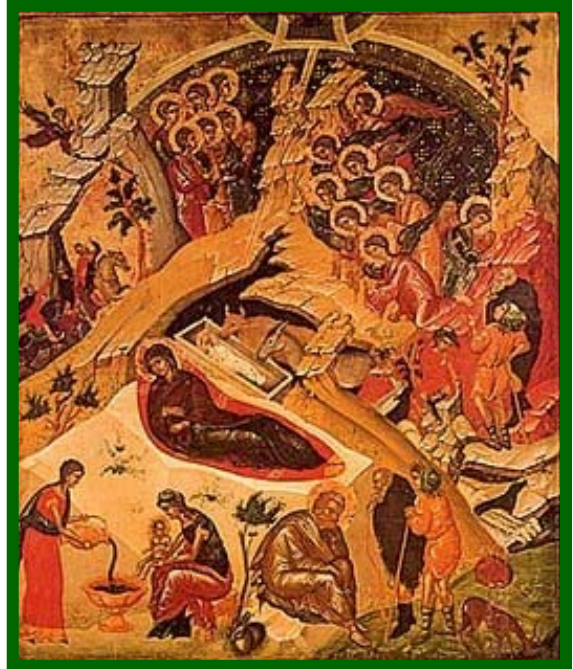


# The Parish Prepares for Christmas

Very Rev. John Tkachuk

In the standard liturgical manuals of the Orthodox Church, Christmas is given the rubric "Pascha: Three-Day Feast." cryptic definition is the "key" for understanding its significance in the annual cycle of Christian celebrations, and it can open many pathways to how each parish can prepare for commemorating the Nativity from the Virgin of the One "born of the Father before eternity."



**1.** The first indication that Christmas is "modeled" on Pascha is the Little Lent, the 40-day fast preceding the feast. Called Advent by Western Christians (meaning "the Coming" of Christ, and of only four weeks duration for them), this season of anticipation and preparation begins on November 15<sup>th</sup> and continues through Christmas. Besides being differentiated by the recitation of the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian with prostrations at services on certain weekdays\*, Orthodox Advent is marked by the two Sundays preceding Christmas: the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers of Christ (between December 11-17), and the Sunday of the Holy Fathers (between December 18-24). But the dietary regulations are less strict than for the Great Lent (and even than for the Dormition Fast), being of the "moderate" variety\*\*.

**2.** The second is the Pre-Feast of Christmas, the five-day period immediately preceding the feast, and deliberately patterned after the "Great and Holy Week of Christ's Passion" prior to the Resurrection. Many of the hymns for these days imitate the ones for Holy Week, and the dietary regulations are as "strict" as for that one.

From these brief observations, it should be clear that the Orthodox liturgy in no way "belittles" Christmas in favor of Pascha—quite the contrary, Christmas is "exalted" by being ranked second to the Resurrection. But the annual challenge for pastors and lay leaders is a monumental one: *how to inspire and instill in the minds and hearts of believers all that the Church offers us in the holy season.* Below are some suggestions on how this may be accomplished; for simplicity's sake, these are grouped into three areas of effort.

From these brief observations, it should be clear that the Orthodox liturgy in no way "belittles" Christmas in favor of Pascha—quite the contrary, Christmas is "exalted" by being ranked second to the Resurrection. But the annual challenge for pastors and lay leaders is a monumental one: *how to inspire and instill in the minds and hearts of believers all that the Church offers us in the holy season.* Below are some suggestions on how this may be accomplished; for simplicity's sake, these are grouped into three areas of effort.

## The Liturgy

**1.** Since no parishes have daily services during Advent—and thus no opportunity to "change keys" marking its commencement—nevertheless the first day should be highlighted by something more than mere mention in announcements or the bulletin. If a separate service on that day is not feasible, then at least a special pray can be changed

after the Liturgy on the preceding Sunday (such a one may be found in the *Trebnik* or "Book of Needs"; or perhaps a version of the one found on pp. 547-59 may be used). The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem may be added as well on this day.

