

✠ St. Gregory's Journal ✠

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St. Gregory the Great Orthodox Church
A Western Rite Congregation of the Antiochian Archdiocese
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*An excerpt from
a homily of
St. Caesarius
of Arles
d. 542*

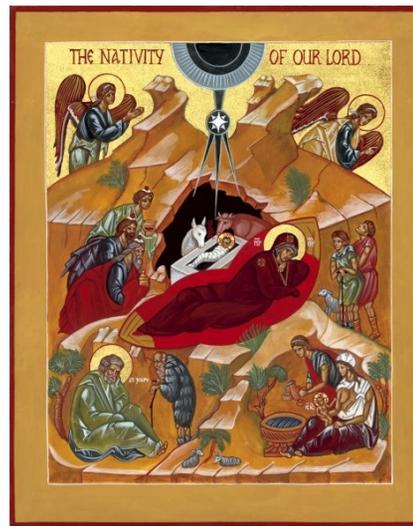
Beloved brethren, as we are about to begin with sincerest devotion a holy and desirable, glorious and excellent feast, that is, the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, with His help we ought to prepare ourselves with all our strength. Let us carefully examine all the recesses

of our soul, lest perchance there be some hidden sin within us to confound and gnaw at our conscience and to offend the eyes of the divine majesty.

Although Christ our Lord arose from the dead after his passion and ascended into heaven, nevertheless, as we believe, He considers and carefully notices how each one of His servants strives to prepare and dispose himself to celebrate His birthday without avarice, anger, pride, or dissipation. In proportion to the way He sees each one

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adorned with good works, in that measure He will dispense to him the grace of His mercy. If He sees a man clothed with the light of charity, adorned with the pearls of justice or mercy, chaste, humble, merciful, kind and prudent, through the ministry of His priests He will dispense His Body and Blood to such a man, not to his judgement, but as a remedy. But if He sees anyone adulterous, drunk, avaricious and proud, I am afraid that He may say to him what He Himself said

in the Gospel: “My friend, how is it you came in here not having a wedding garment?” [Matt 22:12] Then - may God forbid it! - what follows may happen: “Bind him hand and foot and throw him out into the night to wail and grind his teeth.” [Matt 22:15] Behold what kind of sentence will be received on judgement day by the man who has approached the Lord’s festival without the remedy of repentance and defiled with the filth of vices.

On the Lord’s birthday, beloved brethren, Christ was united with His spouse, the Church, as in spiritual nuptials. Then *truth sprang out of the earth*, then *justice looked down from heaven*, [Ps 84:12] and then *the groom came forth from his bridal chamber*, [Ps 18:6] that is, the Word of God came forth from the womb of a virgin. He came forth with His spouse; that is, He assumed human flesh. Now since we have been invited to those sacred nuptials and are destined to attend the banquet of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, see with what kind of garments we should be provided.

Therefore with God’s help let us cleanse both our hearts and our bodies, as far as we can. Then that heavenly inviter will detect

nothing disgraceful in us, nothing loathsome, nothing ignoble, nothing unworthy of His eyes. For this reason, beloved brethren, we ought to heed these truths with great trepidation and not as if in passing. For we have been invited to nuptials where we ourselves will be the bride, if we lead a good life. Let us think and consider to what kind of nuptials, to what kind of spouse, and to what kind of banquet we have been invited. Truly we have been invited to a table where no food of men is found but the bread of angels is served. Therefore let us see to it that we do not appear there wrapped in the old garments of vices within our soul, where we ought to be adorned with the pearls of good works.

Let us with Christ's help prepare ourselves for the nuptials and heavenly banquet by being clear of all dissipation and adorned with good works. Let us give alms to the poor and repel anger or hatred from our hearts like the devil's poison. Faithfully observe chastity, summon the poor to your small meals more frequently, attend vigils more promptly, pray or chant the psalms. Do not utter idle or worldly thoughts with your lips, and rebuke those who have freely spoken them; observe peace with all men, and recall to harmony those who you know are at variance. If with the help of Christ you are willing to fulfill these things faithfully, you will be able to approach the Lord's altar in this life with an easy conscience and in the future life will happily arrive at eternal bliss; with the help of Him who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Martyr Saints of December

All Christians are to work toward deification, we are to seek holiness, we are to strive to become saints. Most of those who achieved this goal in this life - many through martyrdom in various ages of persecution - are celebrated throughout the Church year on their feast days, usually their "heavenly birthdays". Their stories

are written up in books and preached about in sermons. In some ages, however, martyrs for their faith were so numerous that the events of the lives and sacrifice of many were never fully recorded for future remembrance. A few sentences, outlining the basic details, are all we have to acknowledge that here were ordinary people who had to show extraordinary faith and devotion to Christ in the challenges which they faced in the society of their times. Following are a few of those who are remembered in the month of December.

