

The Nativity Sermon of St. John Chrysostom

Behold a new and wondrous mystery.

My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed; He had the power; He descended; He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man, nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Since this heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does His coming amongst us in these days permit of too curious scrutiny. Though I know that a Virgin this day gave birth, and I believe that God was begotten before all time, yet the manner of this generation I have learned to venerate in silence and I accept that this is not to be probed too curiously with wordy speech.

For with God we look not for the order of nature, but rest our faith in the power of Him who works.

What shall I say to you; what shall I tell you? I behold a Mother who has brought forth; I see a Child come to this light by birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend.

Nature here rested, while the Will of God labored. O ineffable grace! The Only Begotten, Who is before all ages, Who cannot be touched or be perceived, Who is simple, without body,

has now put on my body, that is visible and liable to corruption. For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that men cannot see. For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so He has deigned to show Himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt.

Christ, finding the holy body and soul of the Virgin, builds for Himself a living temple, and as He had willed, formed there a man from the Virgin; and, putting Him on, this day came forth; unashamed of the lowliness of our nature.

For it was to Him no lowering to put on what He Himself had made. Let that handiwork be forever glorified, which became the cloak of its own Creator. For as in the first creation of flesh, man could not be made before the clay had come into His hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified, until it had first become the garment of its Maker.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infants bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit that He may save me.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been planted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He became Flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that He, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infants food from His Virgin Mother. So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the

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Magi may more easily see Him. Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny; and the heavens give glory, as the Lord is revealed by a star.

To Him, then, Who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, we offer all praise, now and forever. Amen

Holy Supper

Christmas Eve in the Carpatho-Rusyn Tradition The Christmas Eve Holy Supper (Svjatyj Vecer / Velija)

The Carpatho-Rusyn people maintain a wide variety of customs associated with all the holidays of the year, but few of them are as elaborate or as eagerly awaited as those associated with the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ.

The entire drama of events associated with Christmas is made present in the Rusyn home by the observance of the Holy Supper. The custom of Holy Supper is observed wherever Rusyns live, but variations in customs and foods served at the meal are found from region to region, village to village, even among different families. These variations testify to the richness of the Rusyn culture, but in the unity of a tradition kept by all Rusyns.

Forty Days of Preparation

The season of Christmas is heralded by forty days of prayer and fasting beginning the day after the feast of Saint Philip the Apostle, (November 14/27) [new calendar/old calendar]. This period is thus known as St. Philip's Fast (in Rusyn: Fylypovka) or the Nativity Fast. No festivities are held during this time, which is reserved for spiritual preparation for the Birth of the Savior.

Rusyns reserve the day of Christmas Eve to prepare for the Holy Supper. The men of the house spend the day caring for the livestock; the women are busy baking, cooking and cleaning. Weeks before, the houses are whitewashed or painted inside and out; this day is to make sure everything - and everyone - is thoroughly cleansed inside and out.

In our Carpathian Mountain villages, the "gazda" or head of the household feeds the animals with generous portions of food, honoring them as the animals who

gathered at the cave to honor the newborn Christ child. There he picks up some straw or hay and enters the house. Asking God's blessings that the family all live to see the next Christmas, he places it on the table, under the tablecloth, or on the floor under the table. Seeds or garlic may also be scattered on the table. He might prepare a sheaf of wheat or oats ("didko" or "Diduch") and place it in a corner of the house under the icons in hopes of a rich and good harvest next year. A clean white linen cloth covers the dinner table, representing the swaddling clothes with which the Virgin Mary clothed her infant son. An empty chair and place are set at the table in memory of departed family members and reserved for the unexpected guest for whom there should always be room.

In the middle of the table sits a large round loaf of white, corn, rye or wheat bread, similar to the Easter Paska bread but variously called "kracun", "krecun", kracunyk, rohac or lokska. Candles are placed near the center of the table, or even one in the center of the bread. The bread represents Jesus Christ who called Himself "the Bread of Life." Another candle is placed in the window as a sign of welcome to any traveler seeking shelter. Finally, a manger scene or icon of the Nativity is placed on the table. The room now represents the cave and the manger of Bethlehem, the humble surroundings of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The entire family prepares to greet the newborn Jesus by hurrying to wash their faces and hands at a nearby cold stream, believing they will be kept clean and healthy throughout the next year.

