

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **December 23, 2012** ✠

Forefeast of the Nativity

Sunday of the Holy Ancestors of Christ

Holy Ten Martyrs of Crete (250) St. Niphon of Cyprus (4th C)

St. Nahum of Ochrid, Enlightener of the Bulgarians (910)

"You shall call His
name Jesus, for He
shall save His people
from their sins"
—Matthew 1:21.

⇒ *Many Years! Newly-Illumined Matthew, Leah, Jude and Lucas!*

Nativity Services:

**The Nativity According to the Flesh of Our Lord and God and Savior
Jesus Christ**

✠ **Monday, December 24: 10:00am Royal Hours of Nativity**
3:00pm ~ Holy Supper / 6:00pm ~ Christmas Eve Vigil

🔔 **Tuesday, December 25: 10:00am Nativity Divine Liturgy** 🔔

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

⇒ **NOTE: NO VESPERS – Saturday, December 29**

⇒ **Next Sunday, Dec. 30 ~ Children's Christmas Program**

How did God condescend to be an infant in a cave?

✠ "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One" (Kontakion of Nativity). What can I, the unworthy and filthy one, say about the grandeur of the innumerable dispensations of the Most High God! I am astonished and unable to look directly at it as I contemplate this mystery. How did God condescend to be an infant in a cave of irrational beasts? How was He wrapped in swaddling clothes and carried in the holy arms of the holy Virgin, He Who was born by the Father without a mother! "Great art Thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders!" "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Rom.11:33).

My soul shall rejoice in the Lord; I shall noetically smother with kisses that most sweet and blessed Infant, so that He may deliver me from my irrational passions. ~ **Elder Ephraim**

✠ "Through His incarnation God gave us the model for a holy life and recalled us from our ancient fall. In addition to many other things, He taught us, feeble as we are, that we should fight against the demons with humility, fasting, prayer and watchfulness. For when, after His baptism, He went into the desert and the devil came up to Him as though He were merely a man, He began His spiritual warfare by fasting and won the battle by this means - though, being God, and God of gods, He had no need of any such means at all." **St. Hesychios the Priest (5th C)**

✠ "He who sits at the right hand of the Father goes without shelter at the inn, that He may for us prepare many mansions in the house of His heavenly Father....He was born, not in the house of His parents, but at the inn, by the wayside, because through the mystery of the Incarnation He is become the Way, by which He guides us to our home ." **Venerable Bede (7th C)**

The Holy Fathers on the Feast of Christ's Nativity

"Now the day of mercy has shown forth! Let no one persecute his neighbor with revenge for the wrong he has caused him! The day of joy has arrived! Let no one be guilty of causing sorrow and grief to another person. This is a cloudless and bright day!

"Let anger be stilled for it disturbs peace and tranquility. This is the day in which God descended to sinners! Let the righteous man be ashamed to exalt himself over sinners. This is the day when the Lord of creation came to servants! Let the master of the house humble himself in similar love to his servants. This is the day on which the Wealthy One became poor for our sake! Let not the rich be ashamed to share their table with the poor."

St. Ephraim the Syrian

"...He comes not as a fierce man of war, threatening all things living with death, but as a newly born babe, bringing the hope of rebirth and life into the entire realm of death; He comes—but the land of destruction does not meet, does not embrace, does not praise, does not even see its Savior, and does not hear the Word of God keeping silence in a manger. Virtually in vain does the glory which Jesus Christ had with God the Father before the world was (John 17:5) on the lips of the angels, follow Him descending into the world and pursuing Him, attain even unto the earth."

St. Philaret of Moscow (1867)

"Today the Lord is born, the life and salvation of mankind; today a reconciliation is made of Divinity to humanity, and of humanity to Divinity; today all creation has leapt for joy; those above sent toward those below; and those below towards those above; today occurred the death of darkness and the life of humanity; today a way was made toward God for man and a way for God into the soul."

St. Macarius the Great (5th C)

"The incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before, for no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us."

