

A STRANGE, MOST GLORIOUS MYSTERY

IS THERE ANYTHING more familiar in Christianity than the Christmas story? The child in the manger, the shepherds watching their flocks, wise men from the East, and angels singing, “Glory to God in the Highest!” There is something that warms the heart in the familiar. It is safe. It shelters. It is sort of like home. Certainly, there is a place for this aspect of the Christmas experience. The gentleness of the Mother and Child, the simplicity of the shepherds, the piety of the wise men, and the radiance of the angels soften our souls in the midst of the harsh winter of this life. And yet, where we grow as human beings, where change and transformation take place, is not in the familiar, but in the startlingly new, in the strangeness that alters our perspective about ourselves and about our world. Mothers can see this as their children explore the world. Psychologists have written much on this topic. But most importantly, this is something that the Nativity of Christ should do for us all.

For the Church fathers, what happened in Bethlehem of old was “the only new thing under the sun” (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, book 3, chapter 1, PG 94.984bc). Looking upon the events recounted by the holy evangelists, the response of the Christian that brings forth change is given in the hymnology of the Church: “I behold a strange, most glorious mystery! Heaven—the cave! The cherubic throne—the Virgin! The manger—the place where Christ lay, the uncontainable God, Whom we magnify in song!” (*Ninth Ode of the Canon for the Nativity of*

the Savior). Everything is much more than the familiar. It is a mystery that is glorious and strange, blinding and unfamiliar, radiant and new. Nothing is precisely as it seems, but incomparably more profound, infinitely more holy, and indescribably more divine than anything the human mind can grasp. God becomes man. For our sakes, the pre-eternal God is born a young child. All the rules of logic, all the rules of the creation, all the rules for all things human melt before the fire of divinity that burns, but does not consume, that is majestic, yet humble, and that is our salvation.

The Christmas story is not meant to just warm our hearts. It is meant to enflame us with divine love, to cause us to embrace the humility of Christ and become humble ourselves, to embrace the impossibility of the union of heaven and earth and to become earthly angels and heavenly men and women. It should fill us with boldness in an inhospitable world, spontaneity to look and see where the young child is laid, and a readiness to follow the star of Christ’s truth wherever it may lead us. All of this is possible if we but humble our hearts and seek to worship Christ, praying that He gives us new eyes to behold, not just the familiar story, but the strange and glorious mystery of God becoming a child, so that we who are in so many ways still children might become gods by grace, coheirs in Christ’s heavenly kingdom. A strange, most glorious mystery, indeed!

—Father Alexis (Trader) from *Ancient Christian Wisdom*

New Titles Available in the Bookstore

Are you looking for gift ideas for Christmas? For children, we have a great new series of lives of the saints for children including *The Holy Hierarch John Maximovitch*, *the New Wonderworker* and many others. These books are beautifully illustrated and written to communicate to children. There are two other new children’s books on our shelves: *From God to You: The Icon’s Journey to Your Heart* and *A Child’s Guide to the Divine Liturgy*. For moms we have *The Ascetic Lives of Mothers: A Prayer Book for Orthodox Moms*. The author, Annalisa Boyd, knows motherhood—its challenges, its joys, and its potential for spiritual growth. In this book she offers a wide selection of prayers mothers can use to intercede for their families as well as to grow in virtue themselves.

There are many more potential gifts available in the St. Seraphim Bookstore. Come by and visit us during coffee hour any Sunday!

INFORMATION

Protection of the Holy Virgin & St. Seraphim of Sarov Church
90 Mountain View Avenue, Santa Rosa, CA 95407
Parish office phone: 707-584-9491 / fax: 585-9445
website: www.saintseraphim.com

Our Parish Secretary—Bobbi Griovski—may be reached at the Church office Mon., Tues. and Wed., 9 AM to Noon, at 584-9491. Fr. Lawrence Margitich may be reached at the Parish office phone, or at Lmargitich@sbcglobal.net. He is available Tuesday–Saturday, from noon onwards each day.

Parish Contacts

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KILLER PRAYER!

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED at your prayer book with the distinct feeling of ‘I hate you, I hate you, I hate you?’ Have you felt totally useless spiritually, unable to move forward for one tiny step? Do you, in fact, feel that you are going backwards, rather than advancing in any way; that your prayer life is worse today than yesterday, and definitely worse than a year ago? Well, in that case, rejoice, for this is the sure sign that your prayer is working.

I’ve met so many people this weekend...each with their personal story, personal challenges, personal sources of happiness and pain. Everywhere though, questions and worries concerning prayer take over the conversation in a matter of minutes. The basic thing people seem not to understand is that the point of prayer is not happiness—the reason we pray is not so that we feel happy and fulfilled.

