



ST. NICHOLAS ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX
CHURCH

Wonder Worker

6447 76th Avenue N.
Pinellas Park
St. Petersburg, Florida 33781



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MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF ST. NICHOLAS ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, PINELLAS PARK,
FLORIDA

Thoughts From Father Michael
“Christmas Traditions”

December 2019

Ever wonder how we in America arrived at today’s celebration of Christmas? It was not always this way, and is not that way in other countries. The American celebration with all its hype and extravagance of shopping for the latest gifts, trees, decorations, clothes, and accessories has nothing to do with the birth of the Christ Child, the unique cosmic event of the Son of God becoming fully human.

From the time Christmas began to be celebrated in the 4th century there has existed tension between the pagan end of year rituals and Christmas. Indeed, many of the Christian traditions are “baptized” pagan rites. December 25th is perhaps the most obvious. It is the date of the Winter Solstice and also the time for the pagan celebration of Saturnalia, the time that Saturn is permitted to reign for eight days (December 17 – 24) with revelry, feasting, and making merry.

For early Christians, there was no separate celebration of the Lord’s nativity in the first centuries of the church. Theophany, when the Trinity was made manifest at Jesus’ baptism, was the religious remembrance. In fact, St Athanasios in his book On the Incarnation written in 318 AD hardly speaks of the birth of Christ; rather, he speaks of Christ’s total earthly life, death, and resurrection.

The celebration of Jesus’ birth began slowly. At the 1st Ecumenical Council in 325 AD the church fathers included in the Nicene Creed reference to Christ’s birth in the sentence: “Who for us men and our salvation came down from Heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made Man.” Soon afterwards (*continued*)

in 336 AD the Nativity Feast was celebrated in the West, and in 350 AD Pope Julius I declared December 25th as the official date for Christmas. In 380 AD, St John Chrysostom adopted the western practice and accepts December 25th for Christmas in the East. Why December 25th? Because that was the date of the pagan celebration of the Unconquered Sun. Chrysostom said, “Who is so unconquerable as our Lord? Who is the Unconquerable SON.”

Further developments in the Christian world as it was now free to worship publicly brought fresh challenges to the faith. One such challenge came from the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, who taught that Mary should be called Christotokos as she was the mother of Christ, and not Theotokos, the mother of God. Nestorius’ teaching was condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council in 431 AD and he was removed from office. At the fourth Ecumenical Council it was affirmed that Jesus Christ possessed two natures, human and divine. These developments gave impetus to the celebration of Christ’s human birth.

As Christianity spread into Europe many of the year end pagan customs began to become incorporated into the life of the Church: Fir Tree, Mistletoe, Yule log, Boar’s Head, and feasting and revelry. Excessive revelry celebrations lead ultimately to its abolishment. In 1647 Cromwell would not permit Christmas to be celebrated. This abolishment spread to America and in 1621 the Plymouth colony banned the celebration of Christmas. If one visits Plymouth Colony today one learns that anyone not reporting for work on December 25th will be jailed. As late as 1879 Boston Public Schools were in session on Christmas Day.

Restoration to celebrate Christmas began in England in 1660 but in a more restrained manner. In America the first state to declare Christmas a legal holiday was Alabama in 1836, and the last state was Oklahoma in 1890.

Our current events, animals, people, and figures began to appear in the early 19th century. In 1809, Washington Irving wrote Diedrich Knickerbocker’s A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty where he satirized Dutch life in New Amsterdam. In this book he has St Nick flying a wagon pulled by two goats, Gnasher and Cracker, and coming down a chimney to distribute gifts to children. In 1823, Clement Clarke Moore, a clergyman, wrote the famous poem, “A Visit from St Nicholas,” whose opening line is: “Twas the night before (*continued*)

