



ALL-MERCIFUL SAVIOR MISSION NEWSLETTER

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25TH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST, DEC. 11, 2005

civil date / church date



THIS WEEK'S CALENDAR

Dec. 11 / Nov. 28	SUNDAY	25th of Pentecost.	Tone 8.	<i>Fast, FOW.*</i>	St. Stephen the New.	Service 10 a.m.
Dec. 12 / Nov. 29	Monday			<i>Fast, FOW*</i>	St. Paramon & 370 Other Martyrs, of Bithynia.	
Dec. 13 / Nov. 30	Tuesday			<i>Fast, FOW*</i>	St. Andrew the Apostle, the First-Called.	
Dec. 14 / Dec. 1	Wednesday			<i>Fast</i>	St. Nahum the Prophet.	
Dec. 15 / Dec. 2	Thursday			<i>Fast, FOW*</i>	St. Habacuc (Avvakum) the Prophet.	
Dec. 16 / Dec. 3	Friday			<i>Fast</i>	St. Sophonias (Zephaniah) the Prophet.	
Dec. 17 / Dec. 4	Saturday			<i>Fast, FOW*</i>	St. Barbara & St. Alexander Hotovitsky, martyrs.	Vigil 6:30 p.m.

* *Fast, OW* means that oil and wine are allowed that day. **Fast, FOW* means fish is also allowed that day.

CHRISTMAS: A GREAT FEAST OR A SECULAR HOLIDAY?

by Very Rev. Michael Abdelahad, Antiochian Archdiocese

During the month of September, I needed to purchase a birthday card. I entered the card store, "...when what to my wondering eyes should appear, but..." a display of Christmas ornaments. My initial reaction was surprise, because I had never seen this display put out so early. Usually, they wait until Halloween is over, don't they? Surprise turned to indignation as I asked my usual question: "What does this have to do with the birth of Jesus?" At that point, however, I decided to abandon my usual pre-Christmas cynicism and give this display the benefit of the doubt. Walking over to the display of ornaments with an open mind, here is what I found: Star Trek and Star Wars ornaments; Larry Bird, Michael Jordan and Henry Aaron ornaments; Disney character ornaments alongside Bugs Bunny and his friends. It is certainly not hard to imagine that Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa ornaments will be available shortly. There was an entire section devoted to St. Nicholas, but instead of finding a true depiction of the sainted Archbishop, I found the universally accepted image of a fat, jolly, old elf in a red suit. During my browsing, I did see an occasional angel ornament and, tucked away on the bottom shelf, I finally found a Nativity scene. Unfortunately, this exercise only served to reinforce what I have felt for a long time: December 25th has become a secular holiday, and it presents us, as

Orthodox Christians, with a series of contrasts and contradictions. For the sake of this article, I have chosen to reflect on two.

1. *Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas*

One of the most visible contradictions for Orthodox Christians is the contrast between Santa Claus and Saint Nicholas. If we look at an icon of Saint Nicholas and compare it with a picture of Santa Claus, there is no physical resemblance whatsoever. The differences, however, go much deeper than physical appearance. Santa Claus is the embodiment of "getting". Every child who sits in Santa's lap at the local mall is asked "What do YOU WANT for Christmas?" Saint Nicholas, on the other hand, is the embodiment of "giving to others". Hopefully, we are all aware of the many stories of Saint Nicholas' benevolence in his ministry as Archbishop of Myra. He is especially known for his generosity toward children, and he reflects the Scriptural attitude of defending and upholding the poor and the fatherless. While Santa Claus has become synonymous with self-indulgence, Saint Nicholas challenges us to charitable works.

2. *"Eat, drink and be merry" or the Nativity Fast*

In our society, the period preceding Christmas is a time of frenzied activity. Much of this activity is inevitable, based on the fact that an important day is approaching. Much of it, however, is completely avoidable and not at all in keeping with the majesty that this Great Feast deserves. How often do we hear people say: "I can't wait until Christmas is over?" How often do we encounter people who are desperate for something to do on December 27th or 28th,

but are just too exhausted to do anything? How often do we hear people talking about their “post-holiday depression”? How often are we the people who are too tired and too frustrated to enjoy the celebration? Activities like shopping, cooking, baking and cleaning may be unavoidable when it comes to this type of celebration. Do we have to immerse ourselves, however, in a forty-day period of celebration prior to December 25th?

