



St John of Kronstadt.

## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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

✠ **December 14, 2014** ✠

### **Holy Forefathers of Christ**

St. Daniel the Hesychast of Voronets, Romania (17<sup>th</sup> C)

### **Advent: The Nativity Fast**



✠ **Wed. Dec. 17 6:30pm Akathist to the Theotokos**



### ✠ **Nativity Service Schedule 2014** ✠

✠ **Christmas Eve, Wednesday, December 24:**

✠ **10:00am Nativity Royal Hours**

✠ **Christmas Eve Supper 3:00pm Church Hall**

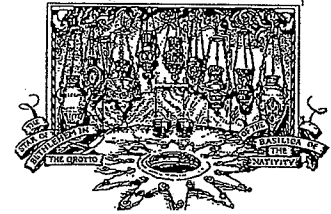
✠ **Nativity Eve Vigil – 6:30pm Compline & Matins**

✠ **Christmas Day, Thursday, December 25:**

✠ **Nativity Divine Liturgy ~ 10:00am** ✠

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

⇒ **Fast-Free Twelve Days of Christmas! – December 25 thru January 4**



### **The Word became Flesh - *by St. John of Kronstadt***

"The Word became flesh; that is, the Son of God, co-eternal with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit, became human --- having become incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. O wondrous, awesome and salvific mystery! The One Who had no beginning took on a beginning according to humanity; the One without flesh assumed flesh. God became man without ceasing to be God. The Unapproachable One became approachable to all, in the aspect of a humble servant."

"Why, and for what reason, was there such condescension shown on the part of the Creator toward His transgressing creatures – toward humanity which, through an act of its own will had fallen away from God, its Creator? It was by reason of a supreme, inexpressible mercy toward His creation on the part of the Master, Who could not bear to see the entire race of mankind – which He, in creating, had endowed with wondrous gifts – enslaved by the devil and thus destined for eternal suffering and torment."

## What Do You Want for Christmas?

When one is asked this familiar question, many Americans might answer that they do not need anything, and then go on just the same to offer a suggestion. Children's eyes usually light up when asked this question - they will with no hesitation pull out toy catalogs and give you a long list of their wants.

"What do you want for Christmas?" Santa Clauses in department stores ask this question. Family members and friends ask this question. But is this the kind of question that God would ask? Why would the Creator of the whole universe ask us what we want, when He knows rather what we really need. He already provides innumerable blessings, too many to count. He gave us the earth, sun, moon, and stars, as well as trees, flowers, seas, mountains, animals and life itself. "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all" (Ps. 104:24).

Yes, He knows above all what we really need - He offers us the "unspeakable gift" of His Only-begotten Son (2 Cor. 9:15). Through His Son's life and longsuffering. His Crucifixion and Resurrection, He offers us His Kingdom. He offers us life itself, rebirth through Baptism, forgiveness of sins, the Eucharist, His own Holy Spirit, great mercy, compassion and love at every single moment. What more could anyone want for Christmas?

Perhaps the question should not be, "What do you want for Christmas?" but instead: What does God want from us at Christmas, as well as at each and every moment? Could it be He wants our love and our sufferings; our prayers and our passions; our sins and our repentance; our faith and our trust; our thanksgiving and our love of neighbor? What indeed does God want from us? All of our being, all of these things; that is, our humility, our pure heart, and an earnest desire to draw closer to Him, starting at this moment-whether Christmas is truly here yet or not!

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

{From *Life Transfigured*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Ellwood City, PA}

## The Word became Flesh (Part 2) - *by St. John of Kronstadt*

**"And the Word became flesh!...**in order to make us earthly beings into heavenly ones, in order to make sinners into saints; in order to raise us up from corruption into incorruption, from earth to heaven; from enslavement to sin and the devil into the glorious freedom of children of God; from death into immortality, in order to make us sons of God and to seat us together with Him upon the Throne as His royal children. O boundless compassion of God! O inexpressible wisdom of God! O great wonder, astounding not only the human mind, but the angelic [mind] as well!"

"What, then, O, brethren, is required of us in order that we might avail ourselves of all the grace brought unto us from on high by the coming to earth of the Son of God? What is necessary, first of all, is faith in the Son of God, in the Gospel as the salvation-bestowing heavenly teaching; a true repentance of sins and the correction of life and of heart; communion in prayer and in the Mysteries [Sacraments]; the knowledge and fulfillment of Christ's commandments."