On December 3: St. Cassian, who was a court reporter in Tangier, Morocco. His primary duty was to write down a record of the legal proceedings in court and these frequently were the trials of Christians who refused to offer incense (and therefore, worship) to the pagan Roman gods. When the centurion Marcellus was brought before the court on this charge, his courageous replies to the judge and his steadfast refusal to denounce Christ in favor of the false gods convinced Cassian that he could no longer do his job with a clear conscience. He resigned his position and became a Christian, and the obvious result was that he, too, received the crown of martyrdom by being beheaded.

On December 5: During the reign of Julian the Apostate (360-63), the older pagan religions were restored to favor by many and the practitioners of these religions became bolder. Devout Christians must have been disheartened by this turning away from the peace which they had experienced since the time of Emperor Constantine. Christian priests and bishops were surely praying that this troubling situation would soon end and that all would see the truth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. St. Pelinus, the bishop of Corfinio in Peligno, was one of those whose fervent prayers were for the restoration of this peace. The Temple of Mars (the Roman god of war) in this city collapsed, and probably without realizing that they were acknowledging the efficacy of the Christian bishop's prayers, the priests of the Temple of Mars blamed Bishop Pelinus and then attacked, savagely beat and pierced him eighty-



five times with a sword. He soon died from these wounds and became a martyr for the Christian faith.

On December 7: During the persecutions in these early centuries, soldiers were particularly vulnerable to danger. Roman soldiers were expected to follow imperial policy by

celebrating Roman gods, but many had converted to Christianity and if their livelihoods depended on their military commission, they had to hope that they were never called upon to do anything that would violate the teachings of the Church. St. Agatho, a soldier in Alexandria during the time of Emperor Decius (249-51), had been able to keep a low profile about being a Christian until some of his fellow soldiers began to mock and desecrate the corpses of some of the martyrs. Agatho tried to get them to show some respect, but this raised suspicion against him. He was brought before a judge, where he declared himself a Christian and was sentenced to death for his faith.

On December 15: During the Vandal persecutions under the Arian King Genseric (428-77), Orthodox Christians were harassed and persecuted. An African bishop, St. Valerian, was ordered to give up the sacred vessels of his church, but the bishop refused to turn over the chalices, crosses, thuribles and other liturgical items to those who would dishonor the purpose for these consecrated vessels. Even though he was more than eighty years old, the persecutors ordered the bishop out of the church and he was driven away from the city. The king decreed that no one was to give Bishop Valerian shelter and so the elderly servant of God

received the crown of martyrdom after being in the open air unprotected from the elements.

On December 19: During persecutions, Christians were often falsely accused of crimes in order to be brought to trial. In Alexandria, the Christian Nemesius was taken to court on a false charge of theft. He was able to prove his innocence, but the judge pressed further and brought the charge of sacrilege - dishonoring the Roman gods - against him. There was no doubt that Nemesius was guilty of this charge and he was subjected to severe torture and then sentenced to be burnt alive with thieves. As the *Roman Martyrology* states, "he became an image of his Savior, who with thieves endured the Cross."

On December 23: An unnamed saint, who was a deacon under St. Anthimus, the Bishop of Nicomedia at the time of the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian (284-305), became a martyr while carrying out his duties. A deacon's first responsibilities are to do whatever work the bishop determines is necessary for his people. This deacon was given the task of carrying letters of encouragement from the bishop to those who were in prison awaiting execution for their faith. The deacon was caught and arrested, but his persecutors took the law into their own hands and stoned him to death and thus, he received the crown of martyrdom.

All these saints were ordinary people attempting to live ordinary lives in difficult times. None of them were famous for working miracles; they were not among the great theologians of the Church; none of them were in positions of great authority. But each one of them - at the sudden moment when their faith was challenged and they had to make a choice - remained steadfast and faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ. In many places in our world today, there are ordinary people doing just this same thing.

The violent death of martyrdom is not what most of us would wish for. Even if we are able to achieve some level of sanctity,

we would wish to be rewarded for that by a long life and a peaceful death. But if we are to follow in the steps of our Lord and God Jesus Christ, we must remember - even as we celebrate His coming to earth as a baby - that He gave up this earthly life by just such a death and that, through His Resurrection, we are assured of eternal life.

May we be inspired by the examples of the martyrs and remain steadfast also, and may we ask for their intercessions. Holy Cassian, Pelinus, Agatho, Valerian, Nemesius, and the deacon whose name is known only to God, pray for us.

