

## Dec. 29, 2019: The Sunday after the Lord's Nativity (The flight into Egypt)

### Epistle reading: Gal. 1, 11-19:

*"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother."*

### Gospel reading: Mat. 2, 13-23:



*"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in*

*Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."*

*Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

First, let us focus on the first two sentences of the Epistle reading: *"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ."*

St. Paul the Apostle makes clear to his readers from two thousand years ago, as well as to all readers of every generation throughout the two millennia, the fact that the Gospel is God's message communicated to the people under the divine inspiration. Being of divine origin, the Word of God (Gospel) is infallible and permanent, meaning that it is applicable (valid) for every generation until the second coming of Christ.

When I say that the message of the Gospel is valid for every generation. I don't mean that it has to be presented (manipulated) in such a way as to accommodate the whim of every generation but rather that each generation must conform itself to the Gospel.

The Gospel reading for this Sunday is about the Holy family's flee to Egypt in order to avoid the destruction of the newly incarnate Son of God by Herod the king: *"Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."*

I would like to draw a comparison between Herod's rage against the Son of God and some of our contemporaries who share in the same kind of rage against Christianity and against God and display their diabolic determination to destroy the divine inspired Word of God (the Gospel) and any notion of God from schools, the minds and practices of the people. Sadly, some of our **contemporary herods** are the politicians who invoke a self-imposed political correctness in order to achieve their goals. The result is a secularized society and a desacralized individual, devoid of any sense of personal responsibility, discernment and moral values, practically a robot who behaves under the influence of unprecedented violence spewed out by the Hollywood movies and the videogames available to the youngest of our children. No wonder then, that from time to time we hear about demonic outbursts from such individuals who kill innocent people without any remorse and respect for life.

**Following the example of the Holy Family, let us take refuge under the protection of the One, Holy, Catholic (Universal) and Apostolic Church, where the whole family (parents and children) can grow spiritually in the infinite love of God the Father who gave His only-Begotten Son for the salvation of mankind!**

**Fr. George Bazgan**

## Sunday Fellowsh

There will be NO FELLOWSHIP this Sunday

## Altar boys for this Sunday:

**Cotfasa Matthew  
Pătru Nicolae Stelian**

## **CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR MESSAGE**

*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, peaceful and HAPPY NEW YEAR!*

## **MEMBERSHIP / PLEDGE**

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.

We also encourage you to renew your financial pledge and be as generous as you can.

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH!**

## **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.

**PASTORAL LETTER  
AT THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY, 2019**

† IOAN CASIAN

*by the mercies of God,  
**Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada**  
To our beloved clergy and Orthodox Christians,  
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,  
and from us, hierarchical Blessings.*

*“And when they were come 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 gifts to Him: gold and incense and myrrh.”*  
(Matthew 2, 11).

***Most Reverend Fathers,  
Beloved Faithful,***

The feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the opportunity for an encounter, but not any encounter. It is the encounter with the One who created everything, the One Whom the first people - Adam and Eve - saw and heard in Paradise, the Word of God. This event reveals to us Him who become one of us and from Whom man drifted away through sin.

Why was the incarnation of the Son of God necessary?

*“The Word of God, our common Savior and lover of mankind - says St. Athanasius the Great - takes flesh and lives as a man among men and attracts the senses of all people, as those who thought that God was in the physical things, to know the truth from the deeds which the Lord works in the body, and through Him, to think of the Father.”<sup>1</sup>*

After failing to be obedient to God, man turns his powers, and especially those of knowledge, to the *saeculum*, to the outer and material things. Since that moment the whole life of man becomes a struggle to regain the authentic knowledge of God, of his own person and of the reality surrounding him, but which always escapes him. The whole tradition of the Old and New Testaments stands as a testimony. Prophet David says, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me ”* (Ps. 51:10), and St. Paul says: *“But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members”* (Romans 7:23). The nature of man and his capacities of knowledge and choice are weakened and darkened, this thing becoming evident in the choices he makes, and which result in suffering. The mind and the thinking are more inclined towards materiality and superficiality than to the true knowledge of the Creator and to the authentic reasons He has placed in each creature and which define a true and clear way of being. Man drifts away from a simple and sure dialogue with God, the source of authentic knowledge.

