

# The Confessor's Tongue for December 14, 2008

## 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: Holy Forefathers

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

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### December 14: Sunday of the Holy Forefathers

The Sunday of the Holy Forefathers occurs between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> of December. This Sunday commemorates all the ancestors of the people of God, the holy patriarchs living up to the law, given on Sinai, and under the law, - from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed; together with them are commemorated "those who preached Christ" the holy prophets - from Samuel to Zechariah and to John the Baptist, and all the Old Testament righteous men, who were righteous in the faith in the coming of the Messiah. Especially in the service for this day are praised "the pious youths" Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, who "in faith were thrown into the fiery furnace" and "who in the middle of the flames were cooled by the dew of the Spirit and who walked about rejoicing, are mystically a prototype of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ" from the Virgin, who after giving birth remained a virgin. With these holy youths are commemorated also "the righteous Daniel and the wonderful prophets", who, clearly revealing the divine second coming, saw Christ, "coming to all nations as Judge", and who, "your mind illumined by divine radiance", "that clearly the Virgin would give birth represented in mystical images".

"Today as we celebrate the Forefathers' memory", the holy Church exclaims: "let us offer praise to the fathers, who shone forth before and during the law, with righteous minds they served the Lord and Master who shone forth from the Virgin, now they delight in the unending light." "Let us offer songs of praise to the prophets of God". "Let us honor the holy youths, for they quenched the flaming furnace, together with the prophet Daniel, and all the righteous ones who shone forth before the law, together with those who served the Master under the law." 1). By accomplishing "now the honor of the memory of the forefathers", the holy Church edifies us, that we, in the expectation of the great and light-bearing day of the Nativity of Christ, is reflected by the faith and life of the holy Forefathers and, through them, has prepared ourselves, by their example, to the worthy meeting of the Lord Who came from Heaven, who has adorned their soul with virtues beforehand to be ready for the great and light-bearing day of the Nativity of our Savior worthily to meet Him with the lamp of faith and with the oil of charitable deeds, with the firm hope of life everlasting, with the light of both the joyful face of cleanliness and purity 2).

Together with them the holy Church on the present day, that its appeal be not in vain, places in the Gospel reading by the clergy about those called in Vespers, inspiring us, that we can be distracted from worthily meeting the Lord by the predominance of flesh over spirit, the attachment to the terrestrial, the blinding by gleam of worldly goods, the predilection

for vanity, the unwillingness to deny one's self-love and pride everyday, the enslavement to passions and covetousness, and in the Epistle reading directly commands us to destroy our earthly members: fornication, impurity, passion, evil lust and cupidity, to lay aside anger, evil, blaspheming, slander, lies, and in general to take off the old man and put on the new in the image of the Creator (Col. 3:4-11).

### December 13: Virgin Martyr Lucia

A rich and famous native of Syracuse, she distributed her estate to the poor and made the vow of virginity to the Lord in gratitude for the healing of her mother before the grave of St. Agatha in the city of Catania. Her angry groom informed the governor that she was a Christian, and St. Lucia after being tortured for Christ was beheaded in 304. The relics of the holy martyr were translated from Syracuse to Italy, and then to Metz. A part of them that was in Constantinople was translated to Venice.

### December 14: Martyrs Thyrsus, Leucius, Philemon, Apolonius, Arianus, & Callinicus

"The wondrous Thyrsus, and the godly-minded Callinicus, and the glorious Leucius" suffered for Christ in the persecution during the reign of Decius (249-251) in Caesarea, Bithynia. St. Leucius, who reproached the ruler Cumbrius for unfair persecution of Christians, was tortured and then beheaded. St. Thyrsus, being "strengthened by the power of the cross", underwent "the planing of the body" and other tortures without injury and died in peace. St. Callinicus, who was a pagan priest, seeing the courage and miracles of St. Thyrsus, accepted Christ and was beheaded. During the reign of Diocletian "the great Philemon, and the most godly Arianus, and the wise Apolonius", and together with them Theoctychus with three guards (imperial bodyguards) suffered in Antinoopolis, Egypt. Apolonius, the reader in Antinoopolis, frightened by the tortures, asked the pagan Philemon, a musician, to make an offering for him to the idol. But when disguised in the clothes of Apolonius, Philemon firmly confessed himself as a Christian before the torturer; Apolonius repented and also confessed Christ. After being tortured, both holy martyrs were beheaded. The torturer of Arianus, seeing the wonders of the holy martyrs, with his whole household also turned to Christ, and was sentenced to death for this. Four guards (of which Theoctychus was the eldest) voluntarily turned themselves over to be tortured for Christ. The church services do not mention the Martyr Theoctychus and the other guards.

