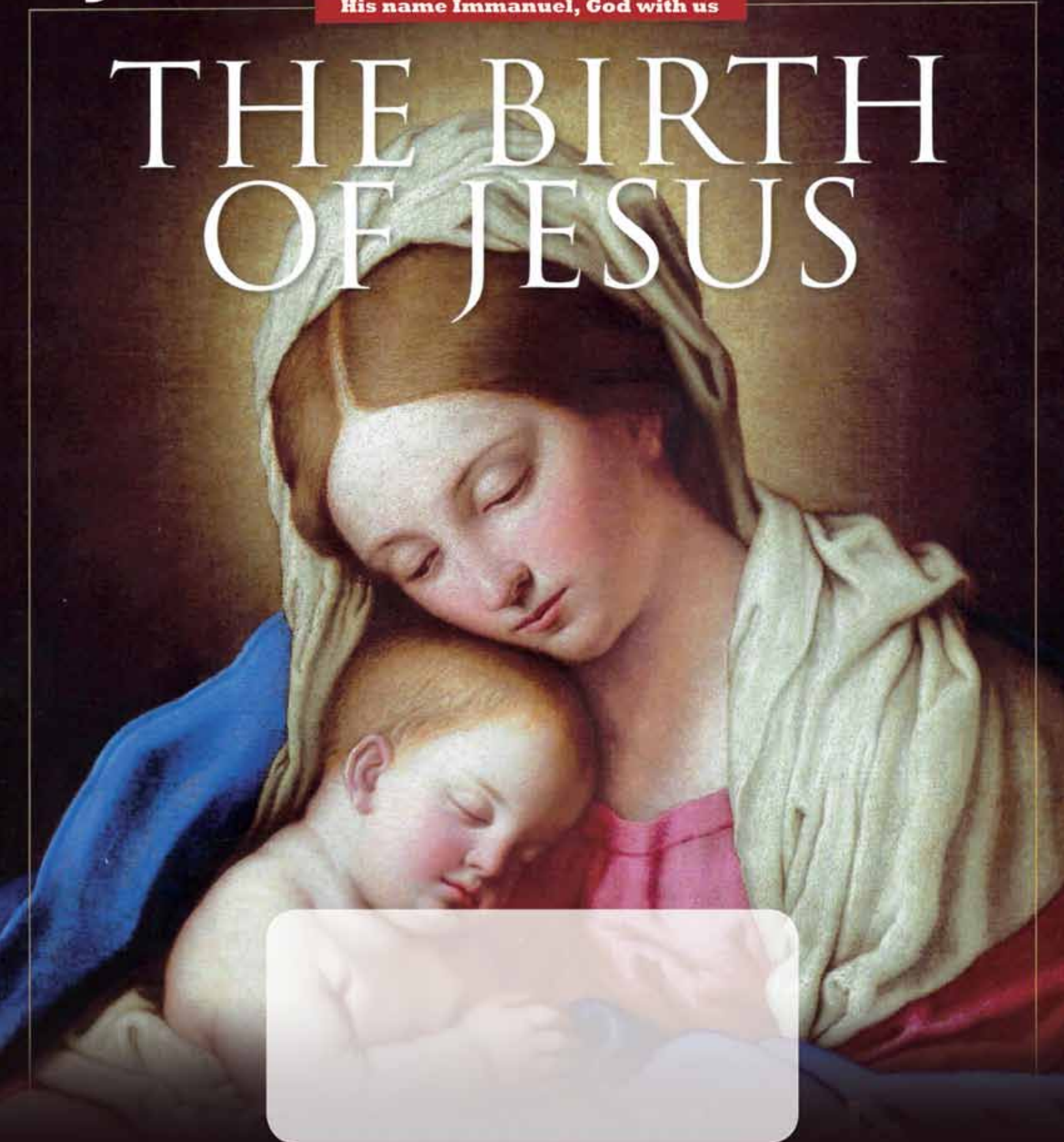




His name Immanuel, God with us

THE BIRTH OF JESUS



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*Verse
of the Month*



**"His name will be called Wonderful, Coun-
selor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince
of peace"**

(Isa. 9:6)

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SCHEDULE of MEETINGS and EVENTS

for the MONTH of January & February 2017

SUNDAY	WEDNESDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
SUNDAY	WEDNESDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
+ English Liturgy 8:00 - 11:00 a.m.	+ Liturgy 8:00 am - 10:00	+ Liturgy 8:00 - 10:00 p.m.	+ Liturgy from 8-10 am
* * *	+ Thursday Morning + Senior Citizen Club 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.		+ Vespers; Bible Study 6:00 - 7:30 p.m.
+ Arabic Liturgy 8:00 - 11:30 a.m.			+ Beginners' Deacons- Meeting 5: 00 p.m.
			+ Elementary Meeting 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.
Servants' Meeting + 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. 2nd & 4th Sunday. + Boy Scouts 12 pm	+ THURSDAY Family Meeting 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. Fr. Augustinos	+ Arabic Youth Meeting 8:00 - 10:00 p.m. Fr. Gawargios	+ College Youth Meeting 6:30- 8:00 p.m.
	Tutoring for new		High School & J. High

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1. Christmas Liturgy (Merry Christmas)

On Sunday, January 7, 2018, the Church celebrates the Nativity Feast. The Liturgy of the Feast starts Saturday 6, at 7:00 p.m. until midnight, presided by Metropolitan Serapion. The service will be followed by Agape meal in the church hall.



2. Feast of St. John the Beloved disciple:

On Friday, January 12, St. John Church celebrates the Feast of the departure of her Intercessor, St. John the Evangelist. Vespers on Thursday, 11 and the Liturgy on Friday at 8:00 a.m., celebrated by H.G. Bishop Abraham.



3. Feast of Circumcision:

On Sunday, January 14, the church celebrates this Lord's Minor Feast. Circumcision was a symbol of our baptism (Gen. 17 & Col. 2:11).



4. Feast of Epiphany:

On Friday, January 19, 2018, the Church celebrates the Feast of Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Feast's Liturgy will be on Thursday 18, from 7:00 p.m. starting with vespers then the "Lakkan" followed with the Liturgy and an Agape meal.



5. Feast of Cana of Galilee's Wedding:

On Sunday, January 21, the church celebrates this Lord's Feast.

+ This Feast comes concurrent with the martyrdom of St. Demiana and the forty virgins with her.



6. Nineveh/Jonah's Fast: (Jan. 29 – Feb. 1)

On Monday, January 29, the three-day-fast of Nineveh starts. There will be daily late Liturgies (from Monday to Wednesday, from 12 noon- 3:00 p.m.). The Feast of Jonah will be on Thursday, February 1; and Liturgy from 8:00 a.m.



7. H.H. Pope Tawadros II:

+ At the end of last November, His Holiness had a successful spine surgery in Germany. May the Lord grant him complete health and strength.

+ His Holiness ordained new bishops.

8. H.E. Metropolitan Serapion:



+ His Eminence ordained Fr. Jeremiah a priest at St. Michael church at Semi-Valley to serve with Fr. Marcos Hanna. Congratulations to the new priest and the church wishing them a blessed service.

+ H.E. will celebrate the Liturgy at St. John Church with the clergy meeting on January 4.

+ H.E. will celebrate the Christmas Liturgy at St. John church, January 6.

9. Feast of St. Anthony:

(Tuesday, January 30):



10. Departure of St. Paula the Anchorite:

(Friday, February 9)

11. The Lent:

(Monday, February 12)

The Holy Lent fasting starts from Monday, February 12 until Easter, April 8, 2018.



12. Feast of Presentation:

On Thursday, February 15, the church celebrates the Feast of Presenting the baby Jesus to the temple. This is one of the Minor Lord's Feasts. The Liturgy is from 8 a.m.

