

The Nativity of Christ -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Question #1: What are we celebrating on Christmas Day?

Answer: For us Orthodox Christians, Christmas is the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the joyous celebration of the Birth of the Word of God as a child. The Birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary is proclaimed in the Kontakion of the Feast: "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One, and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One! Angels with shepherds glorify Him! The wise men journey with a star! Since for our sake the Eternal God was born as a Little Child!" On Christmas we celebrate what we proclaim in the Nicene Creed: "... for us and for our salvation (the Son of God) came down from Heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man." The Nativity of Our Lord fulfills what was first revealed nine months before, in the Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel to the Most Holy Mother of God: the Second Person of the Holy Trinity assuming flesh and becoming human. As St. John declares in the fourth Gospel: "... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Question #2: In what Gospels do we read the accounts of the Nativity of our Lord?

Answer: There are two accounts of the Birth of Christ in the Gospels – one by Saint Matthew, and the other by Saint Luke. Saint Matthew's account relies on Saint Joseph the Betrothed as his source. Matthew's audience is primarily the Jewish people. His Gospel's purpose is to introduce the Jews to Jesus as the Messiah. He sees and presents Christ as the greatest Teacher of all, greater than even Moses. Matthew uses Old Testament prophecy regarding the promised Messiah 41 times to prove his point – he shows the fulfillment of 37 of them in Jesus; and 5 of them are in the Nativity account. Matthew presents the Magi – the rich, the famous, the educated of the world – Gentiles who come to believe in Jesus to educate the Jews who have the Hebrew Scriptures to help them believe in Christ ... an advantage that the pagans, represented by the Magi, did not have. The key passage in Matthew's account of the Nativity is the prophecy the angel reminded Joseph of: "Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His Name Emmanuel," which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:22). Saint Luke's account relies upon the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, as his source. Luke's audience is primarily the Gentiles. His Gospel's purpose is to introduce the Gentiles to Jesus as the Savior. Luke sees and presents Christ as the Savior of all the world – Gentiles as well as the Chosen People. He needs to explain Old Testament things to the Gentiles who are not familiar with them: for example "Jesus" means "Savior". Luke uses the shepherds – the poor, the unknown, the uneducated – the lowly of the world who believe in the new-born Savior. In his Gospel, other lowly ones of the world – women and children, publicans and sinners – all come to Jesus to be forgiven and saved. The key passage in Luke's Nativity Gospel is the announcement of the angels to the shepherds, to Luke's

readers, and to all of us: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:12).

Question #3: What were the roles of the Virgin Mary and Joseph the Betrothed in the Nativity?

Answer: According to St. Dimitri of Rostov, Our Lord’s Most Blessed Mother, the immaculate Virgin Mary, was betrothed (engaged) to the righteous Joseph who was then eighty years of age. Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Epiphanius of Cyprus both tell us that Mary was entrusted to the elder so that he might serve as the guardian of her virginity and a witness to her purity. It was necessary that the couple be betrothed, because God wanted to conceal from the devil the mystery of the Incarnation and the perpetual virginity of His most pure Mother. Deceived by the bonds of wedlock, the evil one did not suspect that this was the Maiden of whom Isaiah had prophesied: “Lo, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son ...” (Isaiah 7:14). Thus, St. Athanasius writes: “Joseph was made steward of the mystery so that the Virgin, appearing to have a husband, would be held in esteem.” The most holy, most pure Virgin was indeed found to be with Child by the Holy Spirit before the completion of the rites of marriage, and day by day the sacred womb, that held the uncontainable God, grew larger. Her pregnancy was especially noticeable after she returned from her three-month stay with Elizabeth. Joseph was troubled by doubts and sorrow, and confronted the Virgin. According to St. Athanasius, the Virgin answered: “Wait a little, Joseph, and shepherds will reveal the truth. As the Lord lives, Who now has preserved my virginity, I have not known sin. No one has touched me and the Child I bear was conceived by God’s doing.” Then while he was pondering these things in his mind, “the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary, thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She shall bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20-21).

Question #4: If Mary gave birth to a Son, how is she considered “ever-Virgin”?