The Evening Star Appears - At Last the Holy Supper Begins

The meal begins just as the first star appears in the sky at the setting of the sun. The first star represents the star of Bethlehem. The father then proceeds into the room greeting his family with "Christos Razdajetsja" - Christ is Born!" The family replies, "Slavite Jeho" - "Glorify Him!" He then takes a rope (or chain) and after sprinkling it with holy water, ties the four legs of the table with rope or chain, asking God's blessings and protection from all corners of the world. This symbolizes the ever-lasting bond of the family.

The mother sprinkles the family members with holy water so that their souls and minds might be receptive to the meaning of the Birth of Christ. The father then takes the holy water to sprinkle the livestock and any household animals, reminding the family of the animals in the stable when Christ was born. After this blessing, the animals are fed. (It is a belief among many Rusyns that the animals can speak at midnight on Christmas Eve and would complain to God if they were mistreated!)

The candles on the table are lit to symbolize the appearance of Christ, the Light of the World, at His birth. **Con't Page 9**

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The father or eldest so leads the family in kneeling prayer, like the adoration of Christ by the shepherds and wise men. The prayer expresses gratitude to God for His blessings during the past year. It includes petitions for health, happiness, long life and salvation, that the family may be united in love forever, and blessing of the food. Then the Troparion of Christmas is sung: "Rozdestvo Tvoje Christe Boze nas, vozsija mirovi svit razuma..." "Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge.."

The food may then be blessed with holy water. A toast "vincovanja" with sweet wine, brandy "palenka", or whiskey mixed with honey is offered, again by the father. It may be simple or quite elaborate, but is usually something like this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Who was born in a manger for our sake and salvation, bless this food and drink of Your servants, for You are holy, always, now and ever, and forever." or "Good Christians! I greet you on the Feast of Christ's Nativity and wish that the Lord grant you and your children good health and fortune to praise the eternal God for many blessed years!"; those present answer "Daj Boze!" - "Grant it, O God!". The prayer is followed with the exchange of the Christmas Greeting: CHRIST IS BORN! GLORIFY HIM!, after which point everyone may be seated.

The father breaks the bread, first making the sign of the cross on the bottom of the loaf with the knife, and gives a piece to each member of the family. The bread is a symbol of Christ, the Bread of Life. The bread is then eaten. The father breaks the bread, first making the sign of the cross on the bottom of the loaf with the knife, and gives a piece to each member of the family. The bread is a symbol of Christ, the Bread of Life. The bread is then eaten.

The mother takes a tooth of garlic, dips it honey, and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the father and then on each member of the family according to seniority. The honey symbolizes the sweetness of life, the garlic - the bitterness. Garlic is held by Rusyns to have curative powers and to keep away evil spirits. When the mother makes the sign of the cross on her eligible-for-marriage daughter, she exclaims. "May Jesus grant that young men will go after you like bees to honey!"

Twelve Dishes - But Even More Variations!

Since St. Philip's Fast culminates with a day of strict fasting on Christmas Eve, the Holy Supper dishes contain no meat and (usually) no dairy products. In some locales, Rusyns keep the fast so strictly that they eat no food on Christmas Eve until the Holy Supper! The meal

consists of seven, nine, or even twelve courses, representing Christ's twelve Apostles. A wide variety of foods may be prepared, depending on the region or village, including:

- *bobal'ki (small dough balls) with kapusta (sauerkraut) or poppyseeds and honey
 - *pyrohy filled with potatoes, lekvar (prunes) or sauerkraut
 - *mushrooms and onions fried in vegetable oil
 - *pea or lima bean soup
 - *stewed and fresh fruit
 - *sauces of dried plums (slivcanka) or pears (hruscanka)
 - *Lentils
 - *Nuts
 - *macanka (thick mushroom soup)
 - *mashed potatoes
 - *meatless holubki (cabbage stuffed with rice)
 - *fish or herring
- (Each family has own traditions of food)

Regional dishes also give a specialized touch to the meal: kutja (boiled barley or buckwheat porridge with honey) in eastern Subcarpathia; kapuscanyk, adzimka, knise, or balja (variations of pagac cabbage pastry) in the Presov Region, keselyca (fermented oatmeal and yeast) in the Lemko Region. No one is permitted to skip a dish; each person must at least taste each dish!