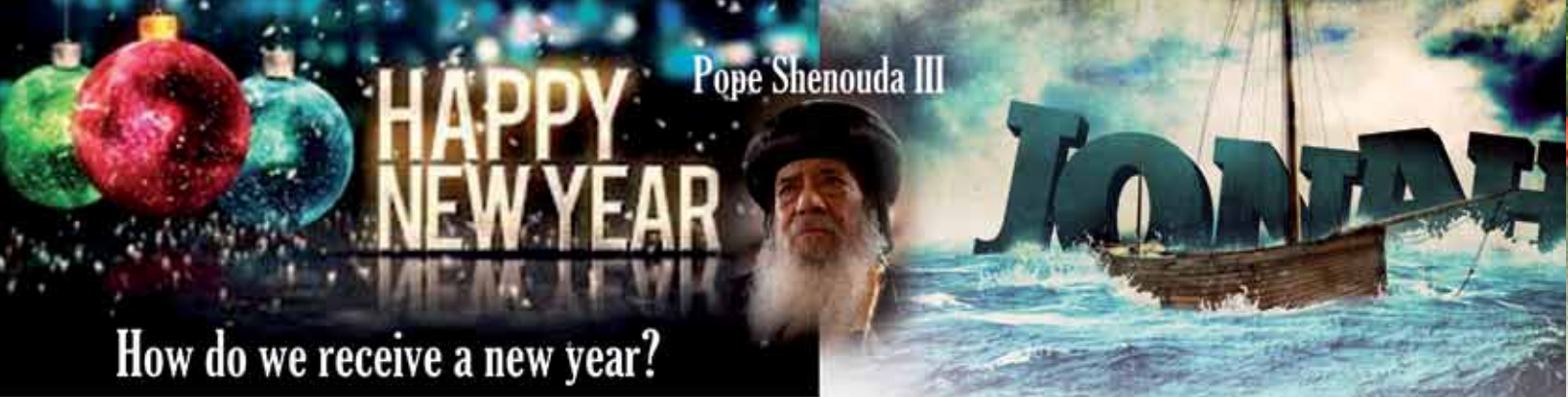


13. Martyrdom of the Apostle St. James:

On Friday, Feb. 17, the church celebrates the feast of St. James' martyrdom, the author of the Letter that bears his name and known as the Letter of Works. He was the Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 15).



14. St. John Magazine thanks the subscribers and reminds them to renew their Annual Subscription for the New Year 2018.



How do we receive a new year?

At the end of a year and the beginning of new one, each one needs to sit down alone quietly. Most people get busy in the celebrations of the New Year's Eve, its programs and preparations, and they have no chance to sit with themselves. But you have to arrange a quite time for sitting alone with God to give account of the year that passed, and to blame yourself for the time you have wasted and to come up with a new plan for the New Year.

You need to imitate the prodigal son when he came to himself and examined his situation and reached a decisive resolution to what he should do next. Many people live in a vicious cycle and in a whirlwind, yesterday delivers them to today and today to tomorrow and they find themselves lost. They do not know where they are going, with no aim or goal. A lot of people live in a total coma towards their spiritual life and their eternity. They take care of many details, but the goal is vague before them. I wonder how many people take vacations from work, for a trip or a visit or entertainment, but no one takes vacation to think of his eternal salvation. Nobody cares to search about what he did to please God and what he did to displease Him. Look at the repeated sins in your life and your shortcomings, their causes and motives and how you get rid of them. Search your behavior and your personal attributes, your characteristics such as your short temper and your tendency to be honored. Be fair and strict judge with yourself. Rebuke yourself for the sins of evil thoughts and desires and the sins of the tongue. Blame yourself for your negligence and carelessness, laziness and your sins toward other people.

Let the New Year be new in everything, make it a year of victory. Decide to avoid all sorts of offences and "remember from where you have fallen and repent and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5).

Repenting is the point of beginning, then grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and be holy and perfect as your heavenly Father is Holy and Perfect. Ask God to give you and a new heart, a new spirit and a new style and features of life, because the Lord promised all of that saying, "I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36: 26, 27).

God likes reasoning together

The last chapter, the 4th of the book of Jonah is focusing on this fact that the Lord likes to reason with his children. God's love to discuss matters with His people is very clear in the entire Bible. He did that with Adam, Elijah and with Jonah and many others.

In the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah, He says: "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord..." (Isa. 1:18). The story of Sodom gives us an idea how God reasoned with Abraham, and said to him, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing? (Gen. 18:17, 18).

God reasoned with Jonah, and He was the One Who started the discussion and asked him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" and Jonah answered frankly, "It is right for me to be angry even to death!" (Jon. 4:9).

God was not annoyed from Jonah's answer, but went on trying to convince him through discussion and practically that he should have cared more for the salvation of Nineveh. God, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe was so humble and patient to debate with Jonah, the dust, without getting angry with him! Jonah as a prophet was supposed to obey and submit to God, but he fell into another sin by his foolish argument.

God is good and merciful and humbled Himself to the level of Jonah to convince him and lift him up and "to deliver him from his misery" and win his soul (Jon. 4:6).

God never force us to accept His will, but always wants us to be convinced and surrender to His will with pleasure. Therefore, He gave us the prayer to talk with Him and reason with Him, and more than that He allowed Jacob to wrestle and struggle with Him, saying, "I will not let You go until You bless me"! (Gen. 32:24-26).

(That was one the main goals of Christ's incarnation, to reason with us and make us understand His will and plan to save us and accept His great redemption).

GREAT JOY SURROUNDS CHRISTMAS



By Fr. Augustinos Hanna

The child born in Bethlehem became the greatest source of joy in history. He was born under unusual circumstances. He was laid in a manger after His birth. His mother, Mary, carried Him while she was a virgin and still betrothed to a poor old carpenter. The child had no human father! Unusual messengers proclaimed His birth; namely angels from heaven. They called Him the Savior, the Messiah, and the Lord. They sang a song

“made in heaven.” (Luke 2:14). It was also unusual who received this angelic message first: simple shepherds, who spread the news of His birth in Bethlehem. Eight days later, the baby received an unusual name: **Jesus**, which means “God Saves”!

His birth had been already prophesied more than 750 years before. **“The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call His name Immanuel, which means “God with us”** (Isa. 7:14 & Matt. 1:23).

Also, another prophecy says, **“For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder; and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David...”** (Isa. 9:6, 7).

A third prophecy was said by the prophet Micah, who lived in the 8th century B.C. about the small village of Bethlehem in which Jesus Christ was born in saying, **“But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have from of old, from everlasting”** (Mic. 5:2). This miraculous Child spreads great joy to everyone who got to have contact with Him. **The word, “JOY” appeared several times around His birth.**

(1) When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why

is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, **the babe leaped in my womb for JOY**” (Lk. 1:41).

(2) St. Mary, His blessed mother, also was filled with the Holy Spirit and JOY, and uttered her great Magnifica and said, **“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has REJOISED in God my Savior...”** (Lk. 1:46).

(3) The angel of the Lord proclaimed to the shepherds the good news saying, **“I bring you good tidings of GREAT JOY** which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Lk. 1:10, 11).

(4) **“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!”** (Lk.2:14).

(5) “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold **wise men from the East** came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He Who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him (Matt. 2:1, 2)”**When they saw the star, they rejoiced with EXCEEDING GREAT JOY**” (Matt. 2:10).

This joy continued throughout Christ’s whole life accompanying His miracles and teaching. St. Peter said, **“Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory”** (1 Pet. 1:8). St. Paul writes to Timothy: **“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory”** (1 Tim. 3:16). Who can see the incarnate God and does not rejoice with great JOY?! **“Zacchaeus received Him joyfully”** (Lk.19:6). Jesus said, **“You now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you”** (Jn.16:22).

