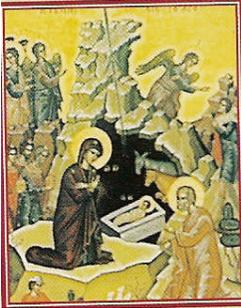


December 25

E. ☩ *Nativity of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ in the Flesh*



The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Ever Virgin Mary (Mt. 1:18-25, 2:1-12; Lk. 2:1-20) in Bethlehem¹ is celebrated on the present day. The beginning of the establishment of this feast belongs to the earliest time of the Church. In the standard opinion, the feast of the Nativity of Christ is older in the Western Church than in the Eastern; but this should only be understood about the time of celebrating the feast on December 25. In the Eastern Churches it was celebrated on January 6 until the 4th century and was known by the name of Theophany. This feast had a special character and was dedicated not only strictly to the memory of the birth or baptism of Christ, but in general to the appearance of God in the flesh, to the revelation in Christ and through Christ of the divine grace. This is why the feast is called Theophany or, more precisely, the manifestation - *ἐπιφάνεια*. The initial basis to celebrate the Nativity of Christ on January 6 served not the historical connection with the birth of the Lord to this date, who even for antiquity remained an unknown person, but the mystical understanding of the relationship between the first and second Adam, between the originator of sin and death and the Author of life and salvation. The second Adam, according to the mystical understanding of the ancient Church, was born and died on the same day on which the first Adam was created and died, - on the sixth corresponding to January 6, the first month of year. Thus the unity between the Eastern and Western Churches concerning the time of celebrating the birth on December 25 is established only since the 4th century. From this view point the feast was entered into the Constantinopolitan Church for the first time about the year 377 under the decree of Emperor Arcadius according to the custom of the Roman Church and due to the energy and the power of the eloquence of St. John Chrysostom, and from here it spread to all the Orthodox East².

Already the very subject of the feast also points out the purpose of its establishment: the commemoration and glorification of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh by the All Holy Virgin Mary. This is the first and basic purpose of the establishment of the feast. Very early another idea was connected to it: in this precise establishment of the feast by means of disclosing true doctrines about the incarnation and the birth of the Savior counters the errors of the heretics: the Ebionites, Docetists and Basilidians. Due to these false doctrines and that on the very feast on January 6 the ancient Church paid its main attention to the commemoration of the event of the birth of Christ as the very appearance of God in the flesh. In the 4th century with the occurrence and spread of Arianism, the new and strongest motive appeared to glorify the event of the birth of Christ for the

Orthodox Church. Finally, with reference to feast on December 25 the Church meant to give a counterbalance to the pagan cult and to protect believers from participating in it. It is known, that among the Romans the feast of the so-called, *dies natalis Solis invicti* [day of the nativity of the unconquerable Sun] falls on December 25, serving the expression of the idea of the continual return of the year and as if the sun is renewed and of the former day of unbridled amusements of the people, with the day of entertainment for slaves and children and so forth. Thus in itself this day was more appropriate for the commemoration of the event of the birth of Jesus Christ, Who in the New Testament frequently is referred to as the sun of the truth, light of the world, salvation of the people and victor of life and death, but the reprehensible pagan commemoration was sufficient motive for the Church to improve it according to the meaning of its lofty Christian commemoration. Therefore the ancient Church, already denying the identity of the two similar feasts, the pagan and Christian, will adopt the feast of the Nativity of Christ of the observed meaning and the expressive denial also of pagan superstitions and customs³.