## **Nativity Message 2006 + Archbishop Dmitri**

*(Published in The Dawn, Winter 2006)*

**“But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law to redeem them that were under the Law that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Galatians 4:4-5).**

In this brief passage taken from the Christmas Epistle, by directing our attention to the Incarnation, the Apostle Paul sums up the joy of the Nativity Season, the joy of our Faith. “God is with us,” we triumphantly sing during the Christmas Eve Vigil; we rejoice that in the Person of Jesus Christ, God became Man to enlighten, sanctify and reconcile us to Himself, to bestow on us dignity befitting His children. “But as many as received Him (Christ), to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name” (John 1:12). In Christ, as children of God our joy is complete, inexpressible and full of glory (John 16:24; 1 Peter 1:8). As with the “peace from above” for which we pray repeatedly during each divine service, Christian joy “passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7); it is impossible to comprehend except through experience, as it proceeds from an intimate relationship with God. Our joy in the Lord — the joy of Christmas — is mixed with great hope even in the midst of adversity for ‘God being with us’ empowers one to place everything into perspective, to understand profoundly every facet of human existence — triumphs and tragedies — as given meaning and possibilities through the Incarnate Lord. Christ, after foretelling His death and that which was to befall the disciples, told them, “. . . in the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16: 33). People know about tribulation; they know, as well, superficial happiness which is fleeting and unfulfilling. What they ultimately need and desire most is that which we experience profoundly at this time of year: authentic Christian joy which, early on, enabled the Church to be victorious in the world (\*Fr Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*), and which has been the basis of Her mission ever since.

It is my personal prayer that our lives will be characterized continually by this most precious fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever the present circumstances of our lives may we now relate to them in light of the joy of the Kingdom revealed through God’s Son. This blessed season is one of rejoicing, forgiveness and love. God becoming Man demands an incarnate response from His followers. Faith in Christ must lead to a complete change of will and of attitude toward life itself in light of the Savior’s appearance, to a life so transparent to His presence that it could be said, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, sums up the kind of Godly existence — incarnate response — that is possible for His disciples in this world. St. Basil the Great, emulating his Lord, accomplishes something similar in the form of a prayer: “. . . rear the infants; train the young; support the aged; encourage the fainthearted; gather together the scattered and lead back those who wander astray, and join them to Thy Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Free those who are vexed by unclean spirits; travel with those that journey by land, by sea, and by air; protect the widows; defend the orphans; deliver the captives; heal the sick. And those that are under trial, in the mines, in exile, in bitter bondage, in every tribulation, necessity, and danger, do Thou remember, O God...”

These words will be chanted numerous times during Nativity and Theophany. As we recite them now and in the months ahead during Lent, let us remember that the faithful constitute Christ’s Body in this world; we are His mouthpiece, arms and legs to a society longing to see evidence of a Savior. That for which we pray we have a responsibility to accomplish: “. . . training, supporting, encouraging, reuniting, leading, protecting, defending, delivering, healing, and remembering...” By (these things)

shall all men know that ye are my disciples..." (John 13:35).

My recent visits to parishes in the Diocese have been a comfort to me as I see such efforts being made by its members. There is much yet to achieve in terms of evangelism, education and charity, and certainly our ongoing endeavors in these areas are in constant need of improvement. The "success" of our mission, however, is being felt by our struggles to remain faithful to that vision of God and man revealed in and through Christ. I am constantly amazed by the challenges to that vision, put forth by both Christians and non-Christians. In the name of Christian love diverse lifestyles are now described as acceptable and in some cases are "blessed" by various churches; quasi-evangelists can be found whose message varies little from that of professional motivational speakers; salvation is often preached in legalistic terms, rather than as a natural result of a living relationship with God through the Incarnate Lord; Christ's divinity is denied not only by members of other religions but is seriously questioned by numerous Christians; and the meaning, the far reaching effect, of this most radiant season is trivialized by believers themselves — lost — not merely by the excessive emphasis on gifts and overindulgent celebrations, but through a false dichotomy present in the minds of many between the Feast of the Nativity and the family.

"Christmas is for families," "Christmas is for children," we hear repeatedly. The evidence of such widespread, limited sentiment was revealed powerfully in 2005 when many non-Orthodox Churches were closed on Sunday, December 25, because it was accepted and taken for granted that most members would stay at home to be with their loved ones.

It seems that, religiously speaking, confusion reigns in the minds and hearts of millions of people, even amongst Christ's followers. Yet, with the simple declaration, "God is with us," we proclaim the end to such bewilderment and ignorance, and the joy of knowing the truth which sets us free. With the Birth of Christ we affirm the coming of a Savior sent to unite rather than divide; to forgive rather than judge; to enlighten, not confound; to heal and bind, not destroy.