By prayer, our saints say, we get closer to God; unfortunately, getting closer to God means we have to get closer to ourselves first, closer to our own hearts, because that is where Christ reveals Himself – and getting to know one’s own heart is nasty business; getting to know who you really are is never fun, never a fulfilling or comforting experience.

When your prayer kills you on the inside, let it. And give thanks. When your prayer exposes the small person that you are in front of your own conscience, let it. And give thanks. These years of pain, these years of staring at one’s prayer book and wondering how did one get so low and miserable, so utterly unable to control one’s thoughts, one’s feelings, one’s attention, one’s passions, these years when you go down in your own personal hell and you discover that

this is where you belong, that there is nothing alive in you, nothing holy in you—these years are the years your prayer IS working. This is the time you’re keeping yourself open for God to start re-creating you, re-shaping you into who you really are.

These are painful years, when nothing good seems to live in us, but these years will teach you so many things about yourself, things you would never learn otherwise. You learn your limitations, you learn humility, you learn repentance, you learn obedience, you learn not to judge, not to condemn—for, how could you judge and condemn anyone, when you yourself are spiritually dead and surviving only out of God’s love and mercy?

These years are the foundation for all your future years. I think about these years as the foundation to a house – my life. Make sure, make absolutely sure that you have a strong, healthy foundation; otherwise, no matter what you build on top of it, it will crumble sooner or later.

This prayer is just a stage, of course. When God sees that the foundation is ready, you will break through, and things will be different. Don’t despair and don’t give up—for now, just rejoice because you know your prayer is working. You’re gradually learning the truth about yourself, you’re gradually leaving behind the idolatrous images of your self that you or those around you have built for years.

As you leave these fake images behind, you’re getting closer to your real self, you gain knowledge about who you really are and, in time, this self-knowledge will be the foundation for knowledge and love for God. Let this prayer kill you. It’s not you who’s dying, not your real self, but the fake and prideful self you’ve learnt to mistake for who you really are. Let this prayer kill this fake self, let this prayer help you discover your real name, your real personhood. Don’t get down from the cross of this prayer. Remember that after the Cross—and only after—Christ’s Resurrection awaits you: You, the real one.

—Father Seraphim (Aldea)

The Church and Civil Marriage ~ Russell D. Moore

While the following article may not reflect a strict Orthodox understanding of the Holy Mystery of Matrimony, it does clarify how the word “marriage” (a comprehensive union of two sexually complementary humans—one male, one female—and the intent for a life-long monogamous union, with the capacity to create a family) is now being redefined. There are two views of marriage: the traditional understanding, called “the conjugal view” and the “revisionist view” which seeks to apply the word “marriage” to non-complementary, non-monogamous and non-permanent relationships which are not capable—in and of themselves without outside agency—of biologically creating a family. Many of the prominent advocates of the revisionist view clearly and radically teach—a short search on the internet will suffice to show it—that gender, family, relationships, father, mother, etc. are changeable and fluid (fathers and mothers), and should be dismantled over time to eventually do away with the traditional understanding of the family that has been based on human biology and ideas about male and female, for all of recorded history. With that redefinition will come the possible intrusion of the state into churches, whose intent will be the dismantling of the millennia-old conjugal view which has never been limited to reasons based on religion. The article below discusses options if and when the state starts to intrude on the practices of Churches. Already, businesses have been targeted and ministers have been harassed (see recent events in Houston, TX) by proponents of the revisionist view. It might be also mentioned that, unlike the current laws regarding the revisionist view, in the conjugal view no one is denied the right to marry. Civil unions are one thing, and if people of the same sex desire to live together, that’s their business, and they should be afforded the rights of any citizen. However, let’s not confuse a civil union—of whatever sort it might be—with the unique, comprehensive, permanent, complementary and monogamous union of a man and a woman. —Fr. Lawrence

With the legal affirmation of same-sex marriage in some states, should churches, synagogues, and mosques stop performing civil marriages? No, not yet. Marriage is, of course, more than a matter of statecraft. That’s the reason we deny that the state can, for instance, call marriages into being without creational essentials such as sexual complementarity.

Marriage is grounded in the natural order itself (Gen. 2:21–23) and points beyond nature to the Gospel mystery that stands behind and makes sense of the cosmos (Eph. 5:31–32). Obviously, then, if the state ever forced congregations or religious institutions to solemnize unions that are not, in our view, marriages, we would be compelled to obey God and conscience and not the bureaucrats. Even with the audacity of recent religious liberty incursions, though, that moment will not be upon us any time soon. Instead, what we see are governments affirming both unions we do recognize as marriages and those that are something else. As citizens, we ought to oppose the redefinition of marriage, but, should we lose across the board, what should we do as churches?

