

Vigil of The Nativity

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

We are now approaching the Feast of the Nativity of Christ! Today, Christmas Eve, is a special day, because Holy Mother Church uses this vigil celebration to prepare us in a special way to accept into our hearts and souls the One born of the Virgin Mary, Christ the Savior.

Not only does the Christmas Vigil stand out from all the other days of preparation leading up to the solemn feast of the Lord's Nativity, this vigil also distinguishes Christmas from most of the other twelve major feasts of our church year. Only the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord has a liturgical arrangement similar to that of the Nativity. The Christmas Vigil can be equated with the ray that penetrates us from the "never-ending day of the Kingdom of Christ." It opens before us the veil of eternity and inspires believers to encounter the Feast of the Nativity, which St. Gregory The Wonderworker called "the great and wonderful mystery."

The Prophet Isaiah foretold that "The people walking in darkness will see a great light" (Is 9: 1). This prophecy continues to excite us, especially when we hear it in the Christmas Vigil Liturgy. On this night, even as the spirit of darkness envelops the world, an event is being repeated that never ceases to amaze us: the people who walk in darkness are seeing a great light—a light that makes us think about the mystery of Christ's birth.

An ancient text of the Slavic Church known as *The Slavic Prologue* in its sermon for December 24 offers this spiritual encouragement for the faithful:

“Know, brethren, that this day is a fast before the Feast of the Nativity of Christ. Therefore, on this day, gather with love and purity for prayer, overcoming anger, clearing bodily transgressions, and rejecting all bad deeds, so that we may become worthy to partake of the Body of God with pure mouths and immaculate hearts. The Lord clothed Himself for us and voluntarily became poor.”

This evening the Church reminds us again that God became man for our salvation. Christ, as Saint Leo the Great teaches, assumed the nature of the human race in order to return it to its Creator, so that when the Father of Death, the devil (Rev. 2:24), seized it, he was defeated by it. St. Leo tells us that “In order to call us to eternal bliss from our ancient shackles and earthly errors, the One, to whom we ourselves could not ascend, descended to us.”

On this night we share the joy of the Gospel: God loves us, He loves us so much that He has given us His Son, so that He may be a light to us in darkness. He is the light that illuminates the darkness. He is our world.

The shepherds were the first to see the “tent” in which the Lord chose to dwell among us, the first to see the earthly body of the Christ Child. They became the first because they were among the least of Christ’s brothers. And they became the first because they were not sleeping at night, rather they were keeping vigil over their flock. Today, tonight, we are like them because we also came to our church to meet Him.

Dear Believers! Let us stand with the shepherds before the Infant Jesus, let us stand in silence. Together with them, let us thank the Lord for giving us the child Jesus, and together with them let us raise from the depths of our hearts our cry of praise: We bless you, Lord God Almighty, who humbled Yourself for us. Being immeasurable, You diminished Yourself; being rich, You impoverished Yourself; being omnipotent, You humbled Yourself. On this holy evening, fill our hearts with Your tenderness, love, peace, and mercy.

Christmas

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Dear Beloved Brothers and Sisters!

It turns out that in the village of Bethlehem, not only did nobody know about the new-born Messiah, but nobody was ready to accept it. Moreover, the political elites of Judea were satisfied with their position. They did not need a Messiah, even if as Jews they believed in His coming. For them, the main thing was “stability.” They desired to avoid any uproar and preserve everything as it was. No wonder that the inquiries of the Magi regarding a new-born king troubled Herod, the King of the Jews appointed by the Romans. And, after consultation with the Chief Priests and the Scribes regarding the location of the Messiah’s birth, Herod ordered the death of all the infants in the environs of Bethlehem. Thus, he hoped to destroy his potential rival.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace towards men of good will!” So sang the angels at the birth of Jesus Christ. Yet, in our present time, even at Christmas, peace on earth is noticeably lacking and human hatred overflows our planet. Peace can arise only when people have a predisposition, that is, the good will to create peace. An example of such “good will” was shown at Christmas in 1914 during the First World War. Without any official order, about 100,000 German and British soldiers stopped fighting in honor of this holy day. Soldiers of the warring parties sang hymns and exchanged handshakes and even gifts.

“Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone’ (Is 9: 1). This prophecy was fulfilled when the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks and the angel appeared to them so that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2: 9).

Perhaps you have heard a story about one unbelieving man who refused to go to the church for a Christmas service, because he did not believe in the truth of the Word of God. While reading the newspaper, he heard a noise under the window and went out to see what happened. Two sparrows had hit the window and lay stunned on the ground. Other birds were

sitting on the branches of trees and shaking from the cold. The man, though, unbelieving, had a good heart and, feeling sorry for the injured birds, picked them up and took them to a warm shed. Hoping that the other sparrows would fly after him and take refuge from the cold in the shed, he left the door open. But no birds moved from their place. Then the man began to lure the sparrows with breadcrumbs, by laying a path to the shed. He hoped that the hungry birds would follow the trail. But they did not even approach the building. Then the man tried to drive them into the barn, but that also did not work. Frustrated, he thought: "If I could only explain to them that I want to help save them from the winter cold. They do not understand human language, and I cannot speak to them. If I could for just a minute be one of them..." This thought was interrupted by the ringing of the church bells. The man fell on his knees in the middle of deep snow, feeling in his heart the peace of which the angels sang on Christmas night. "Thank you, God, that you became one of us!" That was all that the man was able to say.

Another legend relates that after the birth of Jesus, shepherds hastened to the cave with various gifts—some with the fruits of their work, others with things of value. But amidst this show of generosity, there was one peasant that had brought nothing. He was so poor that he had nothing to give. And while all the others presented their gifts, he stood shame-faced to the side. After a while, it became difficult for St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary to accept and acknowledge the many gifts, especially since Mary was trying to tend to her baby. When her eyes fell on the shepherd with empty hands, she asked him to come near and laid Jesus in his hands. Holding the Christ Child, this shepherd realized that he had received what he did not deserve, that he held the greatest gift in his hands. He looked at his hands, those hands that had always seemed empty: they had become a cradle for God. He felt loved and, having defeated his shame, began to show Jesus to the others.

Dear Believers, if any of you feels that your hands seem empty, if any of you sees that your heart is poor in love, then this day is for you. God's grace has come to shine in your life. Let us take the newborn into our arms so that the light of Christmas may shine in our hearts.

Sunday After Christmas – David, Joseph, and James

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Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Each of us calls Christmas a family holiday because we celebrate it with our family. It carries with it great joy, which is shrouded in Divine silence, inner peace, and tranquility. The meaning of this family celebration is revealed today. We honor the memory of people close, in the flesh, to Christ the Savior, and the memory of his earthly family. It is not surprising that today's Gospel of Matthew (2:13-23) was about the atrocities of Herod, who decided to kill all the babies of Bethlehem that were two years of age or under.

Today, the Church turns our attention to Christian families. Because it is the family that is called to share the sorrows and joys of each of its members. Everything in human history has changed, places of one empire have changed, political systems have crumbled, the borders of the earth have been cut every millennium, and only the family has been preserved as God's institution of love for one another, serving one another for life. Any destruction of the family is a sin.

Usually, we do not notice that Christ began his earthly life as an emigrant and political refugee. Today's Gospel reading immersed us in the cold reality of those times. Frightened, Joseph hurriedly took Mary and baby Jesus away, and in the middle of the night fled to Egypt from the persecution of King Herod. The infant was at the center of political intrigue even before he was able to walk.

The events of the Nativity are reminiscent of the story of Moses in the Old Testament. Pharaoh ordered the killing of all Jewish children so that the people did not increase in number and could not rebel against their ruler. But God's will was against Pharaoh. Moses was the only one who managed to escape, and it was he who led the people out of the house of slavery. In the Christmas story, Herod is the new pharaoh, ordering the killing of hundreds of innocent children, hoping that among them would be the newborn King of Israel.

Holy Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis call modern culture the culture of death. The devil makes various efforts to deprive us of the true peace and joy that Jesus brings us. He tries to drive the truth of God out of our minds and sow the belief that the source of goodness, peace, joy, and love for us are material things and the benefits of the body - beauty and glory. To do this, he spreads various ideologies around the world. An evil spirit destroys our gift of love and its fruits.

The example of St. Joseph teaches us that the Nativity of Jesus, in a person's soul, occurs when he listens carefully to God's voice. And God's voice is the voice of love. When a person listens to God's voice in his soul, God fills him with his love and joy, as John the Theologian teaches: "...God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn. 4:16).

A similar thing happened to the wise men, from the east, who came to worship Jesus. They came to Jesus one way, and warned by an angel in a dream not to turn to Herod. They went back the other way and happily returned home.

Dear believers! Jesus Christ continues to be born in our hearts. It is born in our souls and becomes a source of peace and joy. Happy Holidays to you all, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year!