Parish News



In preparation for our celebration of the Nativity of our Lord, the Church encourages us, during Advent, to increase our care for the poor, to multiply our charitable endeavors, and to remember those who are in need. At St. Gregory's, several ways to do this are

presented at this time. Articles for flood buckets and health kits are being collected for distribution by International Orthodox Christian Charities to those areas in our country and throughout the world which have been affected by weather-related disasters, and canned and packaged dry foods to be donated to a local food bank are being collected for the Food for Hungry program of our Archdiocese.

A collection of Advent devotions, which includes scripture readings and prayers for every day of the season, has been prepared for use in the home and is available at the church. The

Great "O" Antiphons are also included. Please use these devotions to help make your hearts ready to receive Christ at the celebration of His Nativity. Advent calendars and Advent wreaths are additional ways to mark the approach of the festival of our Lord's birth.

Our annual service of Advent Lessons & Carols will be held on Saturday, December 16. This opportunity for quiet reflection on the coming Nativity of our Lord through scripture readings and the singing of Advent hymns provides a respite from the frantic pace of our secular world in December.

As the Fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Eve this year, a coffee hour after the morning Liturgy on December 24 will be brief so that preparations for the evening may quickly commence. Confessions will be heard beginning at 8:30PM, a period of carol singing and other Christmas music will begin at 9:30, and the first Mass of Christmas will be celebrated at 10PM.

On Saturday, November 11th, we welcomed Fr. Gregory Mathewes-Green, pastor of Holy Cross Church in Linthicum and diocesan missions coordinator, for a discussion on mission and evangelism. While we have moved to an attractive new facility and taken a number of steps to make our presence known in the neighborhood, we must take a more active and personal role in inviting others to come with us to church. We will continue this conversation at coffee hour on the first Sunday of each month.

My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord

by St. Nikolai of Ochrid

We have, my brethren, only a few words spoken by the most holy Mother of God recorded in the Gospels, and they are all about God's majesty. She was silent before men, but her soul



conversed unceasingly with God. Every day and every hour, she found a new reason and inducement to glorify God. If it were possible to know and record all her glorifying of God in the course of her life, what a vast book that would make! But, even from this one ascription of praise that she spoke in the presence of her kinswoman Elizabeth, the mother of John the great prophet and forerunner, every single Christian can evaluate what a fragrant and godly flower was her most pure soul.

This is but one wonderful canticle from the soul of the mother of God that has come down to us through the Gospel. But such canticles were without number in the life of the Most Blessed. Before she heard the Gospel from the lips of her Son, she knew how to speak to God and glorify Him according to the Gospel. This knowledge came to her from the Holy Spirit of God, whose grace constantly poured upon her like clear water into a pure vessel. Her soul magnified God in psalms throughout the whole of her life, and therefore God raised her up above the cherubim and seraphim. And we, small and sinful beings that we are, will be magnified by the same Lord who magnified her in his Kingdom, if we exert ourselves to fill this brief life with the magnification of God in our words, acts, thoughts and prayers.

Most holy, most pure and most blessed Mother of God, extend thy wings of prayer over us. To thee and thy Son, our God, be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

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Address Correction Requested

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<h1>December 2017</h1>					1 St. Eligius of Tournai, BC, 660	2 St. Peter Chrysologus, BCD, c. 450; St. Bibiana of Rome, VM, 363 <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>
3 First Sunday in Advent V	4 St. Barbara, VM, c. 306	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 <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>
10 Second Sunday of Advent; St. Melchiades, PM, 314 V	11 St. Damasus, PC, 384	12 St. Spiridon, BC, 348	13 St. Lucy, VM, 304; St. Herman of Alaska, C, 1837	14	15 St. Maurus, Ab, 6th c.	16 St. Eusebius of Vercelli, BM, 371 <i>O Sapientia Advent Lessons & Carols at 6pm</i>
17 Third Sunday of Advent; St. Lazarus of Bethany, BC, 1st c. <i>O Adonny</i> V	18 <i>O Radix Jesse</i>	19 <i>O Clavis David</i>	20 Ember Wednesday; St. John of Kronstadt, C, 1908 <i>O Oriens</i>	21 St. Thomas, Apostle, 1st c. <i>O Rex gentium</i>	22 Ember Friday <i>O Emmanuel</i>	23 Ember Saturday <i>O Virgo virginum Vespers at 6pm</i>
24 Vigil of the Nativity (Fourth Sunday of Advent) <i>Mass at 9:30am</i> V <i>Mass at 10pm</i> W	25 The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ; St. Anastasia, VM., c. 304	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 Innocents, Mm, 1st c.; of the Octave of the Nativity	29 of the Octave of the Nativity	30 of the Octave of the Nativity <i>Vespers at 6pm</i>
31 The Sunday after the Nativity; St. Sylvester, PC, 335 W						<i>Sunday Services: Matins at 9AM, Sung Mass at 9:30AM</i>

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

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