

St. George Newsletter

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The Nativity of Christ

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Only two Evangelists narrate the birth of Christ and events related to it, Saint Matthew and Saint Luke. Saint Matthew discusses the revelation of the mystery of His incarnation to Joseph, the adoration of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, and the slaying of the innocents. St. Luke describes the circumstances under which Christ the Savior was born in Bethlehem and the adoration of the shepherds.

The Revelation of the mystery of the incarnation to the betrothed Joseph

Saint Matthew informs us that soon after the Holy Virgin's betrothal with eighty-year-old Joseph, "before they came together," i.e., before the consummation of their marriage, Mary's condition of being with child became clear to Joseph. Being righteous (and this means just and merciful), Joseph did not wish to expose Her seeming transgression before the public, so as not to subject Her to the shameful and agonizing death called for by the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), and intended to release Her without announcing the reason. As soon as he thought this, the Lord's Angel appeared to him and explained "that which is conceived in Her is of the Holy Spirit" and not the fruit of a clandestine sin. The Angel further announces: "And She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." The name Jesus, Joshua in Hebrew, means Savior. So that Joseph has no doubts about the veracity of what was said, the Angel quotes Isaiah's prophecy that witnesses to the fact that this great miracle of the seedless conception and birth of the Savior of the world by the Blessed Virgin was preordained in God's pre-eternal counsel: "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son . . ." (Isaiah 7:14). There is no need to imagine that the prophecy had not been fulfilled because the prophet had said "and shall call His name Immanuel," whereas the Newborn was named Jesus. Immanuel is not a personalized name but a symbolic one meaning "God is with us." So when this miraculous birth from a Virgin takes place, people will say "God is with us"

because it is in this identity God came down to earth and lived among mankind. This is only a prophetic indication of Christ's Divinity — indication that this extraordinary infant will not be an ordinary person, but God. Convinced by the Angel's words, Joseph "took to him his wife," that is, rejected his intention to send Her away and left Her to live in his house as a wife "and did not know Her till She had brought forth Her Firstborn Son." This does not mean that he "knew" Her after the birth of Jesus and began living with Her as a wife. Saint John Chrysostom rightly notes that it is simply not credible to submit that such a righteous individual as Joseph would decide to "know" the Holy Virgin after She had so miraculously become a mother. While in Greek the word "zos" and in Church Slavonic "dondezhe" mean "until" this cannot be interpreted in the way that those who do not honor the Holy Virgin do — Protestants and sectarians — as though Joseph did not "know" Her before Christ's birth and then he did. He absolutely never "knew" Her. In the Holy Scriptures the word "zos" is used in the narration on the concluding stages of the Flood: "And he sent forth a raven, and it went forth to and fro, until ("zos") the waters were dried up" (Genesis 8:6) — but the raven never did return afterwards. Or again, in the words of our Lord: "I am with you always, even to ("zos") the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). As the Blessed Theophylact rightly observed, this doesn't mean that Christ would not be with us after the end of the age. Definitely not, as it is especially then that He would be with us!

Jesus is named "Firstborn" not because the Blessed Virgin had other children after Him but because He was born first, and, being that, was her only child. In the Old Testament, God decrees that "all the firstborn" are to be consecrated to Him, irrespective of whether the family will have further additions or not. And if the Gospel mentions "brothers of Jesus Christ" (Matthew 13:55, John 2:12, and others), it certainly doesn't mean that they were His brothers by birth. As tradition witnesses, Joseph's children were from his first marriage.

The Circumstances and Time of the Nativity of Christ

The most detailed narrative of the circumstances of the Nativity of Christ and of those times is provided by the Evangelist Luke. He refers the events of Christ's birth to the time at which Caesar Augustus decreed a census of all citizens of the Roman Empire, the reign of the Roman Emperor Octavius, who received from the Roman Senate the title "Augustus" — "honorable." Unfortunately, the exact date of this census was not preserved. However, the time of Octavius Augustus's rule, a personality historically well known, gives us an opportunity to approximate the year of Christ's Birth. With the aid of other facts, which we shall mention later, it is possible to determine this with a degree of accuracy — within a few years. A Roman monk Dionysius, named "the Small" introduced the accepted method of calculating the years "after Christ." As the basis of his calculations, Dionysius estimated that the Lord Jesus Christ was born in the 754th year from the establishment of the city of Rome. However, further and more thorough calculations proved his computations flawed: the year he had nominated was at least five years later than the actual date. Nevertheless, from the tenth century, the application of this Dionysian period of time (which was originally intended for Church use only) was wide-spread among Christian countries and accepted by civil authorities, even though it was acknowledged as being flawed by all chronologists. The actual date of Christ's birth can be determined accurately on the basis of the following facts found in the Gospel:

- (1) The time of the reign of Herod the Great. From Matthew 2:1-18 and Luke 1:5, it is absolutely clear that Christ was born when Herod was in power. He ruled from the 714th year of the establishment of the city of Rome and died in the 750th, eight days before Passover (Pascha) and soon after the lunar eclipse. According to astronomers' calculations, the eclipse occurred on the night of the 13th or 14th of March, while the Jewish Pascha fell on the 12th of April in that year. Consequently, Herod died at the beginning of April in the 750th year after the establishment of Rome — at least four years earlier than that established by Dionysius.
- (2) The census mentioned in Luke 2:3, was ordered by Augustus' decree in the 746th year after the founding of Rome. The census commenced in Judea during Herod's reign, was suspended as a consequence of his death, and continued when

Quirinius was governing Syria. This is mentioned in Luke's Gospel (2:2). As a result of the census, there was a public uprising in Palestine. By Herod's directive, the instigator was burned at the stake on the 12th of March in the 750th year of Rome. Consequently, the census commenced some time a little earlier.

- (3) According to Saint Luke's witness (3:1), Saint John the Baptist commenced his ministry in the fifteenth year of Caesar Tiberius' rule, and "Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23). Two years before his death in January 765, Augustus accepted Tiberius as a co-ruler. Therefore, the 15th year of Tiberius' reign would have commenced in January 779. As a result of Saint Luke's statement that the age of Lord Jesus was 30, then it follows that He was born in 749.
- (4) Astronomical calculations show that Christ's death on the cross could only have occurred in the year 783, (according to the data in the Gospel, this transpired in the year when the Jewish Pascha fell on a Friday evening). And as the Lord's age was advancing toward 34 years, He therefore must have been born in the 749th year from the establishment of Rome.

So all the above facts testify to the fact that the year of the Nativity of Christ was necessarily in the 749th year from the founding of Rome.

Due to lack of facts in the four Gospels, it is impossible to determine the day upon which Christ was born. Initially, the Eastern Church celebrated it on the same day as Theophany, under the general title of "Epiphany" — "God came into the world" — the 6th of January. The Western Church has, for a very long time, celebrated Nativity on the 25th of December. From the end of the fourth century, the Eastern Church too began to celebrate this event on the 25th of December. This date was selected according to the following understanding.

There is a hypothesis that Zacharias was serving as the high priest when the Angel appeared to him behind the curtain within the Holiest of the Holy. This is where the high priest was allowed to enter once a year, on the day of purification. This day falls on the 23rd of September, which began to be regarded as the day when the Forerunner was conceived. Six months later, the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary took place (which is celebrated on the 25th of March), and after nine months, on the 25th of

December, the Lord Jesus Christ was born. However, there is nothing to confirm the fact that Zacharias was the high priest. Consequently, a more plausible explanation is more likely a symbolic one. The ancients thought that Christ, as a second Adam, was conceived by the Holy Virgin during the Spring equinox, the 25th of March, and according to ancient tradition, the same day Adam was created. Christ — the light of the world, the sun of truth — appeared to the world after nine months, during the winter solstice, when the day begins to lengthen and the night, to shorten. Corresponding to this, the conception of John the Baptist (who was six months older than Christ) was to be celebrated on the 23rd of September, during the solar equinox, while the day of his birth — on the 24th of June, during the summer solstice, when the days were getting shorter. As Saint Athanasius cited the words of John the Baptist in John 3:30: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Some confusion arises from the statement by the Evangelist Luke about the census conducted at the time of Christ’s birth, that “This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria,” whereas, according to historical facts, Quirinius was governor of Syria some ten years after the birth of Christ. The quickest way to resolve this misunderstanding is through the following: during the translation from the Greek text (and there is strong support for this), instead of the word “this” census, the word “same” census should have been applied. Augustus issued the decree for the census before the birth of Christ. However, because of the public’s unrest and the death of Herod, it was delayed and completed only some ten years later, during the governorship of Quirinius. There is further data that Quirinius served twice as governor of Syria, and the census, begun during his first tenure, was completed only during his second term in office. That’s why the Evangelist calls the census — commenced at the time of the birth of Christ — as the “first.”