**2.** Beginning with the feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple on November 21<sup>st</sup>, the *irmoi* of the Christmas Matins Canon (*Christ is born! Glorify Him!*) can be sung at opportune times after Vespers and the Hours before Liturgy during the censuring of the temple, at the priest's communion **of** the veneration of the cross after the Liturgy. Besides almost fulfilling what the Typikon specifies (i.e., singing them as the *katavasia* at Matins), these "early renditions" of the Canon would give the choir practice-by-performance, to make their singing at Christmas as perfect as possible.

**3.** The services prescribed for the Pre-Feast should be served: at least Vespers and Little Compline on the first days, and Royal Hour-to-Liturgy on the Eve. Those faithful who want to prepare for Christmas with something more than a last-minute-shopping should have the opportunity of doing so!

## Church School

Besides spending class-time preparing for the Children's Play (or *Yolka*), some time should be allotted on the Sundays closest to each of the following dates for stressing the closeness of Christ's Incarnation:

- 1.** November 16, the feast of St. Matthew: his nativity narratives can be read, even with certain portions suggested for memorization (Mt. 1:18-2:23).
- 2.** November 27, the icon of the Sign of the Theotokos: this unique image of the Virgin Mary can be looked-at and the prophecies from Isaiah studied (Is. 7:14, 9:2-7).
- 3.** December 6, the feast of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker: the "genesis" of Santa Claus can be examined, stressing the saint's love and devotion to children.
- 4.** December 13, the feast of St. Herman of Alaska: America's own "Spruce Island" holy man may be regarded as the "baptizer of holiday trees and decorations for Orthodox America.
- 5.** The two Sundays of the Ancestors (see above) can be explained, preparing the children for understanding the meaning of Christ's human genealogy.

## The Family

Pastors and their assistants should encourage parents and adults to welcome the growing festiveness around them: instead of bad-mouthing the commercialization of Christmas and knocking the visible decorations of the approaching feast, everyone should regard the signs and symbols as needed reminders that indeed "there are only XXX shopping-days left" so that time may be reserved for the churchly celebration in the family.

**1.** Customs such as the lighting of Advent candles, the hanging of wreaths and the sending of greetings to far-away friends and relatives can be a focus of the Christmas

Fast; even the selection of gifts for others can be a meditation on the Coming of Christ, God's Gift of Himself for all mankind.

**2.** Caroling visits to homes of shut-ins, done either by individual families or by groups such as the choir or church-school, can be planned as one of the best "gifts" to others at this time; besides hymns native to the parish, the wonderful Western carols such as "O Come, Emmanuel" and "O Holy Night" may be sung; low-keyed "parties" in homes of friends—or local hospitals—can also be arranged.

**3.** Some form of spiritual fasting and dietary discipline should be observed by each family, as decided by the parents. Notwithstanding the dispensation granted by the Holy Synod for eating turkey on Thanksgiving Day and weekend, abstinence from meat-products should be kept at other times, or at least on the three days prescribed by the rules (Monday, Wednesday, Friday). Time-off should be taken from usual TV viewing schedules in order to make time for family reading of the Scripture passages concerning the Messiah (portions of Isaiah, the birth and infancy narratives—ask your pastor for other suggested readings) as well as for short prayers in common at home, such as before or after the evening meals.

As admitted above, "preparing the parish for Christmas" is a monumental challenge each year. But if approached and pursued with joy and zeal, the efforts are always rewarded with success—for, no matter how hard one tries, "you can't spoil Christmas" since it is our "Pascha, Three-Day Feast" given by God Himself for the salvation and sanctification and recreation of the world!

---

\*The lenten format of daily services, the same as during Great Lent, is prescribed for the following weekdays: November 15, 19, 26 and 29; and December 1-3, 7, 8, 11, 14, 16, 18 and 19.

\*\*During Advent, only three days each week are strict fast days (Monday, Wednesday, Friday) with *xerophagy* prescribed; all other days "relaxed" by permission for "wine and oil" and even "fish" for the Entrance of the Theotokos (on any day) and the greater feasts during this period (if not on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday: Nov. 16 for St. Matthew, Nov. 27 for the Sign of the Theotokos, Nov. 30 for St. Andrew, Dec. 5 for St. Sabbas, Dec. 6 for St. Nicholas, Dec. 9 for the Conception by St. Anne, Dec. 13 for St. Herman, and Dec. 17 for the Prophet Daniel and the Three Youths). During Great Lent, this "moderate" regimen is allowed only on Annunciation and Palm Sunday.