

✠ St. Gregory's Journal ✠

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A Reading from a homily of St. Nikolai Velimirovic

*d. 5 March 1956
feast day - 5 March*

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The only-begotten Son of God, my brethren, begotten in eternity of the Father without a mother, was born in time of a Mother without a father. That first begetting is an unfathomable mystery of the Holy Trinity in eternity, and this second birth is an unfathomable mystery of God's power and love for mankind in time. The greatest mystery in time corresponds to the greatest mystery in eternity. Without probing with the light of our small understanding into this greatest of mysteries, let us be content, my brethren, with the discovery that our salvation had its origin not from men nor from the earth but from the greatest heights of the invisible, divine world. Such is God's mercy and such is man's greatness, that God the Son Himself came down from eternity into time, from heaven to earth, from the throne of glory to the shepherd's cave, solely to save man, to cleanse him from sin and to lead him back to Paradise. "I came forth from the Father", where He had everything, "and am come into the world", that could give Him nothing. The Lord was born in a cave, to show that the whole world is a dark cave that only He can illumine. The Lord was born in Bethlehem - the House of Bread - to show that He is the only Bread of life worthy of true men.

He came into the world Whose coming had been foretold by the prophets and who was born in the way that they had prophesied: of the most holy virgin, in the city of Bethlehem, of the lineage of David according to the flesh, at the time when there was no longer in Jerusalem a king of the tribe of Judah, but Herod the stranger was on the throne. After many types and prefigurings, messengers and heralds, prophets and righteous men, wise men and kings, finally He appeared, the Lord of the world and King of kings, to perform the work of the salvation of mankind that could not be performed by His servants.

Lord Jesus, the pre-eternal Son of the living God and Son of the Virgin Mary, enlighten us and nourish us with Thyself. To Thee be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

St. Eligius of Noyon

Feast Day - December 1



Attaining prominence in the heart of government, “having the King’s ear”, achieving a position of influence at court - these are things which have caused many to make an idol of power and to succumb to the temptations which accompany power. But St. Eligius of Noyon shines as a brilliant example of one who used his place of importance for the glory of God.

Born around 590 near Limoges, Eligius (or Eloi) was sent at a young age to apprentice with the goldsmith Abbo, who was master of the mint at Limoges. The boy’s obvious talent as a craftsman led him to work with Babo, a goldsmith with commissions for royalty of the Neustrian kingdom. Eligius was given the assignment of making a throne for King Clotaire II from gold and precious stones provided by the king. As honest as he was talented, Eligius recognized that there was more than enough material for the task, so he created two thrones with what he had been given. The king was so impressed, not only with the beauty of Eligius’ work, but also with his refusal to participate in the usual corruption of his day, that he appointed the craftsman master of the mint at Marseilles and brought him to court to serve as an advisor. Eligius’ rise to power was well underway.

At this crucial moment in his life, Eligius realized that he wanted to devote his life to God. Like the Wise Men at Epiphany, he wanted to offer his gold and jewels as a gift to Christ; instead of golden jewelry for the arms of the wealthy nobles, he wanted to adorn churches with the beauty of his creations; more than earthly royal favors, he desired to find favor with the King of kings. So he and another like-minded soul at court began a semi-monastic life, following the Irish rule which had been introduced into Gaul by St. Columbanus. In addition to fasting and prayer, as often as was possible with his other required duties, Eligius made gold chalices and reliquaries for the shrines of the saints.

When King Clotaire died in 629 and was succeeded by his son Dagobert, Eligius was entrusted with even more courtly responsibilities, often as a diplomat negotiating with ambassadors from other kingdoms. He was able to make use of this position to

ransom slaves and to provide alms for the poor. He wore the external garments of his trade, carrying gold and jewel-filled purses on his belt, and these he sold to buy bread for the hungry and the freedom of slaves (Romans, Gauls, Bretons, Moors, Saxons) who were daily sold in the slave market at Marseille.

While Eligius was not free to lead a cloistered monastic life, he founded a monastery at Solignac and a convent in Paris for those who were. He also built several churches in honor of St. Martin and St. Denis.

Another turning point occurred in the life of Eligius in 639. King Dagobert died and the Queen Regent, Nasthilde, assumed rule for her young son Clothar. Eligius was now released to leave the court and he entered the priesthood. But quiet solitude eluded him. By popular acclamation, he was chosen Bishop of Noyon and Tournai in 641.