Asserting our faith in the greatest mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and condemning all heretics, who deformed this teaching by sophism, the Holy Church, celebrating the Nativity of Christ, in its hymns describes this feast as a day of universal joy, "for today is born a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:10-11). "Let heaven and earth", exclaims the Holy Church, "today be gladdened in the prophecy"; "all creation leaps for joy for the Savior Lord was born for its sake in Bethlehem: for every idolatrous deception ceased, and Christ reigns forever"⁴. At the same time the Holy Church celebrating the Nativity of Christ morally teaches us the holy life of the One Who was worthy to be born the Lord. "For us today is born a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord", "for the sake of humanity and for our salvation", and we, now celebrating this birth of Christ the Lord, naturally, should ignite in ourselves the determination to be reborn from a sinful life to a life holy and pleasing to God. Our Lord Jesus Christ having come down to earth entered into a relationship of grace with us and "was not ashamed to call us brethren" (Heb. 2:11); but, in order for us to be worthy of this lofty dialogue and of union, in order not to turn ourselves away from the Lord Who came down from the heavens, it is necessary for us to leave the darkness of sin and to come nearer to light of faith, piety and good deeds. The Creator and Master of heaven and earth appeared in the world not in glory and magnificence, but in need, poverty and humiliation; the King Who reigns and the Lord Who dominates accepts not luxurious chambers, but a poor cave. By this the majesty of humility, poverty, meekness, simplicity and the perniciousness of pride, riches, vanity and luxury is shown to us. Worthy to be the first to hear the good news of the angels about the birth of the Savior of the world and the first to worship Him were simple Bethlehem shepherds (about them see below), and after them the wise Persian magi (about them see below), and thus at the manger of the Savior we see two sorts of people - shepherds and magi, i.e. the simplest people and the most educated people. By this we are inspired that the Lord accepts each and all: those pleasing to

Him and the simple illiterate, when they are connected to the true fulfillment of their calling, with the purity of conscience and life; human wisdom is not rejected by Him when it is able to subordinate itself to the inspiration from above and uses its knowledge to the glory of God and for the use of neighbor. This teaches each one to be content with his participation and at the same time demonstrates that no calling and position interferes with their coming nearer to God, that pure and sincere labor, inspired by faith and hope in God is the conscientious fulfillment of the duties always pleasing to God and attracts His blessing that in the eyes of God the precious things are not external advantages in the light, but purity of heart and of conscience, meekness and humility of spirit, submissiveness and obedience to the law of God, patience and compliance, hope and fidelity to will of God, gentleness and goodwill to neighbor, going irreproachably before God in all the commandments and precepts, that these precious qualities do not belong exclusively to any estate, that in all callings and positions the person may be pleasing to God, if he will be well pleasing to Him in word, desire and thought. In general the event of the appearance of God in the flesh picturesquely described in the festal services with all the circumstances surrounding it represents by itself an inexhaustible source for our edification⁵.

Troparion, tone 4

**Thy Nativity, O Christ our God,
Has shone to the world the light of wisdom,
For by it those who worshipped the stars,
Were taught by a star, to adore Thee
The Sun of righteousness,
And to know Thee the Orient from on high:
O Lord glory to Thee.**

Kontakion, tone 3

**Today the Virgin give birth to the transcendent One
And the earth offers a cave to the unapproachable One,
Angels and shepherds glorify Him,
Wise men journey with the star:
Since for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child.**

Magnification (Megalynaria)

We magnify Thee, O Lifegiver Christ, who for our sake is now born in the flesh from the unwedded and immaculate Virgin Mary.

The feast of the Nativity of Christ is one of the twelve major feasts. It has 5 days of Forefeast (from Dec. 20 to 24) and six days of Afterfeast; Its Leave-taking is Dec. 31⁶. The liturgical books call it "a three day Pascha". According to the majesty of commemorated events this feast is celebrated as the most festive of all feasts, except for Pascha. St. John Chrysostom calls the

day of the Nativity of Christ the most honorable and important of all feasts", "the mother of all feasts".⁷ The Vigil on the feast of Christmas begins with Great Compline (in which however the ending prayers are dropped) instead of Vespers, which is already merged with the Liturgy. In this Compline the Church especially expresses its spiritual joy by singing the prophetic song: "For God is with us". After reading the Great Doxology, there is a Lita and the Blessing of Loaves, and then Matins is served. "If the Nativity of Christ falls on a Sunday, we sing nothing from the Sunday services".

