

**Christ is Born!**



## **Fire & Light**

**St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 907-9447

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✠ **December 30, 2012** ✠

**Sunday after the Nativity**

**Postfeast of the Nativity**



**Holy and Righteous Ones: St. Joseph the Betrothed,**

**St. David the King, & St. James, the Brother of the Lord**

**Glorify Him!**

**Christ is Born! Glorify Him!**

⇒ Today ~ Children's Christmas Program

🔔 *And a Joyous New Year!* 🔔

Mon. Dec. 31 6:30pm Vespers for the Circumcision of Christ & a New Year's Moleben

Tues. Jan. 1 10:00am Divine Liturgy – Circumcision and St. Basil the Great

⇒ **Holy Theophany ~ Next Sunday**

✠ Fri. Jan. 4 6:30pm Royal Hours of Theophany

✠ Sat. Jan. 5 6:00pm Theophany Vespers, Compline & Great Blessing of Water

✠ Sun. January 6: Theophany Matins and Divine Liturgy & Great Blessing of Water

✠ Mon. January 7: 10:00am ~ Divine Liturgy ~ Old Calendar Nativity

### **Thought for the New Year**

✠ "There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hand and say, "Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer say, "Lord help!" God knows very well what we need and He shows us His mercy." ~ **St. Macarius the Great**

### **HOMILY~ On the Most-Holy Virgin Theotokos**

**His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it (John 2:5).**

Here is joy for all the faithful: she who is closest to Christ the Savior in Heaven, as she had been on earth, cares for the faithful, appears to them, helps them and advises them, "Whatsoever He, my Son and my God, saith unto you, do it." Thus, she advised the servants at the marriage in Cana, and the servants obeyed her and saw a miracle. From those few words of the Most-holy Virgin, God's Bride, recorded in the Gospel, we receive a precious instruction, truly the one and only Gospel instruction that she gave to mankind during her life on earth. Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it! As though she wanted to say: "He knows all; He can do all; He loves you all; therefore, you should look neither here nor there, but hear Him and obey Him." She comprehended the responsibility in this world of living for Him and directing others to Him as the Source of life, and she voluntarily continues carrying out this responsibility even from heaven. Throughout the Church's entire history, she has taught the faithful to do whatsoever He said. And even today, from her heavenly glory, she mystically descends among the faithful to counsel them to do that which He has commanded. That is her Gospel-the Gospel of the Most-holy Virgin, the Theotokos. It consists not of the Four Gospels but of four words: Do whatsoever He saith. O my brethren, let us obey her! Let us obey her as a mother and more than our mother, for she desires the greatest good for us-to reign in the Eternal Kingdom of her Son. O Most-holy Virgin, help us to fulfill His words!

- St. Nikolai of Serbia

## **REFLECTION – The Zeal of St. Nicholas**

There are three types of praiseworthy zeal: zeal in cleansing oneself of sinful desires and thoughts, zeal for the truth of the Faith, and zeal for God's justice among men. All three of these filled the soul of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker to perfection. He showed zeal in purifying himself throughout his life, vigilantly guarding over his heart. He especially showed zeal for the truth of the Faith at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea [325] when he entered into a fearful confrontation with Arius.

His zeal for God's justice among men was seen particularly in two notable events, when on each occasion he saved three innocent men from the punishment of death. Once, in his absence from the city of Myra, the avaricious commander Eustathius condemned three men to be beheaded, receiving a bribe for this from some of their enemies. Informed of this, St. Nicholas returned to Myra with the greatest haste. The condemned men had already been brought to the place of execution, and the executioner had already raised the sword over the innocent men. At that moment, Nicholas grabbed the sword, pulled it out of the executioner's hand, and freed the condemned men. Afterward, he rebuked the commander Eustathius and brought him to shame and repentance. In a similar way, three imperial commanders - Nepotian, Ursus and Herpylion- were slandered before Eulavius the Eparch of Constantinople and before the emperor himself. The emperor signed their death sentence. On the eve of their execution, the three commanders prayed to God, saying: "O God of Nicholas, deliver us innocent ones from death!" That night, St. Nicholas appeared to both the emperor and the eparch in a dream, rebuked them for this injustice, and ordered them to free the three commanders from prison immediately. The next day, the emperor and eparch each related to the other the same dream and they immediately freed the commanders, both from the death sentence and from prison. ~ St. Nikolai of Serbia

