

✠ St. Gregory's Journal ✠

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*St. Gregory the Great Orthodox Church
A Western Rite Congregation of the Antiochian Archdiocese
stgregoryoc.org*

An excerpt from a Homily of St. Leo the Great d. 461

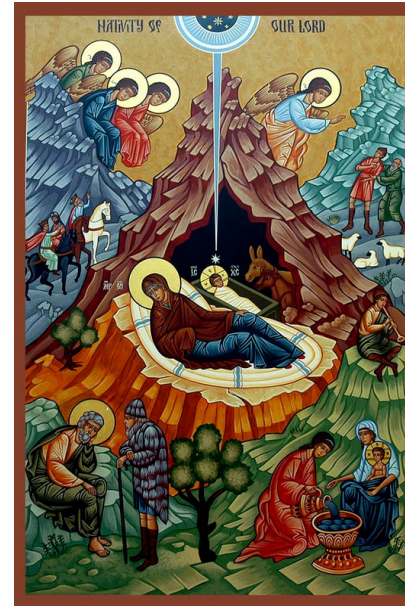
Our Savior, dearly beloved, was born this day. Let us rejoice. Sadness is not becoming upon the Birthday of Life itself, which, now that the fear of death is ended, fills us

with gladness, because of our own promised immortality. No one is excluded from sharing in this cheerfulness for the reason of our joy is common to all men. Our Lord, the Conqueror of sin and death, since there was no one free from servitude, came that he might bring deliverance to all.

Let him who is sanctified rejoice, for he draws as night to the palm. Let the sinner rejoice, since he is invited to grace. Let the Gentiles exult, for they are called to life. For the Son of God, in the fulness of time, has taken upon Himself the nature of our humanity, as the unsearchable depths of the divine counsel hath decreed, in order that the inventor of death,

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the devil, by that very nature which he defeated, would be himself overcome.

And in this contest that was undertaken for us, the battle was waged in accordance with a great and wondrous law of justice. For the Omnipotent God engaged in combat with his most bitter enemy, not in the strength of His own Majesty, but in our human infirmity; confronting him with our very form and nature, and sharing likewise in our mortality; but free of all stain.

The Word of God, therefore, God, the Son of God, Who in the beginning was with God, by Whom all things were made, and without Whom was made nothing that was made, became man, that He might free man from eternal death...Preserving therefore, the substance of both natures, and uniting them in One Person, lowliness is assumed by Majesty; infirmity, by Power, mortality, by Immortality.

Such a birth, dearly beloved, befitted Christ, the Power of God, and the Wisdom of God, whereby He would be both joined to our lowliness, yet remain far above us in His divinity. For unless He were true God, he could bring us no aid; and were he not true man, He could offer us no example. The exulting angels, therefore, sing to the newborn Lord, *Glory to God in the highest*, and they announce unto me, *peace on earth to men of good will*. For they see the heavenly Jerusalem made up from all peoples of the earth. With what joy may not the lowliness of mankind rejoice in this unspeakable work of the divine compassion, when the angels in their glory so greatly rejoice.

Parish News

Work on our property on Roxbury Road in Silver Spring is underway and the contractor is striving to have it completed in time for Christmas (and possibly the weekend before). We have now, finally, secured all the County permits for work to be done and, if all the pieces fall into place (i.e., ordered materials arrive on time, the weather is favorable for paving, etc.), and the inspections of the work pass, we will finally have an occupancy permit and be able to begin worship in our new home. Please check our website for the latest information on the progress of the work and where services will be held.

The season of Advent is a time for fasting, prayer, and almsgiving to prepare our hearts, minds, and bodies for the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For the annual collection of canned goods for the “Food for the Hungry” program, please keep your contributions at home until we are able to put them together at the church and offer them to a local feeding program. A booklet of home devotions for Advent is available to further aid in our preparations for the celebration of the Nativity.

If construction work is finished by December 17, our annual service of Advent Lessons and Carols will be held at the church at 6PM. This para-liturgical service, which includes readings of the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah and hymns and carols which look forward to the Nativity of our Lord, provides a time of quiet in the midst of the chaos of our secular world. (This service will have to be cancelled if the building work is not completed - the third time in our twenty-year history, once for a broken water pipe which flooded the parish hall and once for an early winter blizzard.)

The first Mass of Christmas will be celebrated on December 24 beginning at 10PM, preceded by a half-hour of carols and other Christmas music. Confessions will be heard beginning at 8:30PM. Mass will also be celebrated on Christmas morning at 10AM. It is appropriate to celebrate the greatest gift of God - his own Son - before opening the gifts we give each other at this time.

St. Bibiana, Virgin and Martyr *Feast Day ~ December 3*



This is a story we've heard many times, a story of persecution, constancy, and martyrdom. When the story involves a young person, it is more heart-wrenching and the constancy more miraculous. On December 3, we mark the feast day of St. Bibiana (or Viviana) of Rome, whose story mirrors that of so many young martyrs in the first centuries of the Church.