St. Athanasius the Great (325)

"We confess, then, that the Lord Jesus Christ assumed all the natural and innocent passions of man. For He assumed the whole man and all man's attributes save sin. For sin is not natural, nor is it implanted in us by the Creator, but arises voluntarily in our mode of life as the result of a further implantation by the devil, though it cannot prevail over us by force. For the natural and innocent passions are those which are not in our power, but which have entered into the life of man owing to the condemnation by reason of the transgression; such as hunger, thirst, weariness, labor, the tears, the corruption, the shrinking from death, the fear, the agony with the bloody sweat, the succor at the hands of angels because of the weakness of the nature, and other such like passions which belong by nature to every man. All, then, He assumed that He might sanctify all. He was tried and overcame in order that He might prepare victory for us and give to nature power to overcome its antagonist, in order that nature which was overcome of old might overcome its former conqueror by the very weapon wherewith it had itself been overcome." **St. John of Damascus**

"What is the purpose of the Incarnation of the Divine Logos which is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, about which we read and which yet we do not recognize? Surely it is that He has shared in what is ours so as to make us participants in what is His. For the Son of God became the Son of man in order to make us human beings sons of God, raising us up by grace to what He is by nature, giving us a new birth in the Holy Spirit and leading us directly into the kingdom of heaven. Or, rather, He gives us the grace to possess this kingdom within ourselves (cf. Luke 17:21), so that not merely do we hope to enter it but, being in full possession of it, we can affirm: 'Our life is hid with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3)."

St. Symeon the New Theologian

On the Incarnation – St. Athanasius the Great

Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them?

It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits. As, then, the creatures whom He had created reasonable, like the Word, were in fact perishing, and such noble works were on the road to ruin, what then, was God, being God, to do? Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning? Surely it would have been better never to have been created at all than, having been created, to be neglected and perish; and, besides that, such indifference to the ruin of His own work before His very eyes would argue not goodness in God but limitation, and that far more than if He had never created men at all....Was He to demand repentance from men for their transgression?

You might say that that was worthy of God, and argue further that, as through the Transgression they became subject to corruption, so through repentance they might return to incorruption again. But repentance would not guard the Divine consistency, for, if death did not hold dominion over men, God would still remain untrue. Nor does repentance recall men from what is according to their nature; all that it does is to make them cease from sinning. Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun, men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What—or rather Who was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in

the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all. For he alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be an ambassador for all with the Father.

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before, for no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are, But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us. He saw the reasonable race, the race of men that, like Himself, expressed the Father's Mind, wasting out of existence, and death reigning over all in corruption. He saw that corruption held us all the closer, because it was the penalty for the Transgression; He saw, too, how unthinkable it would be for the law to be repealed before it was fulfilled He saw how unseemly it was that the very things of which He Himself was the Artificer should be disappearing. He saw how the surpassing wickedness of men was mounting up against them; He saw also their universal liability to death. All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than that His creatures should perish and the work of His Father for us men come to nought, He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own. Nor did He will merely to become embodied or merely to appear; had that been so, He could have revealed His divine majesty some other and better way. No, He took our body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father—a pure body, untainted by intercourse with man. He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the Virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very

own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, when He had fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

...Through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the Resurrection... For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city, and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled, and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.

From the Second Century Treatise, "Letters to Diognetus"

Mine are no strange discourses or perverse questionings, but, having been a disciple of the Apostles, I come forward as a teacher of the Gentiles, ministering worthily to them--as they present themselves disciples of the truth--the lessons which have been handed down. For who that has been rightly taught and has entered into friendship with the Word does not seek to learn precisely the lessons revealed openly by the Word to the disciples; to whom the Word appeared and declared them, speaking plainly, not perceived by the unbelieving, but relating them to disciples who being reckoned faithful by Him were taught the mysteries of God? For which cause He sent forth the Word, that He might appear unto the world. Who, although dishonored by the Chosen people, was preached by the Apostles and believed in by the Gentiles. This Word, Who was from the beginning, Who appeared as new and yet is known to be of old, is ever born anew in the hearts of His Saints. This is He, I say, Who is eternal, Who today was accounted a Son, through Whom the Church is enriched and grace is unfolded and multiplied among the Saints, grace which confers understanding, which reveals mysteries, which announces seasons, which rejoices over the faithful, which is bestowed upon those who seek her--those who do not break the pledges of faith nor transgress the boundaries of the fathers. Whereupon the fear of the law is sung, and the grace of the prophets is made known, and the faith of the Gospels is established, and the tradition of the Apostles is preserved, and the joy of the Church exults. If you do not grieve this grace, you will understand the discourse which the Word holds by the mouth of those whom He desires when He wishes. For in all things, that by the will of the commanding Word we were moved to utter with much pains, we become sharers with you, through love of the truths He has revealed to us...