## **Why Orthodox Men Love Church**

**Many men may not love church, but Orthodox men do. ~ Frederica Matthews-Green**

I emailed a hundred Orthodox men, most of whom joined the Church as adults. What do they think makes this church particularly attractive to men? Their responses, below, may spark some ideas for leaders in other churches, who are looking for ways to keep guys in the church.

Challenges. The term most commonly cited by these men was "challenging." Orthodoxy is "active and not passive." "It's the only church where you are required to adapt to it, rather than it adapting to you." "The longer you are in it, the more you realize it demands of you."

The "sheer physicality of Orthodox worship" is part of the appeal. Regular days of fasting from meat and dairy, "standing for hours on end, performing prostrations, going without food and water [before communion]...When you get to the end you feel that you've faced down a challenge." "Orthodoxy appeals to a man's desire for self-mastery through discipline."

"In Orthodoxy, the theme of spiritual warfare is ubiquitous; saints, including female saints, are warriors. Warfare requires courage, fortitude, and heroism. We are called to be 'strugglers' against sin, to be 'athletes' as St. Paul says. And the prize is given to the victor. The fact that you must 'struggle' during worship by standing up throughout long services is itself a challenge men are willing to take up."

A recent convert summed up, "Orthodoxy is serious. It is difficult. It is demanding. It is about mercy, but it's also about overcoming oneself. I am challenged in a deep way, not to 'feel good about myself' but to become holy. It is rigorous, and in that rigor I find liberation. And you know, so does my wife."

# The Holy Fathers on the Nativity of Christ

*"For what greater thing is there than that God should become man?"*

Our Lord humbled without humiliation His lofty station which yet could not be humbled, and condescends to His servants, with a condescension ineffable and incomprehensible. God being perfect becomes perfect man, and brings to perfection the newest of all new things (cf. Eccles 1:10), the only new thing under the sun, through which the boundless might of God is manifested. For what greater thing is there than that God should become man?"

**St. John of Damascus (8<sup>th</sup> C)**

Vain in every respect are they who despise the entire dispensation of God, and disallow the salvation of the flesh, and treat with contempt its regeneration, maintaining that it is not capable of incorruption. But if this flesh indeed does not attain salvation, then neither did the Lord redeem us with His Blood, nor is the Cup of the Eucharist the Communion of His Blood, nor the Bread which we break the Communion of His Body (cf. I Cor. 10:16). For blood can only come from veins and flesh, and whatsoever else makes up the substance of man, such as the Word of God was actually made. By His own Blood He redeemed us... And as we are members of Him, we are also nourished by means of the creation... He has acknowledged the Cup (which is a part of creation) as His own Blood, from which He bedews our blood; and the Bread (also a part of creation) He has established as His own Body, from which He gives increase to our bodies."

**St. Irenaeus of Lyons (150 AD)**

The Virgin, the Birth, the Body, then the Cross, the death, the visit to the lower world; these things are our salvation. For the sake of mankind the Son of God was born of the Virgin and of the Holy Spirit. In this process He ministered to Himself; by His own power - the power of God - which overshadowed her He sowed the beginning of His body, and entered on the first stage of His life in the flesh. He did it that by His incarnation He might take to Himself from the Virgin the fleshly nature, and that through this commingling there might come into being a hallowed Body of all humanity; that so through that Body which He was pleased to assume all mankind might be hid in Him, and He in return, through His unseen existence, be reproduced in all.

**St. Hilary of Poitiers (368)**

Such splendor of heavenly glory was revealed to the simple shepherds of Bethlehem! Up until then, such glory could only be seen by chosen individuals, and this is the first instance that we find in Holy Scriptures of a whole group of mortal men clearly seeing and hearing the immortal, angelic host. This is a sign that, with Christ's coming on earth, heaven is wide open to all who seek it in purity of heart.