This story began when the governor of Rome, Apronianus, newly-appointed to his position by the Emperor Julian (the “Apostate”), was on his way to begin his duties. He had an accident which caused him to lose an eye and anger over this life-changing event led him to seek some sort of retribution. The perfect object for his anger was the Christians, who had been given freedom to practice their faith openly by Julian's uncle, the Emperor Constantine I. Julian rejected Christianity and tried to take the Empire back to its pagan practices. His Roman governor

could gain favor by making public examples of Christians. A well-placed family would make ideal public examples.

Bibiana's father, Flavian, was an official in the city government of Rome, and he was singled out first. He was told to renounce his Christian faith and when he refused, was branded in the face with a hot iron. Sent into exile, he died very soon of this injury. Flavian's wife, Dafrosa, was under house arrest for some time, but was soon taken outside the city and beheaded.

Apronianus' anger was not yet sated. The daughters of this family - Demetria and Bibiana - remained and since the parents had not recanted, surely the young women would. All the money in the house was taken away, any belongings they could sell were removed, and the women were left confined to a nearly empty house. Consoled by prayer, fasting, and their charitable work among the even more needy of the city, the two were being watched by the governor and his representatives.

Apronianus' persecution of this family was not working and his rage was inflamed even more. He now ordered the sisters to court, calling Demetria first. She boldly declared herself a Christian who would never renounce Christ, and she immediately died at the feet of the governor! So that this scenario might not be repeated, Apronianus ordered Bibiana to move to the home of Rufina, a notorious woman of the city, who was given the task of turning this young woman from her faith.

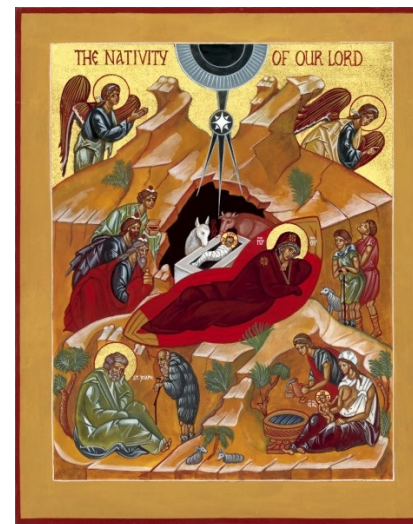
At first, Rufina tried gentle persuasion, using all the arguments the world can offer against the truth of Christian teachings. She also tried the temptations of the world which she thought would be appealing to someone who had been deprived of everything. When none of these tactics were effective in breaking the resolve of Bibiana, Rufina beat the young woman, but to no avail.

Finally, Bibiana was ordered by Apronianus to be tied to a stake and beaten with metal-studded straps. No doubt remembering the scourging of our Lord, Bibiana held fast and continued to pray during her ordeal. When she passed from this life to the next, her body was thrown into the street to be eaten by the wild animals. Even this didn't work according to Apronianus' plan. The animals would not touch the body and a Christian priest was able to secretly retrieve it and bury it near the young woman's home. Later, when Christians were once again free from persecution, a church was built over this site and the women were recognized as saints by those who knew them and had witnessed their steadfast faith.

We give thanks for St. Bibiana and the thousands of other young women who have suffered and died for following Christ. We ask for her intercessions for those who are still suffering and for the persecutors that their hearts may be turned to the love of Christ.

Nativity: A Sacrifice of Love

by Fr. John Breck



The mystery of Christ's Nativity is above all a Paschal mystery. Pascha, in our Orthodox tradition, refers first of all to Easter, the feast of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Yet it refers as well to every image of sacrifice that was revealed during Jesus' earthly ministry, from his birth, through His baptism and transfiguration, to his crucifixion. Each stage of His pilgrimage, from the cavern and creche in

Bethlehem to his burial in the tomb of the noble Joseph, reveals the mystery of his vocation: to be a sacrifice of the Father's love, for our salvation and the salvation of God's world.

In the icon of the nativity this mystery is revealed in a specially poignant way. The traditional image shows the Christ child in the center, surrounded by the walls of the cavern in which He was born. He is wrapped not in the swaddling clothes of a newborn infant, but in winding cloth: a burial shroud that foreshadows His repose in another cavern, another black hole, following His death upon the cross. He is laid not in a cradle, but on an altar of sacrifice: a place of ritual slaughter that points forward to the moment when He will stretch out his arms on the "tree," feel the nails pierce his flesh, and utter the final cry of a dying man: "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit!"

Mary, clothed in the red of death and resurrection, gazes past the child into eternity, pondering the mystery that has come upon her. She is in fact the central figure, since she is the Mother of God, the Holy Virgin in whom the eternal Son of God became man. Because of her "fiat," her acceptance of the awesome call laid upon her, God was able to assume "flesh," the fullness of our fallen humanity. "He became what we are," with the sole intent to open the way before us - the way of holiness, sanctity and love - so that we might "become what he is." So that we might share fully in the glory and joy of His resurrected life.

All of this is possible, because the Virgin replied, "Yes." Because she submitted herself to the most awesome and prodigious mystery of all, the mystery of "Incarnation."