What Does Christmas Mean?

By Fr. Anthony Coniaris



What does Christmas mean? It means many things to many people **but what does it mean to you?**

Christmas means that *"the Word (the eternal God) was made flesh and dwelt among us. Full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14)*. In an attempt to capture the monumental humiliation God endured when He took on human flesh, C.S. Lewis likens it to our becoming a worm (Psalm 22:6)! Yet God did that for us in order to communicate His love to us and to save us.

Christmas means that Emmanuel has come, God is not as impersonal machine or a super power who runs the universe by remote control. He is a Person, "Emmanuel- God with us." *"And you shall call His name Jesus for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21)*. God is a Person who wants to establish a personal relationship with you. He is a Person you can pray to; a Person Who cares for you, a Person Who has reserved a place for you in heaven.

Christmas means that God has visited His people.

But the word visit is inadequate if it means that He came to spend a few years with us and then leave us again.

He came not just to visit but to stay. *"Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:20)*. **He is with us in our joys, with us in our sorrows; with us in our living, with us in our dying.**

He came to Bethlehem. He comes now. And He will come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

Christmas means that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:2). From now on we walk bravely through the valley of shadows for we walk hand in hand with Him Who is the Light of the world, and the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25).

Christmas means that we do not have to be victimized and terrorized by the sins of the past. For God's great gift to us at Christmas is a Savior. One Who came to wipe out the sins of the past.

Christmas means that God cared enough to give the Best. *"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16)*. If God cared enough to give the best, then St. Paul is right when he writes in Romans 8:32, "He Who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He no give us all things with Him?"

Christmas means that God comes to us in Person. He does not send an angel or a saint or a prophet. He came Himself.

A person said to God once:

Lord, don't send Moses! He broke the tables of stone. Don't send Elijah for me, Lord! I am afraid of Elijah- he called down fire from heaven.

Don't send Paul, Lord! He is so learned that I feel like a little child when I read his letters!
O Lord Jesus, come yourself! I am not afraid of You. You took the little children as lambs in your bosom. You forgave the woman taken in adultery.

You healed the timid woman, who reached out in the crowd to touch You. We are not afraid of You.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

And He came!

Christmas means that there are two births of Christ: One unto the world at Bethlehem; the other in the soul when it is spiritually reborn. Through the Holy Mysteries of Baptism and the Eucharist, Christ is born in the second Bethlehem, i.e., our hearts and minds, our souls and bodies. He that is the eternal God becomes a newborn babe that we might be converted and become babes for Him. The Only-begotten Word of God, One of the Trinity, becomes man that man might become "a communicant of the Divine Nature" in Him. The dark cave, the manger, in Bethlehem becomes heaven and is filled with light of Divinity. Christ is born that our dark souls may be filled with light. If He was born in the first Bethlehem, it was only that He might come and be born in the second Bethlehem, which is your soul and mine.

Someone once wrote, What good is it to me, if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself?!

And, what good is it to me if, Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to His Son if I do not also give birth to Him in my time and my culture?

Christmas came for me, when His love and wisdom filled me to serve others, as my gold, frankincense and myrrh.



God Was Disguised in Christ!

Fr. Augustinos Hanna

St. Paul once said, "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh..." (1 Tim. 3:16). This precious declaration may be crystal clear to Christian believers; yet to non-believers it is still a puzzle and seems doubtful or even controversial. Again, St. Paul unveils a secret here saying, "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

Nevertheless, to both believers and non-believers, it is evident in the Bible that God was disguised in Christ in many pictures. Here are some of them:

1. In His Incarnation:

Despite all the long preparation that God made and the prophecies of more than thirty prophets, implicit and explicit, the people in Bethlehem could not recognize Him or welcome Him and that is why all the doors were shut in His face to the point that He was born in a manger, "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

The Holy Family was poor and people did not understand "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). God was in Christ disguised in His incarnation.

2. In His Human Suffering:

The four gospels mention that Jesus thirsted, starved, was tired, slept, wept, suffered pain and died. That was a stumbling block to the regular mind because God is above all that. But when we discover God's plan to manifest Himself in a human form, to reveal His Divine attributes to us and to redeem us, so the difficulty is solved. He proved both, His full Divinity and His full Humanity and that His two natures became one that of the incarnate Word of God "without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration," and "His Divinity parted not from His Humanity neither a moment nor a twinkling of an eye." In this case we realize that His suffering as a full human was a must, and "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

St. Paul goes on explaining, "Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:17, 18). So, in His suffering, God was disguised in Christ, "for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

3. In the Poor and Sick:

The Lord Jesus Christ was born poor, lived poor and died poor. He rejected the earthly kingdom, owned nothing despite He is the Creator of heaven and earth. It was He who said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20). He considered the poor as His brethren and rather as Himself. He said, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the king will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in....Then the righteous will answer Him, saying "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You.... And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'" (Matt. 25:31-45).

Mother Teresa of Calcutta found Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor. She opened her heart and her home to people whom others rejected or bypassed as less than humans, according them exactly the same reverence she gave Christ in the Eucharist.

What are we doing for God's Little Ones?

Neither the sheep nor the goats in the Gospel recognized Jesus in the needs of their brothers and sisters. The distinction between them was not in awareness but in action. What am I actually doing for the poor? Is their poverty material or spiritual? If I don't have enough time for God's poor, then I don't have enough time for Him at all; in other words, we don't have enough time for completing our own salvation (Phil. 2:12). Therefore, God in Christ was disguised in the needy, naked, hungry, sick and imprisoned. So, do you want to hear from the Master's mouth in the last day, "come to Me" or "depart from Me?"

4. In the Eucharist:

When the Lord Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Holy Communion, He said, "Take eat; this is My body...this is My blood" (Matt. 26:26-28). In another statement He said, My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:55, 56). Our Orthodox dogma teaches us that the Eucharist is the very true body and blood of our Lord and not just a symbol. That is why the Apostle Paul says, "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body"(1 Cor. 11:29). It therefore needs discernment to unveil the disguise of God in the body of Christ.



Issues for the **THE SEVEN D'S** (3) **YOUTH**

by Fr. Gawargious Kolta



In the last volume of this magazine, we mentioned the seven D's; that the youth have to avoid for the sake of their spiritual, psychological health and physical growth. These are dating, dancing, drinking, drugs, doubting the faith, disobedience to parents or elders, and deception by the devil's tricks and lies. We also mentioned how both dating and dancing at young age are very harmful and destructive. Now we are going to mention the problem of drinking especially in the young age.

3- Drinking

Wine is a beverage made from fermented grapes. Wine has been used in the past and also now as a drink that is used by the household people and offered to the guests, especially in the feasts (Gen. 14:18, Jn. 2:3), but some people have abused it not only now but also in the old times. Thus, God rebuked them many times (Prov. 20:1, 23:29, Isa. 28:1-7, Hos. 4:11). Wine was offered in sacrifices (Num. 15:5, Duet. 18:4). It was forbidden to the Nazirite to drink wine or similar drink (Num. 6:3, Lk. 1:15). Also it was forbidden that the priest drinks wine before offering the sacrifices (Ezek. 44:21). Strong drinks are not prepared from grapes but from some vegetables and other fruits.

Many people say that drinking is not a sinful deed, and the Lord Himself performed the first miracle in the wedding in Cane by transferring water into good wine (Jn. 2:9-10). They say that it is mentioned in the Psalms among the bountiful provision of God: "He causes the grass to grow... that He may bring forth food from the earth and wine that makes glad the heart of man" (ps. 104:14-15). They add that there are many verses in the Bible that mention that wine is blessed and that our Lord used to drink wine with His disciples when He used to visit people (Mat. 11:19). He also gave the parable of the new wine and the old wine (Mat. 11:19, Lk. 5:37). Also St. Paul asked his disciple St. Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach's sake (1 Tim. 5:23). St. Paul did not however allow indulging freely in wine, but as much as was for health and not for amusement or luxury.