Matins Gospel: Mt. 1:18-25; Sel. 2. **Epistle:** Gal. 4:4-7; Sel. 209. **Gospel:** Mt. 2:1-12; Sel. 3. The liturgy is served "early in the morning, labor for the sake of vigilant". In the Liturgy instead of "the Trisagion" sing "As many as have been baptized into Christ".

On the feast of Christmas, even if it falls on Wednesday or Friday, laymen are authorized to eat meat, and monks, cheese and eggs. "From the Nativity of Christ up to Holy Theophany there is no fasting or kneeling in the church or in the cells".

During the days of the Nativity of Christ church servers go to the homes of parishioners "with glory", similar to the angels who announced the Savior of the world with great joy to the Bethlehem shepherds, announcing and singing glory to God and to the born Savior with the singing of the festal Troparion and Kontakion, sometimes with the addition of a brief Litany of Fervent Supplication⁸.

Commemoration of the deliverance of the Church and Sovereign Russia from the invasion of the Gauls and twelve nations with them in 1812. In the Russian Orthodox Church the solemnity of the Divine services of the feast becomes still more magnified by the commemoration of the defeat of the French and their flight from Russia in 1812.

This commemoration is served after the Liturgy with the singing of the Thanksgiving Molieben, but must not be confused with the kneeling placed here as it is not a kneeling of the fast and repentance, but rather the expression of thanksgiving. In this Molieben the Holy Church confesses the Son of God as the Ruler of kingdoms and nations and at first raises the Many Years to the Sovereign Emperor and to all His House, then the Eternal Memory to the Emperor Alexander in blessed repose in God, chosen by the Providence of God for the protection of the faith and salvation of the fatherland, and finally the Many Years to the troops.

The prayer, read at the Molieben, is printed in one edition (1826, 1882) in a much larger form, and the other (1870) is in the abbreviated, but in this and the other form the prayer is allowed for reading at the Molieben (Decree of Holy Synod III-V/18-4, 1882).

Adoration of the Magi

Three Magi, Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar, having learned about the birth of the Messiah according to the wonderful star which appeared to them in the sky and led them to the birthplace of the world's Savior and they presented to Christ gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt. 2:1-12). They believe that these magi (i.e. eastern wise men) came from Persia. Obviously, they knew the Jewish expectation of the Messiah. According to the opinion of some, these magi were descendants of the Babylonian wise men, who formerly were under the leadership of Daniel (Acts 2:48), who even has sown among his subordinates the seed of the true faith and expectation of the Messiah (Num. 24:17; Dan. 9:24-27). Being worthy to bow to the born Savior, the magi, undoubtedly, were distinguished with lofty spiritual qualities. Apparently, in the use of their reason and in their acquisition of human knowledge they were inspired by piety and faith in the promised Savior and with all their enlightenment there was the glory of God and their own salvation. Their very trip for the adoration of the Savior bears witness to their faith, love and diligence. According to some tales, the magi, having returned to their country, were turned to contemplative life and prayer. Subsequently Ap. Thomas met them in Parthia, and they, having accepted baptism from him, themselves became preachers of Christ. After their death, their relics, found by St. Helen, were first placed in Constantinople, but from there were transferred to Mediolanum (Milan), and later to Cologne. In the Cologne cathedral they even now show visitors the skulls of these three wise men, opened by the Bishop of Cologne Reynold in the 12th century. In honor of the magi the West established the special feast called "the feast of the three kings", which superseded the feast of Theophany on Jan. 6 (see page 16). Among simple people in the West the magi were honored as the protectors of travelers.