Brothers and sisters in Christ let us thank God for the gift of His Son. Through our actions and words may we be found worthy of His love. Let us look deeply into our hearts, taking stock of the only appropriate response to such a gift, a life dedicated to emulating our Lord. The blessings of this Nativity Season be upon all of you.

*Christ is Born! Glorify Him!*

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### ***All the Characteristics of our Nature***

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)

## The Death of St. Herman of Alaska (December 13, 1837)

A year prior to the news that was received in Kodiak about the death of a Metropolitan (it is not known which one), Father Herman said to the Aleuts that their big spiritual leader had died. The Elder often used to say that in America they will have their own bishop, and that there will never be a time when America will be deprived of a bishop, as reported by Bishop Peter. His prophecy came true in time.

"After my death," Father Herman used to say, "there will be a plague and many people will die from it, and the Russians will join with the Aleuts." And truly, evidently half a year after his death there occurred in America the smallpox epidemic, the fatality of which was atrocious: in several villages only a few people remained alive. This compelled the colonial authorities to unite the Aleuts: thus from twenty villages there remained only seven.

"Although much time will pass after my death," Father Herman used to say to his disciples, "My memory will not be forgotten and the place of my dwelling will not be empty: a monk similar to me, fleeing the glory of men, will come and will live on Spruce Island. And Spruce Island will not be without people." (A monastic, Father Gerasim Schmaltz, came and lived in St. Herman's hut for many years in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.)

"My little one," Father Herman once asked Creole Constantine, when he was no more than twelve years old, "What do you think? Will the chapel which they are now building be abandoned?" "I do not know Apa," answered the little one. "And really," said Constantine, "I did not understand the question then, although this whole conversation remains lively in my memory." The Elder, being silent for a while said: "My child, remember that on this place there will be a monastery in time." (There is a monastery there today.)

"Thirty years will pass after my death, all those who live now on Spruce Island will be dead, you alone will remain alive, and you will be old and poor, and then they will remember me," Father Herman used to say to his disciple, Aleut Ignatius Miaga "It is remarkable," explains Ignatius, "how a man similar to us could know all the way ahead of time! However, he was not a simple man! He saw our thoughts and would involuntarily make us open them up to him and receive instructions."

"When I die," the Elder would tell his disciples, "you bury me next to Father Ioasaph. Kill my bullock at once: he served me enough. You bury me by yourselves and do not tell of my death in the harbor. The inhabitants of the port (Kodiak) will not see my face. Do not send for a priest and do not wait for him: your waiting will be in vain! Do not wash my body, place it on the board, fold the arms on the chest, bind me in my mantle and with its edges cover my face and my head with my klobuk(monastic hat with veil). If someone would wish to say good bye to me, let him kiss the cross (in my hands); do not show anyone my face. After lowering me into the earth cover me with my blanket." This blanket, as we have mentioned, was the board that was always in his cell.

The time was approaching for the departure of the Elder. One day he called his disciple Gerasim to his cell to light candles before the Icons and to read the Acts of the Apostles. After some time his face shone and he loudly pronounced: "Glory to Thee O Lord!" Then, ordering to stop the reading he said that it was pleasing to the Lord to prolong his life one week more. After a week, again according to his order, the candles were lit and the Acts of the Apostles were read. The Elder quietly leaned his head on the chest of Gerasim, the cell was filled with fragrance, his face was shining — and Father Herman passed on. Thus he reposed with the sleep of the righteous in the 81st year of his much-suffering life, December 13, 1837.

In spite of the will of Father Herman expressed before his demise, his disciples did not decide to bury him without letting anyone in the harbor know about his death. They were afraid of the Russians, the Aleuts said; and also for some unknown reason they did not kill the bullock.

An envoy was sent with the sad news to the harbor. Upon his return the envoy informed them that the manager of colonies Kashevarov (Mrs. Alexandra Hester's family name – she is a former member of St. Symeon's from Kodiak, Alaska) forbade them to bury the Elder until his arrival, that he had ordered a good coffin to be made for the deceased and that he himself would bring it without delay. However, such instructions were contrary to the will of the deceased. And so a frightful wind blew, rain began to pour, and there developed a terrible storm. The travelling distance from the harbor to Spruce Island was not a long one, only two hours, but no one would venture to go into the sea in such weather. It continued in such a way for a whole month; the body of Father Herman lay in the warm house of his disciples. There was no change in his face and not the minutest smell from his body. Finally with an experienced old man, Cosmas Uchilisshev, the coffin was delivered. No one from the harbor came, and the inhabitants of Spruce Island placed the earthly remains of the Elder into the earth themselves. So was fulfilled the last wish of Father Herman — and the wind calmed down and the surface of the sea was as smooth as a mirror.