**St. Nikolai Velimirovich (1880-1956)**

The goodness of the Deity has endless love for humanity and never ceases from benignly pouring out on us His providential gifts (cf. Tit. 3:4). He took upon Himself in a most authentic way all the characteristics of our nature, except sin. He became one with us in our lowliness, losing nothing of His own real condition, suffering no change or loss. He allowed us, as those of equal birth, to enter into communion with Him and to acquire a share of His own true beauty.

Thus, as our hidden tradition teaches, He made it possible for us to escape from the domain of the rebellious, and He did this not through overwhelming force, but, as Scripture mysteriously tells us, by an act of judgment and also in all righteousness (Isa. 42:1-4). Beneficently He wrought a complete change in our nature. He filled our shadowed and unshaped minds with a kindly, divine light and adorned them with a loveliness suitable to their divinized state. He saved our nature from almost complete wreckage and delivered the dwelling place of our soul from the most accursed passion and from destructive defilement. Finally, He showed us an extraordinary uplifting and an inspired way of life in shaping ourselves to Him as fully as lay in our power.

**St. Dionysius the Areopagite (3<sup>rd</sup> C)**

MAKE ROOM FOR THE CHRIST CHILD  
(A Nativity Sermon by Fr. George Matey)

*[Fr. George Matey is presbyter of the St. Sava Orthodox Church in Pittsburgh  
Serbian Orthodox]*

At the time when Emperor Augustus issued an edict for all the citizens of the Roman Empire to register themselves for census, Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem of Judea, where King David was born, because they were descendants of David. The journey along this bleak road was painfully long and tiresome, especially for Mary who was about to become a mother. As the night was fast approaching and their search for a place in an inn appeared futile, the worn-out couple continued to tramp along the streets of Bethlehem desperately knocking on door after door. At that dark hour, the question loomed ominously: where could they find adequate privacy for the coming Son of God, since everywhere they heard the same refrain: "No room in the inn."

Why was there "no room in the inn" for the Divine Infant? Bethlehem, at that time, was a very small village. It became overcrowded with visitors who came to register and claimed the same exalted ancestry as Joseph did. So the Bethlehem inn became filled to capacity and, in the estimate of the innkeeper, Joseph and Mary, and still less the unborn Child, were in no need of special consideration, since they were individuals of no apparent importance. But if a politically or socially prominent person had appeared at the inn that night, room would have been made for him, somewhere.

Should we censure that Bethlehem innkeeper for refusing shelter to the unborn Christ Child? Before we become too critical of him for his indifference, let us ask ourselves whether we are always open and hospitable in providing room to the Heavenly Guest. Isn't the inn of our heart just as crowded as was the Bethlehem inn? How often do we say to the Babe of Bethlehem, "No room," and, at the same moment, have room for our favorite guests, priorities and preferences? Our life is never so crowded that we have no room or time to do what we want to do!

Why is there "no room" in the inn of our daily lives for Christ? The difficulty with us, is the same as with the people at the time of His birth: namely, He means so little to as many of us today. This is really why there is "no room" for the "Prince of Peace" in our hearts. We are too preoccupied with our daily routine and selfish ambitions, that we fail to see Him. Our minds are filled with boundless thoughts. Our hearts throb with personal wants, loves and desires. Our imaginations revel in ideals, dreams, visions and fancies, with our lives filled with humour and merry-making. Moreover, our sinful habits so deaden our senses that our sensational life mars our spiritual, godly life. And our foolish pleasures, gratifications and light-heartedness keep the Christ Child out of our lives.

How can we find, for this newborn Divine Infant, "room in the inn" in our daily lives? We must be aware that He will come, not in power or popularity not in pomp and pageantry, not in royal purple and fine linens, but in profound humility, simplicity and human weakness as a helpless Infant. We must reevaluate our daily lives and make room for the practice of our Holy Orthodox Faith and Christian virtues; for our regular attendance at the Divine Liturgy, for the worthy reception of the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion and for all those things that have eternal value. And when we open the door and humbly invite Him into our spiritually renewed lives, what a day of rapturous joy that will be for us.