Commemoration of the Shepherds who saw the Lord

Undoubtedly, the shepherds were people who were strictly devout, true Israelites, who were fervently awaiting and desiring the coming of the promised Messiah, frequently, especially in the silence of the night, under the light of the heavenly bodies, turned to pious reflections and conversations on the holy subject of their desires and expectations. Through all their simplicity they were powerful in faith, through their seeming roughness they had cleansed and softened their hearts with the fear of God, through all their scarcity of externally possessed precious treasure in the world, with pure conscience before God and the people, they carefully fulfilled their small service and did not expect another reward, except for their uprightness before God and before the people. For their fervent expectations of the Messiah, for their fair and sincere labor, for their conscientious discharge of the duties of their service inspired by faith and hope in God, for their piety and their lofty spiritual qualities, the humble Bethlehem shepherds received the greatest mercy from the Lord: they were the first to whom the angels revealed

the birth of the Savior and they were the first to have seen Him, they were the first on behalf of all the human race to have bowed down to Him (Lk. 2:8-20).

¹At the present time Bethlehem is a small settlement of about 4,500 inhabitants, and that remarkably there are no Jews among them. The inhabitants of Bethlehem make bone and olive wood chotki (beads), mother-of-pearl crosses, little images, representations of the tomb of the Lord and other things. All these plentiful things are bought up by pilgrims. Near the settlement above this cave where the Savior was born rises the temple at the edge of the mount, with its eastern side; here is located the Monastery of the Nativity of Christ. A majestic temple cruciform in shape was built by Empress Helen. Subsequently this temple was remodeled and worthily adorned by Emperor Justinian. The main altar of the Bethlehem temple is constructed over the very cave of Nativity of the Savior of the world. From both sides of the altar 15 marble steps descend to the basement church which actually is the birthplace of the Savior. Expensive lampadas are suspended around the floor of the cave of the Nativity over which a marble slab supported by columns serves as the altar table where the liturgy is performed. Stepping back a few steps from the place of the Nativity of the Savior, it is possible to see a special cave where they enter for two or three steps where the manger was where the Divine Child rested. The manger in which the Savior reposed was carried away to Rome and put there in certain temple. In its place a Roman Catholic altar table is built in the cave. In the same cave opposite the little cradle manger of the Savior is built another (also Roman Catholic) altar table, in that place where the Holy Virgin Theotokos with the Baby Jesus on Her bosom received the worshipping magi. All the walls of the cave, here as also at the sanctuary of the Nativity, are covered with expensive fabrics, and most of the silver and gold plated lampadas hang along the main arch and along the sides. The entire cave is five sages (35 feet) in length and one and a half sages (about 10 feet) in width.

²The establishment of celebrating the Nativity of Christ on December 25 had great meaning in the formation of the church calendar. As soon as this feast was established and sanctified then in conformity with this it received the appropriate place with the other days with the closest connection to the day of the birth of the Savior such as: March 25, January 1, February 2, September 23 and June 24 (Refer to Lk. 1:36).

³The 12 days after Christmas is called the Christmas season (Sviatkami), i.e. the holy days because they are consecrated by the great events of the Nativity of Christ and Theophany. Christmas season is a Christian feast, but mixed into it was much that was pagan inherited from most ancient times. The Slavs from of old had during the time of the Christmas season a custom to masquerade, to put on masks "of a wedding", "of a chicken", "to play a goat", to honor the "toro" (bull), to tell fortunes (on beans, tin molding, on little twigs, eavesdropping, etc.) and bird magic, to arrange skating and dances, to light fires, etc. With the spread of Christianity in Russia all these pagan rites, customs and amusements did not lose all their power, having become complicated with new formations on a Christian basis. And at the present time the masquerading, fortune-telling and other so called Christmas seasonal pastimes and entertainment continue to exist. But these Christmas season "Holy" days with references inappropriate to their holiness are why they must be rooted out.