However, the Scripture condemns drunkenness and overindulgence. We have to realize that those who drink much wine lose their consciousness and stagger. Noah drank much wine and was drunk and became uncovered, and Lot drank wine, lost his consciousness and he did not recognize his daughters when they slept with him (Gen. 9:21, 19:32-34). When the prophets and the priests of Israel erred through drinking, they stumbled in judgment (Isa. 28:7).

Thus King Solomon advised us saying: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Prov. 20:1). He also said that he who loves wine will not be rich, and he advised us not to mix with winebibbers or with gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty (Prov. 21:17 & 23:20, 21). It is also written in the

Proverbs: "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at wine, those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red ... at last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper" (Prov. 23:29-31).

St. Paul advised us saying: "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Both King Solomon and Ezekiel advised the kings, princes and priests not to drink wine and intoxicating wine, lest they forget the law and prevent the justice of all the afflicted (Prov. 31:4, 5, Ezek. 44:21). St. Paul asked Timothy and Titus to be careful in appointing deacons, elders and bishops that they must not be given to wine (Tit. 1:7). It is written that the prophet Daniel and the three youth did not defile themselves with wine (Dan. 1:8). We can also see that it was said that John the Baptist drank neither wine nor strong drink (Lk. 1:15).

Most of drink addiction starts from the young age, and it is characterized by uncontrolled drinking. Many car accidents happen by drunk drivers. National statistics mention that in the year 2016, 10,265 individuals died in alcohol-impaired driving crashes. Every 51 minutes in USA someone is killed in a drunk driving crash. About 17 % of fatal drunk-related crashes are from drivers under 21 years of age. Those young age drivers may not have been addicts for drinking, but it happened that they had been drinking with their fellows in parties and similar occasions.

This statistics do not include the young kids who drink and don't drive. When I asked some of the young age kids: "Why do you like to drink?" Some answered saying that their parents used to drink and they think that it is not evil. Others said that they drink to have fun with their friends, and they asked why the church attacks those who drink and consider them as evil doers. Others said if the church considers that drinking wine is evil, how it is blessed in the Bible and how the Lord attended a wedding, in which they were drinking and blessed the water and transformed it to wine? Others said that they drink wine on occasions only, and they admitted that they don't drink to get drunk. Others said that it is not harmful to drink wine but it can be not appropriate to drink strong liquors. Some said that they are mature people and drinking would not prevent them to live a holy life, and that they are not different from the majority of people.

I want to give answers for those young fellows:

1- The statistics inform us that most of the alcohol addicts in USA started drinking at young age; either in parties or with the family members. Thus they find that 20% of the youth suffer from anxiety or mood disorder.

2- Most of the youth who like drinking usually go to indecent places to have fun, in the midst of the ungodly and the scornful-

people, against the will of God. King Solomon advised us saying: "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on" (Prov. 4:14) 3- Some youth who say that they cannot be different from other people, and they have to share with them drinking, otherwise they consider them as underdeveloped people, you have to know the answer of that excuse from St. Paul: "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

4- The youth who drink in occasions only, can be addict at any time, because most of them have a weak will. Most young age drunk drivers lost their lives in traffic accidents, because they were drunk in occasions.

I am going to give few stories as examples of the problems that happen to some youth as a result of drinking:

STORY NO. 1:

In 1982 I attended a wedding of a rich man who was a successful business man. He offered many types of drinks in the reception and many people were drinking. They told me that this is the life style of luxurious people. After 6 months, I heard that he died, from alcoholic toxicity because he drank too much on the New Year eve. His newly married wife was just pregnant for 4 months.

STORY NO.2:

When I came to USA in 1989, at St. John Church and I had just started my service, many parents wanted to know my opinion about the Prom. I asked them about what happens in that Prom. They told me that after High School graduate celebrations, most of the boys take their girl friends, and go to some parties for dancing and drinking. When I asked the parents to go to those parties, in order to observe and to watch them, and protect from doing bad deeds, they laughed and considered me coming from another planet. They said: "This is usual that all the graduates celebrate these parties without any supervision from the parents and they should have fun".

Next day, I received a phone call from a parent, who was bitterly crying, and told me that his son passed away in a deadly car crash, while he was driving under the influence, just after he celebrated the Prom night. He was 18 years old.

STORY NO.3:

One day I had a phone call from a mother, asking me to visit her son in the hospital as he was in a critical condition. When I went to see him, I met his wife and I asked her about what had happened. She cried and told me that she had a great fight with him the night before, and she left the house. She did not listen to his petitions and she was very harsh with him.

She added that he got very sad because they were just married for only six months after a long time of dating. I remembered that when I visited them after the wedding, I found that they had many bottles of liquors at home, in a corner of the hall. She told me that after she left the house, he started to drink till he got unconscious. At mid night, the neighbors called the police because they heard a loud voice from his TV. The police entered the house and found him on the ground and there was an empty bottle of strong drink on the table. She pleaded me to

pray for him that God makes him recover from his coma, without any damage. I prayed for him and asked the Lord to be merciful to that young age couple. After few days, he was recovered and went home. He promised me to quit drinking, and his wife admitted her continuous arguments mistakes.

STORY NO.4:

This story is for a girl who had just started her university study. She was from another church and I had not known her before. One day I got a telephone call from her and she told me if I can accept to be her guide through e-mail. I agreed and I promised her to keep everything secret. She told me that although she dropped one class, she succeeded in the first quarter with low grades in the other two subjects. She did not tell the truth to her parents. She told me that she lived in the dorm with bad fellows who had boyfriends coming to them, where they found it easy to drink without supervision. She started to be like them and became an alcohol addict and she could not sleep without drinking. She did not tell her parents and she asked my advice for the next quarter. I told her that she should leave the dorm, and I asked one of the priests near her university if he could find a place for her accommodation. By continuous prayers, the Lord directed us to a good place, where she could stop drinking, and she continued her study properly. That priest was very kind to her and through confession he helped her to repent, and she could continue her study successfully.

STORY NO.5:

A girl came and told me that she had a boyfriend who was very smart and very helpful in her study. She told me that he was different from other boys, and that they had no physical relations. She was very emotional, and she trusted him that they will get married just after they finish their university studies. I warned her from satanic tricks, and that if he was serious he should propose and tell her family.

She did not listen to my advice, and continued the relation. She asked me once if drinking wine with her fellows was wrong. I told her that it was not lawful for her to drink wine in her age and in such parties, as she had a weak will and she could not say 'no'. She told me that she could not disagree with her boyfriend, and she trusted that he would not commit any evil deed with her. I told her that in such parties they do not only drink, but they also dance lustful dancing. I told her not to be in the midst of the ungodly and scornful people.

Again she did not listen to my advice and she continued to attend such parties. She came back to me, she told me that her boyfriend gave her a cup of wine and she did not feel unconscious. I pleaded her not to do it again, and Satan was preparing for her a great fall. She tried to argue with me for a long time and finally she did not obey me.

After two weeks, she met me, and told me crying that she got drunk and that she did not know what happened to her. In the morning she found herself completely naked in a bed in her boyfriend room. She cried with a loud voice and he tried to comfort her, saying nobody touched her and that she took off her clothes willingly when she was unconscious. She told me while she was crying: "Abouna, I am still a virgin". After that she confessed, and promised to quit from that friendship and concentrate in her study.



This was my grandmother's first Christmas without grandfather, and we had promised him before he passed away that we would make this her best Christmas ever. When my mom, dad, three sisters and I arrived at her little house in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, we found she had waited up all night for us to arrive from Texas. After we exchanged hugs, Donna, Karen, Kristi and I ran into the house. It did seem a little empty without Grandfather, and we knew it was up to us to make this Christmas special for her.