Between the servings of each course, traditional Rusyn carols may be sung, or amusing stories and family reminiscences told. The dinner and some individual dishes can be accompanied with superstitious rites to predict what the coming year will hold: blowing candle smoke to see from what direction a suitor may come, throwing a bunch of tied spoons against the door, or using a spoon to toss kutja at the ceiling to see if it sticks (a sign of good fortune).

After dinner, the father reads the narrative of the birth of Jesus from the Bible. A prayer of thanksgiving is recited for the most precious gift of all, the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. Koljady (carols) are sung as the children eagerly hunt for nuts, fruit or coins or small toys hidden in the straw or in some secluded part of the home. If the family is fortunate enough to have a tree - it is decorated now.

The Carolers Arrive

The local carolers (jaslickari / gubi / Betlehemcj / Vyfejcemci / zvizdari) may now pay a visit to the home. The carolers come dressed as angels and shepherds, carrying a miniature church (typical in Subcarpathia) or led in procession by a star on a pole (more common in the Lemko Region/Galicia). **Con't Page 10**

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They dress in white garments, with tall cylinder hats and brightly colored ribbons across their chests, and they carry staves, perhaps with a bell at the end. Almost all ages - youngsters, teens, adults - are known to form "Bethlehem caroler" - or "Star Caroler" groups.

The guba, kuba, dido or staryj pastyr, the oldest shepherd (with a mask on his face) is the main character and also the comedian. The "Bethlehem play" they present is a short presentation of carols, sung greetings (koljadky), dialogue, dancing, and the announcement of Christ's birth. A puppet play, vertep (the cave) may be presented instead in some regions. The family then rewards the carolers with drinks or coins to thank them for their long journey from home to home. The carolers journey will continue after the evening church services, into the night, and throughout the next three days.

On To Church To Meet The Savior

The carolers, like angels, summon the listeners to Bethlehem to witness the miraculous birth of Christ. At the sound of the first bell the family hastens through the snow to the parish church to share in the joy of the service of Great Compline (Povecerije velikoje). As all its candles and icon lamps are progressively lit, the festively decorated church resounds with the antiphonal chanting of prophetic verses from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah concerning the coming of the Messiah, each followed by the response "S nami Boh, razumijte jazyci, I pokarajtesja, jako s nami Boh!" "God is with us, give ear o you nations and submit yourselves, for God is with us!" Like angels and shepherds and wise men of old, the Rusyn family joins the ranks of saints and apostles of every age who truly celebrate the birth of the Savior.

Christos Razdajetsja! Slavite Jeho!



A Christmas Sermon

Sermon preached by St. Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 380)

Christ is born, glorify Him. Christ from heaven, go out to meet Him. Christ on earth, be exalted. Sing to the Lord all the whole earth; and that I may join both in one word, let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, for Him who is of heaven and then of earth. Christ in the flesh, rejoice with trembling and with joy; with trembling because of your sins, with joy because of your hope.

Again, the darkness is past; again Light is made; again Egypt is punished with darkness; again Israel is enlightened by a pillar. The people who sat in the darkness of ignorance, let them see the great Light full of knowledge. Old things have passed away, behold all things have become new. The letter gives way, the Spirit comes to the front. The shadows flee away, the truth comes in on them. Melchizedek is concluded. He who was without Mother becomes without Father (without mother of His former state, without father of His second). The laws of nature are upset; the world above must be filled. Christ commands it, let us not set ourselves against Him. O clap your hands together all you people, because unto us a Child is born, and a Son given unto us, whose government is upon His shoulder (for with the cross it is raised up), and His name is called The Angel of the Great Counsel of the Father. Let John cry, prepare the way of the Lord; I too will cry the power of this Day. He who is not carnal is Incarnate; the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Let the Jews be offended, let the Greeks deride; let heretics talk until their tongues ache. Then shall they believe, when they see Him ascending into heaven; and if not then, yet when they see Him coming out of heaven and sitting as Judge.

This is our present Festival; it is this which we are celebrating today, the Coming of God to Man, that we might go forth, or rather (for this is the more proper expression) that we might go back to God - that putting off of the old man, we might put on the new; and that as we died in Adam, so we might live in Christ, being born with Christ and crucified with Him and buried with Him and rising with Him. For I must undergo the beautiful conversion, and as the painful succeeded the more blissful, so must the more blissful come out of the painful. For where sin abounded grace did much more abound; and if a taste condemned us, how much more does the passion of Christ justify us? Therefore let us keep the Feast, not after the manner of a heathen festival, but after a godly sort; not after the way of the world, but in a fashion above the world; not as our own, but as belonging to Him who is ours, or rather as our master's; not as of weakness, but as of healing; not as of creation, but of re-creation.

Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephen
Commemorated on [December 27](#)

The Holy Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephen was the eldest of the seven deacons, appointed by the Apostles themselves, and therefore he is called "archdeacon." He was the first Christian martyr, and he suffered for Christ when he was about thirty. In the words of Asterias, he was "the starting point of the martyrs, the instructor of suffering for Christ, the foundation of righteous confession, since Stephen was the first to shed his blood for the Gospel."

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Saint Stephen preached Christianity and defeated Jewish teachers of the Law in debate. The Jews maligned Saint Stephen, saying that he had uttered blasphemy against God and against Moses. Saint Stephen came before the Sanhedrin and the High Priest to answer these charges. He gave a fiery speech, in which he recounted the history of the Jewish nation, and denounced the Jews for persecuting the prophets, and also for executing the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ (Acts ch. 7).

During his speech, Saint Stephen suddenly saw the heavens opened and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God. The Jews shouted and covered their ears, and rushed at him. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him, but the holy martyr prayed for his murderers. Far off on the heights stood the Mother of God with the holy Apostle John the Theologian, and She prayed fervently for the martyr. Before his death Saint Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. O Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Then he joyfully gave up his pure soul to Christ.

The body of the holy Protomartyr Stephen, left to be eaten by beasts, was secretly taken up by the Jewish teacher Gamaliel and his son Habib, who buried Stephen on his estate. They both believed in Christ, and later received holy Baptism.

Saint Stephen is also commemorated on August 2 (Translation of his relics) and on September 15 (Uncovering of his relics in the year 415).

Galatians 4:4-7 (Epistle, Nativity)

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Matthew 2:1-12 (Gospel, Nativity)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

TWO BABIES IN THE MANGER

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach in Russia. They were invited to teach at many places, including a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. The two Americans related the following story:

It was in the month of December that it was time to tell the traditional story of Christmas. Many of the orphans had never heard it before since religion had previously been banned. And so the Gospel story was explained-----how Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, found no room in the inn, and went to a cave-stable where the Baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement, grasping every word. The children were given three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square cut from yellow napkins. The children tore the square into strips and placed

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the strips in the manger for straw. Squares of flannel were cut from a worn-out nightgown, and used for a baby blanket. Then a doll-like image was cut from tan felt. The children were busy assembling their manger, when one 6 year old named Misha was spotted at the end of the table. Misha had finished his project, and in his manger there was not one, but two babies! The child began to repeat the Christmas story accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby in the manger. Then Misha made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him, but I told Him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give Him like everyone else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept Him warm that would be a good gift". So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you

warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me". So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him forever.

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table as he sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon him, someone who would stay with him **FOREVER!!!**

Dear Parishioners and friends: The Christmas lesson learned is this. Never take life for granted and its not what you have in your life, but **WHOM** you have in your life that really counts.

CHRIST IS BORN!!!! GLORIFY HIM!!!!!



The Hidden Meaning Of The Twelve Days Of Christmas~

The Twelve Days of Christmas was created in England during a time of religious persecution when Catholicism was outlawed in the 16th to 18th centuries. The song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," was written as a kind of secret catechism that could be sung in public without fear of arrest – a learning or memory aid to Christians in fact. Each verse refers to a teaching of church doctrine — with the partridge being Christ who died on a tree and the "True Love" being God the Father, who gave us all gifts. The twelve days of Christmas are the twelve days between Christmas Day, Dec. 25th, the birth of Jesus, and the Epiphany, Jan. 6th, the day Christians celebrate the arrival of the Magi (Wise Men) and the revelation of Christ as the light of the world.

Each element in the song is a code word for religious truth:

1. The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus.
2. The two turtledoves are the Old and New Testaments.
3. Three French hens stand for faith, hope and love.
4. The four calling birds are the four Gospels.
5. The five gold rings recall the Hebrew Torah (Law), or the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.
6. The six geese a-laying stand for the six days of creation.
7. The seven swans a-swimming represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.
8. The eight maids a-milking are the eight Beatitudes.
9. Nine ladies dancing are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.
10. The ten lords a-leaping are the Ten Commandments.
11. Eleven pipers piping represent the eleven faithful Apostles.
12. Twelve drummers drumming symbolize the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles Creed.