

The Preparatory Season for the Nativity of Our Lord - The Phillipian Fast

The oldest Christian feast is the Resurrection of our Lord (Pascha). This Holy Day includes a whole cycle of feasts such as the Ascension and Pentecost. It is the great feast of our redemption and sanctification. Later Holy Days followed slowly until the fourth century. After the Church won official recognition and full freedom of worship and evangelization, our present calendar of festal celebration began to develop. This development was motivated by the Church's desire to honor both the events in the life of our Lord and the memory of the holy martyrs. Eventually the Church established a full year Christian calendar.

We are familiar with the preparatory period before the Resurrection. This is the "Great Fast" or the "Holy Forty Days' Fast". The celebration of the birth of our Lord cannot be ascertained before the middle of the fourth century. The Church at Rome was the first to celebrate our Lord's birth. Many think that the date of December 25 was chosen to supplant the feast of the god Mithra and the solemn celebration of the birth of the invincible sun god. Others think that the date was chosen for the same reason that the Roman pagans honor the victory of the sun. It is around this date that the sun overcomes the darkness and the days become longer. Several times the prophets call Jesus Christ "Sun of Justice." It was deemed proper to choose the day when the sun begins its victorious cycle of light by shortening the duration of the night.

According to some sermons of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, he introduced this feast into the Eastern Church about the year 379 or 388. After his departure from Constantinople the celebration of Christ's Nativity on December 25 was neglected. In 395 Emperor Honorius reinstated the celebration. St. John Chrysostom tells us how he introduced this feast at Antioch sometime around 380. He explicitly says how he introduced it in imitation of the Church at Rome. St. John believed that the Roman Christians knew the date of Christ's birth better than anybody else since the imperial city archives were accessible to them.

The first mention of a preparatory period before Christmas is mentioned in a decree of the Council of Saragossa (380). The Council Fathers stated that every Christian should daily go to the church from December 17 until the Theophany (January 6th). At the Synod of Mac (581) in present day France it was decreed that from November 11, the day of St. Martin, until December 24 every Christian should fast 3 times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday).

Our pre-Nativity period of preparation developed rather late. Scholars do not agree about the exact time it began. Some hold that it began in the sixth century. Others believe it began in the seventh or eighth century. The present liturgical pre-Nativity season was finally established at the Council of Constantinople (1166). The Council decreed that the fast would begin on November 15 and last until December 24 inclusive. Thus, there was created another 40 days fast.

The pre-Nativity fast is often called "Phillip's Fast" because it begins on the day after the feast of St. Phillip. The fast was introduced to prepare the Church for a worthy celebration of the great and holy day of the Birth of Christ. The regulations for the fast were far more lenient than the Great Fast before Pascha. Only Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were days of strict fasting without meat.

To worthily meet our Lord and Savior, we should sanctify this pre-Nativity season of the Phillipian Fast. Sanctifying means spending our time in faith, prayer and in the service of God and in kindness towards our neighbor, especially those who need our assistance. And we should think of what we would have been had Christ not come to our lowliness and poverty. Together with the whole of the Byzantine Church we should try to meet Christ as he deserves to be met and as it will, in His mercy, best serve our spiritual benefit!

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WHY WE FAST BEFORE NATIVITY (CHRISTMAS)

The time of preparation before the great feast of the Nativity of Christ (i.e. “Christmas”) is, through the wisdom of our holy fathers, intended to be a time of purposeful asceticism, almsgiving, and learning to say “yes” to God while saying “no” to one’s own desires.

Christmas (especially in the present day) has become a time of great anxiety and materialism for many, despite the fact that most every song one hears, most every retail ad that one reads, and most every film with “Christmas” as a theme that one watches will try to convince them that Christmas is a time for warmth, joy, spending time with one’s family and even taking a break from the regular hustle and bustle of everyday life. If only this were to be the case.

On the contrary, Christmas—a period of time that seems to grow longer and more arduous by the year—is preceded by ominous social media status updates that lament, “I can’t believe it is already November; Christmas is just around the corner”. Many will also simply write or say things like: “Wow. I am not ready for Christmas. Where has the time gone?” This palpable grief and anxiety should not be so, beloved ones. No, we have certainly missed the purpose of this feast of Nativity—and the time of preparation and fasting that precedes it—if all we can do is approach it with great stress and sorrow.

As I mentioned from the very beginning, the time before Nativity is intended to be utilized for one’s spiritual benefit (and indeed, for the life of the world), not for remorse and regret. If nothing else, then, the time of prayer and fasting before Nativity reminds us that we are given the immense and unthinkable blessing, privilege, and honor of receiving the very Body and Blood of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. But as we “say yes to Christ” in the holy mysteries, we must also learn to say “no” to ourselves and to make it a point to both follow Christ and to serve those in need.

It is no coincidence that Christ, in the Gospel reading on the eve of this fast, exhorts the Church with “whoever does not bear his cross” as well as “forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke, 14:27,33). While the faithful prepare to receive Christ through his Incarnation on the feast of Nativity and through the mysteries of the faith, one must also be prepared to relinquish whatever it is one possesses or “holds onto” that might keep them from the uncreated light and glory of his everlasting kingdom. But as the faithful are called to a period of Spiritual quietude and asceticism during this fast, one does not engage in asceticism and bear their own cross as an end unto itself. Rather, we learn to say “no” to ourselves so that we can say “yes” to God. And in saying “yes” to the poor and the needy, we are saying “yes” to Christ, so that we might share in the vision of Cornelius and hear: “Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God” (Acts of the Apostles, 10:4).

Incidentally, the subsequent Gospel lessons of this fast remind the faithful not only why they are participating in it, but also how one can make the most of it: We should not lay up treasure for ourselves, while neglecting God (Luke 12:16-21), but should rather be “rich” towards God (and by consequence, those who are in need). We should never make excuses when it comes to serving or helping those in distress (Luke 13:10-17). It is in these virtues and in a genuine concern and care for others that we can be released from the false cares of this world, especially as they are typically found during the Nativity or “Christmas” season. If we give to the poor, we are giving to God. If we say “no” to our own desires, we can fulfill the needs of those who are looking for someone—anyone—that is willing to say “yes” on their behalf. As families, we can help our children give or donate to a family, friend, or even a complete stranger that is in need, rather than providing them with more unnecessary “stuff.” As individuals, we can honor the fast, spend more time in prayer, and make a conscious effort to love our neighbors as ourselves and to dedicate this season to be a time for ascetic, Spiritual growth. We can practice the religion of Saint James that is “pure and undefiled” before God: “to visit orphans and widows in their afflictions and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Epistle of St James, 1:27).

So then, beloved brothers and sisters, rather than approaching this Nativity season with feelings of anxiety and distress, dedicate yourself to the true spirit of the season and the greater purpose that lies within: the salvation and healing of the world. What are some other ways that we as Christians can make the most of the Nativity fast, and avoid the burdens and desires that are regularly associated with the “Christmas” season?

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