Why was it necessary for the Son of God, and not another Person of the Holy Trinity, to take flesh and carry out God's plan?

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<sup>1</sup> St. Athanasius the Great. *Against Greeks. Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word. Three treatises against Arians*. Ed. EIBMO: Bucharest 2010 (translation, introduction and notes Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae) p 161

*“The reason for this - says St. Athanasius the Great - was that it was not possible for anyone else, but the Savior alone, to transform the corruptible into incorruptible, Who, in the beginning made all those that were not. Also, it was not possible for another person to restore in man the image of God, except the Image of the Father Himself. And it was not possible for another person to turn, through the Resurrection, the mortal into immortal, except the One who was the Life itself, that is, our Lord Jesus Christ. And nobody could teach about the Father and would be able to destroy the belief in idols, except the Lord who set up everything and is the only-begotten Son of the Father.”<sup>2</sup>*

God seeks to offer more gifts through the incarnation of His Son in order to remedy the corruption of man touched by sin: (1) the elimination of evil that had been established in human nature, and had become man’s *second nature* and from which he could not liberate himself by his own forces; (2) restoration in man the image of God that constitutes the backbone of his original identity as a creature of God; (3) He who, in the beginning (at the first creation), brought into the existence the world and man, was the only One who could restore the true life in this, the second creation. He who had risen from the dead on the third day was the only One who could do this from within the human nature; (4) He who had planted the reasons of all things, including man and, therefore, the premises of authentic knowledge of God, of the human self and of the world, He, the Son of God, was the only one who was able to reveal them to man in their authenticity and completeness.

The rediscovery of the gift of authentic generosity, the result of a restored inner health, could only be done through the work of the One who had created everything, bringing everything out of nothing, and who was the Word and Son of God and the Architect of everything.

As we see from the biblical text, the encounter of the three magi with God causes a pouring out of their heart manifested by the generosity of the gifts and by the pious respect shown when they met the child Jesus at the manger of Bethlehem. The gifts offered by the magi become the expression of their joy of meeting the Lord and the confirmation of the heavenly signs. The three gifts - *gold, incense and myrrh* - in addition to their material value, have also a spiritual significance, according to St. Gregory the Great:

*“There is something more that must be understood about gold, incense and myrrh. Solomon testifies that gold symbolizes wisdom when he says, ‘a pleasing treasure lies in the mouth of the wise’ (Prov. 21:20). The psalmist bears witness to that incense which prayer offers to God when he says, ‘Let my prayer ascend as incense in your sight’ (Ps. 140:2). The myrrh indicates the mortification of our bodies, of which the holy Church speaks through its workers who strive even unto death on behalf of God, ‘My hands dripped with myrrh’ (Song 5:5). And so, do we offer gold to the newborn king if we shine in his sight with the brightness of the wisdom from high. We too offer Him incense if we enkindle on the altar of our hearts the thoughts of our human minds by our holy pursuit of prayer, so as to spread a sweet fragrance to God by our heavenly desire. We also offer Him myrrh if we mortify the vices of our bodies by our self-denial.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Idem p 169 – 170

<sup>3</sup> St. Gregory the Great. *Forty Gospel Homilies* (PL 76: 1113; CS 123:58-59 - *Homily 8*) in Manlio Simonetti (ed). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (I a / Matthew 1 - 13). Ed. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois (USA) p 28 Coll. 2.

St. Gregory tells us that the three gifts - *gold, incense and myrrh* – are the expressions of generosity but, at the same time, they mean much more; they represent the new reality of a profound transformation that's taking place in the restored and renewed man after the experience of meeting the Lord and after experiencing His providence and guidance toward this encounter with Him. According to St. Gregory, Man is restored to the fullness of his powers in this encounter with God. The first restored power, signified by gold, is the *wisdom* that begins to perceive God and His work in everything as He is. Man regains the natural rationality which the Creator had placed in him and in everything at the time of creation. The second restored power, signified by the incense, is that of *prayer* that gives man his wings. Man knows God through prayer. Prayer lifts the man up and sets him on the path of ascent to the source of life. And finally, the third restored power, signified by the myrrh, is represented by *the deed*, the ascetic effort of purification, of cleansing or subduing the passions that break the unitary harmony of the whole human being. This way, the human person offers itself to God in the fullness of its inner and outer powers. First, the human wisdom begins to be flooded by the uncreated light and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. On the altar of our hearts, through prayer, we offer to God our thoughts as an offering of sacrifice and purification so that we can receive the fullness of the divine life. And in the end, we advance towards acting, that is, the ascetic effort of fighting against one's selfishness through virtues, making through them room for God.

