

The Great Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

by Fr Lawrence Farley

Today, we commemorate the first time the young girl destined to be the Mother of God entered into the Temple at Jerusalem.

Though now long gone, the Temple must have presented an awe-inspiring sight to the young child, with its white stone glistening in the Judean sun, its vested priests, its blowing trumpets, its smell of incense, the crowds of fervent praying worshippers, and the smoke arising from its altar of sacrifice. There is no historical record of her thoughts and feelings at that first visit, but if she did ask the question, “What is all this about?” the Christian answer (later learned after the Annunciation coming about a decade later) would have been, “Actually, it’s all about you.”

The Temple was a house for God so that He might dwell among His people and that they might enjoy access to His saving presence. It was also a pledge and a prophecy, a silent promise in stone of the time when God would come and dwell among them in the flesh. As the great and glorious Temple contained the covenantal presence of the heavenly God, so the flesh of the young and humble adolescent virgin of Nazareth would also contain that presence. She would become the living temple for the incarnate deity, and He Whom the heaven of heavens could not contain [1 Kings 8:27] would dwell in the tiny space of her young womb. Though she would continue to live in the humble obscurity of her hometown, her womb would become more spacious than the heavens.

The simple narrative of her entry as a toddler into the Temple has been adorned by Christian writers. In works such as the *Proto-evangelium of James* (i.e. a story containing a kind of prequel to the Gospel) Mary is portrayed as someone who was well-known to all Israel. At the age of three she is escorted into the Temple courts by “the daughters of the Hebrews,” each one carrying a lighted lamp so that the child will feel happy entering the Temple as her new home. “And Mary was in the Temple of the Lord as a dove that is nurtured, and she received food from from the hand of an angel.” In this story, Zachariah the high-priest leads her into the Holy of Holies, and she remains in the Temple until she turns twelve years old, when she goes to live with Joseph, who was chosen by lot to guard her as her husband.

Reading the entirety of the *Proto-evangelium* makes the discerning reader aware of the poetic and legendary nature of much of the writing. In this wonderful story one

encounters devotion and love, not sober history, as is apparent from the fact that Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was not in fact the high-priest, but simply a priest. (In the Lukan narrative, he is among those who draw lots to burn incense in the Temple—something the high-priest never did.) But no matter; truth comes in many forms, poetry as well as history. And by telling us that Mary dwelt in the Holy of Holies, the story tells us something fundamental and abidingly true about her.

The Holy of Holies was the inner heart of the Temple, the place where the Ark of the Covenant once rested (it was lost and destroyed when the Babylonians sacked the Temple centuries earlier; the Temple later built after the return from exile and still later enlarged by Herod remained empty of the Ark.) As the inner shrine, it was the place where God’s earthly presence resided, the epicenter of divine holiness in the world. No one was pure and holy enough to enter there—even the high-priest himself could only enter there once a year on the Day of Atonement, and even then he must bring with him the blood of sacrifice [Hebrews 9:7]. But according to the tale, Mary could enter there—the lesson being that Mary, as the one destined to become the Mother of God, was holier than all the other children of men. God Himself would dwell within her flesh even as He dwelt in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies, like the rest of the Temple, was all about her.

Why should all of this matter to us today? Just this: her holiness could not only protect her in the Holy of Holies, it now protects us too. Holiness is what adds power to prayer, and effectiveness to intercession. God does not listen to sinners, to those who defy and reject Him, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, God listens to him [John 9:31]. Mary is pre-eminently the best worshipper of God and the one who truly did His will. Accordingly, God listens to her. All Christians live within a network of mutual intercession: you pray for me and I pray for you and we all pray for each other. This network includes the saints, so that we also ask for the prayers of Saints Peter and Paul and Nicholas and Athanasius and Herman of Alaska. And standing at the head of this mighty heavenly army of intercessors is the holy Theotokos, she who is more honourable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim. Her holiness is our shield and buckler, and we can take refuge in her matchless intercession. She no longer stands within the courts of an earthly Temple, however splendid. She now stands within the courts of the heavenly Temple, next to the very throne of God, sharing that splendour as our heavenly Sovereign and Queen. The Feast of the Entrance into the Temple is something more than a mere historical recollection. It is a call to prayer, and to our confident reliance upon her love and intercession for us and for all the world.