Yet her expression reveals another side to her willing acceptance of the angel's call. Her destiny involves not only a miraculous conception under conditions that will expose her to ridicule and condemnation. It also involves tragedy. She senses from the beginning, the icon tells us, that her Son is born to die.

She gives birth to a sacrificial lamb. She knows that this child, a gift to her, will also be a gift to the world. And she realizes that this gift will involve suffering for herself as well as for Him. She cannot yet see herself standing at the foot of his cross. Nevertheless, she already intuits what the Holy Elder Simeon will declare to her a few days hence: "A sword will pierce your soul also."

Despite the air of tragedy that hangs over the scene, the icon points well beyond darkness and death. Into the black hole of the nativity cavern there descends a brilliant ray of light and the image of a dove, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit. Above is the hand of the Father, the source of all life, both human and divine. And on the altar, the Christ child. There, in the poverty and misery of a manger, appear the three persons of the Holy Trinity. As in the scenes of Christ's baptism and transfiguration, God is present and makes Himself known.

Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son of God, is born in the most humble conditions imaginable, in a way that provokes skepticism and hostility on the part of his contemporaries and even members of His own family. He is born into the conditions of our daily life: our routine, our stress, our anxiety, our mortality. Yet He comes as a sacrificial gift of the Father's love.

(reprinted from God With us)

The Christmas Tree

by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos

I suspect that the custom of decorating a tree at Christmas time is not simply a custom which came to us from the West which we should replace with other more orthodox customs. To be sure, I have not gone into the history of the Christmas tree and where it originated, but I think that it is connected with the Christmas feast and its true meaning.



First, it is not unrelated to the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah: *There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.* [Is. 11:1] St. Cosmas the poet had this prophecy in mind when he wrote of Christ as the blossom which rose up out of the virgin stem from the stump of Jesse. The root is Jesse, David's father, the rod is King David, the flower which came from the root and the rod is the Theotokos. And

the fruit which came forth from the flower of the Panagia is Christ. Holy Scripture presents this wonderfully. Thus the Christmas tree can remind us of the genealogical tree of Christ as man, the love of God, but also the successive purifications of the forefathers of Christ. At the top is the star which is the Godman Christ.

Then, the Christmas tree reminds us of the tree of knowledge as well as the tree of life, but especially the latter. It underlines clearly the truth that Christ is the tree of life and that we cannot live or fulfill the purpose of our existence unless we taste of this tree, "the producer of life." Christmas cannot be conceived without holy Communion. And of course as for Holy Communion it is not possible to partake of deification in Christ without having conquered the devil when we found ourselves faced with temptation relative to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, where our freedom is tried.

We rejoice and celebrate, because "the tree of life blossomed from the Virgin in the cave."

(Reprinted from The Feasts of the Lord)

St. Gregory Orthodox Church
c/o 9415 Wire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20901
Address Correction Requested

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<h1>December 2016</h1>						<i>Sunday Services: Matins at 9AM, Sung Mass at 9:30AM</i>
				1 St. Eligius of Tournai, BC, 660	2 St. Peter Chryso- logus, BCD, c. 450; St. Bibiana of Rome, VM, 363	3 <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>
4 Second Sunday of Advent; St. Barbara, VM, c. 306; St. Clement of Alex- andria, CD, c. 210 ✓	5 St. Sabbas of Palestine, Ab, 532	6 St. Nicholas of Myra, BC, c. 342	7 St. Ambrose of Milan, BCD, 397	8 Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary	9	10 St. Melchiades, PM, 314 <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>
11 Third Sunday of Advent; St. Damasus, PC, 384 ✓	12 St. Spiridon, BC, 348	13 St. Lucy, VM, 304; St. Herman of Alaska, C, 1837	14 Ember Wed- nesday	15 St. Maurus, Ab, 6th c.	16 Ember Friday; St. Eusebius of Vercelli, BM, 371 <i>O Sapientia</i>	17 Ember Satur- day; St. Lazarus of Bethany, BC, 1st c. <i>O Adonny</i> <i>Advent Lessons & Carols at 6pm</i>
18 Fourth Sunday of Advent <i>O Radix Jesse</i> ✓	19 <i>O Clavis David</i>	20 St. John of Kronstadt, C, 1908 <i>O Oriens</i>	21 St. Thomas, Apostle, 1st c. <i>O Rex gentium</i>	22 <i>O Emmanuel</i>	23 <i>O Virgo virginum</i>	24 Vigil of the Nativity <i>Mass at 10pm</i> W
25 The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ; St. Anastasia, VM., c. 304 <i>Mass at 10am</i> W	26 St. Stephen, Proto-martyr, 1st c.; of the Octave of the Nativity	27 St. John, Evangelist & Apostle, 1st c.; of the Octave of the Nativity	28 Holy Inno- cents, Mm, 1st c.; of the Octave of the Nativity	29 of the Octave of the Nativity	30 of the Octave of the Nativity	31 St. Sylvester, PC, 335; of the Octave of the Nativity <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>

*Confessions are heard after Vespers, during the
Psalms at Matins, and by appointment.*

*Coffee Hour follows Mass.
Sunday School is during Coffee Hour.*