As his diocese was still largely populated by pagans, Bishop Eligius set about the evangelistic task of converting the Flemings, Frisians and Suevi who lived among his people. Through him, many came to believe in Christ and were baptized. Still in existence is a copy of a sermon which the bishop preached, warning these new Christians about the dangers of continuing their earlier pagan superstitious practices, such as fortune-telling and watching for omens. He urged them instead to seek protection and comfort in the sign of the Cross, in prayers, and in receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

During the long years he was granted to serve as bishop, St. Eligius continued to build churches and shrines, to encourage reverence for the relics of the saints and to practice charity toward the poor. His concern for the plight of slaves also continued and he found an ally in Queen Bathild, who had herself been an Anglo-Saxon slave, gaining her freedom by marrying King Clovis II in 649. When her husband died in 657, Bathild acted as regent for her 5-year-old son Clotaire. Bishop Eligius and Queen Bathild together were able to have laws enacted against selling slaves outside the kingdom and protecting the right of slaves to rest and worship on Sundays and holy days.

St. Eligius fell asleep in the Lord in 660 on December 1, the day we celebrate as his feast day. His friend, Oeun, with whom he had begun monastic practices - who also became a bishop and a saint - wrote a Life of St. Eligius and it is through him that we know many of the details about this holy man. May we, like St. Eligius, make an offering of our talents and skills to God, and may the prayers of St. Eligius aid us in using the influence we have with others for the glory of God.



“Let us go to Bethlehem...”

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. [Micah 5:2, c. 700 BC]



And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. [Luke 2:4 and 5, c. 70 AD]

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” [Matthew 2:15, c. 70AD]

Hadrian (117-138) built an altar to Jupiter over the cave.

Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judaea. [Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* to Emperor Antoninus Pius, c. 155]

Constantine began building a church in 325; dedicated on May 1, 339.

Two miles from thence, on the left hand, is Bethlehem, where our Lord Jesus Christ was born. A basilica has been built there by the orders of Constantine. [Anonymous pilgrim from Bordeaux, 333]

It would be superfluous to describe how the churches - the Anastasis, the Cross, and the church in Bethlehem - are decorated. You see nothing there but gold and gems and silk. If you look at the hangings, they are made of silk with gold stripes; if you look at the curtains, they are also made of silk with gold stripes. Every kind of sacred vessel brought out is of gold inlaid with precious stones. How could the number and weight of the candle holders, the candelabra, the lamps, and the various sacred vessels be in any way estimated and noted down? And what can I say about the decoration of [these buildings] which Constantine, with his mother on hand, had embellished with as much gold, mosaics, and marble as the resources of his empire permitted? [the Spanish nun, Egeria, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 4th century]

St. Jerome settled in a nearby cave, founded a monastery and began work on the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible, c. 390.

Constantine's basilica largely destroyed in Samaritan revolt of 529.

Justinian (527-65) built a new, larger basilica over the earlier one.

In Persian sack of 614, Church of the Nativity spared due to depiction of the Wise Men in mosaics in Persian attire.

634, Bethlehem surrendered to the Arab invaders, but the church was spared. South transept given to Muslims for prayer in 638.

In the extreme eastern angle of this city is a sort of natural half cave, the extremity of the interior of which is the Manger of the Lord, in which His mother laid the newborn babe; while another, contiguous to the manger we have just mentioned, is shown to such as enter, as being the traditional site of His real nativity. The whole of this cave of the Manger of the Lord at Bethlehem has been adorned on the inside with precious marble, in honor of the Savior, while in the half cave, above the stone chamber, there has been built the Church of St. Mary, above the place where the Lord is said to have been actually born, which is a grand structure. [Adomnan, *De Locis Sanctis* (Concerning the Holy Places), 7th century]

10th century, Muslims removed Christian mosaics in South Transept, but the Muslim presence prevented al-Hakim from destroying the church in 11th century.

1099, just before Crusaders captured Jerusalem, the Christian population begged the Crusaders to save the church of the Nativity. Muslims destroyed the town by 1102, but the church survived.

Church restored in 12th century, with contributions from Byzantine emperor & Crusaders.

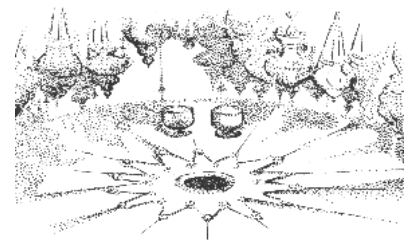
1187, Latins departed, but Salah al-Din allowed priests and deacons to return in 1192 as a favor to the Bishop of Salisbury, England.

1244, town devastated by Khwarizmian Turks, but church survived.

