



Holy Venerable Martyr and Confessor Stephen the New was born in Constantinople in 715 to pious parents named John and Anna. His mother had prayed often to the Most Holy Theotokos in her church at Blachernae to be granted a son, and one day received a revelation from our Lady that she would conceive the son she desired. When Anna had conceived, she asked the newly-elected Patriarch Germanus to bless the child in her womb. He said, "May God bless him through the prayers of the Holy Proto-Martyr Stephen." At that moment Anna saw a flame of fire issue from the mouth of the holy patriarch. When the child was born, she named him Stephen.

Stephen struggled in asceticism from his youth in Bithynia at the Monastery of Saint Auxentius, which was located at a lofty place called Mount Auxentius. Because of his extreme labors and great goodness, he was chosen by the hermits of Mount Auxentius to be their leader. The fame of his spiritual struggles reached the ears of all, and the fragrance of his virtue drew many to him.

During the reign of Constantine V (741-775), Stephen showed his love of Orthodoxy in contending for the Faith. This Constantine was called Copronimus, that is, "namesake of dung," because while being baptized he had soiled the waters of in the baptismal font, giving a fitting token of what manner of impiety he would later embrace. Besides being a fierce Iconoclast, Constantine raised up a ruthless persecution of monasticism. He held a council in 754 against the holy icons. Because Saint Stephen rejected this council, the Emperor framed false accusations against him and exiled him. But while in exile Saint Stephen performed healings with holy icons and turned many away from Iconoclasm. When he was brought before the Emperor again, he showed him a coin and asked whose image the coin bore. "Mine," said the tyrant. "If any man trample upon thine image, is he liable to punishment?" asked the Saint. When they that stood by answered yes, the saint said: if they thought dishonoring the image of a corruptible king worthy of punishment, what torment would they receive who trampled upon the image of the Lord Christ and of the Mother of God? Then he threw the coin to the ground and trampled on it. He was condemned to eleven months in bonds and imprisonment. Later, he was dragged over the earth and was stoned, like Stephen the Proto-Martyr; wherefore he is called Stephen the New. Finally, he was struck with a wooden club on the temple and his head was shattered, and thus he gave up his spirit in the year 767.

Sunday, December 11

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Commemoration of Venerable Martyr and Confessor Stephen the New (†767)

+++

Monday, December 12

Parastas for the blessed repose of Richard Dolenar 9:30 A.M.

+++

Wednesday, December 14

Moleben 5:30 P.M.

+++

Sunday, December 18

Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday before New Calendar Nativity

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Commemoration of Venerable Savva the Sanctified (†532)

ARCHPRIEST ARTEMY VLADIMIROV:

A HOMILY FOR THOSE REJOICING IN THE NATIVITY FAST



Our Mother the Church has the custom of preparing her children, well in advance, of the actual holy day, for extraordinary events which are the central axle of both earthly and eternal

existence. Beyond a doubt, the feast of Nativity of Christ, the appearance of God in the flesh, belongs to this very category.

The whole history of humankind, which began with the fall of our forefather and mother, Adam and Eve, the continuation of history through their descendants, the history of peoples and kingdoms (especially the history of ancient Israel), all led up to and arrived at Bethlehem, to the mysterious cave, where Christ the Saviour of the world manifested His wondrous infant countenance to us.

It is no surprise that even two thousand years later, we, the children of Christ's Church, do not suddenly or immediately celebrate the Lord's Nativity, but rather embark upon a forty-day fast (as the holy fathers have ordained of old), so that we might be gradually illuminated by the wondrous light of the Nativity night.

This period of fasting begins directly after the commemoration of the Holy Apostle Philip, on the 15th November (new style, November 28) according to the Church calendar, and concludes with the Feast itself, on Christmas night, December 25/January 7. The rubrics of this labor of fasting are not so strict as those of Great Lent or the Dormition fast: fish can be eaten on every Saturday and Sunday, as well as on festal days of the Church calendar that do not fall on Wednesday or Friday (if the All-night Vigil is not served the evening before). The fast becomes stricter with the onset of the Forefeast of the Nativity on December 20/January 2 (on which day we also commemorate the Holy Martyr Ignatius the God-bearer), when fish is completely excluded from the table of those who strive to observe the Church rubrics in all strictness.

