



Light of the East

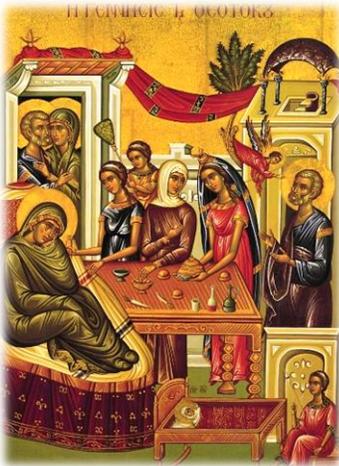


Reflections for our Spiritual Journey

Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church, Roswell, Georgia

The Nativity of the Theotokos September 8

By Your Nativity, O Most Pure Virgin, Joachim and Anna are freed from barrenness; Adam and Eve, from the corruption of death. And we, your people, freed from the guilt of sin, celebrate and sing to you: The barren woman gives birth to the Theotokos, the nourisher of our life!
(Kontakion of the Nativity of the Theotokos)



The Nativity of Our Most Holy Virgin Mary, one of the twelve great feasts of the Eastern Church, is celebrated as a day of universal joy. Within the context of the Old and the New Testaments, the Blessed Theotokos and Ever Virgin Mary was born on this radiant day, having been chosen before the ages by Divine Providence to bring about the Mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. She is revealed as the Mother of the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ.

Sermon on the Nativity of the Theotokos

The Church's veneration of Mary has always been rooted in her obedience to God, her willing choice to accept a humanly impossible calling. The Eastern Church has always emphasized Mary's connection to humanity and delighted in her as the best, purest, most sublime fruition of human history and of man's quest for God, for ultimate meaning, for ultimate content of human life.

If in Western Christianity veneration of Mary was centered upon her perpetual virginity, the heart of the Christian East's devotion, contemplation, and joyful delight has always been her Motherhood, her flesh and blood connection to Jesus Christ. The East rejoices that the human role in the divine plan is pivotal. The Son of God comes to earth, appears in order to redeem the world, He becomes human to incorporate man into His divine vocation, but humanity takes part in this. If it is understood that Christ's "co-nature" with us is as a human being and not some phantom or bodiless apparition, that He is one of us and forever united to us through His and forever united to us through His humanity, then devotion to Mary also becomes understandable, for she is the one who gave Him His human nature, His flesh and blood. She is the one through whom Christ can always call Himself "The Son of Man." Son of God, Son

of Man...God descending and becoming man so that man could become divine, could become partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), or as the teachers of Church expressed it, “deified.” Precisely here, in this extraordinary revelation of man’s authentic nature and calling, is the source that gratitude and tenderness which cherishes Mary as our link to Christ and, in Him, to God. And nowhere is this reflected more clearly than in the Nativity of the Mother of God.

Nothing about this event is mentioned anywhere in the Holy Scriptures. But why should there be? Is there anything remarkable, anything especially unique about the normal birth of a child, a birth like any other? The Church began to commemorate the event with a special feast...because, on the contrary, the very fact that it is routine discloses something fresh and radiant about everything we call routine and ordinary, it gives new depth to the unremarkable details of human life...And with each birth the world is itself in some sense created anew and given as a gift to this new human being to be his life, his path, his creation.

This feast therefore is first a general celebration of Man’s birth, and we no longer remember the anguish, as the Gospel says, “for joy that a human being is born into the world” (Jn. 16:21). Secondly, we now know whose particular birth, whose coming we celebrate: Mary’s. We know the uniqueness, the beauty, the grace of precisely this child, her destiny, her meaning for us and for the whole world. And thirdly, we celebrate all who prepared the way for Mary, who contributed to her inheritance of grace and beauty...And therefore the Feast of her Nativity is also a celebration of human history, a celebration of faith in man, a celebration of man.

Sadly, the inheritance of evil is far more visible and better known. There is so much evil around us that this faith in man, in his freedom, in the possibility of handing down a radiant inheritance of goodness has almost evaporated and been replaced by cynicism and suspicion. This hostile cynicism and discouraging suspicion are precisely what seduce us to distance ourselves from the Church when it celebrates with such joy and faith this birth of a little girl in whom are concentrated all the goodness, spiritual beauty, harmony and perfection that are elements of genuine human nature. Thus, in celebrating Mary’s birth we find ourselves already on the road to Bethlehem, moving toward the joyful mystery of Mary as the Mother to God. (*Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann*)

The icon of the *Nativity of the Theotokos* presents the central figures of Saints Joachim and Anna, Mary’s parents, and the Mother of our Lord as an infant. Saint Anna is in the middle of the icon with her right hand extended toward her daughter.



Likewise, Saint Joachim, Mary’s father, is gazing upon the young child with his right hand extended toward her. Anna is surrounded by attendants who have assisted with the birth. The icon directs attention to Mary as the central figure in this feast. It also acknowledges the joy that was felt by Joachim and Anna as new parents with a child received through a promise from God. The liturgical texts of the feast acknowledge this joy and confirm the special role of Mary as the Mother

of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ. In this event, another step is made in sacred history in preparation for the entrance of Christ into the world. The icon and the feast acknowledge a transition from barrenness to life. This is another foreshadowing of what would be offered through Christ, the transformation from death to eternal life.

Your Nativity, O Virgin, has proclaimed joy to the whole universe!