Churches should join together only those who meet the creational criteria for marriage. A church that accommodates itself to the sexual revolution is no longer a church of Jesus Christ. Moreover, churches should only marry those who are accountable to the Church and to the gathered witnesses, and who are held to their vows. The marrying parson who stands where the wedding coordinator tells him to, reads his script, and signs the paperwork for whatever couple shows up is a disgraceful hireling and ought to do an honest day’s work as a justice of the peace rather than as a steward of the mysteries of God.

When a congregation certifies a biblically married couple to be also civilly married, the congregation is not affirming the state’s definition of marriage. Instead, the Church is witnessing to the state’s role in recognizing marriage as something that stands before and is foundational to society. We are bearing witness to the fact that these unions are the business of the larger society in ways other unions aren’t. We are witnessing that the state has no business in recreating marriage, but the state does have a responsibility to safeguard children, by holding mothers and fathers to their vows to each other and to the next generation. In this sense, we are acting much as Jesus did when he was asked about the payment of the temple tax. Jesus believed himself and his disciples to be heirs of the kingdom and thus free from this obligation. Nonetheless, he paid the half-shekel “so as not to give offense to them” (Matt. 17:27). If the state ever attempts to force us to call marriage that which is not marriage in our churches and ceremonies, let’s obey God, even if that means we sing our wedding hymns in the prison block. But, for now, by registering Gospel-qualified unions as civil marriages and not officiating at unions that are not Gospel-qualified, we call the government to its responsibility even as we call attention to its limits.

We gladly render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but the image imprinted on the marriage union isn’t the union of Caesar and his court, but of Christ and his Church.

—Russell D. Moore is president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

- THE THANKSGIVING FOOD BASKET drive organized by Serge Anderson and Amy Ramirez Margitich provided forty or so complete dinner boxes for the needy on Thanksgiving Day. The boxes included a turkey, all the trimmings, vegetables, dessert and Martinelli's sparkling cider. We thank all those parishioners who so generously donated food items and funds to make this worthy cause a success.
- ON WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 3, ABOUT 6 PM, the parish will welcome guests coming with the Redwood Gospel Mission "Nomadic Shelter" project. We expect maybe twenty to thirty needy homeless folks—for which we will provide dinner, a meditation on the Gospel for the day, some light music entertainment, and a warm and safe place to sleep. The Nomadic Shelter is a program in which the Redwood Gospel Mission of Santa Rosa has partnered with thirty local church communities—each taking one night a month for the next four months—to provide a safe place for prescreened homeless folks (many of them women and children) to be brought by the Mission for the night. Arrival is expected about 6 PM, departure about 6:30 AM. Mission staff and parish volunteers will stay the night to care for the guests.
- ST. NICHOLAS (SAN ANSELMO) FEAST DAY: Father Stephan Meholick has invited our parish to participate in the Patronal Feast Day of St. Nicholas, San Anselmo. Vigil at 7 PM, Friday, December 5, and Divine Liturgy on Saturday, December 6, at 9:30 AM. Archimandrite Daniel (Brum) Bishop-Elect of Santa Rosa, will preside and give the homily. Preparations for Nativity are incomplete without the feast of the Holy Father Nicholas.
- THE REDWOOD EMPIRE FOOD BANK distribution (to low income and needy families) is set for Wednesday, December 10 from 5:00 PM to 6:30 PM. Volunteers, please arrive just before 5 PM to set up. See Denise Pellizzer if you would like to volunteer to help with this outreach.
- OUR SENIOR LUNCH this month is scheduled for Thursday, December 11th at noon. In addition to a scrumptious soup luncheon prepared for us by Eugenia Dada, we'll also be honored with the presence of our very own illustrious Choir Director, who will lead us in singing Christmas Carols. It will be a fun afternoon—so come one and all.
- WINTER WORK PARTY: A parish work party is planned for Saturday, December 13, beginning about 10:30 AM, after the Divine Liturgy for St. Herman of Alaska. Tasks: clean gutters on all buildings, stack and cover picnic tables, clean ditches, clean the church windows, rearrange parts of the storage building, etc.
- SAINT NICHOLAS PARTY, December 20: The Church School children and staff are very excited to be presenting a Christmas play, The Song of Simeon, directed by Carmen Anderson, on Saturday, December 20 following Great Vespers and a potluck. Play rehearsal will be from 1–2 PM this Saturday; no rehearsal next Saturday, and then back to a 3 PM rehearsal for the remaining Saturdays (excepting December 13, due to the production of A Christmas Carol here at the parish hall. Call Gloria Collins at 849-6135 or email her at gypsybootsie@att.net.
- NATIVITY SERVICES: The wonderful services of the Prefeast of Christmas begin five days before Christmas. It's a winter "holy week" in many ways. Please do your soul a favor and come to any or all of the Vespers, Matins, Royal Hours and the Vespersal Liturgy of Christmas Eve. You will see Christmas in a new light and with greater understanding.
- PARISH FEAST DAY: Since the large Church is dedicated to St. Seraphim of Sarov, who reposed on January 2, 1833, we will celebrate his memory with Great Vespers and an Akathist on January 1 at 5 PM, and the Divine Liturgy on January 2. We will greet Vlydyka Benjamin at 9:30 AM. A festal meal will be served after the Divine Liturgy.
- WOMEN'S RETREAT, February 7, 2015: The Parish Sisterhood will sponsor an all day women's retreat here in the Parish Hall, with Dr. Jeannie Constantinou. Presbytera Jeannie (wife of Father Costas Constantinou of San Diego) can be heard on her regular Ancient Faith podcast "Search the Scriptures." She has a doctorate in law from Pepperdine (having passed the California Bar), a master's in theology from Holy Cross Orthodox Seminary in Brookline, Mass., a master's in theology from Harvard Divinity School, and a doctorate from Université Laval, Quebec City, Canada in Patristics. Academic degrees are one thing; teaching skill and Orthodox understanding are another. Presbytera Jeannie has both. Listen for yourself at Ancient Faith Radio. www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/searchthescriptures
- MEN'S RETREAT: scheduled for Friday evening February 20 and Saturday, February 21. Archpriest Josiah Trenham, rector of St. Andrew Antiochian Orthodox Church in Riverside, CA. will lead a retreat for men. Info to follow regarding the exact topic and title of the retreat talks. Fr. Josiah can be heard on Ancient Faith Radio at the "Arena" podcast and author of "Marriage and Virginité according to St. John Chrysostom" (St. Herman Press).

