

EVANGELION
The Power of God

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Chapter 4
THE
CHRISTMAS STORY

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CHAPTER 4

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

THANKS BE TO GOD!

The last chapter ended asking St. Paul's question, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"¹ St. Paul did not stop with his question. He immediately declares, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."²

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

During his earthly ministry Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They told him a variety of answers. He then said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."³

For two thousand years the question has been asked again and again, who is Jesus? And throughout history the church has confessed and proclaimed: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The church also confessed and proclaimed that Christ became one of us so that we who are "dead in Adam might be made alive in him."⁴

¹ Romans 7:24.

² Romans 7:25-8:1.

³ Matthew 16:13-16

⁴ St. Basil the Great, Prayers of the Holy Anaphora, *The Liturgikon*, 3rd edition. Englewood, New Jersey: The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1989), 282.

THE SON EXISTED BEFORE BETHLEHEM

The Apostle John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

St. Paul quoted an early Christological Hymn of the Church to the Colossians—

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things have their existence.⁵

Before all eternity God has existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There never was a time when the Son was not. If there ever was a time when the Son was not, that would mean there was a time when the Father was not. But God has always been Father, and therefore Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son is eternally begotten by the Father; the Holy Spirit eternally processes from the Father.

The first chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims the revelation of the eternally begotten Son of God, his incarnate ministry, and his ascension to the Father. The first twelve verses are read in the Church on December 24 for the Nativity of our Lord. The opening verses declare:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, **through whom He also made the worlds**; who being the brightness of His

⁵ Colossians 1:15-17

glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.⁶

Every passage just cited praises Christ for his role in creation. The Doxology sung by the twenty-four elders in the Book of Revelation declares

You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things; and by Your will they exist and were created.⁷

In the Creed of the Church, when asked yet again in Nicea in A.D. 325, Who is Jesus? the Church answered that Jesus Christ is:

...the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten before all worlds, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father, **by whom all things were made...**⁸

When we say “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God” we are also declaring there never was a time when the Son was not. God has always been Trinity. We are declaring that the Second Person of the Trinity became flesh in space and time and dwelt among us. We are declaring that the Son of God has eternally existed before his birth in the flesh in Bethlehem.

⁶ Hebrews 1:1-4

⁷ Revelation 4:11

⁸ The Nicene Creed

THE THEOTOKOS AND MOTHER OF THE LIGHT

How is it possible that the infinite God could be confined in the body of a finite man? Closely linked to this question are two other questions—How could the infinite God be confined in a woman’s womb? How could the infinite God be confined in an earthen tomb?

There are always those who sought to give human answers to these divine mysteries. Again and again the Church has always rejected human answers and accepted the divine mystery for with man it is impossible but with God all things are possible.⁹

St. Ignatius of Antioch who was fed to the lions in Rome in 108 A.D. wrote seven letters during his journey from Antioch to Rome. In his letter to the church in Ephesus he wrote

There is only one physician, of flesh and spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true Life in death, Son of Mary and of God, first passable and then impassable, Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁰

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was born in the womb by Mary....¹¹

The Child in Mary’s womb was God. The ancient title of the Church for Mary conveyed that truth. Mary was the Theotokos, the Mother of God. Within two hundred years the term Theotokos, Mother of God, was a standard term within the Church as shown in a letter from a synod held in Alexandria in 320 A.D. “After this we receive the doctrine of the resurrection

⁹ Matthew 19: 26

¹⁰ St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 7:2

¹¹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 18:2

from the dead, of which Jesus Christ our Lord became the first-fruits, who bore a body in truth, not in semblance, which he derived from Mary the Theotokos.”¹²

The title Theotokos, Mother of God, is not a Mariological term. It tells us little about Mary. The title is Christological. It tells us about the Child in her womb. He is God. He doesn't become God sometime after he is born. He doesn't become God when he is baptized, or crucified, or resurrected. He has always been God. The Child in Mary's womb is the Second Person of the Undivided Trinity, “begotten of the Father before the foundation of all worlds. He is Light of Light, Very God of Very God. Mary gave birth in the flesh to the Second Person of the Trinity, our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