Answer: The Scripture tells us that rising from sleep, St. Joseph did as the angel of the Lord instructed him. He treated Mary with the honor belonging to a virgin consecrated to God, and, in the words of St. Matthew, “he knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born Son, and he called His name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25). Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid writes concerning the word “till” in this passage: “Till here does not mean that before the birth he did not know her, and afterwards he did ... but that he absolutely never knew her. Christ says, “I am with you always, even till the end of the world,” meaning, when He will be more than ever with us. The Saints tell us that it was fitting that she who bore the Savior should do so without the pain of childbirth, for she was a stranger to the pleasure of marital relations. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “As a virgin, she conceived, as a virgin she

carried the Child in her womb, as a virgin she gave birth, remaining ever a virgin.” In giving birth to God Incarnate, the Ever-Virgin Mary dispensed with the usual assistance of a midwife. Saint Athanasius writes: “She gave birth and herself wrapped the Child in swaddling clothes (fine strips of linen from Nazareth) and laid Him in a manger. She permitted no unclean hand to touch her most pure Son, but herself provided for all His needs.

Question #5: What is the significance of the place where Jesus was born?

Answer: Saint Luke tells us that a decree had been issued by Caesar Augustus, that a census be held throughout the Roman Empire. So Joseph had left Nazareth in Galilee and went to the City of David, Bethlehem in Judea, with his espoused wife Mary (Luke 2:2-7). Bethlehem, which is situated not far south from Jerusalem, was a town that lay on the road from Jerusalem to the hill country in which Hebron, the city of priests (i.e. Zachariah) is located. It was a journey of about three days by foot from Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary lived, to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is called the city of David because it was there that David had been born and anointed with the holy oil of kingship. It was there that Rachel had died, and where Jesse, David’s father, was buried. Originally it was called “Ephrata,” but Jacob who pastured his flocks there, foresaw and proclaimed that the Bread from Heaven, Christ the Lord, would be born in that very place; so he renamed it “Bethlehem,” which means “House of Bread.” There is a well there that bears David’s name (II Kings 23:5). According to St. Dimitri of Rostov, opposite that well, in the hill on which the town stands, but outside the inhabited area, there was a cave, which was used as a stable ... and there, at midnight, on the 25th of December (exactly nine months after the Annunciation), as the most blessed Virgin was praying fervently to God, being entirely immersed in reflection on the Divinity, and aflame with love and longing for the Lord, she gave birth without travail to Jesus Christ.

Question #6: What else is of importance about that first holy night?

Answer: The hymns of our Church proclaim: “The angels encircled the manger as though it were the throne of the cherubim, regarding the cave as heaven and gazing on the Master, who lay therein.” Tied to the manger were the ox and a donkey, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, “The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” (Isaiah 1:3). The ox and the donkey were both brought by Joseph from Nazareth. The donkey carried Mary, and the ox Joseph had intended to sell to pay his tax to Caesar and purchase provisions. Numerous trustworthy accounts assert that the Nativity took place on a Sunday, at midnight, following a Sabbath’s end. The Sixth Ecumenical Council explains in this way our celebration of Sunday as the holiest day of the week: “On this day God created light; on this day He rained manna from Heaven; on this day He was baptized by John in the Jordan; on this day the most merciful Redeemer of our race rose from the dead for our salvation; on this day He poured out the Holy Spirit upon His Disciples.” It was fitting that on the day

created light appeared, the Light eternal and uncreated should be manifested to the world. Solomon had also prophesied this: “When all was encompassed by stillness, and night had reached its midpoint, Thine almighty Word descended out of heaven from amidst royal thrones to this land of destruction” (Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-15).

Question #7: Knowing all of this, how then should we celebrate this feast?

Answer: Saint Gregory the Theologian answers this question for us in his Homily on the Nativity, in which he speaks of new life and re-creation in Christ: “This is our present Festival; it is this which we are celebrating today, the Coming of God to Man, that we might go forth, or rather (for this is the more proper expression) that we might go back to God – that putting off the old man, we might put on the New; and that as we died in Adam ... so we might live in Christ ... being born with Christ and crucified with Him and buried with Him and rising with Him ...” Therefore let us keep the Feast, not after the manner of a heathen festival, but after a godly sort; not after the way of the world, but in a fashion above the world; not as our own but as belonging to Him Who is ours, or rather as our Master's; not as of weakness, but as of healing; not as of creation, but of re-creation.”

My prayer for all of you is that your celebration of this Feast of “God becoming man so that man might become like God” – will be a joyous one, filled with all the choicest of the new-born Savior’s blessings. May He grant you a prosperous and peaceful life, good health and salvation, visitation and good hastening, and may He protect and preserve you in the coming new year, and for many, blessed years!

Christ is Born! Let us glorify Him!