We should also speak a little about the Eve of the Feast (December 24/January 6). From ancient times on this day, Christians ate vegetables cooked in their own juice. The table is laid after the clergy have placed a lighted candle on the candle stand and sung the Troparion and Kontakion of the Feast, directing our gaze toward the icon of the Nativity of Christ, which has been carried out [from the altar] to the center of the church. Pious people have always deferred eating until the first star has appeared in the sky, in remembrance of the star of Bethlehem as symbolized by the lighted candle placed before the Nativity icon. But enough about "meals"...

Let us place our attention upon the essential aspect of fasting; or, as they used to say in olden times, *govenie*, that is, the "preparation" for receiving the Holy Mysteries of Christ (and not only once) during the course of the Nativity fast. What thoughts and feelings shall we encounter if we might open our minds and hearts (if only they might obey the desire of our spirit), enlightened by grace?

We can find support for these thoughts and feelings in the Gospels, in the writings of the Holy Apostles Matthew (chapters 1 and 2) and Luke (chapter 2), which contain the substantial basis of the text of the Nativity service. Having read and re-read these Gospel chapters beforehand, together with the daily practice of fervently reading and fulfilling the morning and evening prayer rule (which the Church requires of a Christian), and zealously attending the pre-Nativity services, we are now called to lift up our minds "to the unseen regions," having taught our own hearts to immerse and satiate us with these luminous contemplations. We shall not forget, our reader, that a sincere confession of sins, and communion "with fear and trembling" of the Most Pure Body and Blood of Christ, united with an earnest attempt to correct our lives, marks a Christian's entire life with Divine power. Grace makes possible the impossible, and changes a dark-minded, hard-hearted sinner into a bright and meek child of God. New thoughts and feelings enter into the mind and heart, and a new world opens up before the true, sincere disciple of Christ...

Thus, casting aside and leaving behind all wavering and doubt, trustingly give me your hand,

dear reader; and guided invisibly by the holy fathers, we shall step into the sacred world of Gospel Revelation, hidden from the wearying din of vain activity around us...

I will by no means show you everything, but you will see the most important thing. Having seen it, strive to remember it, so that later in solitude you might contemplate on all else that is included in the history of Our Lord Jesus Christ's Nativity.

Here before you are the wise men of the East, who have left their homes, family, and native lands—to follow the mysterious star which shone upon them from Jacob... How many dangers did they overcome, what courage they revealed, such firmness of purpose, until they reached the cherished aim of their wandering and finally placed the wondrous gift of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before the Divine Christ Child, Who created the stars they once worshipped! Are you ready, are we ready to reject all service to those deceitful idols which destroy us—our own passions of pride, lust, and love of money—in order to leave nothing in our souls other than golden faith in the Redeemer, fragrant with the hope in His care for us and His love, strong as death, conquering death itself? Will we be found to be as strong as Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, so that we might not fear the punishments of Herod—the world which lies in evil—and depart from him by another way to “our own country,” to the country of holy silence and heartfelt prayer, which is the greatest adornment of a soul that loves God?...



And now turn your gaze, gracious reader, towards the place well-known to any modern pilgrim of the Holy Land called the “shepherds’ field.” There they are: the humble and guileless shepherds; pure in heart like children, heartily and vigilantly watching the cold, winter night... To them, to them, and not to the envying Pharisees or the self-righteous Scribes, hardened in their cold academia that gave nothing to the minds or heart of the people of Israel, did the angel of God appear with the words, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David the Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10–12).

Can you or I boast of such purity of heart and clearness of mind as did allow the Bethlehem shepherds not only to receive the revelation, but even to fulfill the angel’s bidding straightway, not hesitating a moment? Can we find in ourselves the shepherds’ saving self-denial, which did not allow them to fall into the deep and heavy sleep enveloping the entire city—the city which neither knew nor heeded the time of its visitation? Learn, O reader, from the example of the shepherds, how important for the soul’s salvation to “attend to yourself,” that is, to always direct your spiritual gaze

at the field of your heart, never allowing wolves (vicious and evil thoughts) into the sheepfold. Meek sheep are the peace and quiet of the heart, balanced emotional powers, which the enemy of our salvation, the soul-destroying devil, unceasingly seeks to disrupt.