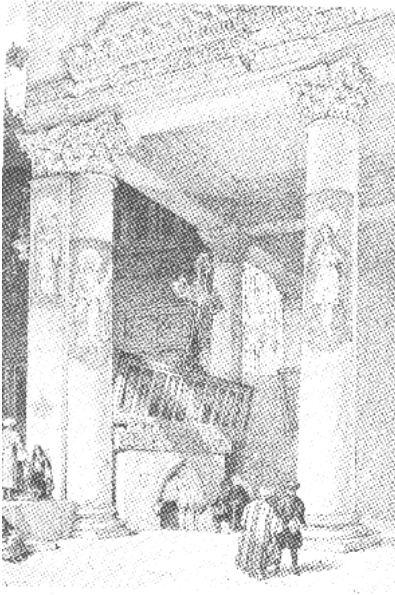
1672, Greek Orthodox given rights to most of the church; Armenians some rights in 1810; Latins re-admitted in 1852 (through intervention of Napoleon III).

1834, earthquake; 1869, fire (each time, the church was damaged but not destroyed).

Some people are a little disappointed that there should be a building at all standing on the spot where Jesus was born. But here - as everywhere in the Holy Land - the Christian pilgrim



should be prepared to look for the holy thing behind the holy place. It is always there to be found.” [Protestant tour guide, James Martin, 1978]



Bethlehem was the place, according to promise, where the Messiah was to be born, but at the time of his birth it was an insignificant village. The apocryphal Protoevangelium of James speaks of a cave in which Jesus was born. It was a common practice then to build a house right in front of a cave. The tradition of the nativity taking place in the cave was affirmed in the second century by St. Justin. In the third century, Origen and Eusebius also cited this local tradition, and indicated that this particular location had been venerated from the beginning of Christianity. This continuous memory makes the cave at Bethlehem one of the best attested early Christian sites, recognized before Queen Helena’s arrival in the fourth century. The main church protects the oldest continuously venerated object in Christendom. [Veselin and Lydia Kesich, Orthodox Christians describing their pilgrimage in 1981]

That afternoon we visited Bethlehem, including the Shepherd’s Fields, the Church of the Holy Nativity, St. Catherine’s Church, and the caves of St. Jerome. It was wonderful pre-Christmas preparation to be in Bethlehem so close to the celebration of our Savior’s birth. The silver star on the floor of the cave under the altar in the Church of the Nativity proclaims (in Latin), “Here of the Virgin Mary Jesus Christ was born”. Since at least the second century (when the place where the birth took place would still have been known to local residents), the faithful have visited that spot to give thanks for the birth of the human child who was also the Son of God. It is no wonder that many pilgrims bend down to kiss the star. [Fr. Nicholas, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, December 1994]

Negotiators reached a deal to end the bloody siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem last night after several days of tortuous negotiations, European Union and Israeli officials said. The agreement, under which several countries will take in 13 hardened Palestinian militants who sought refuge in the church, would end a 38-day stand-off which saw seven Palestinians shot dead by Israeli snipers at one of the holiest sites of Christendom. It also paves the way for an Israeli withdrawal from Bethlehem on the eve of an expected military offensive on the Gaza Strip. Bethlehem is the last West Bank town under Israeli army occupation. [*Guardian* Newspapers, May 10, 2002]

Palestinians in the birthplace of Jesus dare to hope this Christmas will not be as bleak as the last few. Townspeople ruined by years of bloodshed and blockade are looking to the

emergence of new leaders acceptable to Israel and U.S. peace brokers after Arafat's death to rescue the tourism vital to Bethlehem's economy. The intifada and Israel Defense Forces incursions...have wrecked the livelihoods of many ordinary people. The West Bank separation fence that Israel is building with the stated aim of keeping out suicide bombers cuts into part of Bethlehem while Jewish settlements are growing on the hills around, compounding the shrine town's sense of isolation. But in central Manger Square, there was hopeful talk of a "new era" among townsfolk attending Sunday services in the Church of the Nativity... [Reuters News Service, November 2004]

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him, born the King of angels;
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

Adeste, fideles, 18th c., tr. F. Oakley, 1841

Christmas Eve ~

9PM Confessions

10PM Christmas

Music

10:30 The First

Mass of Christmas

Advent Preparations

As Advent is a season of prayer, fasting and alms-giving as ways of preparing ourselves for the celebration of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, special opportunities are being provided during Advent for these disciplines.

A booklet of Advent devotions has been prepared which includes prayers, scripture readings and lives of the saints for use in the home during this season.

On Saturday, December 18, we will have a service of Advent Lessons and Carols instead of Vespers, beginning at 6:00PM. This non-liturgical service includes readings of the prophecies of our Lord's coming, hymns of expectation, and special music prepared by the choir and instrumentalists as aids in preparing our hearts for Christmas.

To help manage the Advent fast, we have revised and expanded our St. Gregory's booklet of recipes, "*Fast Food for Orthodox Christians*", which provides recipes for dishes (which have been tried in our homes and brought to pot-luck dinners) suitable for fasting days and seasons.

We are asked to bring canned goods for a local food pantry or shelter and the Parish Council will soon allocate the tithe of our yearly budget for local and international charities.