MERCY MEALS

IT IS THE SEASON FOR GIVING, and we all hope to help give support to those in our own parish who are sick or in need. Our St Seraphim Mercy Meals ministry is a source of giving and caring for each other. We have amazingly generous and willing members of our parish who would love to meet others' needs with a meal showing we care. If you are going through a difficult or challenging time due to a birth, surgery, illness, etc. and could use some help, Mercy Meals is the avenue to reach out to. We will do what we can to bring the simple kindness of a meal during those times that are difficult. Please share this message with those that may not see the bulletin. Please gently remind everyone who may be in need that this loving ministry is here for them. If someone asks how to support another they know who is sick or in need, please have them contact the Mercy Meal ministry. I'm the coordinator for now...please contact me. There will always be a point person for this sweet ministry. Fr Lawrence will be able to guide you to the current Mercy Meals coordinator, if you are not sure. My main message is to inform and remind us all that our Mercy Meals program exists. It is the ministry to reach out to when wondering how better to support yourself or one of our brothers and sisters in need of some extra TLC when going through a rough patch. With love and prayers for good health and blessings for us all.

—in Christ, Kira Staykow, kirastaykow@gmail.com. 415.279.0353

CONSECRATION WEEKEND January 24 and 25

Mark your calendars for January 24 and 25. On Saturday, January 24, Archimandrite Daniel (Brum) will be consecrated Bishop of Santa Rosa at Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco. Metropolitan Tikhon, Archbishop Benjamin and other hierarchs will arrive at 9:30 for the Divine Liturgy, during which the consecration occurs. There will be a luncheon banquet at an SF restaurant after the Liturgy. Reservations can be made by going to the Diocese of the West website at www.dowoca.org and downloading the form. If enough of our parishioners want to go to the Liturgy, transport can be arranged. A sign up sheet for those interested in going by bus will be passed around in the next few weeks.