Already Tertullian is armed against wearing masks. The blessed Augustine condemned masquerading and the custom "cervum facere", probably, something like "to play a goat" in Little Russia. The Rudder (according to the list of the 13th century) forbids comic masks ("in masquerade games") and speaking like a goat, saying that the Holy fathers rule "that men do not clothe themselves in women's apparel, nor women in men's, that they do not create a Dionysian orgy on feasts, nor may they put on tragic masks, nor shall they assume comic, nor satyric nor tragic masks, for they are the contrived essence of desecration, singing tremulously for pity's sake and for the lament for struggling", etc. The Nomocanon published in Kiev at the beginning of the 17th century repeats that "men dressed like women and women dressed like men, or plat bands as in Latin countries, having become accustomed to evil, create various masks transforming themselves". At the end of the 17th century, Patriarch Jehoiakim, describing the Moscow Christmas season (sviatki), is indignant that "men, women and maidens go along the streets, adding foul language to many demonic songs and dancing with prodigal impurity, transforming themselves into creatures dissimilar to God, adapting the human image to demonic and idolatrous figures, tragic and other demonic contrivances by putting on made-up images, seducing Orthodox Christians with dancing and other contrivances". In the vault of present laws (Ustav o pred. i presech. prest. st. 30-31, izd. 1876) it is forbidden "on the eve of the Nativity of Christ and during the continuation of the Christmas season (Sviatok) to participate in the ancient idolatrous traditional games and to put on idolatrous clothing to do impious dances on the streets and to sing seductive songs". As to fortune telling our Church has for long time been strictly concerned about them and rigorously forbade them among Christians. In like manner, the 61st Canon of the 6th Ecumenical Council states: "Those who turn to wizards or other similar soothsayers so that they may learn from them what they wish them to reveal, let all such, agreeing with the decrees lately made by the Fathers concerning them, be subjected to the canon of a six-year penance. And those who tell fortunes about happiness, about fate, but equally also to the so called enchanters, makers of safety amulets and sorcerers should also be subjected to this same penalty. Those who persist

in these things and do not turn away from such fatal and pagan fictions, we are determined to completely expel from the Church as the sacred canons command". The contemporary Christmas seasonal fortune-telling although is sometimes begun as a joke, but almost always is terminated with great harm for the soul. Let alone the impossibility to know the future by means of ridiculous fortune telling, it must have the view that the future is not useful for us as active knowledge. If the so-called happy events in our life were known to us earlier, then they would be customary for us and would not serve our joy and our happiness. Of course similarly the one who would obviously know what the future would be would not labor, that this or that is certainly necessary for him in the future, and without labor he would become lazy and would be the most unfortunate being, but those, who would know that in the future they would be threatened with any kind of greatest misfortune would be even more unfortunate. Wherefore not knowing coming troubles, we only suffer from the misfortune which reaches us, but knowing, we also suffer affliction from the expectation of misfortune. God, according to His wise Providence, has hidden the future from us. It means that anyone who fearlessly tries to open the curtain of the future wants to go against God, and instead of a strong faith in the power of God to believe in the power of the creature as if this creature somehow can reveal the future to us. The Lord most wisely also arranged for our blessing so that He hides the future from us. Therefore it follows that he who tries to determine his future, it is as though he recognizes himself as wiser than God and according to his understanding recognizing himself as more useful than the all-wise Providence of God, is fatal for that person. The true Christian should always firmly remember that only in hope in God, in deep fidelity and humility to His Holy will is our hope, our power and our happiness and that fortune telling postpones the mercy and help of God for us, but that the use of fortune telling during the holy days established for the glorification of the Savior Who was born, there is a defilement of the holiness of these days, worthy of the penalties of God. The holiness of these days is broken and with every kinds of other unchristian indecent noisy, loose amusements and entertainments, which are scheduled for us during the Christmas season and which have in view to make these days pleasant and cheerful.