Every person had to be registered “in his own city.” Roman politics always acceded to the customs of the conquered, so as the Jewish customs demanded that the census be conducted according to branch, tribe, and clan, everyone was obliged to turn up for registration in that city, where the head of his tribe once lived. As Joseph was David’s descendant, he had to go to Bethlehem — David’s city of birth. God’s wonderful providence can be seen in this: in accordance with the ancient prophesy from Micah 5:2, the Messiah was required

to be born in this city. According to Roman law covering conquered nations, not only men but also equally women were subject to this census. Consequently, there is nothing amazing in that the Holy Virgin Mary, albeit in Her condition, accompanied the guardian of Her virginity — the “elder” Joseph — and undoubtedly being aware of Micah’s prophecy, could not but recognize God’s providence in the census that directed Her toward Bethlehem.

“And She brought forth Her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” The Evangelist emphasizes the fact that Holy Virgin Mary Herself diapered Her newborn Infant, meaning that the birth was completely painless. Again, Her Son is called “firstborn” not because the Blessed Virgin had other children after Him. According to the law of Moses, every first male child born was called firstborn, even though he was the only child in the family. Because of the multitude of travelers that had arrived earlier, but more so because of their poverty, the Holy Family were forced to settle in one of the many caves that were abundant throughout Palestine. These caves were used to shelter stock during inclement weather. It was here that the Divine Messiah was born. Instead of being placed in a child’s cradle, He was laid in a manger and thereby, from His Own Nativity, accepting the cross of abasement and suffering for the redemption of humanity. And by His Own Nativity, giving us a lesson in humility — that highest virtue, which He later taught His followers continually. According to ancient tradition, during the Savior’s birth, near His crib stood an ox and an ass, as though signifying that “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” (Isaiah 1:3).

However, not only humiliation accompanied Him at birth and throughout His earthly life but also reflections of His Divine glory. God’s Angel, illuminated with Divine glory, appeared to the shepherds — who may have been the owners of the cave and were sleeping in the field due to the prevailing good weather — and announced to them “great joy” of the birth of the Savior in the city of David, “Who is Christ the Lord.” It is important to note here the words of the Angel “great joy . . . to all people.” The Messiah did not come to earth for the Jews only, but for the whole human race. With this, the Angel gave a “sign”, an indication as to how they will recognize Him: “You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And as though in corroboration of the veracity of the Angel’s words,

there appeared “a multitude of the Heavenly host,” a whole mass of Angels praising the astonishing glory of the Newborn God-Infant — the Messiah: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” The Angels are praising God for sending the Messiah to earth; they are acclaiming the peace that will settle in people’s souls who have accepted the Savior; they are happy for the people to whom God’s grace had returned. The higher powers, the sinless eternal spirits, continually praise their Creator and Lord in the heavens. They especially praise Him for the extraordinary manifestation of His Divine clemency, which in fact is an expansion of His domain. The peace that was brought to earth by the incarnate Son of God cannot be confused with ordinary human tranquility and well being. This is a peace of conscience in the soul of the human-sinner who has been redeemed by Christ the Savior. It is a peace of conscience, reconciliation with God, with people and with yourself. And as much as this is God’s peace that surpasses all understanding (Philip. 4:7) and settles in the souls of humans that have accepted Christ, so does the inner peace become the heritage in human life. Redemption revealed the total greatness of God’s benevolence, His love toward humanity.

Therefore, the purpose for the Angels’ praises is in the following: Worthy are the praises to God by the Heavenly Spirits, as peace and salvation has settled on earth, because humanity has become deserving of a particular Divine blessing. The shepherds — who were evidently pious — immediately hurried to the location indicated by the Angel and became worthy of the honor of being the first to worship the Christ-Infant. Wherever they went, they proclaimed the news about the appearance of the Angel and the Heavenly announcement, much to the amazement of their listeners. The Blessed Virgin Mary, filled with feelings of profound humility, memorized all that was happening, “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

Upcoming Events:

Jan. 7: Nativity of Christ. Liturgy at 8:30. All are invited to a reception at the rector’s home after Liturgy.

Jan. 13: Immediately after the Liturgy, our children will present their play “Tell me a parable”. There will be refreshments and gifts for children.

Jan. 19: Theophany. Liturgy at 9:00. From this day until the beginning of Great Lent, the priest will visit homes and bless them with holy water. Sign up at the candle counter.

March 1: Second Annual Gala Banquet at “Arbat”. Tickets: \$100. Talk to Anna Galayda for ticket purchases, or buy online at www.stgeorgeslc.org/gala.html