On Sunday, January 25, Bishop Daniel will arrive here at St. Seraphim at 9:30 AM, where he will be installed as the Bishop of Santa Rosa and serve the Divine Liturgy with us as our new bishop. Vladyka Benjamin and other bishops will be in attendance as well, but will not serve. All will have the opportunity to personally greet and receive the blessing of the bishop after the Liturgy at the banquet in the Parish Hall. Obviously, this event is unique and a great blessing for our parish, and I encourage everyone to participate as fully as possible and enjoy the festivities. — Fr. Lawrence

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THE HOLY SUPPER OF CHRISTMAS EVE

AMONG THE ORTHODOX PEOPLE of Carpatho-Russia there is a wonderful tradition of having a “Holy Supper” on Christmas Eve, just before going to Church for the Vigil. While the menu and details of the meal may be different from family to family and region to region, the general idea is as follows:

On Christmas Eve, the late morning **11:30 AM Vespers Liturgy** is celebrated. We keep a strict fast (no food or liquids) before this service and until Holy Communion. After the Liturgy we go home to prepare the meal. Back in the “old country,” twelve dishes are prepared, in honor of the Holy Apostles. The foods, prepared with oil, but without dairy products due to the fast, usually include fish, soup, stuffed cabbage, stewed plums, mashed potatoes, honey, garlic, etc. The dining table is covered with a white linen cloth in memory of the swaddling clothes of Christ Child, and an extra place is set to receive a stranger, remembering that the Holy Family found no lodging in Bethlehem’s Inn.

In the center of the table is a large round loaf of bread, which symbolized Jesus as the Bread of Life. A tall candle is placed in the bread, as a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem. Straw is laid down on the floor and some of it also placed on the table or under the white tablecloth, symbolizing the fact that Jesus lay in a manger. The father greets everyone with the exclamation: “Christ is born!” And just as in Church, all answer “Glorify Him!” Wine is poured by the father, or the eldest, for a toast, recalling the act of our Lord Jesus at the Last Supper with these words: “Grant, O God, that we may live to an even better Holy Night next year. May the Lord give good health to you, my dear wife, and to our children, to my good and bad neighbors, to my friends and enemies. May God bless all Christians here and abroad, and may He grant eternal memory and heaven to the departed. And above all, my Sweetest Jesus, born this day, bring peace, health and happiness!” All reply with the prayer: “Grant this, O Lord!” The mother sprinkles all the family members with Holy Water so that their minds and hearts would open to the meaning of the Birth of Christ. The father also takes Holy Water, sprinkling his livestock and household animals, and treating them to sugar or salt and plenty of feed. Many people wistfully feel that perhaps the animals speak at midnight on Christmas Eve. One would be fearful that they might complain to God if mistreated! Beware, those with livestock and pets.

After dipping her forefinger into honey in a bowl, the mother makes a sign of the cross on the foreheads of all present, including herself. The use of honey symbolizes her prayer that the lives of all present would be sweet without bitterness. After the Holy Supper, all then go to the Church for the evening Nativity Vigil, to hear the Psalms, the Troparion “Thy Nativity, O Christ our God...” the Kontakion “On this day the Virgin beareth...” the prophecy from Isaiah “God is with us” many other hymns, and of course, the Gospel of the birth of the Lord. Afterwards Carols are sung as all return home to prepare themselves for the Divine Liturgy on Christmas morning. *Menu options:* The traditional Holy Supper consists of twelve dishes in honor of the number of apostles. This is a fast day, so all dishes should be selected and prepared without meat, cheese, eggs or dairy products. In addition, small portions should be served in keeping with the character of fasting, this is not a feast. Feel free to build your own menu with additional appropriate dishes from your own family collection.

THE RENEWAL OF HUMANITY...the perfection of our humanity, according to the teaching of St. Irenaeus, must be brought to pass by the dispensation of the Incarnation of the Son of God, not by any kind of doctrine, not by the writing of any book. By taking flesh and becoming man, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, made men partakers of the Divine nature. Assuming human nature in the unity of His Hypostasis, the Son of God by taking flesh became the New Adam, the Progenitor of the new humanity. “Beholding him that was in God’s image and likeness fallen through the transgression, Jesus bowed the heavens and came down, and without changing He took up His dwelling in a Virgin womb: that thereby He might fashion corrupt Adam anew.” St. Irenaeus says that the Son of the Most High became the Son of man in order to make man a son of God. In the new humanity, built upon the foundation of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the unity of our human nature, broken by sin, is restored. Christ Himself named this new humanity the Church. From *Holy Scripture and the Church*, St. Hilarion Troitsky, in *Orthodox Word*, 2009

The St. Porphyrios Players Present
Charles Dickens'
A Christmas Carol



Saturday, December 13 & Sunday, December 14 at 7:00 pm

St. Seraphim Orthodox Church
90 Mountain View Ave. Santa Rosa, CA 95407

Suggested Donation: Adult \$10 Children \$5
For Tickets & Reservations call: (707) 545-5688