

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, December 4, 2011 Incarnation of Jesus

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I just finished skimming some new history books from the library (I try to stay on top of this for pastoral reasons). These books reflect the growing anti-Christianity of so-called scholars and historians. It is distressing and stressful to see this ongoing and deepening movement—which accurately reveals the fact that Christian civilization, as founded in the fourth century by the Emperor St. Constantine the Great, is now dying in the West, at many levels throughout society, education, morality, and religion itself. However, it was a great relief to then turn once again from these books, these continuing negative cultural “trends”, to the meaning of the holy season of the Nativity Fast, into which we Orthodox Christians are now already well launched, whether we are on the Old or the New Calendar.

And furthermore, it was a relief to turn away, just for a while, from the grim and foreboding political headlines and tragic economic realities of our world and our country today.

And why was it such a relief? Because this sacred season is one in which we must take some time out from other occupying concerns to think more seriously and more intensely about the “one thing needful”—the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which occurred on the *first* Christmas Day, the Nativity or birthday of the Lord. Therefore, turning my attention back to the historical truths of our Faith is a cause of great joy as well as relief, and I urge all of us to do so, too.

In this regard it’s worthwhile to remember what the word “incarnation” itself means. The dictionary gives two relevant definitions. First, incarnation means a person who embodies in the flesh a deity, spirit, or abstract quality. And second, in traditional Christian theology, this term refers to the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh as Jesus Christ. In other words, God’s divine nature took on *our* human flesh (exactly as we ourselves today experience this body of flesh, with all of its weaknesses and temptations—a body Jesus acquired through His pure Mother, the Virgin Mary. Thus, God became “enfleshed”, as it were, or “wrapped in flesh”...

Many so-called Christians no longer believe this, you know. Some believe that Jesus was only a great man, a prophet, a wise teacher. They have abandoned the clear witness of Scripture and the testimony of the Apostolic Age, thinking themselves “wiser” than our forefathers in the faith and the actual witnesses to the life of Christ. Others—in particular so called “Christian feminists” today—believe that Christ was simply the product of His own culture and times, and therefore no longer relevant for us...



But for us Orthodox Christians to be full participants in the approaching Feast of the Incarnation of Christ, we need to reflect both on this essential dogma and also on our own hearts and souls and how we *receive*—not “reinterpret”—this revelation, both in the our own past lives, and today, this very day, as we progress through the Nativity Fast. And no, I’m not talking about fasting rules, which have value in themselves; rather, I’m talking about something critically more important and deeper than what we put in our mouths, which, for some, has sadly become what the Nativity Fast is basically all about.

YOU SEE, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST CAME TO THE EARTH AS A HELPLESS INFANT IN ORDER TO GIVE US THE POSSIBILITY OF REBIRTH.

Therefore, the *first* thing we must be doing during this time of preparation is to thank Him for coming to us, to humankind, and making this rebirth possible through his birth, life, death, and resurrection. And how do we thank Him? Of course, in words, but more than that, by actually *following* Him—as He said: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Therefore today let us ask ourselves frankly: how well have we followed Him? Or are we primarily still caught up and even blinded by our own measly needs and desires?



ONCE WE’VE ANSWERED THIS QUESTION WE NEED TO QUICKLY MOVE ON AND ASK OURSELVES HOW WE CAN CHANGE, HOW WE CAN BECOME BETTER DISCIPLES OF THE JESUS OF NAZARETH, AND HIM CRUCIFIED AND RISEN.

Very often, you know, we seek substitutes for Him in this world, but these substitutes keep us very earth bound. Of course, we do need to provide for the physical welfare of ourselves and our families in a responsible, moral, and normal way. But if we are truthful we also know that often we go considerably beyond what is necessary and, instead of seeking to *grow* in Christ, we seek to grow in worldly wisdom, worldly acquisitions, and worldly concerns which are actually not necessary for a responsible Christian life in this world, but which our culture and society have brainwashed us into thinking are necessary...

Many decades ago—in the early 1950’s; in fact it was 1954 and I was eleven years old—I saw a film which I’ve never seen again since, but which I’ve never forgotten, called “The Sign of the Pagan”. This was in the heyday of Hollywood Bible spectacles, but for some reason “The Sign of the Pagan” hasn’t



survived in our cultural memory the way films like "The Ten Commandments" and "Ben Hur" and others have. But it has survived in *my* memory, and it has survived for a very specific reason I want to share with you.



This is a film about Attila the Hun. For those who do not know anything about late ancient Roman and early Christian history, Attila the Hun was the 5th century ruler of the Hunnic pagan barbarian empire of northern and northeastern Europe. He was the most feared enemy and invader of the Christian Empire, which he twice invaded, conquered, plundered, pillaged, and raped. In the film there is an accurate portrayal of what happened when Attila approached the city of

Rome. The bishop of Rome at that time—the pope—known to history and to us Orthodox Christians (as well as Roman Catholics) as St. Leo the Great--comes forth bearing a large cross to confront Attila in the mists of the Tiber River. And, there, this gentle but holy and firmly spoken man persuades the terrifying Hun to spare the city of Rome, its Christian churches and shrines, and its Christian people. So powerful is the sanctity of Leo's personality that—in this film at least—he quite overwhelms the lesser personality of the craven and bloodthirsty barbarian. I can still see this scene as if I had watched the film yesterday instead of nearly 60 years ago!

I mention this because it so happens that St. Leo the Great has left us some wonderful words to reflect on concerning the Incarnation, and these words can be a fine subject of meditation for us at this particular point in the Nativity Fast. Here is what this holy—and heroic--Bishop of Rome wrote 1500 years ago:

"Let us then, dearly beloved, give thanks to God the Father, through His Son, in the Holy Spirit, Who 'for His great mercy, wherewith He has loved us,' had pity on us: and 'when we were dead in sins, has quickened us together in Christ,' that we might be in Him a new creation and a new production. Let us put off then the old man with his deeds: and having obtained a share in the birth of Christ let us renounce the works of the flesh.

"Christian, acknowledge your dignity!--and becoming a partner in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct. Remember the Head and the Body of which you are a

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member. Remember that you were rescued from the power of darkness and brought out into God's light and kingdom. By the mystery of Baptism you were made the temple of the Holy Spirit: and do not subject yourself once more to the devil; because your purchase money is the blood of Christ, because He shall judge you in truth Who ransomed you in mercy, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reigns for ever and ever."

And St. Leo concludes:

"Remember, Jesus came as fully God and fully human to save us. This requires our participation."

This is it, brothers and sisters: our salvation is not automatic. It requires our cooperation and involvement. We must heed well the advice of this 5th century Holy Father of the Church and make every effort to *fully participate* in this sacred season of the Fast in order to reap the spiritual benefits and graces of the Feast which comes at its end. In other words, we must wake up from the sleep of our slothfulness, induced by our own inattentiveness and laziness as well as by the materialistic culture around us. And we must not only wake up, but we must then force ourselves to *concentrate*, to focus, to actually pay attention—something our culture discourages us from doing, lest we learn the truth about our world and ourselves.

Yet Our Lord said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." And what is the truth? More correctly, WHO is the truth? Jesus Christ Himself, who said plainly and clearly: "I am the way, the TRUTH and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by Me."

This is the same God-Man who was born two thousand years ago in a cave-stable in Bethlehem, for whom we now humbly prepare our own hearts to be a safe crib or manger for Him...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.