The Orthodox Church mandates that a forty-day period of fasting precede the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is our unwillingness to immerse ourselves in this Fast, however, that leaves us tired, frustrated and exhausted. Compare, for a moment, the joyful exhaustion that accompanies Great Lent with the exhaustion that accompanies Christmas shopping and parties. They are not at all alike, are they? As Orthodox Christians, we would find a way to avoid massive celebrations in the days leading up to Pascha. Why are we so unwilling to do the same thing during the Nativity Fast?

Sadly, when it comes to our preparation for the Feast of the Nativity we settle for local customs at the expense of the Tradition of the Church. Forty days of celebrating is chosen over the Nativity Fast and the celebration of the twelve days of Christmas. Thanksgiving turkey is chosen over maintaining our Fast. We even joke about a “one-day dispensation” that doesn’t exist. We must understand that by making these choices, we are choosing 200 years of traditions over nearly 2,000 years of Holy Tradition. Is that a trade that we are really willing to make?

What can I do? I am only one person.

1. A critical decision needs to be made. Do I want to be a practicing Orthodox Christian or a member of mainstream society? Answering this question will determine whether or not we choose to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity or Christmas.
2. Having decided to be Orthodox Christians, we must rededicate ourselves to the concept of Fast, Feast, post-Feast, leave-taking. To celebrate this blessed event before December 25th is very presumptuous on our part. We are quick to ask Western churches how they can celebrate Palm Sunday before the Passover. We must begin to ask ourselves a similar question regarding the Nativity.
3. Return Saint Nicholas to his rightful place as an Archbishop who championed the cause of the needy. The Nativity fast must be a time when we concern ourselves with the scriptural mandate to give alms, i.e., to provide for others instead of for ourselves. During Vespers on the eve of the Feast of the Nativity, we hear the following words: “What shall we offer thee, O Christ, who for our sake has appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by thee offers thee thanks. The angels offer thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger; and we offer thee a virgin Mother. O pre-eternal God, have mercy on us.” An important aspect of the celebration of the Nativity is our offering to Christ, through our devotion to the “least of the brethren.” If we are not upholding the poor, the widow and the fatherless, if we are not caring for our neighbor as the Good Samaritan did, then we are not making an offering to Christ.
4. We cannot expect to change anything unless we are willing to take the first step.

NEWS

- Fr. Aidan has been working on a book of chants that go with the Psalms. Please pray for him.
- Don’t forget the mission in Haiti, which is supplying good Haitian coffee to Americans to support the active Orthodox ministry there. Just send your order (\$15 per pound, for shipping and handling \$5 for 1 or 2 packages; call 615/536-5239 for shipping cost of larger quantities) to: Haitian Orthodox Mission, attn: Mission Bleu Coffees, 1180 Orthodox Way, Liberty, TN 37095. What a good Christmas present to a coffee lover!
- Don’t forget to give your church a Christmas present this year.
- Our website is now home to the icons of over 400 hard-to-find Western Saints. All Saints of God, pray for us!

SCRIPTURES THIS WEEK

Today: Ephesians 4:1-6, Luke 13:10-17

Mon. 2 Timothy 2:20-26; Luke 19:37-44

Tue. 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4; Luke 19:45-48

Wed. 2 Timothy 4:9-22; Luke 20:1-8

Thu. Titus 1:5-2:1; Luke 20:9-18

Fri. Titus 1:15-2:10; Luke 20:19-26

Sat. Galatians 3:8-12; Luke 9:57-62

Troparion, tone 8. O All-Merciful Saviour, Thou Luminary like the sun: | Through the light of Thy radiance grant us eloquence, | that with pure conscience we may sing praises on Thy feast all-divine, | glorifying Thee the only-begotten Son, and the consubstantial Spirit; | for Thou givest us peace and great mercy.

Kontakion, t. 4. I committed every abomination, O All-Merciful Saviour, | and fell into the pit of despair. | Yet I groan from the depths of my heart | and cry to Thee, O Word: | Hasten, O Merciful One, | and quickly hep us, | for merciful art Thou!

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