The day after the death of Father Herman, his bull began to miss him and from this despair hit a tree with his forehead and fell onto the ground dead.

On an evening in the village of Katari (on Afognak Island) an unusual pillar of light was seen over Spruce Island that reached to heaven. Stunned by this miraculous phenomenon the experienced senior citizens, Creole Gerasim Vologdin and his wife Anna said to themselves "It looks like Father Herman has left us!" and began to pray. Subsequently they were informed that precisely at that time the Elder had passed away. This pillar of light was seen in other places by other people as well. That very evening, in another village on Afognak Island people saw a man who was lifted up from Spruce Island towards the clouds.

Having buried their father his disciples erected a wooden memorial over his grave. "I saw it myself," said Kodiak priest Peter Kashevarov, "and now I can say that it is by no means touched by time and looks as if it were nailed together today."

Seeing the glorious life of podvig of Father Herman, seeing his miracles, seeing the fulfillment of his prophecies and finally his blessed falling asleep, "generally all the local inhabitants have an awesome respect for him as a holy ascetic, and are entirely convinced of his having pleased God," witnessed Bishop Peter.

In 1842, five years after the repose of the Elder, while traveling by sea to Kodiak and finding himself in extreme danger, His Eminence (St.) Innocent, Archbishop of Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands, looked at Spruce Island and said in his mind "If you, O Father Herman, have pleased the Lord, then let the wind change!" And indeed, even a quarter of an hour did not pass, says the Bishop, when the wind became favorable to them and they successfully landed at the shore. Out of gratitude for his deliverance, Archbishop Innocent served a pannikhida at the grave of the blessed one.

*Valaam (written at the request of Abbot Damascene)*

A reminder from Church History for the Nativity Season:

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## **THE NESTORIAN HERESY AND THE THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

From *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God* (an excerpt)

By St. John the Wonderworker of Shanghai and San Francisco

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WHEN ALL THOSE who had dared to speak against the sanctity and purity of the Most Holy Virgin Mary had been reduced to silence, an attempt was made to destroy Her veneration as *Mother of God*. In the 5th century, the Archbishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, began to preach that of Mary had been born only the man Jesus, in Whom the Divinity had taken abode and dwelt in Him as in a temple. At first he allowed his presbyter Anastasios and then he himself began to teach openly in church that one should not call Mary Theotokos, since She had not given birth to the God-man. He considered it demeaning for himself to worship a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Such sermons evoked a universal disturbance and unease over the purity of faith, at first in Constantinople and then everywhere else where rumors of the new teaching spread.

St. Proclus, the disciple of St. John Chrysostom, who was then Bishop of Cyzicus and later became Archbishop of Constantinople, gave in church a sermon, in the presence of Nestorius, in which he confessed the Son of God born in the flesh of the Virgin, Who in truth is the Theotokos (Birth-giver of God), for already in the womb of the Most Pure One, at the time of Her conception, the Divinity was united with the Child conceived of the Holy Spirit; and this Child, even though He was born of the Virgin Mary only in His human nature, still was born already true God and true man.

Nestorius stubbornly refused to change his teaching, saying that one must distinguish between Jesus and the Son of God, that Mary should not be called Theotokos, but *Christotokos* (Birth-giver of *Christ*), since the Jesus Who was born of Mary was only the man Christ (which signifies Messiah, anointed one), like to God's anointed ones of old, the Prophets, only surpassing them in fullness of communion with God. The teaching of Nestorius thus constituted a denial of the whole economy of God, for if from Mary only a man was born, then it was not God Who suffered for us, but a man.

St. Cyril, Archbishop of Alexandria, finding out about the teaching of Nestorius and about the Church disorders evoked by this teaching in Constantinople, wrote a letter to Nestorius, in which he tried to persuade him to hold the teaching which the Church had confessed from its foundation, and not to introduce anything novel into this teaching. In addition, St. Cyril wrote to the clergy and people of Constantinople that they should be firm in the Orthodox faith and not fear the persecutions by Nestorius against those who were not in agreement with him. St. Cyril also wrote informing of everything to Rome, to the holy Pope Celestine, who with all his flock was then firm in Orthodoxy.

