

Preparing for Christ's Nativity

(The Virgin Mary in Prophecy & Christian Tradition)

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On November 15, the Church will enter the period of the Christian year known as the Nativity Fast (Advent). For forty days our attention will be directed toward the Nativity of Christ, both in the proper parts of the services and in the scriptural readings.

As part of the lenten effort, several days in December are dedicated to the memory of Old Testament prophets, persons with an extraordinary call to proclaim God's will and announce beforehand the Savior's coming into the world. On December 1 we commemorate the prophet Nahum; December 2, Habakkuk; December 3, Zephaniah; December 16, Haggai; and on December 17, Daniel and the Three Youths. In addition, on the two Sundays preceding Christmas the entire assembly of Old Covenant prophets are among those many people commemorated who prepared the way for Christ's advent.

Of particular significance is the feast day which occurs in the midst of the Fast, on November 21: The Presentation (or Entrance) of the Theotokos into the Temple. According to Tradition as old as the Church itself, the parents of the Theotokos were Joachim and Anna. Being elderly and having no children, they prayed that God would grant them a child, even in their old age. God answered their prayer by giving to them a daughter. Everything surrounding her birth and infancy was extraordinary. First, her birth was announced by an angel. Second, she was born of a very old and barren mother. Third, when according to custom she was presented in the temple forty days after her birth, the priest Zacharias, father of the Forerunner John the Baptist, received her with unusual joy, taking her into the Holy of Holies, a place reserved only for the priest to enter once a year. Finally, from an early age until her betrothal, the blessed handmaiden was raised in the temple. Mary being brought to the temple at the age of three, escorted by young girls carrying candles or lamps in their hands, constitutes the fundamental event commemorated on November 21.

Many Old Testament prophecies which pointed to God's New Covenant with man, had to do with the instrument that He would use to accomplish His purpose. We will recall that the first prophecy about Mary occurred at the very moment of man's fall. God said unto the serpent which had beguiled both Adam and Eve:

"Because thou hast done this...I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3: 14-15).

Mary is the new Eve, the one who crushes with her perfection and sinlessness, the head of evil. In addition the burning bush which *"was not consumed"* by fire (Exodus 3:1-6), the uncrossed gate of the temple (Ezekiel 44:1-3), and a host of other Old Testament types or images, tell of this extraordinary creature that was to be the earthly instrument by which God

would enter into His own material creation. Psalm 45, recited in part at the Proskomedia prior to the Divine Liturgy, is a prophecy directly related to the feast in question:

"The King's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the King in raiment of needlework: the virgins, her companions that follow her, shall be brought unto thee. With gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought: they shall enter into the King's palace" (Psalm 45: 13-15).

Only from such a person as Mary could God take flesh -- the perfect human nature of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We call her sinless, even immaculate. By these words we mean that she committed no personal sin. We reject, however, the idea of an immaculate conception, or any approach to the Theotokos which would distinguish her radically from the entire race of mortals, making her something other than human. We also call her ever-virgin, because in spite of attempts to prove otherwise, it has never been demonstrated that she had children other than Jesus, nor had she sexual relations with any man.

Mary has a place of high honor in Christian Tradition. She is referred to as being *"more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious without compare than the seraphim."* She is called Theotokos, or God-bearer. She is even known as the Mother of God, for the One to whom she gave birth is God, but unites perfectly within Himself His own divine nature and our human nature as well, identifying Himself completely with the whole race of mortals. During the feast of the Presentation much is made of the Virgin as the abode of God, the one who enters the Holy of Holies to become herself the Tabernacle of the Righteous One.

The veneration of the Theotokos, the high honor given her in the Church, is a fulfillment of the prophetic words that she herself spoke:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior; for He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1: 46-48).

The angel Gabriel had addressed her in these words: *"Hail, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women"* (Luke 1:28). The woman who called out from the crowd in the Gospel lesson read at all major feasts of the Theotokos, *"Blessed is the womb that bare thee,"* was answered by our Lord, *"Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it"* (Luke 11: 27-28). Mary is considered to be the person, par excellence, who heard the word of God and kept it.

The consequences of denying the Theotokos her rightful place in the life of Christians are more serious than one may think, unless he considers all its implications. The Church's theology insists upon the two perfect natures of Christ; He is both fully God and fully Man. The Virgin Mary was the perfect human being from whom Christ's human nature was taken. Man's redemption was made possible through the union of God and man in Christ, and it is over the very fundamental question of the personality of Christ that the Church throughout its history

has had to wage its bitterest battles. In fact, the main work of the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus 431 AD) was to combat Nestorianism, a heresy which denied Mary the title, Theotokos. At least partially, as a result of this fifth century controversy, the very specific Greek term for Christ's mother is used untranslated in Orthodox Church services to this day. To this one title is ascribed great importance, because in a very specific way it bears witness to the salvation given to us in Christ.

De-emphasis of the sinlessness of Christ's mother, insistence upon her having other children by Joseph, and failure to remember her part in the history of the salvation of mankind, have contributed to a general misunderstanding of the Incarnation in all its fullness and power. These are but preliminary steps towards a denial of the virgin birth, and with it the divinity of Christ, the Holy Trinity, and so on.

Thus, this feast of the Presentation (Entrance) of the Theotokos stands at the beginning of the season in which we commemorate the Incarnation, the intervention of God in time and history. We rightly bestow honor, homage and veneration to the one that gave birth to God the Word, for the salvation of the world.

From the Church services celebrating Mary's Entrance:

"Heaven and earth rejoice, beholding the spiritual Heaven, the only Virgin without blemish, enter the house of God, there to be reared in reverence. To her Zacharias in amazement cried: 'O Gate of the Lord! Unto thee I open the gates of the temple: rejoice and go round it in gladness. For I know and believe that the deliverance of Israel shall now come to dwell openly in our midst, and that from thee shall be born God the Word, who grants the world great mercy.'" (From the Aposticha for the feast).

"Today is the foreshadowing of the good pleasure of God and the herald of the salvation of men. The Virgin is revealed in the temple of God, and beforehand she announces Christ to all. Let us therefore cry to her with mighty voice: Hail! Thou fulfillment of the Creator's dispensation." (Troparion for the feast). (Translations of liturgical hymns by Mother Mary and Bishop Kallistos Ware.)