If you have the strength and fortitude, behold the horrifying scene of the murder of the innocent Bethlehem children, the first martyrs for Christ, who spilled their infant blood because of Herod's truly satanic guile... Killed without having ever sinned; they finished their earthly life that had not even begun! Believe with the whole Church in the mysterious, providential, prophetic meaning of these sufferings which cannot be rationally understood... And we shall say with the nineteenth century poet:

The wisdom of Our God above
Is not for us to search and measure:
With humble heart and trusting love
We patiently await the treasure...

Like the stars in the sky, the eternal souls of the Bethlehem infants shine to us who live in the night of this age ("in which righteousness is often lacking"), and testify that "righteousness lives in the heavens," where "there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting"... May our faith be strengthened in the all-good and all-powerful Divine Providence, which turns even the most horrifying acts by criminal human hands into beneficial consequences for their innocent victims...

The closer we come to the end of the fast, the brighter the wondrous Bethlehem star is enkindled above our heads, proclaiming to the Magi the time of the Infant's birth, and the place where He lay... The rays of this rational star (according to the holy fathers, this star was actually an angelic power, and not a dead astronomical body) illumine with their incorruptible, unfading light the twilight in the cave—the rib cage encasing each of our hearts... The rays of this star bring the soul, which has but scarcely touched it, to inexplicable trembling and heavenly joy, the likes of which we shall not find here in this sinful world with its sensuous, quickly passing pleasures, disappearing like smoke. "I am ... the bright and morning star" (Rev. 22:16), testifies the Lord. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give ... the morning star. He that hath an ear [to hear], let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 2:26, 28–29). Ye do well, repeats the Apostle Peter, that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts (2 Pet. 1:19).

The morning star is hidden prayer of the heart! It is made not with lips or fingers, but with the mind and heart; it turns all of man's existence to the Lord, and places the disciple before the most radiant face of his Teacher...



Illumined by the unwaning light of the Nativity star, let us pass, obedient reader, under the canopy of the very cave in Bethlehem... and let us timely stop, that we might not overstep the bounds laid for us sinners, and be scorched by that radiance from the Divine Child, Who rests in the oxen manger...

There He is, the Angel of Great Counsel, the King of the world, the Father of the age to come, as the “Old Testament Evangelist,” the holy Prophet Isaiah, exclaimed in prophetic, sober inebriation. There He is, the Yearning of the nations, the Expectation of all peoples, the Great Light that has come into the world to enlighten those sitting in darkness! Already celebrating the Forefeast of the Nativity night that is bright as day, let us sing, O reader, with the whole Church, “Christ is born, give ye glory... Christ is on earth, let us be exalted. Sing unto the Lord all the earth...”

Concluding this narrative, I leave you, beloved reader, and entrust you to the action of God’s grace, which, according to the words of the Apostle, can instruct its friends more aptly than feeble human words, though they be pronounced from the heart...

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. December bulletin covers’ sponsors are the Polomchak family — memory of deceased parents.
2. This Sunday, December 11, following the Divine Liturgy, a Panihida is served for the blessed repose of the handmaid of God Helen Sulich.
3. On Monday, December 12, a Parastas will be served for the blessed repose of the newly-departed servant of God Richard Dolinar (thus marking the fortieth day of his repose).
4. On Sunday, December 18, following the Divine Liturgy, a Panihida will be served for the blessed repose of handmaid of God Ann Salamon.
5. Our major annual fund-raising project the Cookie Walk is the coming Saturday, December 17 from 10 A.M. till 1:00 P.M. We are asked to bring our cookies and other products to church between 6:00 P.M. and 8:00 P.M. on Friday evening, the night before the Cookie Walk. We are asked to try to make at least 3 varieties of cookies — we are hoping to provide our customers with a great selection of pastries. We are hoping that all our parishioners are going to participate in this event.
6. Please, continue to look, when grocery shopping, for the ingredients needed for our major fund-raising products. We need margarine, flour, nuts and sugar. No sour cream is needed at this time. Thank you for your continuous support!
7. Saint Nicholas festive brunch is next Sunday, December 18. We are not going to order food, but will try to get by with what we can bring ourselves and what will be left over after the Cookie Walk. If you have any questions or would like to contribute a dish of food, please call Matushka Svetlana.
8. Please help us purchase flowers to adorn the church for the Nativity. The sign-up sheet is in the narthex.
9. December 28, at 6:00 P.M., the parish board members are asked to assemble at church for a meeting.