Grandfather had always said that the Christmas tree was the most important decoration of all. So we immediately set to work assembling the beautiful artificial tree that was stored in Grandfather's closet. Although artificial, it was the most genuine-looking Douglas fir I had ever seen. Tucked away in the closet with the tree was a spectacular array of ornaments, many of which had been my father's when he was a little boy. As we unwrapped each one, Grandmother had a story to go along with it. My mother strung the tree with bright white lights and a red button garland; my sisters and I carefully placed ornaments on the tree; and finally, Father was given the honor of lighting the tree.

We stepped back to admire our handiwork. To us, it looked magnificent, as beautiful as the tree in Rockefeller Center. But something was missing. "Where is your star?" I asked. The star was my grandmother's favorite part of the tree.

"Why, it must be here somewhere," she said, starting to sort through the boxes again. "Your grandfather always packed everything so carefully when he took the tree down."

As we emptied box after box and found no star, my grandmother's eyes filled with tears. This was no ordinary ornament, but an elaborate golden star covered with colored jewels and blue lights that blinked on and off. Moreover, Grandfather had given it to Grandmother some fifty years ago, on their first Christmas together. Now, on her first Christmas without him, the star was gone, too.

"Don't worry, Grandmother," I reassured her. "We'll find it for you."

My sisters and I formed a search party. "Let's start in the closet where the ornaments were," Donna said.

"May be the box just fell down." That sounded logical, so we climbed on a chair and began to search that tall closet of Grandfather's. We found Father's old yearbooks and photographs of relatives, Christmas cards from years gone by, and party dresses and jewelry boxes, but no star. We searched under beds and over shelves, inside and outside, until we had exhausted every possibility. We could see Grandmother was disappointed, although she tried not to show it.

"We could buy a new star," Kristi offered. "I'll make you one from construction paper," Karen chimed in.

"No," Grandmother said. "This year, we won't have a star." By now, it was dark outside, and time for bed, as Santa would soon be here. We lay in bed, snowflakes falling quietly outside.

The next morning, my sisters and I woke up early, as was our habit on Christmas day- first, to see what Santa had left under the tree, and second, to look for the Christmas star in the sky. After a traditional breakfast of apple pancakes, the family sat down together to open presents. Santa had brought me the Easy-Bake Oven I wanted, and Donna a Chatty-Cathy doll. Karen was thrilled to get the doll buggy she had asked for, and Kristi to get the china tea set. Father was in charge of passing out the presents, so that everyone would have something to open at the same time.

"The last gift is to Grandmother from Grandfather," he said, in a puzzled voice.

"From who?" There was surprise in my grandmother's voice.

"I found that gift in Grandfather's closet when we got the tree down," Mother explained. "It was already wrapped so I put it under the tree. I thought it was one of yours." "Hurry and open it," Karen urged excitedly. My grandmother shakily opened the box. Her face lit up with joy when she unfolded the tissue paper and pulled out a glorious golden star. There was a note attached. Her voice trembled as she read it aloud:

"Don't be angry with me, dear, I broke your star while putting away the decorations, and I couldn't bear to tell you. Thought it was time for a new one. I hope it brings you as much joy as the first one. Merry Christmas. Love, Bryant



What Do You Mean Sleeper?!

God called Jonah the Prophet to go to Nineveh and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Him. It was a call from God to a holy ministry aiming the salvation of every soul in Nineveh. But Jonah, instead, fled from the presence of the Lord! Didn't Jonah know that when he flees to Tarshish, God is there too, and God is the Lord of the sea too!

The Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. The mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, but Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep! What a shameful thing that God's prophet was the only man who could sleep and did not call on his God! It was strange that the one who awoke him was the pagan captain, who said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God". The ship is about to drown... because of your sin and disobedience. God's work is very strange, He can "out of the eater produce something to eat, and out of the strong produces something sweet!" (Judg. 14:14). He could win Nineveh by Jonah's obedience, and could win the pagan mariners by Jonah's disobedience!

And what about Jonah, did God reject his ministry because he tried to escape? No, because Jonah repented and prayed from the fish's belly and learned obedience and said, "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me." In his prayer we see his faith, and see how God accepts repentance and gives a second chance. Isn't strange that God is still insisting to use Jonah for the same mission, to save Nineveh! Can't you find someone else, O Lord? Of course God has many to use and is "able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones", but God's way as the Divine Potter, is to remake the marred clay again into another vessel and to make out of that rough stone a cornerstone. At this time all the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Jonah's message was completed by the repentance of the city of Nineveh. Therefore, no matter who you are and what have you done; God is ready to do everything for your own salvation and the salvation of everyone else through you. Let us learn to subject our will to God's wise and perfect will, for God's glory and the edification of his church.

Do You Know your Heavenly Friends

The Angels?

Some things the Bible Tells about Them

1. They were created by God (Gen. 2:1) before creating the universe (Job 38:6, 7).
2. There are several orders or classes. Isaiah 6:2 told about the Seraphim (Angels of praise), and Genesis 3:24; Ezekiel & Revelation told about the Cherubim (Angels of knowledge); Colossians 1:16 talked about Thrones, Dominions, Principalities and Powers.
3. They are immortal. They don't die (Luke 20:36).
4. They worship God (Philippians 2:9-11).
5. They are obedient to God (Matt. 6:10; Psalm 103:10).
6. They do not marry (Matthew 22:30) and do not die.
7. They are many millions. (Thomas Aquinas says 4 billion).
8. Only three are actually named in the Bible: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael (and Lucifer before the fall-Isa.14:12-15) Then he was called Satan or the Devil, or the dragon and old serpent (Rev. 12:7).
9. Some of the angels are fallen: They left God and decided to be evil angles. Lucifer is the only one whose name we know.
10. They have personalities and free will and are not just forces or spirits or robots (Luke 1:26).
11. They can appear in visible form like a man or a flame of fire or horses of fire (Lk. 1:12; Jud. 13:3 & 20 & 2 Kings 6:17).
12. They help and guide people and are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14 & Acts 8:26).
13. They rejoice over one sinner who repents (Lk.15:10).
14. They protect the believers and deliver them from dangers (Psalm 34:7; 91:11).
15. They carry the souls of Christians to Paradise or the "bosom of Abraham." (Luke 16:22).
16. Each one of the believers, especially the children and the least of Jesus' brothers has a "Guardian Angel" (Matt. 18:10; Psalm 34:7; 91:11).

Priorities of Christian Life

Fr Augustinos R. Hanna

(Translated from Arabic by Mr. Magdy Boutros)



First: Priorities of Christian Life

We should reconsider the priorities of spiritual life, and Christian life in general. There are very important verses and issues that the Lord of Glory Jesus Christ set as Number One in our lives, and said that we have to observe them first, before anything else, including the following:

1- The first and greatest commandment:

How do we begin sound religion and relationship with God? Is it by prayer, or fasting or giving alms, or by going to church or doing good works? No. All of these are important, but they come second and should be preceded by something else, without which all of these would be useless. So, how do we begin?

Listen then, to this story:

A young man once tried to join a theological college. The Bishop, who was dean of the college, wanted to test him, so he asked him, "Why do you prefer a theological college to the schools of medicine, law or engineering, which are eagerly sought by your colleagues?"

The young man answered, "Because I was brought up in a religious family. I have learned prayer, fasting and church-going since I was young. The Bishop said, "That is good, but it is not enough."

When the young man looked bewildered, the Bishop asked him this question, "Don't you know that you have committed the greatest sin; even the most serious crime a man can commit?"

Here the young man was stunned, and objected saying, "Me? Impossible, you must mean someone else."

