

Dr Vrame shared some wonderful thoughts about the Advent season and the Feast of the Nativity last fall. I find him to be a meaningful writer, integrating the teaching of our Orthodox Faith and the world about us, and bringing the humor that we all need as catechetical teachers. PMO

The Nativity is Upon Us

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Often lost amid the lights, decorations, shopping and celebrating is the significance of the Nativity of Christ, in other words the Incarnation itself. As Orthodox Christians, we make an extremely radical claim: that God became human, he became one of us. Of course we believe he retained the fullness of his divinity even as he took on the fullness of our humanity, except sin. Fr. John Breck in his book *God With Us* (SVS Press, 2003, p. 158) offers a clear explanation of the meaning of the Incarnation when he writes, "Why the Incarnation? Because in order for us to share in His life, He had to assume all the conditions of both our life and our death. He had to become what we are, in order to enable us to become what He is in the fullness of His eternal life and glory."

As we begin the season of the Christmas Fast, we have an opportunity to reflect first on the mystery of the Incarnation. It is an extremely difficult idea to fathom, so don't be dismayed! This is also a good time to reflect on our human nature, what we believe about ourselves as human beings. While we say, we are created in the "image and likeness of God," (Genesis 1:26), this leaves us with the question of what is the image of God within humanity. *God's Many-splendored Image* (Baker Academic, 2010) a new book by an eminent Orthodox theologian and patristic scholar, Sr. Nonna Verna Harrison, can be helpful to consider this question. While I am still in the middle of the book, she clearly and cogently explores the issue through the lens of the early Church writers, such as the Desert Fathers and the great Fathers of the Church, such as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, whose writings she has explored extensively. She points out that it is not one facet of our nature that is the image of God within us, such as our rationality, but many facets, such as our freedom, virtue, embodiment, and more.

In this time of year there are many other themes and topics to consider as well.

First, today the Nativity Fast begins [November 15]. Unlike other fast seasons in the Church, there are few if any references to the season's beginning in our liturgical hymns. This tells us that the fast is "recent," that it came about well after the hymns for today were written. Given that the Fast is 40 days in length tells us that the desire is to imitate Great Lent in some way by creating this period of preparation for the birth of the Lord. How people

observe the fast varies widely from culture to culture and parish to parish, so I will not tell this worldwide audience how to observe it. Ask your parish priest or local church leaders about how your community observes the fast.

Second, the season is filled with the celebrations of many saints. To name a few from now until Christmas, we will celebrate St. Katherine, St. Andrew, St. Barbara, St. Savas, St. John of Damascus, St. Nicholas, St. Spyridon and these are just some of the "big names"! While every day celebrates a saint of importance, this is a rich season for study and celebration (and as a humorous aside, one reason why I think some people don't observe the fast too strictly, especially early on - too many nameday celebrations).

Third, in American culture, the Christmas season is a time for charitable giving. This is an important activity and there are many ways to organize parish life and programs to collect food, warm clothing, money and other items and distribute them to the poor and the needy around us. Also, many youth groups will devote time to visiting shut-ins, whether from the parish or the community at large, offering gifts and most importantly offering friendship and fellowship to others. Of course, these activities can and should happen year round, but Christmas is a good time to start or reinvigorate a program. To this, worth studying and thinking about are all the reasons in our society for the existence of the poor and the lonely and what the Orthodox Christian Faith teaches about our social responsibilities.

Fourth, there are many cultural traditions for celebrating and commemorating the Christmas season, from cookies and breads made at only this time of year, to the ever present candy cane (shepherd's staffs - not "J's for Jesus"). But all of them carry the message of Christmas into our homes, helping us to remember the story of the Nativity. A great family or family night activity could be to make these "treats" and share the stories they relate, as well as the stories from our own childhoods with the next generation.

The season is rich for our work as teachers but also for growing in our knowledge as well.