Second century treatise, "Letters to Diognetus", by an unknown author - Adapted from A Treasury of Early Christianity, edited by Anne Freemantle; Viking Press, 1953

More of a Series of Commentaries on the Great Old Testament Saints ~ From St. Nikolai of Serbia in his *Prologue of Ochrid*.

HOMILY ~ **On Noah**

Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God (Gen. 6:9).

To be righteous among the righteous is a great and praiseworthy deed, but how far greater and more praiseworthy a deed it is to be righteous among the unrighteous. Noah lived among men who were filled with unrighteousness and evil; he lived among them for five hundred years and remained righteous before God: Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8). The Most-high Judge, who looks at all the works of mankind and evaluates them without prejudice and without error, valued the labors of Noah because, in the midst of a corrupt and perverse generation, he remained in the righteousness of God; and God rewarded him with His grace. Assuredly, Noah endured much misery and bitterness from his evil neighbors. Assuredly, he was unable to have a friend among them. The greatest satisfaction for a sinner is to drag a righteous man down into his own mire and to share his sin with him. But Noah did not allow himself to be dragged down or misled. Noah favored God's friendship over that of unrighteous men. **It was dearer to him to walk with God without men, than to walk with men without God.** Fear of God, the Creator and Judge, preserved him from the worldwide corruption; and he was not only righteous but also perfect in his generations. That is, he did not allow himself, even in the least, to be contaminated by the common evil, but rather he cleaved to God's righteousness. The allurements of sin and the ridicule of the sinners: everything merely served to separate him all the more from them. When the universal flood befell the human race, God did not abandon his faithful Noah to perish with the others. Instead, He saved him and glorified him, making him the progenitor of a new generation of men. Brethren, this shining example of Noah teaches that each one of us can please God even in the midst of sinners, if only we want to.

HOMILY ~ **On Joseph**

And Joseph left his garment in her hand, and fled outdoors (Genesis 39:12).

The innocent and chaste Joseph endured two great and difficult temptations and overcame them: the temptation of wicked envy on the part of his blood brothers, and the temptation of adulterous passion from the Egyptian temptress. Jealousy sold him as a slave, and the passion of adultery drove the innocent one to prison. In both cases he returned good for evil: he gave food to his hungry brothers and preserved the life, throne and people of frightened Pharaoh. His brothers thought to slay him, but God saved him; the adulterous woman thought to destroy him, but God saved him. Out of slavery and imprisonment, God crowned him with glory and unlimited authority. And him whom his evil brothers could have killed with one stroke and whom Potiphar's powerful wife could have crushed in an instant, God made the unlimited master over the lives of millions of people and the only nourisher of his starving brothers. Such is the wondrous mercy of God toward the righteous. Thus does the Lord know how to save and glorify the innocent and the chaste. In the greatness of the destiny of Joseph, we see the greatness of God's mercy. There is one eye that never sleeps, my brethren. Let us cling to God and not fear anyone. Let us be innocent and chaste and not fear evil, or slander, or prison, or ridicule, or misfortune. On the contrary, let us rejoice when all of this befalls us because of our innocence and chastity; let us rejoice and await with faith the revelation of God's wonders toward us. Let us, in every storm, await the thunder of God's justice-and afterward the calm.

HOMILY ~ On Moses

Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3).