## More of a Series of Commentaries on the Great Old Testament Saints

~ From St. Nikolai of Serbia in his *Prologue of Ochrid*.

### HOMILY ~ On Samuel

**For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord (I Samuel 1:27-28).**

Besought of God and dedicated to God, Samuel was a prophet and leader of the people of Israel. The blessed Hannah, his childless mother, besought him from God with tears and sacrifices. And she gave him, her one and only greatest blessing, to the service of the Lord from his infancy.

**A wise mother does not consider her children as her own, but rather as God's.** They are God's both when God gives them and when He takes them, but they are mostly God's when a mother herself dedicates them to Him. God's gift is returned to Him as a reciprocal gift, for we have nothing of our own to give to Him but only that which we receive from Him. The young Samuel lived in the Temple among the iniquitous sons of Eli the high priest, and he did not become corrupt. The Lord would not reveal Himself to the sinful elders, but He appeared to this pure child: for Samuel did the will of God, and did let none of his words fall to the ground (I Samuel 3:19).

Samuel was a judge of the people of Israel from his youth to old age and committed nothing wrong either before God or before the people. God gave him the power to prophesy and work miracles. He defeated all of God's enemies and the enemies of the people, and he anointed two kings, Saul and David. When he grew old, he called the people together and asked them if he had ever committed any violence against anyone or accepted a bribe from anyone. And the people replied with one voice: Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man's hand (I Samuel 12:4). Behold, such a man was he, who was given by God and given to God as a reciprocal gift, and who grew up with the blessing of God and the blessing of his mother. Let mothers benefit from the example of the blessed Hannah; let judges and rulers of the people benefit from the example of the righteous Samuel.

### HOMILY - On Ruth

**Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God ... naught but death shall part thee and me (Ruth 1:16,17).**

These are wonderful words, whether they are spoken by a son to a father, a daughter to a mother, or a wife to a husband. But they are three times more wonderful when a daughter-in-law says them to her mother-in-law. Blessed Ruth spoke these words to Naomi, her sorrowful mother-in-law. When both of Naomi's sons died in the land of Moab, where they lived as immigrants, the aged mother wanted to return to Bethlehem, her native land, and there to lay her bones to rest. And Naomi, noble in her grief, counseled her young daughters-in-law to remain in their own land and to remarry. Orpah remained, but Ruth said: Naught but death shall part thee and me. Behold a most beautiful example of how a mother-in-law can tenderly love her daughters-in-law, and again how a daughter-in-law can be wholeheartedly devoted to her mother-in-law. But in Bethlehem someone had to feed these two souls. Who would feed them? God and the diligent hands of Ruth.

Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn (Ruth 2:2), said the daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law. And Naomi replied: Go, my daughter (Ruth 2:3). In a strange field, with strange reapers, she had to glean the ears of grain. That was not only toil but also shame. However, Ruth took upon herself both toil and shame out of love for her aged mother-in-law.

The All-seeing God saw these two sweet souls and rejoiced. Their Creator rejoiced and rewarded and glorified them, as only He knows how to reward and glorify those who fear Him. And God, in His providence, provided that Ruth should enter the field of the wealthy Boaz to gather the gleaned ears of grain, and Boaz saw Ruth and asked Naomi for her hand in marriage. Of this marriage was born Obed, the father of Jesse and grandfather of David the King. So it was that Ruth had humbled herself to being a beggar but God made her the ancestress of the great king (David), from whom came many kings and finally the King of kings, our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **HOMILY ~ On David**

**And David said to Nathan: I have sinned against the Lord (II Samuel 12:13).**

**My tears have been my food day and night (Psalm 42:3).**

King David sinned against God and repented, and God forgave him. The king's sin was great, but greater still was his repentance. He was guilty before God of two grave sins: adultery and murder. But when Nathan the Prophet of God denounced him, he cried out in anguish: I have sinned against the Lord! Thus he confessed his sin and repented bitterly, most bitterly. Grief-stricken, he prayed to God, weeping, fasting, lying on the ground, and enduring meekly the terrible blows that God sent upon him, his house and his people because of his sins. In his penitential Psalms he says: I am a worm and not a man (Psalm 22:6); Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones cling to my flesh (Psalm 102:5); I lie awake ... for I have eaten ashes like bread and mingled my drink with weeping (Psalm 102:7, 9); My knees are grown weak through fasting (Psalm 109:24).