Then the Bishop told him, "I mean you," the young man was more confused, and grew tongue-tied. The Bishop asked him, "In your opinion, which is the gravest and most serious sin or crime?" The young man said, "Murder", the Bishop said, "No", the young man said, "Adultery," the Bishop again said, "No", the young man mentioned theft, drunkenness and narcotics addiction, but the answer was always, "No, No, No."

Then the Bishop asked, "Which is the first and greatest commandment?" As the young man didn't know, the Bishop opened the Gospel of Mark to the verse 12: 28 "And one of the scribes asked him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"

And Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: this is the first and great commandment." (Mark 12: 2-30 & Matt. 22:38).

He asked the young man, "Have you observed this commandment?"

The young man answered, "I can't claim to have observed this commandment. I love the Lord, but not with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, and with all my strength." He then asked him again, "So, which commandment have you broken?"

The young man answered, "The first and greatest commandment."

He asked him, "So, which sin have you committed?"

The young man said, "The first and greatest sin!"

The dean admitted him into the college but after he had given him an important lesson to correct his path and start with the first correct step on the right path. When we love God first, with all our hearts, thoughts, and ability we love His words (the Bible). The Bible will be FIRST every day. We love talking to Him (i.e. prayer). We love visiting Him at His house (i.e. the Church). We sanctify His day (Sunday), and become stable in Him through Communion, and train ourselves to overpower our bodies through fasting. We give the poor what they need as if we are giving to Christ. Thus, all our spiritual practices will be acceptable, likable and normal, because they are motivated by love for God with all our hearts, thoughts, and strength.

2- First request is the kingdom of God and His righteousness;

What is the most important requirement in life? Is it money, education, employment, food and drink, clothing or marriage? All of these may be important requirements, but they should be preceded by something more important. The Lord Jesus said, "For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6: 32, 33).

This first requirement is related to the aforementioned first commandment, because when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, the first thing we seek is the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. God taught us to pray asking, "Thy kingdom come," meaning that He shall reign over our hearts, lives and families, and His kingdom shall extend and spread all over the world, and the Lord Jesus shall come again in His eternal, glorious, and happy kingdom.

When we correct the ordering and seek the kingdom of God first, the other things, which we haven't asked for, shall be added, because our Heavenly Father knows our need for them, and will give them to us generously. However, if we place

seeking the kingdom of God at the tail of the list of interests, I am afraid we will lose everything, or toil in vain.

3- Giving thanks first:

St. Paul set giving thanks at the onset of prayer and of speech. In the introduction to the Epistle to the Romans he said, "First, I thank my God" (Rom. 1: 8).

Before we ask for anything, we must first give thanks for the past and for God's previous numerous bounties. This is a matter of taste, good manners and gratitude. God created us and brought us into existence from scratch, though He was not required to do so. He created us healthy, not disfigured, so what is the blessing of the sound mind worth? What is the blessing of sight worth? What is the worth of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sun, the food, the clothing, the shelter, the family and all the bounties that we enjoy, and even more, what is the worth of the spiritual blessings, the blessing of salvation, of the Bible, of the Church, of partaking of Communion, of the of Throne Blessing that is open to us, of God's care and preservation, etc.. God waits for us to thank Him. When he cured the ten lepers, only one came back to thank Him. He asked, "But where are the nine?" (Luke 17: 17)

The Church has done well to set the thanksgiving prayer first, on joyful and sad occasions, and in every service according to this correct order. It is a very brief prayer and we can add lots of things to it, to thank God for them first before anything else, otherwise our prayer will turn into selfish, childish requests at a beggar's level! Therefore the Bible reminds us, "Giving thanks always for all things." (Eph. 5: 20).

4- Reconciliation first:

The Lord Jesus Christ placed reconciliation first, prior to worship, otherwise worship, including prayer, fasting, and alms giving will be rejected. In the Sermon on the Mountain the Lord said, "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5: 23).

If you have done injustice to someone or insulted him, don't offer Cain's sacrifices, rejected by God, but overcome your heart's pride and go and be reconciled to your brother, and only then will your sacrifices be acceptable. It is not only reconciliation that is required, but also practicing the Apostolic Kiss. We start the Liturgy with the "Reconciliation Prayer", and the deacon says, "Kiss one another with a holy kiss". If someone evades reconciliation and the Apostolic Kiss, and takes a seat away from the person he should be reconciled to, he is deceiving himself. In case he takes part in communion, he will be eating and drinking damnation to himself, "For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself" (1 Cor. 11: 29).

5- Purifying the inside first:

Which cleanliness is required first.... cleanliness of body or soul? Cleanliness of the outside or the inside? Elegance of clothes and house decoration, or of the heart? The Lord Jesus Christ severely criticized the Pharisees and described them as hypocrites and blind, "for you make clean the outside of the cup

and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. You blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also." (Matt. 23: 26). Someone once said, "People care for cleaning their shoes more than they care for cleaning their souls and purifying their hearts!" Prioritization of washing, purification and cleansing should start with the inside, therefore the Lord blessed the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Without purity of heart no one can see God. The Lord says to every one of us, as he said to Peter, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." (John 13: 8).

Means of purifying the heart are: repentance, confession, partaking of communion, prayer, keeping away from unholy places and scenes, and daily reading of the word of God, as He says, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15: 3).

6- Beginning of remedy and correction:

Is it correction of others or myself? The right divine position is to start with oneself. The Lord says, in wonder, "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first remove the plank from your own eye; and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matt. 7: 3-5) On another occasion, He expressed the same meaning, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (Jn. 8:7).

Therefore if you are keen on correction, you should know that correction begins with yourself. Struggle against your inner self and don't be angry with others, but be angry first at your own faults, shortcomings, and sins. Yes, remove these vices first and acquire virtues, so that you may be qualified to remedy others.

7- Calculating the cost first:

It is not possible to build a tower, or go out to war without sitting down first and calculating the cost. That is the teaching of the Good Teacher, and His wise and sound order and arrangement, (Luke 14: 28). When He said, "Sit down first, and count the cost", He taught us that destiny and salvation decisions related to discipleship cannot be made in a hurry or haphazardly, but they need one to sit down and take time for thinking, consideration, premeditation and careful calculation, otherwise they will end in failure and mockery. "This man began to build, and was not able to finish." (Luke 14:30) If we don't calculate the earthly and physical sacrifices, costs and losses, and if we don't hold in place, fight and win, we will have a setback, like Judas, Dimas and others like them.

8- Prioritization of giving:

Which comes first, giving tithes, money or the heart? St. Paul described the generosity of the people of Corinth in giving and distribution saying, "They gave themselves first to the Lord." Those who give themselves first to the Lord can give anything else willingly, easily, and generously, but those who do not give themselves and their hearts first to the Lord cannot give anything that is of value to God or to people (Prov. 23:26).

Epiphany (baptism) in O.T. Symbols & Early Church Fathers' Sayings

1. Noah's Ark: The flood of Noah and the ark were types and prophecy about purifying our sins through baptism (Tertullian of 3rd century).

All who entered into the ark were saved. This was an icon of the church. The dove, which brought the olive branch, was a type of the Holy Spirit who gave us peace and declared the new life.

+ St. John Chrysostom said: "The Ark was a symbol to the church, Noah was a type of Christ; the Dove was a type for the Holy Spirit, and the Olive branch referred to the reconciliation and the peace of God as the fruit of justification (Rom. 5:1& 1 Peter 3:20).

+ St. Jerome said, "The dove of the Holy Spirit flew toward Noah after the black bird (the raven), as if it was heading to Christ in the River Jordan."

+ St. Ambrozo said, "You see the water, the wood and the dove, so the sacrament of baptism is clear. The water cleanses us from our sins, and the wood is the cross of Christ, and the dove is the form that rested on the Lord Jesus in the Jordan river, and the raven was a type of sin that goes away and does not come back.