"The spirit of Christ," according to the remarks of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, "is not the enemy of legislative joy"; the soul exhausted by the noise of vanity rests in innocent games and entertainment, and eating supports the feeling of friendship among people. From the Christian point of view, games and entertainment which do not break the purity of ideas, feelings and words, do not offend hearing and the eyes and do not debase human worth, are permitted. But it is necessary to remember firmly, that "where there is effeminacy and luxury," as St. John Chrysostom teaches, "where there is drinking and all kinds of entertainment, there nothing is difficult and everything is shaky, changeable. Listen to this, whoever likes to watch indecent dancing will destroy his conscience". During the "holy days" one should more strenuously try not to distract the mind and heart from holy thoughts, feelings and actions; and this obliges everyone to eliminate the self from all noisy turbulent gladness. Revelry and noisy worldly gladness does not make a feast of Christ joyful and pleasant for us, but calming the soul, satisfying and making glad the heart is the grace of God bestowed from above only to those who avoid everything that offends the love of God, that averts the benevolent gaze of the Heavenly Father from us, that dishonors the holy and venerable name of Christ, that breaks the holiness of the feast. Many efforts and labor on the part of the pastors of the Church are required in order that the celebration of the Christmas season be given a true-Christian character.

⁴ In his homily for this feast St. John Chrysostom says: "What the forefathers so strongly aspired, what the prophets announced beforehand and the righteous ones wished to see, today was accomplished. God was revealed on earth in the flesh and dwelled among the people. O beloved ones! Let us rejoice and be glad! John leapt in the womb of his mother when Mary came to Elizabeth; should we not exclaim all the more from internal joy, seeing today not only Mary, but also our Lord, our Savior? Should we not be filled with greater awesomeness and amazement, seeing His birth and the greatest mystery of His incarnation, not conceivable for the mind? What amazement would come to us if the sun left the sky, rotated on the earth, and His rays were distributed to all people? Really all the inhabitants of the earth would be struck by such a wonder: shouldn't we be no more filled with the deepest amazement at the major wonder now accomplished that the Sun of truth spreads its rays from our flesh and lights up our souls?"

⁵St. Ephraim the Syrian says in his talk on the feast of the Nativity of Christ, "Now a day of mercy is sent up, that none follows his neighbor with revenge for the offence put to him; the day of joy has come that none will be guilty of afflictions and sorrows for the other. This is the day, cloudless and clear, that anger, the disturber of peace and tranquility, will be bridled. This is the day, in which God has descended to sinners, that the righteous will be shamed is announced to the sinners. This is the day in which the Lord of creation has come to the slaves, in order that the lord with similar love is not ashamed to condescend to his servants. This is the day, in which the Wealthy has become impoverished for our sake, that the wealthy will not be ashamed to share his meal with the poor!" "Come, O blind men and receive the light of eyes! Come, O lame men, receive strong legs! Come, O tongue-tied and dumb, receive the gift of words! Come all those not possessing hands, receive power in the hands! The Creator Son has a treasury full of every kind of healing. Flow down, O Lepers, receive cleansing without labor". "And you, wanderers and strangers, hasten to the great Physician! The Son of the King - the Lord of everything avoids nobody."

"We shall," teaches St. Gregory the Theologian in his sermon on the day of the Nativity of Christ, "celebrate not extravagantly, but divinely, not according to the world, but above the world, not as our own feast, but as the feast belonging to Him Who is ours, or it is better to say, the feast of our Master. We shall not crown the threshold of our houses, nor arrange dances, nor decorate the streets, nor satiate the eye, nor enchant the ear with musical pipes, nor enervate the nostrils with perfume, nor defile the taste, nor indulge the touch - these are the short ways to vice, these are the gates of sin. Let us not be effeminate in clothing, soft and flowing, all whose elegance is useless, nor in the glittering of gems, nor with the sheen of gold, nor with the tricks of color, resulting in the suspicion of natural beauty and invented to desecrate the image of God. Let us not be given to speaking like a goat and to drunkenness, with which as I know, are connected to debauchery and licentiousness (Rom. 13:13). Since the lessons which evil teachers give are evil, or, it is better to say, harvests from worthless seeds are worthless. Let us not set up high beds with wooden branches, building luxurious meals for the belly. Let us not appraise the bouquet of wines, the seasonings of cooks, and the great expense of unguents. Let neither land nor sea offer us a gift of precious dung - for this is the way I have learned to estimate luxury! Let us not try to surpass each other in intemperance (all that is excessive and beyond need, in my opinion, is intemperance), especially, when others, who are made of the same clay and in the same manner with us, are thirsty and suffer need. To the contrary let us leave all this to the pagans, pagan splendor and pagan celebrations. They call by the name of gods those who are charmed by dung, but consistently serve their divinity with their belly as evil inventors, sacrificers and venerators of evil demons. But if we, who venerate the Word, must have pleasure, then let us be pleased in the word and the law of God, and in the tales about the other, and about the reasons for the actual celebrations in order that our pleasure would be making to His, and not alien to the One who has called us".