Understood in this perspective, the sentiment of generosity that we see in the three magi is nothing but the spontaneous movement that God has placed in the very nature of man and which is the immanent reflection of the movement of generosity and dedication of the Persons of Holy Trinity, which means love.

*"By offering the sacrifice of virtues, or of our openness in the Church to the infinite God - says Father Dumitru Staniloae, - we achieve the extended unity of Christ's body in which the infinite love of the Persons of the Holy Trinity moves, unity whose beginning was set by the Word through the incarnation. The virtues are the forms and degrees of our unending openness to the Father and to our fellow human beings through love in Christ, for in Christ this opening has been made and remains forever."*<sup>4</sup>

By the work of the virtues, the person open to the Creator, becomes a temple or a church in which God and His saving grace dwell. Through virtues, humanity becomes an extended body of Christ in communion with the Holy Trinity. Man offers to God all his outer and inner gifts as a total offering. The greatest virtue, however, is the self-giving by which man embodies and expresses his most authentic and intimate vocation, that is, the human love, the expression of the trinitarian love. This means to be a church of the true God. This means to be in the image and likeness of God. This brings everything into unity, both from a personal and community point of view. It best expresses the mystery of divine unity and love in the churched humanity, directed toward the new leaven, characterised by the communion with God.

*"God is now with all of us - says the Archimandrite Vasile Vasilachi - sharing with everybody His life, His truth and His grace for our eternal happiness! Are you with God? Are you, during this Christmas season, a new Bethlehem to receive Jesus Christ in your heart? With Him is possible to create a new man, a new family, a new society and a new era! This will be the best*

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<sup>4</sup> *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. (vol 2) Ed. EIBMBOR, Bucharest 2003, p 231

*gift, the First One, for each of us, having Jesus Christ in our hearts for eternity. Merry Christmas!”<sup>5</sup>*

***Beloved Christians,***

The year 2019, dedicated to the Patriarchs Nicodim Munteanu and Justin Moisescu, to the distinguished representatives of the Romanian village - priests, teachers and diligent mayors - as well as to the Church book translators, reminds us of the example of the magi. All of the aforementioned and many others have put their personal gifts in the service of God and of their fellow men, contributing through them, according to the measure of grace of God bestowed upon them, to the work of the Church and the communities which they have served. In better or more difficult times, they knew how to share the gift of gratitude toward God and the neighbor.

We also contemplated this year the beauty, the clarity and the generous richness of the simple but noble culture of the Romanian peasant who knew how to transfigure his daily life within the Romanian village, into a paradisiac garden, having Christ, the tree of life, through the Church, present in the middle of it. Through his participation in the Sunday holy services, the Romanian peasant guided his senses through the Church towards God, knowing that this is the most natural and normal way to return to the spirit of paradise, that is to understand the divine reasons that underlie every creature or thing created by God and through this to come to live the presence of God in a clear, simple and wise way.

Let us also follow the example of our predecessors – magi, priests, teachers, diligent mayors, Church book translators and so on - and let us put our gifts in the service of God, of the Church and of our neighbors, in order to rebuild a world according to the beauty, the kindness and the truth thought from eternity by God.

On the occasion of the feasts of the Lord’s Nativity, the New Year and the Epiphany, I extend to you my most sincere blessing and wishes for good health and spiritual achievements in our Lord Jesus Christ!

***Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!***

Your brother in prayer to Christ the Lord, the One born in the cave of Bethlehem,

† **IOAN CASIAN**

Saint-Hubert/Montreal, Feast of the Lord’s Nativity, 2019

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<sup>5</sup> *The Nativity of Jesus Christ*, p 63 – 64 in *The Supremacy of God*. Theological Collection ‘Word of Life’: New York, 1991



## 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’rently 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 / Sorrowing, 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**