

## **The Nativity and Almsgiving, Part One**

*By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

The hymn of the angels at the Nativity of Christ is the key verse to the practical meaning of this feast. The angels of heaven sing: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among men' (Luke 2:14). God is always glorified in the highest, and through His presence, peace is achieved on earth and goodwill enters the hearts and souls of mankind.

If the glory of God in the highest, the peace on earth, and the goodwill among men are interconnected, then the responsibility for achieving them falls primarily on the believers. The incarnation of the Lord Jesus teaches us to be messengers of peace and apostles of joy. This great responsibility is not fulfilled by excessive concern for the appearances of the holiday, but by working seriously to make the Lord ever present in and directing our lives.

Hence, this feast gains priority among believers in knowing how Jesus Christ was born in their souls. If they remain during the feast and after it as they were before, this means that the feast has not achieved its goal inside of them. Church feasts are stations for self-examination, and new beginnings to a more advanced extent in the life of virtue and the fruition of the Holy Spirit.

Today, Christmas is an essential moment to think about bringing joy to the hearts of despondent, sad, displaced and suffering people all around us. Unfortunately, their population is on the rise. The most important question is: How do we bring them joy? The answer is simple: by giving – morally, spiritually, emotionally and materially. Reviewing the customs associated with this feast is necessary and essential for all believers. On this feast, let us invite each other to activate our participation in bringing joy to our brothers and sisters in God.

How do we return the customs of this feast to their origin? Consider the popular tradition of exchanging gifts and distributing alms to the needy on this blessed holiday. The origin of this tradition goes back to the Christian belief that God has presented humanity the greatest gift at Christmas, the second person of the Holy Trinity, His Word, His Son, in order to save it. Therefore, believers offer gifts to one another as a token of gratitude to God for His greatest gift: Jesus Christ.

Like everything transcendent, the concept of giving is distorted by sinful humans and diverted from its original meaning. In like manner, this tradition has become disfigured with excessive consumerism where exchanging gifts is now a mere imposed seasonal tradition. Anyone can see the excess in this area. Gifts should not be exchanged between people just because "it is Christmas," regardless of the receivers and their needs. Nevertheless, it remains a beautiful custom, although it needs more spirituality and personalization.

Believers first present themselves as pure offerings to the Lord. The Lord came to us to save us, so we, in turn, present ourselves to Him pure and clean with sincere repentance and a noticeable change for the better.

Then, we present to our brothers, sisters, loved ones and friends a simple, thoughtful and joyful offering. Hence, it has become customary on the eve of this feast for all family members to gather for Christmas dinner.

The most important thing is for believers to visit the grieving, the needy, and the neglected, bringing whatever they can provide them during the Nativity Fast.

This feast is an occasion to practice giving. God gave us Himself, so we give Him ourselves. God visited us with His great mercy, so we visit others with our love derived from His love.