Thank You, O Lord!

Final words

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann, the late Dean of [Saint Vladimir's Seminary](#), celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the last time on Thanksgiving Day 1983. Two weeks later, on December 13, he fell asleep in the Lord. As is well known, Father Alexander had devoted his entire life to teaching, writing and preaching about the Eucharist—the Greek word eucharist means thanksgiving. At the conclusion of the Liturgy, Father Alexander took from his pocket a short written sermon, in the form of a prayer, which he proceeded to read. This was uncharacteristic of Father Alexander, since he never wrote his liturgical homilies, but delivered them extemporaneously. These were his words, which proved to be the last ever spoken by him from the ambo in Church.

Thank You, O Lord!

Everyone capable of thanksgiving is capable of salvation and eternal joy.

Thank You, O Lord, for having accepted this Eucharist, which we offered to the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and which filled our hearts with the joy, peace and righteousness of the Holy Spirit.

Thank You, O Lord, for having revealed Yourself unto us and given us the foretaste of Your Kingdom.

Thank You, O Lord, for having united us to one another in serving You and Your Holy Church.

Thank You, O Lord, for having helped us to overcome all difficulties, tensions, passions, temptations and restored peace, mutual love and joy in sharing the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Thank You, O Lord, for the sufferings You bestowed upon us, for they are purifying us from selfishness and reminding us of the “one thing needed;” Your eternal Kingdom.

Thank You, O Lord, for having given us this country where we are free to worship You.

Thank You, O Lord, for this school, where the name of God is proclaimed.

Thank You, O Lord, for our families: husbands, wives and, especially, children who teach us how to celebrate Your holy Name in joy, movement and holy noise.

Thank You, O Lord, for everyone and everything. Great are You, O Lord, and marvelous are Your deeds, and no word is sufficient to celebrate Your miracles.

Lord, it is good to be here! Amen!

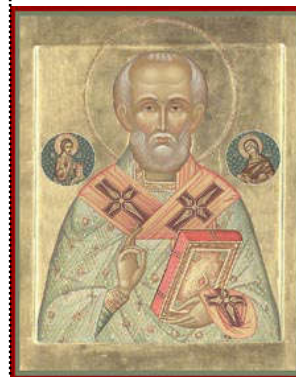
Ephesians 2:14-22 (*Epistle*)

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Luke 17:12-19 (*Gospel*)

Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner? And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

St. Nicholas of Myra



Troparion — Tone 4

In truth you were revealed to your flock as a rule of faith, an image of humility and a teacher of abstinence; your humility exalted you; your poverty enriched you. Hierarch Father Nicholas, entreat Christ our God that our souls may be saved.

Kontakion — Tone 3

You revealed yourself, O saint, in Myra as a priest, For you fulfilled the Gospel of Christ By giving up your soul for your people, And saving the innocent from death. Therefore you are blessed as one become wise in the grace of God.

The Holy Great Martyr Barbara lived and suffered during the reign of the emperor Maximian (305-311). Her father, the pagan Dioscorus, was a rich and illustrious man in the Syrian city of Heliopolis. After the death of his wife, he devoted himself to his only daughter.

Seeing Barbara's extraordinary beauty, Dioscorus decided to hide her from the eyes of strangers. Therefore, he built a tower for Barbara, where only her pagan teachers were allowed to see her. From the tower there was a view of hills stretching into the distance. By day she was able to gaze upon the wooded hills, the swiftly flowing rivers, and the meadows covered with a mottled blanket of flowers; by night the harmonious and majestic vault of the heavens twinkled and provided a spectacle of inexpressible beauty. Soon the virgin began to ask herself questions about the First Cause and Creator of so harmonious and splendid a world.

Gradually, she became convinced that the soulless idols were merely the work of human hands. Although her father and teachers offered them worship, she realized that the idols could not have made the surrounding world. The desire to know the true God so consumed her soul that Barbara decided to devote all her life to this goal, and to spend her life in virginity.