*S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers, 2 ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp 0447-9 Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 199-2008. All rights reserved.*

## On the Pagan Origins of Nativity

Fr. Justin Frederick

Often objections to the Christian celebration of the Nativity of Christ or "Christmas" are heard on the basis of the supposed pagan origin of the celebration. The "pagan origin" argument is used two ways. First, it is used by certain groups of anti-Catholic, anti-Orthodox Protestants as a way of discrediting aspects of the ancient Church which they mistakenly don't like. Anything that can be shown to have had a possible pagan origin or precedent is held as evidence that the Church apostatized from the simplicity of Apostolic Christianity and became compromised by paganism, particularly from the fourth century on (though some groups trace the supposed apostasy to the end of the first century). Second, it is used by certain cynical critics to discredit the newness and originality of Christianity and the Divine Revelation on which it is based. Such critics find (or try to find) a pagan precedent for everything to show that nearly everything in the Scriptures and the Church is borrowed from another source and hence presumably not from God. The Christian faith, then, appears as merely another man-made religion, certainly not God-revealed absolute truth, and its claims need not be taken seriously.

The answer to the second group (the cynical critics) must await another time, but the objection of the first group to the Christian celebration of Christ's birth may be answered by three considerations.

First, it is not at all clear that the Christian celebration of Christ's birth appropriated a pagan feast. The pagan feast of the Invincible Sun was established only in the year 274 by the Emperor Aurelian in an attempt to unite the disparate religions of the empire around the worship of the sun. The feast of the Invincible Sun, then, was a late pagan development, not an ancient, deeply rooted pagan tradition. In fact, December 25 had no significance on the Roman pagan calendar before the time of Aurelian, and the cult of the sun was insignificant until his time.

Thus, the pagan feast of the sun falling on December 25 which many claim to be the source of Christmas dates to nearly two and a half centuries after Pentecost. So which was it: was the Christian feast an attempt by the Church to answer the pagan feast, or was the pagan feast an attempt by a pagan emperor to answer the Church and to try to unite a disintegrating empire by creating a new festival on a day already important to Roman Christians? It is true that the first clear historical evidence for the Church's celebration of Christ's birth on December 25 dates to 336, and this is why it is generally assumed that the Church borrowed the pagan holiday (but it could equally be an example of the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy). But this does not mean that the Church had no celebration of Christmas before 336, nor does it mean that Christians chose to celebrate Christ's

Nativity on December 25 in order to co-opt the pagan feast of the sun. There is evidence from the early fathers that Christians both in East and West had made efforts from early on to determine the date of Christ's birth in order to celebrate it.

The notion that Christmas was a pagan holiday before being a Christian one was first advanced by a German Protestant scholar named Paul Ernst Jablonowski at the end of the seventeenth century. He endeavored to use Christmas as an example of the corruption and paganization of Apostolic Christianity in the fourth century which produced Roman Catholicism. In response, a Benedictine monk Dom Jean Hardouin, accepting the basic premise that the Church had Christianized a pagan holiday, argued that it had adopted pagan holidays without paganizing the Church.

In the end, the historical evidence seems inadequate to support a definitive conclusion either for or against the pagan origin of Christmas.

Second, and more importantly, even if it was the case that fourth-century Christians took the late third-century pagan celebration of the sun on December 25 and transformed it into the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ the Sun of Righteousness, the Orthodox Christian has every right to respond, "So what?" To advance the objection of a pagan origin against a Christian practice assumes that the thing in question is irrevocably pagan and cannot be redeemed. But even the New Testament, let alone the practice of Christian missionaries through the ages, reveals that assumption to be false. St. Paul preaching to the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17) started with the example before him of an altar the Athenians had made to the "unknown god." Paul identifies himself as the apostle of that unknown God, and proceeds to declare the God unknown to the Athenians as the one and only true God. Now that was a pagan altar built with pagan intent replete with pagan associations. But that didn't stop Paul from making use of that pagan altar and redeeming it for the purpose of his sermon.

God created the world, bringing into existence from nothing. He declared that His creation in the end was "very good." Everything was made with a purpose, everything was a reflection of God's glory. Since man's fall, every good thing that God has made has been corrupted by man and used for pagan or ungodly purposes: food, drink, wives, children, sex, animals, minerals, talents, etc. All things, however corruptly they have been used, derive from the good God who made them and gave them, and they were intended to be used properly for His glory. No created thing is evil, only the misuse of it. The purpose of Christ's coming proclaimed in the Gospel is to redeem that which was fallen and misused, to purify it, to sanctify it, to renew it, to restore it, starting with man, but including the whole fallen world subjected to the curse brought by man's fall. To reject the Christian celebration of Christ's birth

because it supposedly has a pagan origin is to affirm a fallen world that cannot be redeemed in significant ways. It is to confess that the Gospel cannot repair what is broken, heal what is ill, recover what is lost. It is to affirm that the power of evil is greater than the power of our good God, for once something is tainted, it can't be reclaimed.