St. Celestine for his part wrote to Nestorius and called upon him to preach the Orthodox faith, and not his own. But Nestorius remained deaf to all persuasion and replied that what he was preaching was the Orthodox faith, while his opponents were heretics. St. Cyril wrote Nestorius again and composed twelve anathemas, that set forth in twelve paragraphs the chief differences of the Orthodox teachings from the teachings preached by Nestorius, acknowledging as excommunicated from the Church everyone who should reject even a single one of the paragraphs he had composed.

Nestorius rejected the whole of the text composed by St. Cyril and wrote his own exposition of the teaching Which he preached, likewise in twelve paragraphs, giving over to anathema (that is, excommunication from the Church) everyone who did not accept it. The danger to purity of faith was increasing all the time. St. Cyril wrote a letter to Theodosius the Younger, who was then reigning, to his wife Eudoxia and to the Emperor's sister Pulcheria, entreating them likewise to concern themselves with ecclesiastical matters and restrain the heresy.

It was decided to convene an Ecumenical Council, at which hierarchs gathered from the ends of the world should decide whether the faith preached by Nestorius were Orthodox. As the place for the

Council, which was to be the Third Ecumenical Council, they chose the city of Ephesus, in which the Most Holy Virgin Mary had once dwelt together with the Apostle John the Theologian. St. Cyril gathered his fellow bishops in Egypt and together with them traveled by sea to Ephesus. From Antioch overland came John, Archbishop of Antioch, with the Eastern bishops. The Bishop of Rome, St. Celestine, could not go himself and asked St. Cyril to defend the Orthodox faith, and in addition he sent from himself two bishops and the presbyter of the Roman Church, Philip, to whom he also gave instructions as to what to say. To Ephesus there came likewise Nestorius and the bishops of the Constantinople region, and the bishops of Palestine, Asia Minor, and Cyprus.

On the 10th of the calends of July, according to the Roman reckoning, that is, June 22, 431, in the Ephesian Church of the Virgin Mary (Our own Deacon Ephraim has visited the ruins of this church in Ephesus.), the bishops assembled, headed by the Bishop of Alexandria; Cyril, and the Bishop of Ephesus, Memnon, and took their places. (*Note: Our own Deacon Ephraim has visited the ruins of this very church in Ephesus*) In their midst was placed a Gospel as a sign of the invisible headship of the Ecumenical Council by Christ Himself. At first the Symbol of Faith which had been composed by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils was read; then there was read to the Council the Imperial Proclamation which was brought by the representatives of the Emperors Theodosius and Valentinian, Emperors of the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire.

The Imperial Proclamation having been heard, the reading of documents began, and there were read the Epistles of Cyril and Celestine to Nestorius, as well as the replies of Nestorius. The Council, by the lips of its members, acknowledged the teaching of Nestorius to be impious and condemned it, acknowledging Nestorius as deprived of his See and of the priesthood. A decree was composed concerning this which was signed by about 160 participants of the Council; and since some of them represented also other bishops who did not have the opportunity to be personally at the Council the decree of the Council was actually the decision of more than 200 bishops, who had their Sees in the various regions of the Church at that time, and they testified that they confessed the Faith which from all antiquity had been kept in their localities.

Thus the decree of the Council was the voice of the Ecumenical Church, which clearly expressed its faith that Christ, born of the Virgin, is the true God Who became man; and inasmuch as Mary gave birth to the perfect Man Who was at the same time perfect God, She rightly should be revered as THEOTOKOS.

At the end of the session its decree was immediately communicated to the waiting people. The whole of Ephesus rejoiced when it found out that the veneration of the Holy Virgin had been defended, for She was especially revered in this city, of which She had been a resident during Her earthly life and a Patroness after Her departure into eternal life. The people greeted the fathers ecstatically when in the evening they returned home after the session. They accompanied them to their homes with lighted torches and burned incense in the streets. Everywhere were to be heard joyful greetings, the glorification of the Ever-Virgin, and the praises of the Fathers who had defended Her name against the heretics. The decree of the Council was displayed in the streets of Ephesus. (To be continued)

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## **Our Christ is Invisibly Present**

✦ With fear and reverence may you stand in church, for our Christ is present invisibly with the holy angels. The attentive and reverent He fills to the full with grace and blessing, the heedless He censures as unworthy.

Try to receive Communion as often as possible – you have the freedom – for divine Communion is the best help for one struggling against sin.

May you approach the divine mystery with much compunction, contrition and consciousness of your sins. Great is the mercy of God, Who condescends to enter within you, not abhorring the multitude of your sins. But from a boundless love and affection He comes to sanctify you, counting you worthy to be His child and co-heir of His Kingdom.

**Elder Ephraim**