



THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON

His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

His Grace, Bishop Gregory of Brookline

NATIVITY ENCYCLICAL

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

By the grace and compassions of our merciful God, we have been deemed worthy once again to arrive at the blessed Feast of the Nativity according to the flesh of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

For forty days, the Holy Church has been preparing us with fasting and prayer for the arrival of this holy night, when in a humble cave, the mystery that was hidden from eternity and unknown even to the angels is being accomplished. This mystery did the prophet Esaias foresee from afar, and exulted, saying: “Unto us a Child is born, and unto us a Son is given.” (Esaias, 9:6) Not a common child, nor an ordinary son, but the pre-eternal Son and Word of God, by Whom all things were made. For He, our merciful Savior, did not abandon us in our sins, but having instructed us first by His holy prophets over many generations, in the last days, He Himself came to us, to recreate His own image that had been distorted by sin. For on this blessed night, in Bethlehem, He Who is motherless according to His divinity, being the Only-begotten of the Father before all ages, has become fatherless according to His humanity, being the only-begotten Son of His Mother, who knew not wedlock. No night equals this blessed night in its serenity and holiness, no other, save one, when yet another cave, in Jerusalem, gave rest to the crucified body of our Savior. Two blessed nights, that cloaked in their quietude and darkness two great works of our salvation, the Birth and the Death of our Savior. Here, Jesus the Newly-born rests in a small cave, and there Jesus the Mighty King lies in the cave of His life-giving tomb, keeping the Sabbath, resting after the mighty works of our Salvation that He wrought in the midst of the earth. Here, the Theotokos is the first to see and embrace Him that was born of her, yet kept the seal of her virginity intact; there she also is the first to see and touch her beloved Son who came forth from the cave alive on the third day, yet kept the seals of the tomb untouched. In

both caves on those two blessed nights, our Savior wrought marvellous things for our Salvation, for by His Supernatural Birth and His Life-giving Death, He healed the two extremes, two woes, two curses that tyrannized our nature, pleasure and pain, both of which together lead to the spiritual and bodily death of men.

For the Holy Fathers teach us, dear brothers and sisters, that the manner of procreation of human beings through the passion of pleasure was not intended for us by God in the beginning, but rather, we have been reduced to it because of the transgression and fall of our forefathers. Before the fall, both Adam and Eve were virgins, which is the natural state which God had intended for them. St. Maximus the Confessor, among the greatest all the Church's theologians, tells us that "after the transgression, pleasure naturally preconditioned the births of all human beings, and no one at all was by nature free from birth subject to the passion associated with this pleasure; rather, everyone was requited with sufferings, and subsequent death, as the natural punishment...^[1] For Adam, our forefather, having transgressed God's commandment, introduced over against the original one another source of human generation based on pleasure and ending in the death that comes through suffering...^[2] Therefore death in its dynasty dominates all human nature because of the transgression, and has as the basis of its rule the pleasure which, through disobedience, initiated the whole natural human conception."^[3]

Therefore, since no human being is engendered without sensual pleasure, and sensual pleasure breeds corruption—and ultimately, death—all were liable to death, for not only did we add sin upon sin, which produces the "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23)—death—but our very manner of generation had a corrupt root: unrighteous, sensual pleasure, which brought forth a corrupted fruit - pain, illness, sorrow, and finally death. As the Prophet David lamented: "For behold, I was conceived in iniquities and in sins did my mother bear me." (Psalm 50:5)

A new root was needed therefore, a new beginning, another way of birth. "In truth then," continues St. Maximus, "God became man, and provided another beginning, a second nativity for human nature...^[4] Because of this unrighteous beginning based on pleasure, Adam subjected along with him his whole posterity, all who like him are born of flesh, to the finality of death through suffering. But the Lord, when He became man, did not have a birth in the flesh preceded by the unrighteous pleasure that caused death to be elicited as a punishment... and in so doing fashioned another nativity through the Holy Spirit"^[5].

In other words, since our Savior was not conceived in the iniquity of pleasure, but rather in virginity, and He was not born in a corruptible way, but rather in a manner past nature, he was not liable to suffering and death, and only submitted to it willingly, in order to destroy the dominion of death by His glorious arising. His death was not a just punishment for sin like for the rest of humans, for not only is He the only Sinless One, but He was even conceived in a manner that is free from unrighteous and corruptible pleasure, and thus was not liable to corruption and death. “For He even submitted to death through suffering” continues St. Maximus, “which in Adam’s case was thoroughly justified, but which in His own case was absolutely unjust since it did not have as its genetic root the unrighteous pleasure stemming from our forefather’s disobedience. Therein the Lord destroyed both extremes—both the beginning and the end—of the mode of human generation inherited from Adam, such as were not originally God’s doing...^[6] He did this, so that suffering unjustly, He might uproot the principle of our being conceived through unrighteous pleasure, which tyrannizes our human nature.”^[7]

His conception and birth free from sin and corruption, is also what made His voluntary death salvific for us, for death could not hold captive Him Who had none of the corruption that comes from a birth conceived in passion running through His veins. And to this same new mode of nativity does He invite us also to become participants, so that being born again with Him, we may also have a new beginning, being grafted to the new, incorruptible root of our Savior’s incorruptible birth. How? Again, St. Maximus gives us the answer: “He liberated from liability to those extremes all who are mystically reborn in His Spirit and who no longer retain the pleasure of sexual conception derived from Adam;”^[8] for “all who in the Spirit are willingly reborn of Christ with the bath of regeneration [that is, the Holy Baptism] are able by grace to put off their original Adamic birth based on pleasure. By keeping the Gospel commandments they preserve the baptismal grace of sinlessness and the unabated and immaculate power of mystical adoption in the Spirit.”^[9]

Being baptized, therefore, in the Holy Church, we strip off the corruptible birth according to first Adam, and instead we receive a new, incorruptible birth through Second Adam, our Savior. And death is no more a punishment for us, just as it was not for our Savior, but rather it has become the means and instrument for our salvation: dying to the world, mortification of passions, killing of sinful inclinations in ourselves, and after the physical passing away, a righteous rest in the expectation of the general resurrection. And this new birth and beginning did our Savior initiate with His

supernatural Nativity from a Virgin Mother, in a humble, little cave, in the royal city of David.

Now we see and understand how and in what way our Savior's supernatural Birth from the Most Holy Theotokos has such a deep theological meaning, and how this new mode of Birth of the New Adam, our Savior, has a paramount importance in the story of our Salvation. And that is precisely why the teaching of the Virginal Conception and Birth of our Savior from the Most Holy Theotokos is a dogma of our Church. For, besides glorifying the supernatural virtue of her who is holier than all the celestial beings, this dogma, like every other teaching of the Church, is what our very salvation depends upon.

Let us, therefore, approach the great Mystery of the Incarnate Dispensation of our loving God with both joy and awe, rejoicing at His immeasurable love for us and wondering at the mighty deed of Salvation that He wrought in the midst of a small cave. Together with the Magi and the shepherds, let us worship the Prince of Peace and Chief Shepherd, and let us bless the Holy Virgin that bore Him for us. And let us chant together with the Angels: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men!"

Christ is Born!
Glorify Him!

With love in our Savior,

* Gregory, Bishop of Brookline

Nativity, 2013.

[1] To Thalassius, 61, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, SVS Press, 2003, p. 133

[2] Ibid., p. 135

[3] Ibid., p. 137

[4] Ibid., p. 135

[5] Ibid., p. 135

[6] Ibid., p. 136

[7] Ibid., p. 134

[8] Ibid., p. 136

[9] Ibid., p. 139