Birthdays for December

2 December, Amanda Kassis, Armand Robert Poirier; 3 December, Maria Miller, Sofia Nassif; 5 December, Edna Mason, Cora Grace Raynovich, Katherine Liss; 6 December, Venus Victor Guild; 8 December, Matt Nassif, Ralph Parker; 9 December, Diane Orloff, Jacob Pham; 12 December, Sarai Jadoun Fenton, George Kanalos; 14 December, Cheryl Lipscomb, John Milligan; 1 December, David Yopp; 21 December, Ethan Packey; 22 December, Sonja Cotton, Kay Larson, Nicholas Mater; 24 December, Joseph Chapman; 27 December, Anthony Bianca; 28 December, Nicholas Yopp; 29 December, Damond El Khouri; 31 December, Robert Wiggins

Anniversaries in December

5 December, Peter & Jaymelyn Kassis; 6 December, Langley Dunsmuir & Venus Guild; 12 December, Ralph & Eleanor Parker; 19 December, James & Lena Ayoub Hannush; 27 December, Fr Michael & Kh Virginia Massouh; 30 December, Col. Michael & Nancy Nahas

Departed this Life in December

1 December, Almaza Samara; 5 December, Adeebe Massouh; 11 December, Donald Thorpe; 16 December, Gene Jacox Roy, Leon Victor; 19 December, Ibrahim Abu Hanna; 23 December, Victoria Massouh; 24 December, Sylvia Jean Joseph; 28 December, Shirley Helms; 29 December, Elizabeth (Betty) Rae; 30 December, Emily Albert; 31 December, Ibrahim (Jack) Ayoub

Nativity of Our Lord

What greater gift can we receive than the gift of God the Father who gave us His Only Begotten Son? With Christ’s coming into the world to establish a new covenant, He destroyed the power of death, and re-opened for us mortals the gates of Paradise where there is neither pain, sickness, nor sadness, but brightness, green pastures, peace, and rest.

Think of it! Christianity is the only religion where the divine comes down from the mountain top to our level to help us reach the goal of our lives - to become god-like, to reach the mountain top and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Other religions have ultimate goals for mortals to reach and give instructions on how to reach them, but we mortals are on our own to reach them.

For us Christians the path to holiness has been trodden by Christ Himself. The Son of God, one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, became human to dwell among us, to experience what it was like to be a human being, to teach us, to heal us, and to establish His Church to continue to be among us. He is with us still through partaking of His Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist.

As we contemplate the birth of Jesus, let us meditate on this unique cosmic event where the Christ becomes incarnate for our sakes.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

Merry Christmas!

Please Pray for the Following Brothers and Sisters

Departed: Almaza Samara, Adeebe Massouh, Donald Thorpe, Gene Jacox Roy, Leon Victor, Ibrahim Abu Hanna, Victoria Massouh, Sylvia Jean Joseph, Shirley Helms, Elizabeth (Betty) Rae, Emily Albert, Ibrahim (Jack) Ayoub, Richard Braswell

Shut-ins/Sick: Metropolitan PAUL, Archbishop YOHANNA, Nicholas Hughes, Schauki Kassis, John Bennett, Rose Beede, Alice Flaherty, Theodora Ohlinger, Sally Bell, Bob Bostley, Bill Yopp, George Joseph Rolfes, Aurelia Buda, Eveyne Lonack, Richard Pippy, Diane Zorich, Lisa McCoy, Thomas Ziegler, Susana Kassis

For the Health of: Fr Lazarus Sucanto, Kh Loretta Karparlenia, Kh Virginia Massouh, Pf. Margot Siniari, Viola Haddad, Angela Jacob, Farhat David, Helen Massarelli, Carole Massarelli, John & Evelyn Salem, Helen Salem, Ruth & Evern Hazel, Gerorgette Abraham, Mariam Haddad, Bryan Haddad, Nasir Kassis, Geri & Mitch Kanaan, Alice Faccenda, Pat Salem, David & Eva Szabo, Marion Bostley, Theodore Todorow, Alex Gimon, Diane Karns, Leo Poirier, Sophie Massouh, Bob Poirier, Steve Bové, Natalie Floreancig, Millicent Palko, Leila Bashara, Paula Massouh, Philip Lemieux, Mary Magdalena Foltz, Charlene Toney, Gail & Charles Barnett, Suha Mansour

Service Members: Christopher Salem (Air Force): Nephew of Helen Salem), Peter McIntire: Nephew of Viola Haddad, Curtis Brickwood (Navy): Fr. Michael's Cousin, James Sexton(Army): Grandson of Michaelina Sexton, David Butler (Navy): Son of Joanna Kassis Butler, Trenton Wesley (Army): grandson of Leila Bashara, Luka Dundua (Army): Grandson of Salome Rollins

Upcoming Events

Friday, December 6, 2019 - 10:30 AM, Liturgy for St Nicholas' Feast Day;

Sunday, December 8, 2019 - St Nicholas Feast Day Celebration after Liturgy & Raffle

Saturday, December 7, 2019 - Ladies Society Christmas Party

Saturday, December 14, 2019 - Ladies Society Yard & Bake Sale on Church Grounds

Tuesday, December 24, 2019 - 5:30 PM, Vesperal Divine Liturgy, Christ's Nativity

Wednesday, January 1, 2020 - 10:30 AM, Divine Liturgy of St Basil for the Circumcision of Jesus

Major Bequest

Our church, St Nicholas, was one of six Orthodox churches to receive a bequest from The Charles K. and Stella C. Misoyianis Trust. It was for \$40,326.84.

Charles (Kyriakos) and Stella attended our church from time to time, and became friendly with a number of us. Charles died first, and Stella continued to visit. They had no children.

Stella always said she was going to include us in her will and wanted to donate an icon to St Nicholas Church. Accordingly, we have designated the Mystical Supper Icon that curves around the apse in the altar as given in memory of "Irene & Gust Caravas, Stella & Charles Misoyianis, and Virginia & Lambros Misoyianis" as the letter from the trustees of their estate requests.

God bless them!

Bequests are a significant way for a parishioner to continue to support the church after they depart. St Nicholas has received bequests from former parishioners. Please consider including St Nicholas in your wills.

Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there." His transport was a sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. A jolly and fat St Nicholas came down the chimney to give gifts to the children.

With these references' others built upon them and added new elements to our current celebration. Charles Dickens in 1843 wrote A Christmas Carol that emphasized the giving spirit of Christmas. Exchanging Christmas Cards began in England after the penny postcard appeared in 1841 that allowed people to send greetings inexpensively. In 1843, an Englishman commissioned John Calcott Horsley to produce 1000 cards to send to friends with the inscription, "A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year to You." In the 1850s, R. H. Pease of Albany pioneered Christmas Cards in America.

Between 1863 to 1900, Thomas Nast, the famous cartoonist for Harper's Illustrated Weekly, published a fat, bearded, jolly St Nicholas. In an 1885 cartoon he had him coming from the North Pole and wearing a furry costume. Nast's cartoons of St Nick captured the imagination of others, in particular Haddon Sundblom who added red color to Nast's black and white sketches. Our current image of Santa Claus comes from his drawings in the 1930s that were designed to sell Coca-Cola in the Winter Season, as sales of Coke declined over the wintry months of the year.

The famous editorial of Francis Pharcellus Church "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" appeared on Christmas Eve in 1897 in the New York Sun in answer to a September letter from Virginia O'Hanlan.

Who is this Santa Claus? He is based upon a real person - the ever-popular St Nicholas, the 4th Century bishop of Myra in Lycia who attended the 1st Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325AD. He was known for his generosity and is the patron saint of children, sailors, and pawnbrokers. One example of his generosity is his giving anonymously bags of gold to a neighbor to allow him to provide a dowry for each of his three daughters. These bags appeared either in stockings hung out to dry or in shoes; thus, our hanging stockings on the mantel. How did the words "Saint Nicholas" become the words, "Santa Claus?" Credit the Dutch who called him "Siint Nikolas" or "Sinter Klaus". Pronouncing this name quickly it became reduced to "Santa Claus." *(continued)*

Most of the Christmas carols we know and love were composed in the 19th century, and most of the popular songs we sing were composed in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The movies we associate with Christmas are mostly post World War II; Holiday Inn (1942), It's a Wonderful Life (1946), Bishop's Wife (1947), Miracle on 34th Street (1947), Lemon Drop Kid (1951), and White Christmas (1954). Since the 1940s and 50s we have had few songs or movies that capture the joy of Christmas. Recent songs and movies have stretched the envelop of Clement Moore's A Visit of St Nicholas. We now have not only Mrs Claus, but his daughter, and all the weird totally obnoxious characters and cartoon figures as part of Christmas. The real St Nicholas was a celibate bishop!

The revelry that brought the celebration of Christmas to a halt once in the 17th century and may indeed once again bring it to a halt today. For many Orthodox Christians who observe the Old Calendar they celebrate New Calendar Christmas Day on December 25th as a secular holiday, and reserve the Old Calendar observance of Christmas as a religious holiday on January 7th. For us New Calendar Orthodox we may want to do the same.

There is little harm in putting up a Christmas tree and decorating it and one's home. But let us not get carried away with all the hoopla and hype, but stay focused on the Christ event. The Hallmark Channel, for example, presents feel good Christmas themed movies of romantic love and family reconciliations during this time of year, but with little focus on Christ's nativity.

Let us recall that Jesus is the reason for the season, and His incarnation is God's gift of His only begotten Son to us mortals. For the Father's action we should stand in awe, and be thankful to Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and worship Him.

Spiritual Sayings

Imagine if we just went up and took communion without attending any of the prayers to go along with it. It seems that we would be partaking of mere bread and wine. But when I attend the readings and the prayers, and witness that the bread and wine are consecrated and set apart for the purpose of becoming the Body and Blood our Lord Jesus Christ, it is then that I realize the importance of the sacrament. Not only are the gifts being made holy, but through listening to the readings, I am being made holy as well.

St Justin Martyr

Update on Burning the Mortgage

We are nearing our goal of reducing the Church Mortgage to zero. Thanks to the generosity of Helen & Carole Massarelli and others the mortgage balance as of November 30, 2019 is \$130,676.82. We should easily reach our interim goal of \$125,000 by December 31, 2019.

Helen & Carole Massarrelli completed their pledge of \$40,000 in October rather than waiting to December. Thank you, Helen & Carole, and God bless you! On Sunday, October 27, 2019 the following parishioners agreed to make a pledge: Fr Michael & Kh Virginia Massouh, Luis & Janet Rodriguiz, Rob & Bonnie Guirguis, Pia Cummings, Chip Hanna, Gaby Atik, and Gerald Vizvary.

Also in October we have received the following contributions; a \$10,000 contribution, and a \$1,000 contribution. In November we received a \$3,000 contribution, a \$1,000 contribution, three \$500 contributions, and a \$200 contribution.

We humbly ask each of our parishioners to consider making a pledge. Once we pay off the mortgage, we can direct our current monthly payment to ourselves to begin setting aside funds to demolish the First Church and to build a new structure that will house a larger fellowship hall, Sunday School classrooms, a restaurant style kitchen, a clergy office, a library, and meeting rooms.

God and St Nicholas have blessed us to come this far, and with your prayers will continue to bless us in taking the next steps in the history of our beloved St Nicholas parish.

Please consider responding to Helen's and Carole's challenge by making a pledge before the end of the fiscal year. Consider your tax situation and make and honor your pledge either in this tax year or early in the next one. We look forward to celebrating the burning of the mortgage by the time His Grace Bishop NICHOLAS visits us after Pascha during the weekend of May 22-23, 2020.

You can make a secure on-line donation to St Nicholas using your credit card or through PayPal. Check it out at www.stnicholasaoc.org

Kontakion of the Nativity

On this day the Virgin beareth the Transcendent in essence; to the Unapproachable, the earth doth offer a small cave; the Angels join in choir with shepherds in giving glory; with the star the Magi travel upon their journey; for our sakes is born a young Child, He that existed before the ages as God.