



## The Nativity of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ

Each year as we celebrate the Feast of Christ's Nativity, our western culture has developed many customs and traditions that surround us. Stores begin putting up Christmas decorations and playing the familiar Christmas carols as early as October 1, and in the mid-1980's, a new term was coined for this: "Christmas Creep." As we get closer to western Christmas, the decorating, shopping for presents and office parties can become almost a frenzy of activity. Yet, for those of us in Orthodox Churches that celebrate Christ's Nativity according to the Julian Calendar, there can be an awkward period between December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 7<sup>th</sup> when the decorations are taken down and things return to 'business as usual.'

While it's great that people acknowledge Christmas each year, it must be admitted that quite a bit of secular influence seems to compete with the spiritual meaning of this great Feast. Fortunately, our Orthodox Church has preserved for us the great mystery of Christ's Incarnation through the Divine Services, Holy Fathers and Sacred Tradition.

In order to better appreciate the true meaning of the Incarnation, we must go back to the Garden of Eden, for it was there that our ancestors Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment and brought about the Fall of our human race. Not wishing to leave mankind in this sorrowful condition, God decided to be born as a man of the Most Pure Virgin Mary in order to open the way back to our heavenly home and bring salvation to all those who would believe in Him.

St. Theophan the Recluse compared this with the following image: "A king promises freedom to a man who is imprisoned in a dungeon and bound with fetters. The prisoner waits a day, then another, then months, and years. He sees no fulfillment of the promise, but does not lose hope, and believes in the king's words. Finally, he sees signs that it is coming soon. His attention increases—he hears a noise; someone is approaching with cheerful words. Now the locks fall and the liberator enters. "Glory to Thee, O Lord!" the prisoner involuntarily cries. "The end of my imprisonment has arrived, and soon I will see God's light!"

This image resonates with the famous statement of St. Athanasius the Great: "*The Son of God became man, that we might become god.*" In the Gospel of John 10:34, the Lord says "*Is it not written in you Law, I said ye are gods?*" The Holy Fathers tell us that when we receive the gift of the Grace of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism, we are reborn into new spiritual life. With God's help and the help of the Church, we can receive the strength we need to struggle against the sinful passions and acquire the virtues. However, our participation in the Holy Sacraments of Confession and Communion and all the rest, are essential in order for us to 'become God-like' through *deification* as our Holy Fathers called it. Let's reflect on these things that we might better be able to give thanks to God for this great gift of His Incarnate Son, Who frees us from death and sin and offers us salvation and eternal life!