

The Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God

One of our great celebrations which comes at beginning of the liturgical year is the Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God. As evidenced by the words of the Troparion of this festival, it is a joyful and significant occasion. It is joyful because it is the birthday of the Mother of God, the Queen of heaven and earth. It is significant because it places before our eyes the great truth of our holy faith concerning the divine motherhood of the Most Pure Virgin Mary from whom “shown forth the Sun of Justice, Christ our God.”

The Gospel records very few incidents in the life of the Virgin Mary. It says nothing about her birth, her parents, her childhood or youth, or her holy Dormition and Assumption into heaven. What is the source of our information about all these things? All that we know comes from the tradition of the Church and the apocryphal writings, which are not included in the Gospel, but which relate certain events in the lives of Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother. Although the Church does not acknowledge the apocrypha as authentic writings, nor as trustworthy historical sources, nevertheless, much of what they relate is accepted as traditional belief stemming from the early Church.

The chief source of information on the life of Mary is the apocryphal book written between 170 to 180 called the Protoevangelium of James, which presents the bases for the institution of this and other feasts concerning the Virgin Mary. From this book we learn of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Mary, as well as the first mention of and the names of her parents, Joachim and Anna.

The Protoevangelium of James was held in high esteem in ancient times, even though it was not accepted as one of the Gospels. Many saintly fathers speak about it in their writings; among them were St. Epiphanius, St. Andrew of Crete, St. Sophronius, Patriarch Germanus I, St. John Damascene, and Patriarch Photius. From this work we learn that the Most Pure Virgin Mary was descended on her father’s side from the royal house of David, and on her mother’s side from the priestly line of Aaron. Her parents were rather financially secure living in both Nazareth and Jerusalem. They were also distinguished for the great holiness of their lives and their great love of God and neighbors. Joachim was accustomed to dividing the fruits of his labors into three parts: one which he donated to the Temple in sacrifice to God; a second which he distributed charitably to the poor; and the last which he kept for himself. The couple’s one great sorrow was that they were childless, which among the Jews of the time, was looked upon not only as an absence of God’s blessing and as a punishment from above., since a childless couple stood no chance of giving birth to the Messiah. Thus, they suffered much ridicule from their family and acquaintances. Therefore, it is not surprising that they would unceasingly pray to God for a child. Finally, in their old age t he Lord God blessed them with a daughter who was destined to become the Mother of God.

The history of the feast.

In the Eastern Church, the celebration of the Nativity of the Mother of God is one of the most ancient Marian feasts, so ancient, that we do not know exactly when it was first celebrated. St. John Chrysostom, Saint Augustine and others mention it in their writings, and a tradition in Palestine recounts that Saint Helen (d. 330AD), mother of the Emperor Constantine, built a church in Jerusalem honoring this feast. The liturgical books of Pope Gelasius (492-496 AD) also mentions this holy day. While we have evidence that it was being celebrated in the Byzantine Empire of the fourth century, it was not given official recognition until the Emperor Maurice did so sometime during the sixth century.

The festival found its way to the West, spreading first to Rome in the seventh century AD, and eventually, throughout the entire Latin church. The eighth day of September was selected as the date of this feast, most likely because the church in Jerusalem, built by St. Helen, was consecrated on this day, but also because it marks nine months from December 9, the celebration of the Conception of the Virgin Mary in the womb of her mother Anna.

The Nativity of the Mother of God ranks as one of the 12 Major Feasts of the liturgical year. It has a one day pre-feast and a post-feast lasting only four days, rather than the customary eight days, because the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross follows close after on September 14.

A Day of Universal Joy

The birth of Mary, was a singular source of joy for her parents, Joachim and Anna, as well as for heaven and earth and all creation. The spiritual joy occasioned by this feast has been stressed by various Fathers of the Church. In his longer sermon regarding this holy day, Saint Andrew of Crete extols the Most Holy Mother of God as the one in whom all the prophecies and prefigurements of the Old Testament were fulfilled. Extolling her with the most sublime titles of praise, he fittingly summons all to share in this joy: heaven, earth, the sea and every creature. Finally he concludes with the words “for today a child is born, from whom we have received salvation...”

In a sermon for this day, Saint John of Damascus says “the day of the Nativity of the Mother of God is a day of universal joy for, through the Mother of God, the entire human race was renewed and the sorrow of the first mother, Eve, was transformed into Joy. “

The divine services of this day are filled with joyful melodies, almost as though we were celebrating the Nativity of our Lord Himself, or His glorious Resurrection. The principal motives underlying this joy are the end of the childlessness of the holy Joachim and Anna, The beginning of our salvation, the wonderful dignity of divine motherhood bestowed on Mary, and the unique role and significance of the Mother of God in the work of the redemption of the human race.

In the Vesper service, we hear how the angels and all the faithful of the Church rejoice at Mary's birth, proclaiming "to your honorable Nativity, O most holy and pure Virgin, the multitude of angels in heaven and the human race on earth are singing praises. For you became the Mother of the Creator of all, Jesus our God. While imploring Him, do not cease praying for us, for after God we place our hope in you, O ever praised and immaculate Mother of God. "

All the saints of both the Old and the New Testaments share in this joy. At the Matins Service we hear the words "Renew yourself, O Adam, be happy, O Eve; rejoice together, you prophets with the apostles and the righteous ones, for today the universal joy of the angels and mankind has shown forth from the righteous Joachim and Anna, Mary, the Mother of God."

Finally, the Church calls upon the faithful to venerate the Mother of God: "Come, all you faithful, let us hasten to the Virgin, for she is born, who before her conception was destined to be the Mother of our God... She is born; and through her the world is renewed, and the church is clothed in splendor. She is the holy temple, wherein God abides, ..."

The Devotion to Saints Joachim and Anna

One cannot understand the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God properly without acknowledging the role of her parents, Saints Joachim and Anna. The veneration of these two righteous saints began to take hold quite rapidly after the institution of the holy day honoring the birth of their daughter, and on the following day, the Church honors their memory. Accordingly in the dismissal blessing at the end of all church services, we daily ask their prayerful intercession.

In the sixth century, churches in honor of Saint Anna began to be erected; in the year 550 AD, the Emperor Justinian I dedicated a church in her honor in Constantinople, and in that same century, another was dedicated to her in Jerusalem, the place of Anna's birth. Together, these two churches had a great influence on the spreading devotion to the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ancient Greek hymns also exist in their honor, as well as in the writings of the Church Fathers especially St. Epiphanius and Saint John of Damascus. By the eighth century, a significant following of St. Anna had developed particularly in Rome; by the 14th century, this devotion to her had spread throughout Europe, particularly in France, by the Crusaders returning from the Holy Land.

During the services of our Church we honor and praise Saints Joachim and Anna for their role in relation to our salvation, extolling them as the most blessed of parents. "O lovers of the feast, come today, let us rejoice singing, and let us zealously honor the memory of; the honorable couple Joachim and Anna, because for us they gave birth to the Mother of God..." In another place in our services, we sing out: "O blessed couple, you surpassed all parents, for you gave birth to the most beautiful of all creatures! ..."

Truly you are blessed, O Joachim, being the father of such a virgin! And blessed is your womb, O Anna, for you brought forth the Mother of our life. Blessed is she who nursed her, that she in turn may nurse Him, the Nourisher of all Creatures. Therefore, we implore you, O blessed ones, pray to Him for the salvation of our souls. “

As grandparents to Christ, Saints Joachim and Anna are special intercessors for grandparents and grandchildren.