2. Crossing the Red Sea:

+ St. Dedimus the Blind and St. Bazel said, "When the children of Israel left Egypt and fled from the bondage of Pharaoh by crossing the Red Sea, God destroyed Pharaoh and all his army in the water. That was a type of our baptism as St. Paul mentioned in 1 Cor. 10:1-4, and we came out of sea of baptism a new creation to praise God (Exod. 15 & Rev. 15)

3. The Crossing of Joshua the river Jordan:

+ St. Cyril of Jerusalem said, "Joshua was a type of Christ who entered God's people into the Promised Land after leading them through crossing the Jordan carrying the Ark of the Covenant, which was a type of the humanity of Christ.

4. The bitter water of Marrah and the wood of the cross: God's people could not drink from the water of Marrah because it was very bitter, and according to God's plan, when Moses threw the tree (the cross) into it, the water became sweet (Exod. 15:22 and St. Ambrozo).

5. See also, accepting the sacrifice of Elijah with fire after pouring the water over it three times (1 kings 18 and crossing Elijah himself the Jordan before his ascension to heaven (2 kings 2) & Elisha's healing of Naaman the Syrian from leprosy in the Jordan & the floating of the iron ax head above the water of the Jordan after Elisha threw the stick of wood in the river as a symbol to the cross of Jesus- 2 kings 6 – read also in this regard the sayings of St. Athanasius the Apostolic, Origen, Sts. Gregory and Justin Martyr).



Each December, I vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. I had cut back on nonessential obligations – extensive card writing, endless baking, decorating, and even overspending. Yet still I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and the true meaning of Christmas.

My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six year old. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant." I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production. Unwilling to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then.

Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise. As I waited, the students were led into the room. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross-legged on the floor. Then, each group, one by one, rose to perform their song.

Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas," I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment- songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. So, when my son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love," I was slightly taken aback by its bold title. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters, and bright snowflakes upon their heads. Those in the front row-center stage- held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song.

As the class would sing, "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love. The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her; a small, quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down- totally unaware her letter "M" appeared as a "W". The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one's mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood tall, proudly holding her "W". Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, we understood – the reason we were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear: CHRISTWAS LOVE (CHRIST WAS LOVE). And I believe, He still is. Maybe it wasn't a mistake after all.

I LOVE YOU Christmas!



Christmas is beautiful. Some people look at it as a tree, sparkling with lights and cheerful decorations everywhere, a cozy fire in the fireplace. That incredible smell of the tree mingled with cake baked. It is the most joyful season in the year. You can hear the Christmas carols in churches, hospitals, stores, banks, and TV and radio stations. It is the time for family and friends gatherings, exchanging gifts and Christmas cards; a crowded time of shopping as well.

But, on the other hand, true Christians, besides; consider Christmas as the time to glorify God for His incredible love which appeared in His incarnation to save us. It is celebrating Immanuel, God with us, the Wonderful Savior, the Wisest Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of peace. It is the time to celebrate all the great teachings, which Christmas brought to our fallen world, the songs of the angels, the Star of Bethlehem, the Virginal Birth of Jesus Christ from Saint Mary, the Manger, the Magi and their amazing gifts, humility, peace and the glory of poverty! Let us not forget that Christ is the reason for the season....

Christmas is the time to remember our brothers and sisters, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the grieving and the widows and the orphans. To follow up the blessed footsteps of the Good Shepherd, who "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). This is the real spirit of Christmas.

If you want to really enjoy Christmas, you have to imitate the Founder of the Feast and learn from Him how to serve others, wash their feet and wipe away their tears. Do not be too much involved in the superficial decorations of the Feast, but go deeper..."Launch out into the deep and let down you nets for a catch" (Lk.5:4).

Yes, you have to love Christmas in a true, mature way, for that and to set a good example for others to follow and to honor the Lord of the Feast, the way He likes and teaches.



God's Unconditional Love

By Dr. Emil Goubran

A good number of people talk about God's unconditional love, but do they all understand what it means?

God's unconditional love does not mean we have a blank check to continue to sin without repentance till the end of our lives.

But what it means is that we don't have to do anything to earn God's love in the first place. He loves us all unlim- itedly and unfailingly as mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ro- mans, ***"For I am persuaded that nei- ther death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** (Rom 8:38-39)

On the human side, there are two kinds of people; those who reciprocate by lov- ing God in return, i.e., building a love relationship with Him, and those who will reject God's love and refuse to have a relationship with Him.

What is the practical difference be- tween these two groups of people? The Lord Jesus Christ said ***"If you love Me, keep My commandments"*** (John 14:15). Therefore, those who love God will submit to Him and keep His com- mandments during their earthly lives,

while those who reject Him will not.

However, if at any time in their lives, anyone who rejects God's love decided to repent, accept God's love and follow His commandments, God will forgive and accept him ***"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Sav- ior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of the truth"*** (1 Titus 2:3-4).

This is also an expression of God's unconditional love.

As for those who refuse to repent and keep rejecting God and His love till the end of their lives, will not be living with Him in heaven. For God will not force them against their will to have a relationship and spend eternity with Him.

In doing so, God is in fact honoring their will of wanting nothing to do with Him. This is another aspect of God's love, in which He hon- ors man's free will.

As C.S. Lewis mentioned in one of his books (paraphras- ing) "In the Judgement Day there are two kinds of people; those who told God Thy will be done, and those to whom God will say your will be done".

In conclusion: God's unconditional love means that we don't have to do anything to earn it but we simply have to decide whether or not we accept or reject it. God's love will also grant forgiveness to those who change their course and accept God's love. For the Lord has said ***"the one who comes to Me I will in no way cast out."*** (John 6:37)

Short Stories (Collected by Fr. Augustinos)

God is Good



The goodness and love of God is evidence to the eyes of faith during bad times as well as good, as this Jewish folktale shows.

Two men set out on a journey together. They took a donkey to carry their packs, a torch to light their way at night, and a rooster, who was a friend of the donkey. The rooster sat on the donkey's head during the entire journey.

One of the men was deeply religious; the second was a skeptic. On the journey they frequently spoke about the Lord. "In all things, God is good," said the first companion.

"We will see if your opinion bears out the trip," said the second.

Shortly before dusk the two men arrived in a small village where they sought a place to sleep. Despite their frequent requests, no one offered them a night's lodging. Reluctantly, they traveled a mile outside of town, where they decided to sleep.

"I thought you said God is good," the skeptic said sarcastically.

"God has decided this is the best place for us to sleep tonight," replied his friend.

They fixed their beds beneath a large tree, just off the main road that led to the village, tethering the donkey about 30 yards away. Just as they were about to light the torch they heard a horrible noise. A lion had killed the donkey and carried it off to eat it away from the two men. Quickly the companions climbed the tree to stay away from danger.

"You still say God is good?" the skeptic asked with anger.

"If the lion hadn't eaten the donkey, he would have attacked us. God is good," his companion declared.

Moments later a cry from the rooster sent them further up the tree. From this new vantage point they saw a wildcat carrying the cock away in his teeth.

Before the skeptic could say a word, the man of faith declared, "The cry of the rooster has once again saved us. God is good."

A few minutes later a strong wind arose and blew out



the torch, they only comfort of the men in the black night. Again the skeptic taunted his companion. "It appears that the goodness of God is working overtime this evening," he said. This time the believer was silent.

The next morning the two men walked back into the village for food. They soon discovered that a large band of outlaws had swept into town the previous night and robbed the entire village of all its possessions.

With this news the man of faith turned to his friend. "Finally it has become clear," he cried. "Had we been given a room in the village last night, we would have been robbed along with all of the villagers. If the wind had not blown out our torch, the bandits who traveled the road near the place where we slept would have discovered us and taken all our goods. It is clear, that in all things, God is good."