But if God redeems pagan and corrupt man who willingly and willfully corrupts himself, surely He in His Church can redeem a once pagan holiday through the Gospel, especially since the pagan feast of the Invincible Sun can readily admit a Christian interpreted as did the Athenian altar to the unknown god.

December 25, which was the ancient date of the winter solstice marking when the days stop getting shorter and begin to get longer, is the perfect time to celebrate Christ's birth (at least, in the northern hemisphere where Christ was born into the world). He is the Light of the world. Coming into the world, he illumines every man. When things are darkest, coldest, dead, and least hopeful, Christ enters to transform the situation, to bring light, warmth, life, and hope. Hence, the time of year Nativity is celebrated reinforces the eternal meaning of Christ's birth.

Third, at its heart, the "pagan origin" argument against Christmas is based on either a misunderstanding or a willful distortion of what Christ came to do: to found His Church against which the gates of hell would not prevail. Many today want to be spiritual without being religious, want to be Christians without being committed to the Church—or "organized religion" as they say (what do they want, "disorganized religion?" No, they simply want their own self-determined form of religion rather than someone else's.) Yet Christ came to found His Church, the community of baptized believers sharing the common faith and way of life in Christ's Church. To deny Christmas is not only to deny the transforming power of the Gospel but also to deny the Church—particularly the fourth-century Church. It was this Church that gave us the Nicene Creed. It was this Church that stamped out Arianism and other heresies. It was this Church that gave us some of the greatest teachers of the Christian Faith of all ages. It was this Church that defined the canon of the New Testament received by every Bible-believing Christian for the ages to come. It is this Church which, according to St. Paul, is the "pillar and ground of the truth." And it is this Church that definitively gave us the Feast of Nativity.

To claim that Christmas represents the betrayal of Apostolic Christianity and the paganization of Christ's Church is to deny the Church, Christ's promise to His Church, and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church preserving her from error and leading her into all truth. It is to reject God's authority given to His Church to bind and loose, and it is to set up some other authority in place of Christ Himself. The pagan origin of Christmas argument might have served Protestants effectively against 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholicism, but it does

so by replacing the authority of Christ in His church with that of the individual believer interpreting the Bible for himself. And by denying the Church in the name of the Bible, it ends up undermining the basis on which that Bible is received by Christians in the first place—it's acceptance and use in the Church Christ and His apostles established.

We must not for a moment give credence to any argument against Christmas on the basis of its supposed pagan origins, and when we hear it voiced, we must challenge it. Now it is true that the celebration of Christmas has been paganized anew in the West, that it has been reduced to a generic holiday season with its very name expunged from the public realm, that it has become merely an excuse for an orgy of consumption containing less deep meaning than its ancient pagan ancestor, the feast of the Invincible Sun. As was the early Church, we are faced with the task of sanctifying our world and that which fallen man has corrupted, and this is accomplished through proclaiming and living the Gospel in the Orthodox Christian way. An important part of the Orthodox way is the Orthodox celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, which represents not a paganization of the Christian Church by the world, but the Christianization of the pagan world by the Church. And that is what the Gospel is all about.

#### **December Namedays**

- 6 Nicholas Gluschenko, Alexander Nicholas Sancer (St. Nicholas of Myra)
- 7 Ambrose Leif Pierson (St. Ambrose of Milan)
- 13 Lucia Lydia Sancer
- Sunday of Holy Forefathers (Dec 11-17)
  - Reader Benjamin (Patriarch Benjamin)
  - Joseph (Derek) Sancer (Joseph the Comely)
- Sunday before Nativity Dec 18-24
  - David Riewe (Prophet David)
  - Nancy Saito (Rachel mother of Joseph & Benj)

#### **December Birthdays**

- 5 Alexander Sancer
- 7 Nancy Saito
- 11 Lydia Sancer
- 16 Emmauel Lyda (05)
- 28 Nathan Brouillette
- 31 Leah Cole

#### **Upcoming Events 2008**

- 16 December, Tuesday, 7:30 p.m. Holy Unction
- 24 December Nativity Eve: 8:00 a.m. Royal Hours, noon Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil, 5:30 p.m. Vigil, 7:30 p.m. Holy Supper
- 25 December Nativity of Our Lord: 8:00 a.m. Divine Liturgy
- 27 December – January 2: Winter Service Retreat at St. George's, Pharr, TX.

**GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!**