How this is so, I do not know. It is an ineffable mystery, incomprehensible to my finite mind. The Trinity is always an Unbroken Trinity. Wherever the Father is the fullness of the Trinity is. Wherever the Son is the fullness is. Wherever the Spirit is the fullness is. When the Second Person of the Trinity entered Mary's womb to become incarnate the fullness of God came. St. Paul said it this way, “It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,” the Son.¹³

Ineffable, incomprehensible, and indefinable, the Incarnation nonetheless remains a reality.

Standing before that which I see, but cannot understand, there is only one proper response:

worship.

¹² Bishop Alexander in a letter from the synod held in Alexandria in 320 A.D., *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Volume 14 in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 208.

¹³ Colossians 1:19.

The proper response is not academic study. It is not philosophical speculation. It is not even a theological doctrine. The only proper response to revelation is worship.

We do not worship the Virgin Mary. We worship the God whom she bore. But we honor her and sing the Magnificat¹⁴ from the Gospel of Luke in our Orthros Service.

The Theotokos and Mother of the Light let us honor and magnify in song.

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

Refrain: More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, thou who without stain barest God the Word, and art truly Theotokos, we magnify thee.

For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

(Refrain)

For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his Name; and his mercy is on them that fear him, throughout all generations.

(Refrain)

He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

(Refrain)

He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the empty with good things, and the rich hath he sent empty away.

(Refrain)

He remembering his mercy hath helped his servant Israel, as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed forever.

(Refrain)

¹⁴ Luke 1:46-55

AGAIN AND AGAIN—THE COUNCILS

The Third Ecumenical Council met in Ephesus in 431 A.D. again to declare that Jesus was fully God and fully man. Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, declared he was unwilling to call the Virgin Mary “the Mother of God.” He said, “I can never allow that a child of three months old was God.”

Nestorius was condemned as the Church continued to affirm what the Church from the beginning had always believed, that Jesus was the Son of Mary and the Son of God, fully God and fully man. The Second Person of the Trinity had become flesh and dwelt among us.

Faced with an unexplainable revelation, such as the Resurrection or the Incarnation, humans find it easier to concoct and believe an idea that makes sense even though the idea contradicts the revelation it seeks to explain. Heresies spread because they make sense.

Many Christians in the West are heretics without knowing it. They believe things that make sense and sound logical. When confronted with the reality of the Incarnation, or the reality of the Resurrection, they find it easier to believe what makes sense than to believe the reality of the Risen Savior or the Incarnate God standing before them.

Therefore heresies spread easily and rapidly and are very difficult to eradicate. Arius denied that the Son of God existed co-eternal with the Father. He said there was a time when the Son was not, that the Son came into existence later than always having existed with the un-originate Father.

Many Christians in the West today hold a modified form of Arianism. They believe the Son of God did not exist until his birth in Bethlehem. Nestorianism is another such heresy that continues to flourish in the West. Many Christians in the West aren't sure whether Jesus is God or not and aren't sure when he became God if he was God, but like Nestorius they are certain they will never call Mary "the Mother of God."

The Fifth Ecumenical Council met in 533 A.D. By this time the Church made it clear in the strongest words possible what the Church believed, and had always believed. An anathema means to set something apart for evil, thus, to curse. We may not understand all the issues in each statement. But one thing is dramatically clear. They are defending that the Second Person of the Trinity became flesh and dwelt among us.

The Capitula of the 5th Ecumenical Council

I.

IF anyone shall not confess that the nature or essence of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is one, as also the force and the power; [if anyone does not confess] a consubstantial Trinity, one Godhead to be worshipped in three subsistences or Persons: let him be anathema. For there is but one God even the Father of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things, and one Holy Spirit in whom are all things.

II.

IF anyone shall not confess that the Word of God has two nativities, the one from all eternity of the Father, without time and without body; the other in these last days, coming down from heaven and being made flesh of the holy and glorious Mary, Mother of God and always a virgin, and born of her: let him be anathema.

III.

IF anyone shall say that the wonder-working Word of God is one [Person] and the Christ that suffered another; or shall say that God the Word was with the woman-born Christ, or was in him as one person in another, but that he was not one and the same our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, incarnate and made man, and that his miracles and the sufferings which of his own will he endured in the flesh were not of the same [Person]: let him be anathema.

IV.

IF anyone shall say that the union of the Word of God to man was only according to grace or energy, or dignity, or equality of honor, or authority, or relation, or effect, or power, or according to good pleasure in this sense that God the Word was pleased with a man, that is to say, that he loved him for his own sake, as says the senseless Theodorus, or [if anyone pretends that this union exists only] so far as likeness of name is concerned, as the Nestorians understand, who call also the Word of God Jesus and Christ, and even accord to the man the names of Christ and of Son, speaking thus clearly of two persons, and only designating disingenuously one Person and one Christ when the reference is to his honor, or his dignity, or his worship; **if anyone shall not acknowledge as the Holy Fathers teach, that the union of God the Word is made with the flesh animated by a reasonable and living soul, and that such union is made synthetically and hypostatically, and that therefore there is only one Person, to wit: our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the Holy Trinity: let him be anathema.** As a matter of fact the word “union” (τῆς ἐνώσεως) has many meanings, and the partisans of Apollinaris and Eutyches have affirmed that these natures are confounded *inter se*, and have asserted a union produced by the mixture of both. On the other hand the followers of Theodorus and of Nestorius rejoicing in the division of the natures, have taught only a relative union. Meanwhile the Holy Church of God, condemning equally the impiety of both sorts of heresies, recognizes the union of God the Word with the flesh synthetically, that is to say, hypostatically. For in the mystery of Christ, the synthetical union not only preserves unconfusedly the natures which are united, but also allows no separation.

V.

IF anyone understands the expression “one only Person of our Lord Jesus Christ” in this sense, that it is the union of many hypostases, and if he attempts thus to introduce into the mystery of Christ two hypostases, or two Persons, and, after having introduced two persons, speaks of one Person only out of dignity, honor or worship, as both Theodorus and Nestorius insanely have written; if anyone shall calumniate the holy Council of Chalcedon, pretending that it made use of this expression [one hypostasis] in this impious sense, and if he will not recognize rather that the Word of God is united with the flesh hypostatically, and that therefore there is but one hypostasis or one only Person, and that the holy Council of Chalcedon has professed in this sense the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ: let him be anathema. For since one of the Holy Trinity has been made man, viz.: God the Word, the Holy Trinity has not been increased by the addition of another person or hypostasis.

VI.

IF anyone shall not call in a true acceptation, but only in a false acceptation, the holy, glorious, and ever-virgin Mary, the Mother of God, or shall call her so only in a relative sense, believing that she bare only a simple man and that God the word was not incarnate of her, but that the incarnation of God the Word resulted only from the fact that he united himself to that man who was born [of her]; if he shall calumniate the Holy Synod of Chalcedon as though it had asserted the Virgin to be Mother of God according to the impious sense of Theodore; or if anyone shall call her the mother of a man (ἀνθρωποτόκον) or the Mother of Christ (Χριστοτόκον), as if Christ were not God, and shall not confess that she is exactly and truly the Mother of God, because that God the Word who before all ages was begotten of the Father was in these last days made flesh and born of her, and if anyone shall not confess that in this sense the holy Synod of Chalcedon acknowledged her to be the Mother of God: let him be anathema.

VII.

IF anyone using the expression, “in two natures,” does not confess that our one Lord Jesus Christ has been revealed in the divinity and in the humanity, so as to designate by that expression a difference of the natures of which an ineffable union is unconfusedly

made, [a union] in which neither the nature of the Word was changed into that of the flesh, nor that of the flesh into that of the Word, for each remained that it was by nature, the union being hypostatic; **but shall take the expression with regard to the mystery of Christ in a sense so as to divide the parties,** or recognizing the two natures in the only Lord Jesus, God the Word made man, does not content himself with taking in a theoretical manner *i.e.* “as an abstraction (τῆ θεωρίᾳ μόνῃ).” the difference of the natures which compose him, which difference is not destroyed by the union between them, for one is composed of the two and the two are in one, **but shall make use of the number [two] to divide the natures or to make of them Persons properly so called: let him be anathema.**

VIII.

IF anyone uses the expression “of two natures,” confessing that a union was made of the Godhead and of the humanity, or the expression “the one nature made flesh of God the Word,” and shall not so understand those expressions as the holy Fathers have taught, to wit: that of the divine and human nature there was made an hypostatic union, whereof is one Christ; **but from these expressions shall try to introduce one nature or substance [made by a mixture] of the Godhead and manhood of Christ; let him be anathema.** For in teaching that the only-begotten Word was united hypostatically [to humanity] we do not mean to say that there was made a mutual confusion of natures, but rather each [nature] remaining what it was, we understand that the Word was united to the flesh. **Wherefore there is one Christ, both God and man, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood. Therefore they are equally condemned and anathematized by the Church of God, who divide or part the mystery of the divine dispensation of Christ, or who introduce confusion into that mystery.**

IX.

IF anyone shall take the expression, Christ ought to be worshipped in his two natures, in the sense that he wishes to introduce thus two adorations, the one in special relation to God the Word and the other as pertaining to the man; or if anyone to get rid of the flesh, [that is of the humanity of Christ,] or to mix together the divinity

and the humanity, shall speak monstrously of one only nature or essence (φύσιν ἕγουν οὐσίαν) of the united (natures), and so worship Christ, **and does not venerate, by one adoration, God the Word made man, together with his flesh, as the Holy Church has taught from the beginning: let him be anathema.**

X.

IF anyone does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and the Lord of Glory and one of the Holy Trinity: let him be anathema.

XI.

IF anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, as well as their impious writings, as also all other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and by the aforesaid four Holy Synods and [if anyone does not equally anathematize] all those who have held and hold or who in their impiety persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned: let him be anathema.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Those who confessed him to be the Son of God became the Church. Through the centuries the Church time and again faced the question of the identity of Christ. Henry Percival, in his Historical Introduction to the First Ecumenical Council said this about all Seven of the Ecumenical Councils—

In this, as in every other of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the question the Fathers considered was not what they supposed Holy Scripture might mean, nor what they from *a priori* arguments, thought would be consistent with the mind of God, but something entirely different, to wit, what they had received. They understood their position to be that of witnesses, not that of exegetes. They recognized but one duty resting upon them in

this respect—to hand down to other faithful men that good thing the Church had received according to the command of God. The first requirement was not learning, but honesty. The question they were called upon to answer was not, What do I think probable, or even certain, from Holy Scripture? but, What have I been taught, what has been entrusted to me to hand down to others?¹⁵

The battle over the identity of Jesus Christ continues in the world around us. But that battle has been waged and won in the Eastern Church. The final victory came on the first Sunday of Lent, March 11, A.D. 843, with the restoration of the icons to our churches. Christ is fully God and fully Man. His Incarnation can be depicted in an icon. His mother can be depicted holding him as babe or young child. On the first Sunday of Lent one year later in 844 and every year since, on the first Sunday of Lent we declare out loud the Synodikon of the Day of Orthodoxy. In a loud voice we proclaim, “This is the Faith of the Apostles, this is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Orthodox, this is the Faith which has established the Universe.”

GOD’S RELAY RACE

In a relay race each team has four runners. Each runner carries a baton, that’s a French term. The capitol of Louisiana is Baton Rouge. If the French had settled in Oklahoma, we’d have called Baton Rouge, Red Stick, Oklahoma.

In a relay race each runner carries a baton, a stick. As a runner completes his leg of the race he passes the baton to the next runner on his team. This is repeated until all four runners on each

¹⁵ Henry Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, volume XIV in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company, 1988), 2.

team have completed their legs of the race. The teams race against each other. The team whose fourth runner crosses the finish line first wins the race.

In a relay race the tricky part is the passing of the baton from one runner to the next. There is a particular area within which the handoff must be made. If the runners drop their baton, either while running or during the exchange with the next runner, their team is disqualified from the race. In short, they can't drop it nor can they swap it. Each team has to finish the race with the baton with which they started.

A runner during his race can't look at his baton and think, what an ugly stick! It's old with nicks and notches. We need to spruce it up. We need a newer look. We'll never get the next generation to carry this old thing. We need a new baton, one with bells and whistles. The runner doesn't get to swap his baton. He can't drop it and he can't swap it. Each runner must pass on the baton they were given. And each team must finish the race with the same baton they had at the beginning of the race.

In the following passage, see if you can tell how many times the baton is passed:

“And the things which you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”¹⁶

There are four runners and the baton was passed three times. St. Paul passed the baton to St. Timothy. St. Timothy is to pass the baton on to faithful men, who in turn are to pass the

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:2

baton on to others. The baton is the faith once for all delivered to the saints.¹⁷ We must finish the race with the same baton carried by our first runner, and every runner before us. We must finish the race with the baton handed to us by them.

WORSHIP AT THE MANGER

When the shepherds arrived at the manger, they worshipped. When the Magi arrived from the east, they worshipped. They knew less than we about the Child in the manger, but in the presence of revelation, they worshipped.

For us the journey to Bethlehem begins each year on March 25th with the Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. Nine months before Christmas the mystery of the Incarnation begins with the conception of Christ in the Virgin's womb. Come, let us begin our journey to Bethlehem. The journey to Bethlehem begins in Nazareth. Before arriving in Bethlehem on December 25th we must begin by first going to Nazareth on March 25th.

The following passages are passages of worship. They are spoken and sung out loud. You may find it beneficial to read them out loud as you enter the reliving of these events and experience revelation and worship for yourself.

¹⁷ Jude 3

*MARCH 25—THE ANNUNCIATION*VESPERS¹⁸

Verily, Gabriel did come to thee, disclosing the purpose which was before the ages, hailing thee and saying, Rejoice, O unseeded land! Rejoice, O unburning bush! Rejoice, O depth inaccessible to vision! Rejoice, O bridge leading to the heavens! Rejoice, O lofty ladder whom Jacob did behold! Rejoice, O jar of divine manna! Rejoice, O dissolution of the curse! Rejoice, O recall of Adam! The Lord is with thee.

And the blameless Maiden, replied to the captain of hosts, Verily, thou dost appear to me as a man. Wherefore, then, dost thou utter superhuman things, saying that God shall be with me and dwell in my womb? Tell me, how am I, then, to become a spacious place of sanctification for him, who rideth on the cherubim? Mislead me not with deceit; for I have known no pleasure, and have not approached wedlock. How, then shall I give birth to a son?

When the incorporeal one cried unto her, saying, Whensoever God willeth, the order of nature is overcome, and that which is superhuman is accomplished.

Wherefore, O all-pure and holy one, believe thou my true words. But she cried, saying, Let it be unto me as thou sayest, and I will give birth to the Incorporeal, who shall take a body from me, that by his union therewith he may raise man to the first rank, since he alone is mighty.

*Glory and Now—6th Tone by John of Damascus*¹⁹

From heaven the archangel Gabriel was sent to announce the Conception to the Virgin. He went to Nazareth thinking within himself and wondering greatly, how it is that he who is in the highest and incomprehensible shall be born of a

¹⁸ Special Feasts have three parts: a Vesper service held at night, an Orthros service held the following morning, and the Divine Liturgy that follows Orthros.

¹⁹ A hymn by St. John of Damascus.

Virgin. He whose throne is heaven, and earth his footstool, how shall he be contained in a woman's womb? How was he pleased to be incarnate of her by a word only, he whom the six-winged ones and those of many eyes cannot gaze upon? Yea, he who cometh is the Word of God. Why then do I hesitate, and not address the Maiden, saying, Hail, O full of grace, the grace of the Lord is with thee? Hail, O spotless Virgin! Hail, O groomless bride! Hail, O Mother of life; blessed is the fruit of thy womb?

*By Cozma the Anchorite*²⁰

Today doth Gabriel make announcement to her who is full of grace, saying, Hail, O groomless and unwedded Maiden. Let not my strange appearance dazzle thee, nor be dismayed at me; for I am the archangel. Verily, the serpent did deceive Eve of old, and now I bring thee glad tidings of joy. Thou shalt remain without corruption, and shalt give birth to the Lord, O pure one.

*Aposticha—Idiomelons*²¹

In the sixth month the archangel was sent to a pure Virgin. And as he opened his mouth to her with, Peace, he announced to her that from her should come the Redeemer. And having accepted the greeting with faith, she conceived thee, O God before eternity, who wast pleased, in an inexplicable manner, to become incarnate for the salvation of our souls.

The Theotokos heard a language she did not understand; for the archangel uttered to her words of the Annunciation. And having accepted the greeting with faith, she conceived thee, O God before eternity.

[Note: The Annunciation is being relived in front of us. We are eye-witnesses to the Annunciation. We are eye-witnesses to the revelation.]

²⁰ A hymn by Cosma.

²¹ A unique tune that is sung in a drawn out manner.

Today is the Annunciation, the virginal celebration; for terrestrials shall unite with celestials, Adam being renewed and Eve freed of the first sorrow. And the tabernacle who is of our own substance hath become a temple for God, by deification of the clay derived from her. What mystery, the incomprehensible quality of the condescension, and the ineffable manner of the Conception! An angel, ministering the wonder, and the virgin womb receiving the Son. The Holy Spirit is sent, and on high the Father is well pleased. The reconciliation was effected by the universal will—

[Note: We stand before the revelation. We stand before the mystery. We see that which is incomprehensible. We are not neutral observers. This revelation includes us, has to do with us. There is only one appropriate response to revelation—worship. We now join Gabriel in proclaiming with him...]

—through which and by which *having been saved, let us* with Gabriel sing unto the Virgin, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee, from whom Christ our Lord God and Savior did take our nature and join it to himself. Wherefore, implore thou him to save our souls.

Today is the beginning of *our* salvation, and the manifestation of the mystery from the ages; for the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel proclaimeth grace. Wherefore, do *we shout* with him to the Theotokos, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee.

ORTHROS²²

In Vespers we are witnesses of the revelation and we became worshippers. In the Kathisma of Orthros we deepen our understanding of what this means, what the Annunciation

²² Special Feasts have three parts: a Vesper service held at night, an Orthros service held the following morning, and the Divine Liturgy that follows Orthros.

means. The Annunciation is a response to Adam and Eve's lunch in Paradise. "Today the haughtiness of the serpent vanisheth, as the bond of the curse of the first father is undone."

But the Annunciation also gives us the mystery of the mother who "carries in thy womb God before the ages, by whose Word he did establish the ends of the earth." This is God in Mary's womb. This is the eternal God before the ages in Mary's womb. The Theotokos is "the living tabernacle of God" who "shall never be touched by an unclean hand."

Heaven and earth now rejoice in the Virgin who has become the Mother of God. "The lips of believers shall sing unto her ceaselessly with the voice of angels, crying joyfully, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee."

Orthros reminds us that the God-inspired Scriptures have spoken of the Mother of God mystically. Jacob saw "the ladder that joined heaven and earth and cried out mystically, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee. The bush that burned but was not consumed revealed the miracle of God within thy womb to Moses, who cried out mystically, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Daniel called you the mountain, Isaiah the Mother of God, and Gideon saw thee as a fleece. They cried out mystically, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee."

Having witnessed the revelation of the Annunciation we have become worshipping believers.

We join Gabriel and the Old Testament saints in shouting: Hail, O full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Our understanding having been deepened, before leaving Orthros, we now become evangelists, declaring to the world:

*Exaposteilarions*²³

The leader of the heavenly hosts was sent from Almighty God to an undefiled Virgin to announce to her the strange and ineffable wonder that God as Man shall, without seed, become a child from her, restoring the whole creation of mankind. Wherefore, ye nations, receive the glad tidings of the re-creation of the whole world.

[Note: Having become worshippers, we now call out, O nations of the world—be a witness of the revelation with us. Join us in standing in awe before this which God has done. Join us as we join the angels in shouting...]

Rejoice, O Theotokos, O deliverance of Adam from the curse! Rejoice, chaste Theotokos! Rejoice, O living bush! Rejoice, O lamp! rejoice, O throne! Rejoice, O ladder and door! Rejoice, O divine chariot! Rejoice, O bright cloud! Rejoice, O temple, O most-gilded jar! Rejoice, O mountain! Rejoice O tabernacle and table! Hail to thee, O deliverer of Eve!

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

To what end is our shouting? To what end our praise? We shout and we praise for the same reason the shepherds came, for the same reason the Magi came, and for the same reason men and women for two thousand years have followed the star to Bethlehem. Nine months before Christmas the meaning of Christmas is announced in the praises of Orthros:

From the arches on high did Gabriel descend coming towards Nazareth. He came to the Virgin Mary, lifting his voice to her and saying, Hail, for thou shalt conceive a Son older than Adam, to the Maker and Creator of the ages, who delivereth those who cry to thee, O Undefiled one, Hail!

²³ A category of hymns known as “dispatching.”

From heaven did Gabriel come, bringing the Annunciation to the Virgin, and crying unto her, Hail, for thou dost carry in thy womb him who shall be contained in thee, the Uncontainable in space. Thou shalt be revealed as carrying him who shineth forth from the Father, before the morning star.

The Word, co-eternal with the Father before eternity, was not separated from the celestials. But he descended, through his exceeding compassion, to those who are below, taking pity on our stumbling and fall, and putting on the humility of Adam, taking on a strange likeness.

The transubstantial Word, appearing eternally from his Father, and in time from his Mother, taketh on the likeness of a servant, becoming flesh, without separation from the Godhead and renewing the creation of Adam in the womb of her who conceived him without seed.

*Glory and Now by Theophanes*²⁴

Today is disclosed the mystery before the ages; and the Son of God shall become the Son of Man, that by his adoption of the lowest he may grant me the highest. Of old Adam failed to become God as he desired, so God became Man that Adam might become a God.

Wherefore, let creation rejoice, and nature exchange greetings, for the archangel did stand reverently before the Virgin and offered her joy instead of sorrow.

Wherefore, O our God, who by thy compassion became man, glory be to thee.

God became man so that we might become like God. “For thou, O all-blameless, not knowing a man, didst give birth in the flesh to a Son without father, who before eternity was begotten of the Father without mother.”²⁵ Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee.

²⁴ A hymn by Theophanes.

Nine months later Wise Men arrived from the East and shepherds came from the nearby hills. They came in response to the revelation. They came to worship. “And the Magi came into the house and saw the Child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.”²⁶ “And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.”²⁷

We are eyewitnesses of these things. We have shouted with the Archangel Gabriel, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee. We have shouted with the Old Testament saints, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee. We have joined our voices with the multitude of the heavenly host in praising God, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace goodwill toward men.” With the Magi and the Shepherds we have traveled to Bethlehem. We have beheld the coming of our salvation and knelt in worship before the human birth of our God lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Who shall deliver us from this body of death? Thanks be to God! “Most blessed art thou, O Virgin Theotokos, for through Him that was incarnate of thee is Hades despoiled, Adam is recalled from the dead, the curse is made void, Eve is set free, death is slain, and we are endowed with life.”²⁸ God has become man so that we might become like God.

²⁵ Oktoechos, Third Tone, Vespers, Glory and Now.

²⁶ Matthew 2:11

²⁷ Luke 2:20

²⁸ The Theotikion prior to the Great Doxology in the Orthros Service.