

The Nativity Fast in the Byzantine Tradition

By Gabriel Martini

The time of preparation before Christmas is intended to be a time of purposeful asceticism, almsgiving, and learning to say yes to God while saying no to our own desires.

But Christmas, and especially in present day America, has become a time of great anxiety and materialism, despite the fact that most every song one hears, most every retail ad one reads, and most every film that is produced -with “Christmas” as a theme- will try to convince us that it’s a time for warmth, joy, spending time with family, and even taking a break from the regular hustle of everyday life. *If only* this were the case.

On the contrary, Christmas -a period of time that seems to grow longer and more arduous by the year- is preceded by ominous social media status updates that lament: “I can’t believe it’s already November ... Christmas is just around the corner,” or “My children won’t stop bothering me about [insert the latest gadget here] ... I can’t wait until Christmas is over,” and so on. Many will also complain: “Wow. I am not ready for Christmas. Where has the time gone?”

This grief and anxiety should not be. No, we have certainly missed the purpose of this feast -and the time of preparation and fasting that precedes it- if all we can do is approach it with stress and sorrow.

As I mentioned above, the time before Nativity -Advent (or “Coming”) in the West, and the Fast of St. Philip the Apostle (due to its beginning on the eve of this Saint’s feast) or simply “the Nativity Fast” in the Orthodox Church- is intended to be utilized for one’s Spiritual benefit (and indeed, for the life of the world), not for remorse or regret.

The Nativity Fast dates to the year 1166 and a synod at Constantinople, where our fathers inaugurated a forty-day period of fasting and preparation before the annual celebration of Christ’s Incarnation. This period of forty days is analogous to the forty days that Moses fasted before receiving the commandments from God.

Of this connection, St. Symeon of Thessaloniki (ca. A.D. 1381–1429) writes: The Nativity forty-day Fast represents the fast undertaken by Moses, who -having fasted for forty days and forty nights- received the Commandments of God, written on stone tablets. And we, fasting for forty days, will reflect upon and receive from the Virgin the living Word -not written upon stone, but born, incarnate- and we will commune of His Divine Body.

If nothing else, then, the time of prayer and fasting before Nativity reminds us that we, as Orthodox Christians, are given the immense and unthinkable blessing, privilege, and honor of receiving the very Body and Blood of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. But as we say yes to Christ in the holy mysteries, we must also learn to say no to ourselves, making a point to both follow Christ and serve those in need.

It is no coincidence that Christ, in one of the Gospel readings during Nativity exhorts: “Whoever does not bear his cross” as well as “forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27,33). While the faithful prepare to receive Christ anew in his Incarnation, we must also be prepared to relinquish whatever it is we possess that keeps us from the glory of his everlasting kingdom.

But even as the faithful are called to a period of spiritual quietude and even asceticism during this fasting period, we should not engage in asceticism and bear this cross as an end unto itself. Rather,

we learn to say no to ourselves so that we can say yes to God. And in saying yes to the poor and the needy, we are saying yes to Christ, so that we might share in the vision of Cornelius, hearing: “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4).

An effective remedy for the anxieties and desires of this time of year is found in a concern for our fellow man. Rather than being so caught up in the materialism and “me too” nature of contemporary celebrations, Orthodox Christians should play a pivotal role in showing a wholly better and more noble way forward.

Incidentally, the other Gospel readings throughout the Nativity Fast remind us not only why we are participating, but also how we can make the most out of it. For example, we should not lay up treasure for ourselves, while neglecting God (Luke 12:16–21), but should rather be “rich” towards God -and by consequence, towards those who are in need. We should not make excuses when it comes to serving or helping those in distress (Luke 13:10–17). And, of course, we should be willing to “sell all that [we] have and distribute to the poor” (Luke 18:22).

It’s in these virtues, and in a genuine concern for others, that we can be released from the empty cares of this world, especially as they are emphasized during the holiday season. If we give to the poor, we are giving to God. If we say no to our own desires, we can fulfill the needs of those who are looking for someone -*anyone*- that is willing to say yes on their behalf.

As families, we can help our children give or donate to a family, friend, or even a complete stranger in need, rather than providing them with more and more stuff.

As individuals, we can honor the fast, spend more time in prayer, and make a conscious effort to love our neighbors as ourselves, dedicating this season to be a time for true, spiritual growth. We can practice the religion of St. James that is “pure and undefiled” before God: “... to visit orphans and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). Instead of overeating for the next month, spending countless hours at parties and other premature celebrations, we can fast from our regular intake of food so that we have more time and resources to give to those who are truly in need -not to mention more focus and attention for prayer and spiritual growth.

Rather than approaching this Nativity season with anxiety and distress, dedicate yourself to the *true* spirit of the season and the greater purpose that lies within: the salvation and healing of the world through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.