Here is true repentance; here is a true penitent! He did not become hardened in sin nor did he fall into despair, but, hoping in the mercy of God, he repented unceasingly. And God, Who loves the penitent, showed mercy upon this model of penitence. God forgave him and glorified him above all the kings of Israel; He gave him the great grace to compose the most beautiful penitential prayers and to prophesy the coming into the world of the Holy Savior, Who would be of his seed.

Brethren, do you see how wonderful is God's mercy toward penitents? So much mercy did God have on this repentant David that He was not ashamed to take upon Himself flesh from David's seed. **Blessed are they who do not become hardened in sin and who do not fall into despair because of sin.** Repentance saves both the one and the other from evil.

O Merciful Lord, soften our hearts with tears of repentance! To Thee be glory and praise forever! Amen.

## **HOMILY ~ On Elias the Prophet**

**As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years but according to my word (I Kings 17:1).**

These words are terrible sounding to every mortal ear, for a man spoke them, a man subject to like passions as we are (James 5:17). You ask yourselves, brethren, how can a mortal man shut up the heavens and stop the rain? But ask yourselves: how can a mortal man open the heavens and bring down rain upon the parched ground? We know that even now God opens the heavens and gives rain at the prayers of men: And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive (Matthew 21:22), says our Savior.

As Moses, by living faith and prayer, worked awesome miracles in Egypt and in the wilderness, as Joshua the son of Nun held back the course of the sun, so also God's Prophet Elias shut and opened the heavens, brought down fire from heaven, and worked other mighty and awesome miracles all through faith and prayer. God gave Elias the power to work such miracles, for Elias was zealous for the glory of God and not for his own glory: I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts (I Kings 19:14). This man of God sought nothing for himself but sought everything for God. God was everything to him: all glory, all strength, all good. Therefore, God crowned him with immortal glory, awesome might, and treasure which does not decay and which moths do not corrupt. God did not permit Elias to die but took him to Heaven as he did Enoch. St. Elias had a soul as pure as the morning dew, a body as chaste as a child's, and a heart and mind as blameless as that of an angel of God. Therefore, he was and remains a vessel of God's power. He worked wonders then and works them today.

O Living Lord, the God of Thy Prophet Elias, Who hast adopted us through Baptism by Thy holy Grace: enkindle also in us the faith and zeal of Thy holy Prophet!

# Christmas in an Anti-Christian Age

By Patrick J. Buchanan, December 26, 2012

For two millennia, the birth of Christ has been seen as the greatest event in world history. The moment Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, God became man, and eternal salvation became possible.

This date has been the separation point of mankind's time on earth, with B.C. designating the era before Christ, and A.D., *anno domini*, in the Year of the Lord, the years after. And how stands Christianity today?

"Christianity is in danger of being wiped out in its biblical heartlands," says the British think tank Civitas.

In Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria, Christians face persecution and pogroms. In Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, conversion is a capital offense. In a century, two-thirds of all the Christians have vanished from the Islamic world.

In China, Christianity is seen as a subversive ideology of the West to undermine the regime.

In Europe, a century ago, British and German soldiers came out of the trenches to meet in no-man's land to sing Christmas carols and exchange gifts. It did not happen in 1915, or ever again.

In the century since, all the Western empires have vanished. All of their armies and navies have melted away. All have lost their Christian faith. All have seen their birthrates plummet. All their nations are aging, shrinking and dying, and all are witnessing invasions from formerly subject peoples and lands.

