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The Incarnation of God as the Opposite to Today's Sinfulness (Archimandrite Ephraim, Abbot of the Vatopaidi Monastery)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Beloved Fathers and brothers, today we celebrate the greatest event of all time and all ages: the birth of Christ, the 'capital of all feasts', according Saint John Chrysostom. God enters our life, in time, in history as 'Jesus Christ the man' (I Tim. 2, 5).

'Christ appeared in the flesh' (I Tim. 3, 16). God empties Himself, is humbled, belittles Himself, diminishes in an inconceivable manner and becomes an infant. An infant divine and human. He becomes a human person, like us, with flesh and blood, with soul and body, mind and will. Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, is perfect Man and perfect God.



The entry of the eternal, the inaccessible, but merciful God without beginning into our own reality is, according to Saint John the Damascan 'the marvel of all marvels, the only marvel under the sun'. Nothing compares with this great and imperishable mystery, not even God's very creation of the world. Then He created things that had not been; now, He Himself becomes a creature, a creation. 'The Being comes into being; He who knows no beginning, begins'. Not matter how enlightened and penetrating human or angelic understanding might be, this mystery remains shrouded and inscrutable. Even at the rebirth, the manner of the unification of the divine nature with that of us humans in the one Person of the Divine Word will still not be explicable.

When God put on human nature, He didn't feel lessened, He didn't begrudge doing so, because, in a way which is beyond understanding, human nature is able to contain the Divinity. We are God's kin, our existential essence is God-like. In order to point out to us that God isn't a stranger to us, Saint John the Evangelist says that Christ 'came into his own home' (Jn. 1, 11). Saint Gregory Palamas stresses that it's only human nature- not the angelic- which contains and is like God and is able to achieve perfect purity, to find room within itself for all the effulgence, the glory, the power and the energy of the Holy Spirit, because 'from the beginning we were not merely creations of God, but His children in the spirit'.

God knew that, in time, at some particular moment, He would wear our flesh. So, from the beginning, we were created for Christ, since we were made in the image of God, so that at some stage the archetype Himself could dwell in us. From the beginning, all things on earth- and, indeed, all those beyond, the angelic powers and orders- were inclined towards this dispensation of God and Man, which they served from beginning to end.

Some Western theologians in the Middle Ages and, unfortunately, some modern Orthodox ones, claimed that God's incarnation was independent of the Fall. They claimed that God the Word would have become a human person even had Adam and Eve not sinned and there was no need of salvation. In other words, they spoke of a 'non-contingent incarnation', to use theological terminology. But the purpose of the divine incarnation was none other than our salvation, our glorification.

The aim of the incarnation of the Divine Word isn't to be found in Christ, but in us people. Of course, the pre-eternal, motherless God acquired a Mother, within time, a woman with our human nature. A sinless Mother, a Virgin. Had there been no need for our race to be saved, says Athanasios the Great quite clearly, then God would not have become human. First comes the need for our salvation and then

the dispensation of the divine incarnation. That which we weren't able to achieve because Adam and Eve were led astray by the devil and didn't keep the commandment, as given to us by God through His incarnation.

The purpose of the mystery concealed from and unknown to even the angels throughout the ages is now revealed with the birth of Christ from the most holy Virgin. And who is this Christ? God emptied Himself and descended to us humans, so that we could be raised up to Him. God shared our human nature so that we could share His divine nature. God became the Son of Man, so that we could become children of God. God became human, so that we humans could become gods.

The whole of the incarnate dispensation occurred 'for us', 'for our sake'. 'For us' and 'for our sake' are referred to and emphasized a great deal in the very theological hymnography of the Church. The kontakion for Christmas says 'for a young child has been born for us', and at the Ascension 'Who fulfilled the dispensation for our sake'. The thought that God 'emptied himself and took the form of a servant' (Phil. 2,7) for us, for our salvation and remaking, is most humbling for the faithful. It makes us grateful to God our Saviour and is an encouragement for us to strive to please Him by observing His holy will and to put our backs into the task. So we won't be surprised by the case of Abba Isidoros which we read about in the Book of the Elders. Abba Pimin urged Abba Isidoros to rest a little from his tireless efforts, because of his advanced years, but Abba Isidoros replied: 'Even if they burn Isidoros and scatter his ashes to the winds, it's still of no great account to me, because the Son of God came here for us'.

For God, we people aren't just a creation, but a special event, a separate, eternal person, and this is a great truth, however bold it seems. The late Elder Sophrony used to say that if you undervalued the Gospel message, which is that we were destined for the fulness of perfection, of glorification, then this isn't merely a mistake, but actually a great sin. It lies within the free will of each person to accept it or not, however, and thus experience becoming a god by grace or falling away from the God of love and life. Because, as Saint Gregory Palamas says, 'a mind separated from the contemplation of God becomes either demonic or bestial'.

At this critical time for the whole of humanity, we can see that more people have descended into an unnatural life, either through passions of the flesh, such as fornication, adultery and homosexuality, or the spiritual passions of egotism, pride, ambition and greed. Our prayer for these people (whom we shouldn't reject as people- because we always condemn the sin not the person- but should see as ailing members of our own body) should be intense and fervent. There needs to be

a powerful counterweight if people are to be able to cast off sinfulness, find their way, and rise to their full stature and this is none other than the message which flows from the nativity of Christ: our adoption by God, through His grace. Saint Gregory the Theologian writes: 'God is united to the gods and known [by them]' and this empirical knowledge is crystal clear and satisfying, from our point of view, as well as that of God.

'The Word became flesh' 'in order to abolish the dominion of death', and to liberate and save us from the bonds of death and sin. This great gift and blessing that Christ grants us through His nativity- our ontological salvation within God, our glorification- is the centre of the monastic life. Monastics have an existential awareness of this condition and this why they have renounced the world. What holds together the heart, mind and spirit of a monk or nun is knowledge and love of God, the closest possible union and contact with Him, which is why they've become dead to the world. They may live in the world, but nothing touches their heart. Their citizenship and the whole of their being really are in the heavens, as Saint Paul says (see Phil. 3, 20).

Beloved Fathers and brothers, the presence and teaching of Christ on earth makes us responsible to Him and to the whole world. Do we accept His message and try to apply it in all good conscience? If we do, then we justly accompany Christ and celebrate with Him. Christ's nativity is really celebrated when we feel our rebirth in God through the participation in divine Grace. And if all Christians have to be reborn from above, in the Holy Spirit, how much more true is this of monastics, who are supposed to be a light for lay people, according to Saint John the Sinaite?

We pray that the Word of God Who was born of the all-spotless Virgin, He Who voluntarily became poor, will enrich all of us Orthodox Christians with the sweetest gifts of the Holy Spirit- peace, joy and love- and that He will give His blessings abundantly, so that the light of His knowledge may rise and all the people in the world may be illumined. 'Christ is born'. 'He is born, indeed'.