A chosen man, a great wonderworker, a type of the Lord Jesus Christ in his miracles, a victor in Egypt, a victor in the wilderness, the leader of a people-how could he not be proud? But if he had become proud, Moses would not have been all that he was. They become proud who think that they do their own works and not God's in this world, and who think that they work by their own power and not by God's power. But the great Moses knew that he was the doer of God's works, and that the power with which He did them was God's power and not his. That is why he did not become proud because of the awesome miracles he performed, or the great victories he obtained, or the wise laws that he gave to the people. The Lord is my strength and my song (Exodus 15:2), said Moses. Of the entire assembly of the Israelites in the wilderness, no one felt his own particular weakness as much as he, the greatest one of that assembly. In every task, in every place and in every moment, he expected help only from God. "What shall I do?" he cried to God, and he ceaselessly listened for God's reply and sought God's power. "Meek above all men on earth." For all the others considered themselves as being something, trusted themselves as being something, but he-nothing. He was completely absorbed in God, completely humbled before God. If the people needed to be fed and given drink, he turned to God; if it was necessary to do battle with his enemies, he raised his hands to heaven; if it was necessary to calm an uprising among the people, he cried to God. The meek, the all-meek Moses! And God rewarded his faithful servant with great glory and made him worthy to appear on Mount Tabor with Elias alongside the Lord Savior.

HOMILY ~ On Joshua

Turn not from it to the right hand or to the left ... be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest (Joshua 1:7, 9).

Joshua the son of Nun obeyed the Lord in everything to the end, not turning either to the right or to the left of the Lord's commandments. He was surrounded by great horrors and fears while leading the people through an unknown land and through thick ranks of enemies, but he was neither afraid nor dismayed. He considered himself the weapon of God, and knew that his battles were God's battles. As a faithful soldier obeys the commands of his commander, so Joshua listened for and hearkened to the will of the Living God. He did not ascribe any good thing, any power, any merit to himself, but he ascribed all to God and only to God. He did not depend in the least on his own army, his own weapons and his own wisdom, but he depended on God and only on God, the Almighty and All-wise. See, brethren, with what sort of men God walks. Oh, if only Christian rulers and commanders could see this and learn from God's servant Joshua how to serve God! Oh, if they would understand, once and for all, that the people are best served when God is served; and that the people cannot be served if God is not served! The Lord God fulfilled His promise and was with Joshua the son of Nun to the end of his labors and life. And that the Lord was with him is shown by the great and awesome miracles that He manifested through His faithful servant. God divided the river Jordan so that the people crossed over on dry land without a bridge; God made the walls of Jericho fall at the sound of the trumpet; God delivered powerful enemies into the hands of the Israelites; God caused the sun to stand still over Gibeon and the moon to stand still over the valley of Ajalon. Truly, never and nowhere did God forsake His servant Joshua, for Joshua did not leave unfulfilled a single commandment of God. A witness of the Living God and a type of the Savior of the world, when he was old and stricken in years, he instructed his people as God had taught him in the beginning: Turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left ... but cleave unto the Lord your God (Joshua 23:6, 8).

On the Genealogy of Christ

+ Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of London

Every year before Christmas we read the genealogy of Christ from St. Matthew's Gospel, and for years I asked myself, why? Why have we got to read all these names that mean so little to us, if anything at all? And then I became more perceptive of what they convey to us.

For one thing, they are the people to whose family the Lord Jesus Christ belongs through His humanity. They are all relatives of His, and this should be enough for us to find their names deeply moving: Christ is of their blood, Christ is of their family. Each of them, thinking of the Mother of God can say, "She is a child of our family"; and of Christ, "He also is a child of our family, although He is our God, our Savior, the very Divine Presence in our midst." Furthermore, some names stand out: names of Saints, heroes of the Spirit, and names of sinners.

