? (On "Keeping up with the times"...)

"...Much of the trouble in this world is caused by people trying to keep up with the times. Such people consider following current trends imperative, because they have no unchanging standards by which to judge those trends. For them, change automatically means improvement, and the word change itself is a kind of mantra for them.

The "progressive" mentality is marked by an odd faith in the future, with a corresponding disdain for the past. It believes that the future will be better, if present trends continue; the only change it disapproves of is change back toward the past.

This faith was best expressed by the progressive journalist Lincoln Steffens, who returned from a visit to the Soviet Union to proclaim, "I have been over into the future, and it works."

But by what standard will the future be better, when to the progressive mindset all standards are themselves impermanent and fluid? After all, progressives tell us, "there are no absolutes"; they even speak of "evolving standards." What seems good today may appear bad from the perspective of the future. Even today's progressive may become tomorrow's reactionary, if he fails to keep up with the times!

"Lord, we know what we are, but we know not what we may be," says Shakespeare's mad Ophelia with demented insight. She doesn't know she is expressing the progressive philosophy in a nutshell.

Well, the present is the glorious future of yesterday's progressives. Is it really an improvement? By definition it must be. But not everyone finds it so." **- Joseph Sobran**

⇒ He who cannot forgive others, destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass.

THE LIGHT OF THEOPHANY

This week we celebrate the Great Feast of the Theophany (Θεοφάνεια), the manifestation of God (Jan. 6). Sometimes this feastday is called the Epiphany, meaning the manifestation or shining forth of the "true Light of the World," when our Lord Jesus Christ received baptism at the hands of Saint John the Forerunner. The most beloved characteristic of this feast is the sanctifying of the waters by the invoking of the Holy Spirit that appeared in the form of a dove over Christ at the time of His baptism. The faithful are blessed with this water and receive some at the end of the services to sanctify their homes and also to preserve in order to partake of it each morning perhaps with a small piece of antidoron as a blessing before eating or drinking anything else. At this time of year the priests bless the homes of all the faithful asking God's protection and blessing in the New Year.

How should we celebrate this great Feast of Light? Let us consider the following thoughts of Bishop Theophan of Poltava:

"In celebrating the Theophany, let us be transported to the very place where the event occurred and let us intelligently pay attention to what came to pass there. Here is the wilderness around the Jordan! You see Saint John on the riverbank, in clothing of camel's hair and leather...a numberless multitude of people surround him, from Jerusalem, from Judea and from all the lands of the Jordan. The Baptism of the Savior has only just occurred, and the eyes of all are turned toward the Son of Man as He comes up out of the water. They see nothing more than that. But stir up by faith the eye of your mind, and follow John, passing beyond that which is visible to all, fix your attentive gaze on that which is not visible to all: on heaven opened and the dove descending and the Voice heard: "This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased! Fix your gaze and do not tear away from this wondrous vision! Oh! who will grant our words power enough worthily to hymn the glory of God, revealed in the Jordan in Three Persons!



At the loss of Paradise, the Heavens were sealed up by God's righteousness. But just as a strong barrier cannot hold back the powerful pressure of the waters, so in the end the stronghold of righteousness was riven by the fire of God's love,--and behold, the Heavens were opened! Let us also open all the powers of our nature...receiving what is revealed of God and let us delight in Him. In Him let us sate all our feelings, all our thoughts and all our desires.

We are immersed in darkness; and here is abundant light! We are confounded by a disunity without consolation, both with heaven and within ourselves, but here is an all-quickening reconciliation. We are crippled with lack of strength, and here is an inexhaustible fountain of every strength!

And so, just as after a long night of darkness, every creature thirsts for the light and desires to enjoy the first rays of the rising sun, so we, having drawn near to the Theophany Light by faith, receive the consoling rays of the Divine dispensation for our salvation, and we are granted the merciful Word of God the Father, and we are filled and strengthened!

When gripped by winter cold, how greedily nature embraces the breaking of the bonds of that cold by Spring and again awakens, so we are awakened by the hope of salvation in hearts receptive to the reconciliation shining forth in the baptized Lord---and we are filled and renewed Him!

Just as in sultry summer time, the thirsty earth drinks with every pore the rain that falls on it from heaven; so we too with the desire of our souls become recipients of every strength, ready to be poured out upon us from the Spirit, Who came down in the form of a dove--and we are satiated thereby!

How might we acquire this for ourselves? But..are we not already participants in the plan of salvation? Does not God already desire us to be reconciled, illumined and brought to life? But, oh, when will it be so? In times of old, recalling John the Baptist, the Lord said to the Jews reproachfully: "He was a burning and shining light, and you were willing for a season to rejoice in his light" (John 5:35). Behold, every year in His Holy Church and upon us the Lord directs the Light of His Theophany by John in the Jordan. Does he not say to us; "Here is a burning and shining light! Behold therefore, do not desire to rejoice in some other way in the hour of His light!"

Observe, therefore, how dangerous is the going. Do not the enemies of our salvation sometimes enticingly confound our hearing?

Worldly wisdom calls out: "Come to me; I have the light." But she has no light, only the signs of light, and those who listen only to her call light darkness and darkness light.

The world calls out: "Come to me; I will give you peace. But it has no peace, only signs of peace, and those who are captivated by it discover the lie too late, and reproachfully condemning it, repeat: "Peace! Peace! and where is peace?"

The prince of the world promises spaciousness, and life, and power, and satisfaction. But he has no power, no freedom, no satisfaction, but only the appearance thereof---and those enticed by him only have life, freedom and satisfaction in name, but in actuality they are starving, slaves pinched with the hunger of deprivation.

Hasten to acquire the habit of discerning all this, and by the Light of the Theophany do not be captivated by those things which only appear to have light, peace and power but not in reality; but more than all strive towards Him, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who is the way, the truth and the life, our sanctification and deliverance.

Thus we shall not come to judgment or condemnation. This is what the Lord desires for us. He has given the Church the the commandment of radiantly celebrating His Theophany, and He is well-pleased that each one of us keep this festival in the joy which comes through a fearless examination of the conscience. If we commit ourselves to this struggle, then the small heaven within us will become like the great heaven of God, and the Image and Likeness and Light of God will become manifest in us!

The Icon of the Nativity: “Let us behold where Christ was born...”

Conclusion

~ George Gabriel

In the lower portion of the ancient Nativity Icons it is customary to show the bathing of the Infant. One or two women are preparing the bath, pouring the water and testing its temperature. Apocryphal sources say that Joseph summoned help for the Virgin, enlisting the aid of the women of his own clan, his daughter Salome, for example. (St. Salome later became the mother of St. John the Evangelist and Theologian and St. James the Apostle. The latter is not to be confused with St. James the Brother of the Lord, who was also the brother of Salome. It is likely that the second woman in the Icon is either Tamar or Esther, Salome's sisters. As one of the Myrrhbearing Women, St. Salome also came to the tomb of Christ. She is commemorated on Aug. 3rd.) When the women arrived, the painless birth was already accomplished. For the reasons already stated, the Theotokos had no real need of midwives. By preserving this charming scene, tradition teaches not that the women actually served as midwives or nursemaids but that the Divine Child had the same natural, human needs as any infant. Likewise the Feasts of the Circumcision (Jan. 1) and the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple (Feb. 2) emphasize the true humanity of the Son of Man.

The Church suffered great persecutions and struggles in defense of the orthodox truth about the Incarnate Lord. Her Fathers bore witness to it before Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites, Monothelites, Iconoclasts and other heretics throughout history. The Arians made Christ into a creature - not only in His humanity but even in His divinity. The Monophysites claimed that the human nature, in its union with the divine nature in the person of Christ, was absorbed and virtually erased by the divine leaving only an empty appearance or phantasm. The Nestorians, on the other hand, insisted that between the two natures in Christ there is no permeation or mutual communication of characteristics from one to the other, that they merely co-exist side by side in two different personalities, as “other and other,” one human and one divine, locked but not joined together.

The Fathers insisted on the complete union of the two natures without confusion in but one composite Personality of the Incarnate Son of God, and on their mutual communication or “perichorisis” and, therefore, on the genuine deification of human nature. With regard to the Church's teaching here, the famous statement of St. Gregory the Theologian is axiomatic: “Whatever has not been taken on [Himself] has not been healed; but whatsoever has been joined to God has been saved.”

But there have always been those (heretical) Christians who regard the natural processes of childbearing and especially child-birthing as essentially evil and an accursed and unspeakable passion. Historically, they even harbored the belief that Christ emerged from His Mother's side, or perhaps frontally through the abdominal wall, or in any other way but not in the usual way children are born. Among them there have often been zealots of every rank in the Church, but “zealots without understanding.” Attitudes of this kind oppose anything “natural” about the birth of Christ, e.g. the depiction of the women and the bath of the Infant Christ in the Icon. Such attitudes also influenced the depiction of a rigid, upright or seated posture of the Theotokos (when she should be reclining on her cushion next to her newborn Son). They want to make the doctrine of the painless and virgin birth into something which is not Orthodox - a childbearing and delivery that is sterilized, de-humanized, anaesthetized, de-materialized, and so “spiritual” as to be devoid of all maternity and humanity, and, therefore, of redemption as well. But the Church does not share their views. And the Fathers do not share their views. When the Church exalts the seedless and virgin birth of Christ and even calls it a birth above the laws of nature, it does not mean that His birth was in no way natural. Let some of the greatest Church Fathers explain:

St. John of Damascus—

“So far as He was born of a woman, His birth was in accordance with the laws of child-birth. While so far as He had no father, His birth was above the nature of generation (i.e. procreation). And in that it was at the usual time, for He was born after the completion of the nine-month cycle as the tenth was

about to begin, His birth was in accordance with the laws of childbirth. And in that it was painless, it was above the natural generation. For as pleasure did not precede it, neither did pain follow it, according to the Prophet (Is.66:7)... He Who was conceived kept her who conceived still virgin. In like manner also He was born preserving her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed. The conception, indeed, took place through the hearing, but the birth was through the usual path by which children come, although some people make up myths about His birth through the side of the Mother of God. For it was not impossible for Him to have come through this gate without injuring its seal in any way." (Exposition IV, 14)

St. Gregory the Theologian—

"He was born of the Virgin Mary ineffably and stainlessly, for nothing can be stained where God is and by which salvation comes." (Oration on Holy Baptism)

Also depicted in the cave are two innocent animals—the ox and the ass. Their presence is a fulfillment of prophecy, a searing indictment against the apostate Jewish people, and a reminder to them of the Prophet's caustic words: "The ox knoweth its Owner and the ass its Master's crib. But Israel knoweth Me not and the people have not regarded Me." (Is. 1:5)

In the upper portion of the Icon, the angels appear in bodily form and in classical attire. They both worship the newborn Redeemer and proclaim His birth to the Shepherds. Tradition keeps the angels outside of the cave in order to maintain an unobstructed focus on the Incarnate Word and the only other person who was directly involved - His All-holy Mother, to whom belong honors that are second only to those which are proper to the Holy Trinity. The Shepherds symbolize the good portion of Israel, the simple people who are not distressed by the news of salvation but hasten instead to worship the Lord.

The worship by the Magi completes the composition of the Nativity Icon. They come in their exotic garb to offer their regal gifts. The star that guided them - an angel, according to the Fathers - hovers above the cave "like a stalagmite hanging above the head of Christ." (Photios Kontoglou, "Ekphrasis") The entire gentile Church is reflected in their faces. Neither their knowledge and wisdom, nor their station in life became an obstacle to their worship. The simplicity of the manger, the humbleness of the Mother, and the lowliness of the place did not scandalize their hearts which were enflamed by divine knowledge. The Magi are numbered as three, and this does not come from the Scripture but only from the number of their gifts. The setting in which the miracle of the Incarnate Birth is placed is plain, simple and humble, just as His birth was simple and humble. "Wild holly and fragrant grasses, myrtle, thyme, and other plants adorn the rags." (Kontoglou)

When we speak of the birth of Christ, in reality we are speaking of our own re-birth. When we confess the Incarnation, we confess the belief in our own deification and Christification. The "kenosis" (emptying) of divine love is at the same time the filling of man with divine life. The Incarnation of the Word reveals not only the infinite philanthropy of God but also the tragic condition of man and depth of his fall. Man can therefore come to a knowledge of his dilemma. Looking into the manger he is able to see that he was half-dead, battered by the thieving demons. And he can understand his powerlessness and smallness, and thus glorify his Redeemer and discover the riches of the divine mercy. "It is therefore important when we are speaking of the appearing of the Savior, to also speak of man's beginnings so you will know that His descent was occasioned by our cause, and our transgression prompted the philanthropy of the Word in which the Lord descended and appeared to men." (St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation)

(Based in part on an article in "Epignosis," Winter, 1991-92., George Gabriel)

Thought for the New Year:

St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994) – On the Consequences of Pride

“When we do not understand that we progress only with the help of God, and - becoming prideful - think that we achieve our spiritual goals on our own, God removes His Grace so that we can realize that the only things that are ours are our will and our effort. The power and the result are from God. As soon as we recognize that we made progress because God was helping us: we are humbled; we weep for our fall; God feels sorry for us; He restores His Grace in us and we carry on.”

“[St. Paisios answers the question: ‘When one becomes prideful, does divine Grace depart immediately?'] Of course! What do you think — that it took hours on end for Lucifer the Angel to become Satan? It happened in seconds. As soon as the slightest thought of pride goes through anyone’s mind, the Grace of God leaves. For what does the Grace of God have in common with pride? God is humility. And when the Grace of God departs from someone, the devil comes to spin him around. Afterwards, that person is outwardly subject to demonic influence and inwardly filled with spiritual darkness.”