In America, too, the decline of Christianity proceeds.

While conservatives believe that culture determines politics, liberals understand politics can change culture.

The systematic purging of Christian teachings and symbols from our public schools and public square has produced a growing population -- 20 percent of the nation, 30 percent of the young -- who answer "none" when asked about their religious beliefs and affiliations.

In the lead essay in the Book Review of Sunday's New York Times, Paul Elie writes of our "post-Christian" fiction, where writers with "Christian convictions" like Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor are a lost tribe.

"Where has the novel of belief gone?" he asks.

Americans understand why Mao's atheist heirs who have lost their Marxist-Leninist faith and militants Islamists fear and detest the rival belief system of Christianity. But do they understand the animus that lies behind the assault on their faith here at home?

In a recent issue of New Oxford Review, Andrew Seddon ("The New Atheism: All the Rage") describes a "Reason Rally" in Washington, D.C., a "coming out" event sponsored by atheist groups. Among the speakers was Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins, author of "The God Delusion," who claims that "faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument."

Christians have been infected by a "God virus," says Dawkins. They are no longer rational beings. Atheists should treat them with derisory contempt. "Mock Them!" Dawkins shouted. "Ridicule them! In public!"

In "The End of Faith," atheist Sam Harris wrote that "some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people."

"Since the New Atheists believe that religion is evil," notes Seddon, "that it 'poisons everything,' in (Christopher) Hitchens' words -

- it doesn't take much effort to see that Harris is referring to religions and the people who follow them."

Now since atheists are still badly outnumbered in America and less well-armed than the God-and-Country boys, and atheists believe this is the only life they have, atheist suggestions to "kill people" of Christian belief is probably a threat Christians need not take too seriously.

With reference to Dawkins' view that the Christian faith "requires no justification and brooks no argument," Seddon makes a salient point.

While undeniable that Christianity entails a belief in the supernatural, the miraculous -- God became man that first Christmas, Christ raised people from the dead, rose himself on the first Easter Sunday and ascended into heaven 40 days later -- consider what atheists believe.

They believe that something came out of nothing, that reason came from irrationality, that a complex universe and natural order came out of randomness and chaos, that consciousness came from non-consciousness and that life emerged from non-life.

This is a bridge too far for the Christian for whom faith and reason tell him that for all of this to have been created from nothing is absurd; it presupposes a Creator.

Atheists believe, Seddon writes, that "a multiverse (for which there is no experimental or observational evidence) containing an inconceivably large number of universes spontaneously created itself."

Yet, Hitchens insists, "our belief is not a belief."

Nonsense. Atheism requires a belief in the unbelievable.

Christians believe Christ could raise people from the dead because he is God. That is faith. Atheists believe life came out of non-life. That, too, is faith. They believe in what their god, science, cannot demonstrate, replicate or prove. They believe in miracles but cannot identify, produce or describe the miracle worker.

At Christmas, pray for Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins and the other lost souls at that Reason Rally.

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## Grace...Still Shines in Our Hearts

In spite of our sinfulness, in spite of the darkness surrounding our souls, the Grace of the Holy Spirit, conferred by Baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, still shines in our hearts with the inextinguishable light of Christ ... and when the sinner turns to the way of repentance the light smooths away every trace of the sins committed, clothing the former sinner in the garments of incorruption, spun of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. It is this acquisition of the Holy Spirit about which I have been speaking. ~ **St. Seraphim of Sarov (Jan. 2)**

**"God is a fire** that warms and kindles the heart and inward parts. And so, if we feel in our hearts coldness, which is from the devil, - for the devil is cold - then let us call upon the Lord, and He will come and warm our hearts with perfect love not only for Him, but for our neighbor as well. And from the presence of warmth the coldness of the hater of good will be driven away."

**St. Seraphim of Sarov**

## The Body its Servant

✠ When the mind inclines towards God, it makes the body its servant and gives to it only what is needful for life. But when it inclines towards the flesh, it then becomes a slave of its passions.

**St. Maximus the Confessor (7<sup>th</sup> C)**