The fame of her beauty spread throughout the city, and many sought her hand in marriage. But despite the entreaties of her father, she refused all of them. Barbara warned her father that his persistence might end tragically and separate them forever. Dioscorus decided that the temperament of his daughter had been affected by her life of seclusion. He therefore permitted her to leave the tower and gave her full freedom in her choice of friends and acquaintances. Thus Barbara met young Christian maidens in the city, and they taught her about the Creator of the world, about the Trinity, and about the Divine Logos. Through the Providence of God, a priest arrived in Heliopolis from Alexandria disguised as a merchant. After instructing her in the mysteries of the Christian Faith, he baptized Barbara, then returned to his own country.

During this time a luxurious bathhouse was being built at the house of Dioscorus. By his orders the workers prepared to put two windows on the south side. But Barbara, taking advantage of her father's absence, asked them to make a third window, thereby forming a Trinity of light. On one of the walls of the bath-house Barbara traced a cross with her finger. The cross was deeply etched into the marble, as if by an iron instrument. Later, her footprints were imprinted on the stone steps of the bathhouse. The water of the bathhouse had great healing power. Saint Simeon Metaphrastes (November 9) compared the bathhouse to the stream of Jordan and the Pool of Siloam, because by God's power, many miracles took place there.

When Dioscorus returned and expressed dissatisfaction about the change in his building plans, his daughter told him about how she had come to know the Triune God, about the saving power of the Son of God, and about the futility of worshipping idols. Dioscorus went into a rage, grabbed a sword and was on



the point of striking her with it. The holy virgin fled from her father, and he rushed after her in pursuit. His way became blocked by a hill, which opened up and concealed the saint in a crevice. On the other side of the crevice was an entrance leading upwards. Saint Barbara managed then to conceal herself in a cave on the opposite slope of the hill.

After a long and fruitless search for his daughter, Dioscorus saw two shepherds on the hill. One of them showed him the cave where the saint had hidden. Dioscorus beat his daughter terribly, and then placed her under guard and tried to wear her down with hunger. Finally he handed her over to the prefect of the city, named Martianus. They beat Saint Barbara fiercely: they struck her with rawhide, and rubbed her wounds with a hair cloth to increase her pain. By night Saint Barbara prayed fervently to her Heavenly Bridegroom, and the Savior Himself appeared and healed her wounds. Then they subjected the saint to new, and even more frightful torments.

In the crowd where the martyr was tortured was the virtuous Christian woman Juliana, an inhabitant of Heliopolis. Her heart was filled with sympathy for the voluntary martyrdom of the beautiful and illustrious maiden. Juliana also wanted to suffer for Christ. She began to denounce the torturers in a loud voice, and they seized her.

Both martyrs were tortured for a long time. Their bodies were raked and wounded with hooks, and then they were led naked through the city amidst derision and jeers. Through the prayers of Saint Barbara the Lord sent an angel who covered the nakedness of the holy martyrs with a splendid robe. Then the steadfast confessors of Christ, Saints Barbara and Juliana, were beheaded. Dioscorus himself executed Saint Barbara. The wrath of God was not slow to punish both torturers, Martianus and Dioscorus. They were killed after being struck by lightning.

In the sixth century the relics of the holy Great Martyr Barbara were transferred to Constantinople. Six hundred years later, they were transferred to Kiev (July 11) by Barbara, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenos, who married the Russian prince Michael Izyaslavich. They rest even now at Kiev's Saint Vladimir cathedral, where an Akathist to the saint is served each Tuesday.

Many pious Orthodox Christians are in the habit of chanting the Troparion of Saint Barbara each day, recalling the Savior's promise to her that those who remembered her and her sufferings would be preserved from a sudden, unexpected death, and would not depart this life without benefit of the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

The Nativity Fast: The Testing of our Patience

by Fr. Steven Kostoff

Today—November 15—we begin the forty day Nativity Fast, one of four seasons of the year during which we are called upon to intensify our spiritual lives through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. I would like to expand on this by emphasizing the necessary virtue of patience that accompanies any period of preparation in the life of the Church. We are directed to observe a fast as we prepare for the advent of the Son of God in the flesh. This is only for forty days, but that can seem like a very long period to make some alterations and adjustments in our lifestyles! Clearly, it has its challenges, all of which we are very much aware of. We know that the “sacred” number of forty – years or days – is a very scriptural number, always implying a period of expectation and fulfillment, a movement begun and completed in accordance with the express will of God. That could be the forty years of Israel’s wandering in the desert, or the Lord fasting for forty days in the wilderness. Yet, less specifically, we need to understand the great length of time that Israel was forced to wait for its deliverance. If we think in terms of Abraham to Christ, we become aware of the 3 x 14 generations that Saint Matthew lists in the opening genealogy of his Gospel. That is a long history indeed, filled with God’s providential care for His chosen people, but also filled with apostasy and betrayal on the part of Israel—a history embracing Israel’s victories against its surrounding enemies, but also its subjugation and humiliation at the hands of other enemies.

While this tumultuous and even torturous history of Israel was unfolding, the prophets were both exhorting and chastising the people, but also speaking of deliverance. Although this is a very complex development, there were clear indications among the prophets of a Messiah figure – sometimes very human, but at times a transcendent figure – around whom and in whom these longings for deliverance were concentrated. He would be the Lord’s Anointed, and as such he would proclaim deliverance and salvation to Israel. That profound and poignant sense of longing for deliverance is beautifully expressed in the two hymns found in the opening chapters of Saint Luke’s Gospel, the first from Saint Zechariah [Luke 1:67-79) and the other, the *Magnificat* of the Theotokos [Luke 1:46-55]. One needs only to read the Book of Isaiah to get a sense of this messianic longing which took on universal dimensions, so that all the peoples of the earth would come to know the one true God and then come to Zion to worship Him. We read of the Son of Man, the Suffering Servant of the Lord, and of the Messiah throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament. This basic human longing for regaining a “lost paradise” in one form or another was gathered around these mysterious figures “promised” by the prophets who, in turn, were those chosen by God to deliver God’s word to the people of Israel.

But many generations were disappointed that these prophetic promises were not fulfilled in their time.

If we can appreciate this sense of waiting and longing, we can understand better how we, as contemporary Christians, in a very modest sense, are re-living or actualizing the experience of Israel as we await the advent of our Lord in a specially designated period known as the Nativity/Advent Fast. This designated forty days serves as a microcosm of Israel’s testing and preparation. Waiting implies expectation, perhaps even a certain sense of excitement. (Ask your children about that!). But it also implies patience, stabilized and strengthened by trust and faith in God, especially when we encounter obstacles, temptations, doubts, diversions and distractions. Therefore, if Israel waited for the Lord’s Anointed, so will we as the New Israel of God. Of course, we know and believe that the Messiah has come as Jesus of Nazareth, and our festal cycle again allows us to also re-live and actualize that advent on an annual basis, so as to renew our sense of fulfillment of the prophecies of old and to again “greet” the newborn Christ Child with great joy and thanksgiving to God for working out our salvation “in the midst of the earth.” All Christian believers of all ages can experience a child-like joy in the birth of Christ, the Son of God Who became flesh. We have the decided advantage of knowing all of this in advance, and this has been expressed very powerfully in the Epistle to the Hebrews, wherein the author, after reminding the early Christians of the great faith of the saints who lived before Christ, further reminds them of the great privilege of having lived in the time of fulfillment: “And all these, though well-attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” [Hebrews 11:39-40].

We cannot join “the world” in its indifference to Christ. And we cannot descend to the level of the crass commercialization of Christmas. We are, after all, Christians! Our goal is to fulfill the words of the Apostle Paul” “I therefore... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” [Ephesians 4:1-3]. This will test our patience, our trust in God, and our faith. It has never been otherwise.



- (1) True
- (2) Turkey (He lived in the region of Lycia, Turkey
- (3) True. (He attended the Council of Nicea in 325 AD
- (4) False. His Feast Day is December 6
- (5) Myra (Myra was the capital of Lycia, Turkey)
- (6) False (There are no native reindeer in the Middle East)

St. Nicholas Quiz Answers