"Venerate the birth, by which you were freed from the chains of your birth; render honor to little Bethlehem, which had led you back to Paradise; bow down before the crib, through which you, being speechless was nourished by the Word. Recognize (as Isaiah commands you), as the ox its Owner, and as the ass its Lord's crib" (Is. 1:3).

"Go with the star, offer gifts with the Magi, gold and frankincense and myrrh, as to a King, and as to God, and as to the One who died for you. Glorify Him with shepherds, exult with angels and sing with archangels. Let this celebration be common to the powers in the heavens and on earth. For I am persuaded, that the heavenly powers are rejoicing and are now celebrating with us, because they love mankind and love God".

"If Christ flees to Egypt, willingly flee with Him. It is good to flee with the persecuted Christ. If He tarries in Egypt, call Him out of Egypt, by offering Him good worship there. Travel faultlessly through every stage of growth and powers of Christ. As a disciple of Christ, be cleansed, be circumcised and take away the veil which covered you since birth".

"Be crowned with thorns, with the severity of life according to God. Put on the purple robe, accept the reed, and let them mockingly bow down before you while swearing the truth. Finally, willingly be crucified, die and share burial with Christ that you may rise with Him, and be glorified, and reign, look at and be looked at by the Great God, the God who is worshipped and glorified in Trinity, Whom let us pray, will be and now is. How is this possible that our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed to us prisoners of the flesh".

⁶Almost everywhere among Christian peoples the real feast, as the feast of the birth of the divine Child, is considered by preference as a feast for children, for whom it has become customary to put up a fir-tree, decorated with various toys and sweets and in the evening shining with lit candles attached to its branches. It is recognized that this custom passed to us from Germany where it existed from ancient times. According to the ideas of the Archpriest J. Debolsky, branches of a fir-tree can serve as an instructive paradigm that our nature in itself, as a lifeless and a barren branch, that it is only in Christ Jesus, the Source of life, light and joy, can be chilled and bear spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22-23).

According to the opinion of others, the fir-tree serves as a symbol of the tree of life, returned to us with the birth of Christ the Savior; being decorated with lit candles, it serves as a symbol of the spiritual light, enlightening the world with the coming of Christ, and, by the hanging fruits, it serves as a symbol of the endless kingdom of grace and of its saving fruits, revealed with the birth of the Savior.

But the famous preacher Archpriest J. N. Polissadov in one of his sermons calls the custom of putting up a fir-tree for the children "completely ridiculous, purely German or, more precisely speaking, some kind of paganism, unbecoming to the feast of Christ at all, with pure absurdity".

According to the opinion of the "Tserkovnyi Vestnik [Church Messenger], it is quite natural, that in gray-haired antiquity the fir-tree was made an accessory of some kind of pagan festival, but subsequently all the pagan spirit in the custom has disappeared and gave up its place to other ideas and feelings. In Germany during the past time all members of the family, peacefully and ritually gathered around the fir-tree, enjoyed reading stories about the birth of Christ, sang appropriate festal hymns and songs. It was then considered obligatory to distribute gifts to the children, maids and the poor". The doors of every home were hospitably opened for the hungry and needy. Grades and ranks were forgotten at this time (see Tserkovnyi Vestnik [Church Messenger] 1893, 52). All this, certainly, is fully appropriate for the feast of Christ. And in general does not present anything prejudicial in putting

up a fir-tree for children, if this entertainment is so arranged that it has a moral-educational value for them, if their teachers manage to lead their idea from contemplation of the decorated fir-tree to the Bearer of all blessings, to the born Christ and to stimulate in their hearts the feeling of awesomeness and gratitude of unspeakable benefactions for the human family for Him, if fir-tree gifts laying around them serve as an encouragement for them to good behavior, if it will stimulate in them the feeling of compassion for the needy and their needs to help them and to share the received gifts, etc. Unfortunately, other teachers are far from all this... Still more sorrowful that frequently the children's feast of the fir-tree turns to debauchery for adults.