8 Minutes to Eternity

The world was in dismay from the tragedy that filled hearts with pain and disbelief. One hundred forty-nine people lost their lives when a copilot, apparently suffering from severe psychological problems, decided to end his life crashing the plane that he flew into a mountain in the French Alps.

The images of suffering, pain and anger on the faces of family, friends and the general public have gripped the world and are striking and distressing. The uncontrollable longing, immense grief and torturous memory of what happened became the daily burden of hundreds of people who lost a family member, friend or acquaintance in that unspeakable tragedy.

No warning!

According to technical data available, the tragedy began eight minutes before the crash, when the unfortunate copilot decided to initiate the sharp and steady decline of the plane until its final crash against the rocks. However, according to reports, the 149 victims only realized the tragic reality that they faced a few moments before the plane's collision into the mountain. According to the recorded tape, the shouting of victims was heard only moments before the disaster.

I can't imagine what it is to see death before one's eyes and be unable to escape. One thing is certain: all those passengers who on that fateful morning stepped onto the plane in Barcelona, believed that it would take them safely to the city of Düsseldorf, Germany. There was one who had chosen the tragedy, much less counted on it. How much laughter, joy, hope and expectation was shared during the flight, minutes before a tragedy? Certainly a lot.

But at some point, someone put the clock of those lives in a countdown of 8 minutes. Eight minutes to the fatal collision.

Eight final minutes of a desired existence, but abruptly interrupted.

What is the greatest tragedy?

The crucial question should not be to determine what drove the copilot to cause a tragedy like this – though obviously this deserves attention and reflection- but to know what spiritual condition all those lives were in.

It is always best to be prepared!

Our whole life is a real trip to a destination previously chosen. If I choose to live with God and relate to Him through the person of His son, Jesus Christ, I have eternal life. Therefore, I am ready to leave this world at any time of the journey; I will be in the presence of God, in peace and security, confident that He will receive me in His arms of love and forgiveness. But if I choose to live independently of God, disregarding His invitations and calls to reconcile with Him in Christ Jesus through the recognition and confession of my sins, I will be unprepared. I will risk facing eternal condemnation and separation when the journey of my life is interrupted.

That's why God warns us: "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, while the evil days come not..." "Prepare to meet thy God."

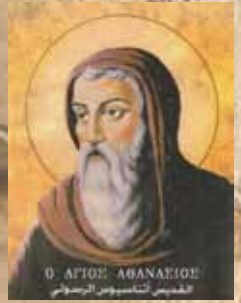
No one is the master of his fate. No one really knows when or how you will enter eternity. You need to be ready when the interruption occurs. It is better to place our lives in the hands of God and depend on Him, trusting His power to keep us from all evil. Then we are ready to face Him with confidence and certainty of the wonderful destiny that He has prepared for those who love Him.

"Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:5).

The Creed is a Biblical Creed



Fr. A. Hanna



**I believe in one God, Father Almighty
Creator of heaven and earth
And of all things visible and invisible
And in one Lord Jesus Christ
The only begotten Son of God
Begotten of the Father before all ages
Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created**

Genesis 1: 8– 17, Deuteronomy 6:4
Genesis 1:1–31; Job 38:1–30
John 1:3; Colossians 1:15, 16
John 3:16; 20:28; Acts 16:31
Psalm 2:7; Matthew 3:17; John 3:16
John 1:1–2; 8:58. Colossians 1:16; Phil. 2–6

**Of one essence with the Father
Through Whom all things were made
Who for us men and for our salvation
Came down from heaven
And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit
And the Virgin Mary
And became man
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate
And was buried
And He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures**

Jn. 1:1–9; 16:27, 28
John 14:10–11, 17:22–23
John 1:3–10; Colossians 1:16
Luke 2:30; John 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:14; 1 Tim. 2:5, 6
John 3:13, 31; John 6:12–38
Luke 1:35
Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:35–46
John 1:14; Philippians 2:6–8; Heb. 2:14–17
Matthew 27:24–31
Mark 15:16–46

**He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of the Father
And He will come again with glory
To judge the living and the dead
His kingdom shall have no end
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord
The Creator of Life
Who proceeds from the Father
Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified**

1 Cor. 15:3,4; Lk. 24–12; Matt. 12:33–38–40
Luke 24:50– 53' Mark 16:16–19
Romans 8:34; Eph. 1:20
Psalm 72:9–19; Isaiah 40:5; Rev 1:7
Revelation 20:11–15; Acts 10:42
Psalm 145:13; John 6:40, 47
Genesis 1:2; Matt. 3:16; Act 2:1–4
John 15:26; Jn. 14:16. 17; Rom. 8:2; Gal.:8
John 15:26

**Who spoke through the prophets
In one, holy, Catholic & apostolic Church
I confess one baptism for the remission of sins**

Matthew 3:17; Luke 10:22; John 4:24
Acts 2:17–18; 2 Peter 1:21
1 Cor. 12:12, 13; Eph.2:19–22; Thess. 2:15

**I look for the resurrection of the dead
And the life of the age to come**

Matt. 3:16; Jn. 3:5; Acts. 2:38; 8:36–40; Eph.4:5
1 Cor. 15:12–58
Romans 8:17; 2 Peter 3:13

Congratulations

Baptisms

St John church congratulates



Peter Costandi & Maggie for the baptism of their baby boy

Isaiah (Paul)

May the Lord Jesus Christ bless his life and grant him health, strength and blessed long life. Congratulations to his grandparents



Sherif Salib & Neven Shahid for the baptism of their child

Isaiah Sherif

Praying that Christ the Lord grant him a blessed long life with growth in the grace and stature.



George & Hilda Bishara for the baptism of their child

Anthony

Praying the Lord to bless him with health, wisdom and long life.



Mark Saleh & Monica for the baptism of their child

Elias Mark Saleh

Asking God to bless his life with health, success and happiness in Christ



Bebawy & Christine for the baptism of their child

Jacob Bebawy

Asking God to bless his life with health, success and happiness in Christ



Congratulations

Dr. Aresaneuse Halaka,
PharmD

on your pharmacy degree

WHEN *Hope* WAS BORN

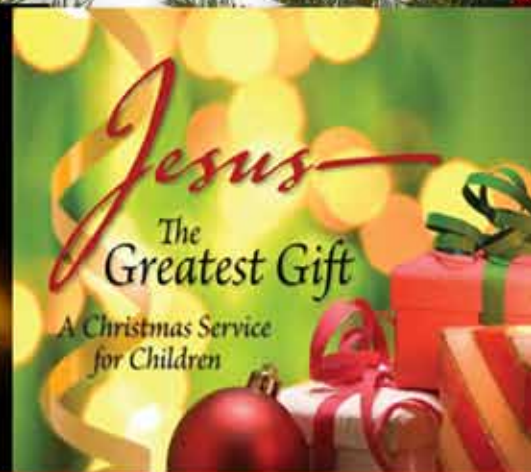
GALATIANS 4:4-5

"What do I profit if Jesus is born in thousands of cribs all over the world during this Christmas, but is not born in my heart?"

- Alexander Pope



JESUS T R U E LIGHT *of Christmas*



**St John church youth celebrating Christmas 22 years ago at Fr. Agustinos house.
Now they are married and became fathers and mothers, doctors, lawyers & priests.**

A CHILD
HAS BEEN
BORN FOR US,
A SON IS GIVEN
TO US;
AUTHORITY RESTS
UPON HIM
HE IS NAMED
JESUS



Metropolitan Serapion, Fr Anastasi and St. John church priests with the group of Hawaiian mission



Fr. Agustinos 28th anniversary



Halloween party



Thanking giving party for new comers