The Saints among them could well teach us what it means to believe; not simply to have an intellectual faith, a world outlook which coincides, as far as it is able, with a God's vision, but have faith which means a complete trust in God, an unlimited faithfulness to Him, the readiness, because of what we know of God, to give our lives for what He stands for, for what He is. In this context think of Abraham whose faith was tested to the utmost. How difficult we find it to give to God something of ours: but Abraham was asked to bring as a blood offering his own son — and he did not doubt God. And Isaac? He surrendered without resistance, in perfect obedience to his father, and through him — to God.

We can remember the struggle of Jacob with the angel in the darkness, as we at times struggle for our faith, for our integrity, for our faithfulness, in the darkness of night, or the darkness of doubt, in the darkness that seizes us at times on all sides.

But we can also learn something from those who in history, in the Bible, appear to us as sinners. They were frail, this frailty conquered them. They had no strength to resist the impulses of their bodies and of their souls, of the complex passions of men. And yet - and yet - they believed in God passionately. One of them was David, and one of his Psalms expresses it so well: "from the deep I cry unto Thee .." From the depths of despair, of shame, from the depths of his fall, from the depths of his alienation from God from the darkest depths of his soul he still cried to God. He does not hide from Him, he does not go away from Him, it is to Him he comes with this desperate cry of a desperate man. And others, men and women have this same concreteness as, for instance, Rahab the harlot -- and so many more.

Do we, when we are at the darkest point of life, when we are wrapped in all the darkness that is within us — do we, from within this darkness turn to God and say: It is to you, oh Lord I cry! Yes -- I am in darkness, but Thou art my God. Thou art the God Who created the light, and the darkness, and Thou art within the darkness as Thou art within the blinding light. You are in death as You are in life; You are in hell, as You are on the Throne; and from wherever I am I can cry to You.

And then, there is a last thing I would like you to think about. To us these people are names; of some of them we know a little from the Bible, about others we know nothing. But they all were concrete human beings, men and women like us, with all our frailty and all our hope, although wavering of the will and all the hesitations, all the incipient love that is so often martyred, and yet remains like and fire. They are concrete and real, and we can read their names with the feeling, that, Yes - I don't know you, but you are one of those who are of the family of Christ, concrete, real, who through all the vicissitudes of life - inner and outer - belong to God. And we ourselves can try and learn, in the concreteness of our lives, whether we are frail or strong at any given moment still to be God's own.



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS ^{OF} ATLANTA

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΑΤΛΑΝΤΑΣ

December 17, 2012

Reverend Clergy and the Faithful of the Holy and God-protected Metropolis of Atlanta

My dearly beloved,

"In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world"
[John 16:33]

It is with a troubled and sorrowful heart that I greet you today in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Like the rest of you, I was devastated to learn about the tragedy that took place in Connecticut at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and I know that we all extend our deepest and most heartfelt sympathy to the parents, families and friends of the adults and children who were killed.

In the face of such terrible events, we may feel confused and angry: why would anyone do such terrible thing? Yet we also know by our own experience or simply by reading the newspaper or watching television that such evil does indeed occur, reminding us that we live in a broken world, desperately in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with its eternal message of forgiveness and love.

In these times, we may find ourselves lost, afraid, alone and confused by the evil and destruction that claimed so many innocent lives. When we experience this darkness, pain and sorrow, we may feel as if God has abandoned us, yet those are the times when He is most near, loving us, supporting us and caring for us, surrounding us with the prayers of the saints and the holy angels, to strengthen us to go on.

In the midst of all the problems, difficulties and uncertainty of our broken and sinful world, the Feast of the Nativity carries God's message of comfort and joy: "God is with us!" No matter how profound the darkness surrounding us seems, there shines the light of our Lord, the Light of the World: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5) My beloved in Christ, when we light a candle and say our prayers for these innocent victims, we remind ourselves that the light of Jesus Christ overcomes the darkness of evil and death.

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School reminds us again how important it is to cherish and love one another. We must pray together that His light may shine more brightly in this present darkness, illuminating hearts and minds with His grace and love.

May the memories of the innocents who lost their lives on that terrible day be eternal!

Prayerfully yours with paternal love in Christ,

+Metropolitan Alexios

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta