

Sunday, December 25, 2016: The Lord's Nativity (Christmas Day)

Epistle reading: Gal. 4: 4-7:

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. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Gospel reading: Matt. 2: 1-12:



Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and came to worship him. When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he

demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And you Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, are not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of you shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they came into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had

opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY 2016

† NICOLAE

by the mercies of God

*Archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the United States of America and
Metropolitan of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas*

*To our beloved clergy and Orthodox Christians,
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,
and from us Archpastoral Blessings.*

*"For in Bethlehem Mary, completing her journey,
In a little dwelling in that town gives birth to the Messiah."*

**Most Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Faithful,**

The words of the *holy and good* carol „O, What Wonderful News” (O, ce veste minunată) speak to us all of the joy of the fulfillment of the holy family’s journey to Bethlehem in obedience to the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. Their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not fulfilled, however, through their presenting themselves to the authorities, but through the wondrous event of the birth of the baby Jesus in the Bethlehem manger. And the angels’ announcement of the fulfillment of this pilgrimage was the occasion for a song of praise brought by the shepherds to God. The holy family’s pilgrimage becoming the occasion of joy can offer us too a way to understand our pilgrimage on this earth toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

Adam, the first created and fallen into sin, began this pilgrimage of regaining the lost paradise. Adam and Eve, disobedient to God, first hid themselves from His face (Genesis 3:8-9), and then heard the punishment of their banishment from paradise (Genesis 3:24-24), but not before they were promised the sending of the Savior who would destroy the power of the evil one, the one who brought division between man and God: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15). Man, fallen away from the face of God, begins a *pilgrimage of repentance* with the desire to again find God the Creator and Ruler, to again find meaning to his existence on earth.

The history of mankind up until the Incarnation of the Son of God is a long pilgrimage of man through the ages, like the journey of a ship on the storm-tossed seas of the world. The tempests of the ages nearly swallowed up disobedient and stubborn mankind, if we think of Noah’s flood or the tower of Babel, but God’s care for His creation can be seen in them. For He chose for Himself a people that He blessed that from it would be born the Savior of the world: “*Blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants... In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice*” (Genesis 22:17-18). The history of the Jewish people is the continuation of this pilgrimage marked by wanderings away from the worship of the true God and returning through the voice of the prophets. St. Basil the Great speaks of this pilgrimage that has taken place under the watchful care of God: “*For You did not forever reject Your creature whom You made, O Good One, nor did You forget the work of Your hands, but because of Your tender compassion, You visited him in various ways: You sent forth prophets; You*

performed mighty works by Your saints who in every generation have pleased You. You spoke to us by the mouth of Your servants the prophets, announcing to us the salvation which was to come” (St. Basil’s Liturgy).

Mankind’s pilgrimage through history is fulfilled through the descent of the Son of God in time and history to give them the meaning of eternity. It is not a coincidence that the wondrous event of the Nativity of Christ is also described as a pilgrimage. The Virgin Mary and the Righteous Joseph set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem “to be registered,” for they were “of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4-5). They set out on pilgrimage just in the days when the Virgin was due to give birth. But the true pilgrimage was fulfilled by the baby in the womb. He, the unseen God, set out toward Bethlehem in order to be seen in the form of the innocent baby in the lowly manger. Bethlehem became the place of the meeting of God with man, the little village on the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem became the center of the Universe, for there God was revealed to man-the-pilgrim desirous of repentance and of encountering God. God and man hasten toward one another, toward a saving rediscovery for man. Man’s alienation from God through Adam’s sin is healed at the fulfillment of the pilgrimage through history toward the Bethlehem manger.

The mystery of the humility of the Son of God revealed through His manifestation as a baby is expressed by St. Paul the Apostle in his Epistle to the Philippians, taken up by St. Basil the Great in the Liturgy that bears his name: *“And when the fullness of time had come, You spoke to us through Your Son Himself, through whom You created the ages. He, being the splendor of Your glory and the image of Your being, upholding all things by the word of His power, thought it not robbery to be equal with You, God and Father. But, being God before all ages, He appeared on earth and lived with humankind. Becoming incarnate from a holy Virgin, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming to the body of our lowliness, that He might change us into the likeness of the image of His glory.”* St. Gregory Palamas interprets this unimaginable way of humility: “God, as nature beyond nature, cannot ascend higher, to the heights or to a greater glory. He ascends from the things below, from having descended and humbled himself in His creatures. The glory of the Most High is His condescension down to the things that are humble.” The Son of God became man in order to make man god, the Holy Fathers say.

The marvel of God’s humility in Bethlehem was revealed also to other pilgrims: first to the shepherds by the angels, later to the magi as pilgrims following a star to the place of the Savior’s birth. They “were instructed by a star to worship the Sun of Righteousness,” as the Troparion of the Feast tells us. This means that their pilgrimage was undertaken under the sign of a perceptive humility. They went off to worship the King of the World without knowing where they were going, but guided by faith in God’s protection and illumination. And they fulfilled their pilgrimage by bringing gifts to Christ the Savior, revealed by a star in the Bethlehem manger.

Most Reverend Fathers, Beloved Faithful,

The discovery of these meanings of the pilgrimage to Bethlehem is profoundly meaningful for our own pilgrimage through this life. From baptism we are in the ark of the Church, under the command of Christ, journeying toward the meeting with God in eternity. But we already fulfill this journey, this pilgrimage, when we journey together with Christ. In our pilgrimage we need to have the faith and humility of the magi, that God protects us and that we will make it through the waves of life’s temptations. When those waves rise up threateningly, let us not take our eyes off Christ, that we may not sink as did St. Peter the Apostle. Let us remain as pilgrims in the ark of Christ, having Christ as our captain, for outside it we will lose the way toward eternity. Let us lift up our hands in prayer and include also those who are separated from Christ and His ark, let us stick together with our brethren, children, youth, or adults, and together let us travel with the hope that we too will “complete our journey” toward the Bethlehem of our salvation. In these

few words are comprehended all the hope of the fulfillment of the mission to which God has called us on this earth.

I pray that God will illumine every priest and believer, that He will protect every parish and monastery of our new Metropolia. May the new year be blessed, and may we multiply our hope, and grow in our faith in God.

With a brotherly embrace in Christ the Lord, my wish for you is to celebrate the holy Feasts of the Nativity, the New Year, and Theophany in health, peace, and spiritual joys!

Merry Christmas! Many Years!

Your brother in prayer to God,
desirous of every heavenly good,
† Metropolitan NICOLAE

Chicago, The Feast of the Lord's Nativity, 2016

Sunday Fellowship

**The following families are scheduled to look after
this Sunday's fellowship:**

Șerban & Mădălina Stoleru

Liviu & Corina Sasu

Viorel & Veronica Ciocan

If you use the kitchen and the stove, clean them up, please!

Thank you all very much!

**The Board of Directors and the Ladies Auxiliary of our parish extend
to all members and supporters of our church their best wishes for a
MERRY CHRISTMAS and a healthy and HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

The Lord's Nativity Vespers

**On Saturday, Dec. 24, Vespers of the Lord's Nativity
will be served at 4:30 PM.**

Following the Vespers Service, Confession will be heard

HOUSE BLESSING

On January the 6th we celebrate the Epiphany (Theophany), the Baptism of our Lord and Savior. Following the Divine Liturgy and the Greater Blessing of Water, Fr. George will begin the blessing of homes.

**Those who are interested, please sign in the sign-up sheet
or call Fr. George at 473-0029.**

MEMBERSHIP

The Board of Directors extends a warm appeal to all supporters of our parish, asking them to pay their membership as soon as possible.

This way we can ensure that we have the necessary funds to fulfill our financial obligations until the end of the year.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

The Sermon on line

**The Sunday's Sermon is being posted on line.
To access it, go to our parish's website (bisericaedmonton.org),
click on "Multimedia" and then on "Audio."**

Spread the word

**We make an appeal to all of you, subscribers to our weekly electronic Bulletin,
to invite your family members and friends to submit their
email address and join the list of our parish subscribers.
This is so we can reach as many people as possible.**

Thank you for your help!

The theology of the Lord's Nativity conveyed by the Christmas Carols

Here we are, by the grace of our loving and merciful God, getting ready to celebrate once again the great Feast of our salvation, the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Every time this Feast day comes around, we cannot help but re-live happy memories of our childhood in connection to this joyous and festive season. And it seems that the older we get, the more sentimental we are. Whether we share those memories with our family members or friends or choose to descend within ourselves and travel alone the memory lane, this mental exercise is explained by the intensity with which we anticipated and then experienced Christmas in our innocent childhood, and also by the mystery that surrounds this great, unique and hard to fathom act of God's intervention for our salvation. Ever since the angels sang the first Christmas Carol { "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men*" (Luke 2:14)} on the holy night of our Lord's Birth, Christians have followed their example, proclaiming from generation to generation, for over two thousand years, God's rich mercy, divine compassion and infinite love for mankind. Who among us doesn't remember teaming up with other children and going caroling from house to house, courageously contending with the deep snow and cold of the night? Although we did it for the treats or the money offered by every householder, nobody (not even our parents) told us that we were in fact repeating what the angels had done on the night Jesus was born: we were announcing to the world the fulfillment of God's promise to give His only-begotten Son for the salvation of the humankind. We were the angels of our time who brought great joy to the shepherds, homemakers, farmers, workers, teachers, priests, etc. of our communities. This is why we should encourage our children and grandchildren to continue this wonderful tradition of announcing and praising the coming of our Savior in our midst.

Let us now examine the content of some of the Christmas carols, passed down from generation to generation, and understand that they are not meaningless songs created at the spur of the moment, but rather thoughtful messages full of theological and doctrinal meaning, as most of all originate in Europe, where the Christian message was preached by the Apostles of the Incarnate Son of God.

Some of these carols start by establishing the setting (the backdrop) in which the Nativity of Christ took place: "*Silent night, holy night / All is calm, all is bright*" (Silent Night), "*O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie / Above the deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by*" (O Little Town of Bethlehem), "*It came upon the midnight clear / That glorious song of old / From angels bending near the earth / To touch their harps of gold*" (It came upon the midnight clear). Oh, how beautiful and truthful words! Even though His coming was announced centuries before, by the prophets of the Old Testament, the Birth of our Lord and Savior takes place in the silence and calmness of the night, unnoticed by the world that was busy with its continuous wandering in the "*darkness and the shadow of death*" (Mathew 4:16). The image of the angels who are "*bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold*" speaks of the role of the angels who are God's messengers to the world. Besides the Nativity of Christ, they are also present at the most important moments in the history of our salvation: the Annunciation, the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, the Ascension into heaven, etc.

The silence of the night is interrupted by the choir of the angels who bring the **good tidings** to the whole world. Christ is announced as the new-born **King** and **the Son of God**. According to His human

nature He descends from the line of David the King: “Hark! The herald angels sing / Glory to the **new-born King!**” (Hark the herald angels sing), “**Glad tidings** of great joy I bring / To you and all mankind” (While shepherds watched their flocks), “From God our heav’nly Father / A blessed angel came / And unto certain shepherds / Brought **tidings** of the same / O **tidings of comfort and joy**” (God rest You merry Gentlemen), “To you, in David’s town, this day is born of **David’s line** / The Saviour who is Christ the Lord” (While shepherds watched their flocks).

As foretold by the Old Testament prophets, Christ is **born of the Virgin Mary**. His divinity is “**veiled in flesh**” and His name is **Emmanuel** as indicated by the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: “Christ, by highest heav’n adored / Christ the everlasting Lord / Late in time behold Him come / **Offspring of the Virgin’s womb** / **Veiled in flesh** the God-head see / Hail **th’Incarnate Deity** / Pleased as Man with man to dwell / **Jesus, our Emmanuel**” (Hark! The herald angels sing), “Silent night, holy night! / All is calm, all is bright / ‘Round yon **Virgin Mother and Child**” (Silent night).

The Child born in Bethlehem is the **Son of God**; He is the **Saviour of the world** and the **Incarnate Word of God**: “Silent night, holy night / **Son of God**, loves pure light” (Silent Night), “God rest you merry gentlemen / Let nothing you dismay / Remember: **Christ our Savior** / Was born on Christmas Day / ...How that in Bethlehem was born / **The Son of God** by name” (God rest you merry gentlemen), “Yea, Lord, we greet Thee / Born this happy morning / Jesus to Thee be glory giv’n / **Word of the Father** / **Now in flesh appearing**” (O come, all ye faithful).

Some of the Christmas carols mention the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, offered by the **three Wise Men**, which represent the Three ministries of Christ: king, God and a Man who is to suffer and die: “Then enter’d in **there wise men** three / Full rev’reently upon their knee / And offer’d there in His presence / **Their gold and myrrh and frankincense**” (The first Noel), “Born a Babe on Bethlehem’s plain / **Gold we bring to crown Him again** / **King** forever, ceasing never / Over us all **to reign** / **Frankincense** to offer have I / Incense owns a **Deity nigh** / Prayer and praising, all men raising / Worship Him, **God on high** / **Myrrh** is mine, its bitter perfume / Breathes a life of gathering gloom / **Sorr’wing, sighing, bleeding, dying** / **Sealed in the stone-cold tomb**” (We three kings of Orient are).

Messiah came to bring **peace** to every soul and **reconciliation** between God and His masterpiece, man: “**Peace on earth and mercy mild** / **God and sinners reconciled**” (Hark! The herald angels sing). He liberated us from the **the fear of death** and brought **salvation** to the whole world: “**Now ye need not fear the grave**, Peace! Peace! / **Jesus Christ was born to save**” (Good Christian men rejoice); “**Jesus Christ was born for this: He hath ope’d the heav’nly door** / and man is blessed ever more” (Good Christian men rejoice).

The holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church see the birth of Christ as the Feast of **our own spiritual birth** and the **re-creation** of man. This idea is expressed by one of the Christmas carols in these beautiful words: “Mild he lays His glory by / Born that **man may never die** / Born to raise the sons of earth / **Born to give them second birth**” (Hark! The herald angels sing).

There are no better words to conclude our attempt to explore the rich theological content of the Christmas carols than the ones we find in “O little town of Bethlehem,” which is not only a Christmas carol but also a prayer:

“O Holy Child of Bethlehem / Descend to us we pray / Cast out sin, and enter in / Be born in us today / We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell: / O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel.”

Fr. George Bazgan