⁷ "Here comes", says St. Chrysostom about the day of the Nativity of Christ, "the most important feast of all: whoever will call it the beginning of all feasts will not sin in any way. What is this for the feast? The Nativity of Christ in the flesh: on this feast they have the beginning and the basis of the day of Theophany and Pascha, Ascension of the Lord and Pentecost. If Christ was not born in the flesh and were not baptized is why there would be no feast of Theophany. And that He would not have suffered is why there would be no Pascha. He would not have sent the Holy Spirit, and that after this there would be no Pentecost. And so from the feast of the Nativity of Christ comes our feasts, as from the source of various streams".

⁸ Vainly some, mainly of the young priests, look at this custom as humiliating for the shepherd of the Church, and are confused that the "glorifying of Christ" is incorporated together with the collecting of voluntary gifts of the flock for the benefit of the clergy. Being sent "to glorify Christ" at the homes of parishioners, but the priest should not be confused, but to the contrary rejoice, and to rejoice not with an earthly joy, but in the holy joy coming from Christ Himself, wherefore, going "with glory" among the homes, the priest is doing his apostolic mission, his red legs go not to gather alms from parishioners, but to carry the good news about the birth of Jesus - the one hope of the Christian family to their homes. The priest does not go to the homes of his parishioners to stretch out his hand, but to extend the blessing with the honorable cross and his priestly blessing to all the homes; not the poor priest in the home of a parishioner, but the faithful servant of Christ - His wealthy one by grace. Good will gifts of parishioners to the clergy during the "glorifying" are not humiliating gifts when they are completely natural. Who grazes the flock and does not drink the milk of the flock? And is it possible to demand that the good feelings of the parishioners in relation to the clergy not be expressed by an external image? Good will gifts of the flock, first of all, are not completely alms, but the bread of the Lord, - the Lord Whom you serve and not to wait for the bread from who knows where, and secondly, these gifts serve as a mightily and spiritually tie between shepherd and flock, for he must be their father, and they his children. That they compose one family of Christ is why the shepherd, eating from the gifts of the parishioners, as though he constantly participates with them even in one meal. It is not necessary to hide from view, that the "glorifying" (as well as in general "going with a relic" on other feasts) is based on the need deeply rooted in the Orthodox people to bless his dwelling with the presence of the relic and prayers of the church servers on the day of the feast. And many of the flock are deeply convinced that in the person of the server of God the Lord their home is worthy of His visitation. Undoubtedly, this devout custom will exist as long as the Orthodox faith will be in Rus. The goodness of this custom is reflected also in external behavior especially among the simple Russian people, the peasants, who before the clergy arrive for the glorifying, keep from rough sensual pleasures usual during the holidays, and after the visitation of the clergy "with glory" to their houses the religious mood is elevated among them and is carried over into the temple. Serving with the most hopeful guard of becoming behavior of parishioners during the days of the most high feast, the custom of glorifying together with them gives a plentiful source of comfort to disabled elders and to small children, the sick and the healthy, who, because of the range of distances, severity of weather or for the other reasons, had no opportunity to participate in the spiritual celebration of the feast in the temple. It should be understood by this that the duty of the shepherd of the Church is to support in every way similar sorts of pious customs, for by doing so it also is a religious nurturing of the flock that in every way develops pious habits and strengthens pious customs (For details see Tserkovnyi Vedomosti [Church Messenger] 1892, 51).

*S. V. Bulgakov, **Handbook for Church Servers**, 2nd ed. 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp. 473-479.
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