“The prideful person does not have the Grace of God in him, which is why he is at risk - God forbid! - of taking the great fall. Such a person is separated from God, because pride is a bad conduit — insular; it prevents the Grace of God from passing through, and it isolates us from God.”

Pride is the greatest spiritual illness. Just like a leach that clings to your body and sucks out your blood, pride also drains the entire inner person. It also brings about spiritual asphyxiation, because it depletes the soul of spiritual oxygen.”

“Whatever you do, you must do it with humility. Otherwise, you place the devil in your good deeds. For example, if one says proudly: ‘I will go and do some good deed,’ he is putting the devil into the mix, and he might then encounter a great number of obstacles, and - finally - not be able to go at all. On the contrary, if he goes quietly to do some good deed, the devil does not enter into the situation.”

“[St. Paisios answers the question: ‘How do we do proper spiritual work upon ourselves?'] Secretly and quietly. Spiritual work is very refined and requires great watchfulness in our every action. The spiritual life is “the science of sciences and art of arts,” according to the Fathers. Such vigilance is required! Ascending in the spiritual life is like ascending a circular stairway without railings. If one ascends without looking to see where he is going, and says: “Oh, how high have I ascended! And how much higher I will go!”, he will surely slip and fall.”

“[St. Paisios answers the question: ‘Can spiritual barrenness be caused by pride?'] Yes, it can. If there is pride, God allows for a person to remain in a state of indolence [laziness], sloth and aloofness. Because if He helps him and he experiences something heavenly, then he would feel proud and think that it was due to his own struggle. ‘You must struggle!’ he will affirm to others. ‘I struggled, and look at the things I have experienced!’ He will be harming souls by his actions. This is why God allows him to fall and be harmed, as much as necessary, in order to kill the high opinion he has of himself — to become despairing of himself in a good sense, so that he can fully grasp the words of Jesus: ‘For without Me, ye can do nothing’ [John 15:5].”

On Repentance:

Why do you increase your bonds? Take hold of your life before your light grows dark and you seek help and do not find it. This life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits.

St. Isaac the Syrian

- The old are not really smarter than the young, in terms of sheer brainpower. It is just that we have already made the kinds of mistakes that the young are about to make, and we have already suffered the consequences that the young are going to suffer, if they disregard the record of the past.
 - You cannot live a long life without having been forced to change your mind many times about people and things — including in some cases, your whole view of the world. Those who glorify the young today do them a great disservice, when this sends inexperienced young people out into the world cocksure about things on which they have barely scratched the surface.
 - In an age of artificial intelligence, too many of our schools and colleges are producing artificial stupidity, among both blacks and whites.
 - There are words that were once common, but which are seldom heard any more. The phrase "none of your business" is one of these. Today, everything seems to be the government's business or the media's business. And the word "risque" would be almost impossible to explain to young people, in a world where gross vulgarity is widespread and widely accepted.
 - Reading about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and the widespread retrogressions of Western civilization that followed, was an experience that was sobering, if not crushing. Ancient history in general lets us know how long human beings have been the way they are, and dampens giddy zeal for the latest panaceas, despite how politically correct those panaceas may be.
 - When I was growing up, we were taught the stories of people whose inventions and scientific discoveries had expanded the lives of millions of other people. Today, students are being taught to admire those who complain, denounce and demand.
 - Politics has turned the lofty ideal of equality into the ugly reality of resentments of other people's achievements — and a feeling that the world owes you something, while you owe nobody anything, not even common decency
 - Have we reached the ultimate stage of absurdity where some people are held responsible for things that happened before they were born, while other people are not held responsible for what they themselves are doing today?
-

St. Maximos the Confessor :

"Our forefather Adam used his freedom to turn toward what was worse and to direct his desire away from what had been permitted to what was forbidden. It was in his power 'to be united to the Lord and become one spirit with God...' (I Cor. 6:15). But Adam was deceived and chose to cut himself off voluntarily from God's happy end for him, preferring by his own free choice to be drawn down to the earth (cf. Gen. 2:17) than to become God by grace."

Lorenzo Scupoli (Unseen Warfare):

"Watch yourself with all diligence, lest the enemy steals near and robs you, depriving you of this great treasure, which is inner peace and stillness of soul. The enemy strives to destroy the peace of the soul, because he knows that when the soul is in turmoil it is more easily led to evil. But you must guard your peace."