

The holiday that we will be celebrating this Sunday is The Nativity of the Mother of God. Since the Orthodox Church begins the Church year on Sept. 14 (Sept. 1 according to the Orthodox Calendar), this holiday is the first major feast day of the Church year. It marks the first link of the chain of events that culminated in salvation becoming available to mankind. This event is not found in the Gospel, but has been preserved for us through Sacred Tradition. Because of her profound humility, the Mother of God did not permit the apostles to write about many things that happened to her personally during her earthly life. That is why we find this information through Sacred Tradition.

When the time arrived for the Savior to be born, a mother was needed to give birth to Him. Such a woman had to be a sinless person to be able to give birth to the sinless divine child. Therefore, very holy parents were needed to give birth to such a special person. God found such parents in Joachim and Anna. They were very pious people who served God faithfully, obeying all of His commandments. God prepared them for their mission by keeping them childless, which was a source of great grief to them. Since being childless was understood at that time to be a severe punishment by God for one's sinfulness, being childless stigmatized people in the eyes of society. But this holy couple only grew in faith and piety by accepting God's will without any grumbling and never losing hope that sooner or later God would free them from this stigma. They continued to pray for a child despite Anna's advanced age, well beyond the time that a woman is able to conceive. Also they made a sacred oath to God that if they would be given a child they would give that child back to God by consecrating him/her to the Temple at the age of three.

The end of their spiritual trial came when one day, Joachim went to the Temple to offer a sacrifice to God. He was chased out of the Temple by the serving priest who told him that due to his sinfulness, being childless, God would not accept his sacrifice. In grief and wanting to pray in solitude to God, Joachim went into the desert. He remained there for forty days in prayer, after which he was visited by an angel who brought him the joyous news that his prayer had been heard by God, Who would give him a baby girl to be named Mary. Joachim ran home with the news and was met by Anna who informed him that she too was visited by the angel with the same revelation. Anna conceived and gave birth to the Mother of God, Mary, despite of being in her eighties.

There are many wonderful lessons that we receive when we remember the details of this incredible event. We are given a vivid demonstration of why God forbids us to judge other people. By judging, we are in danger of making that same kind of horrid mistake that the priest made in judging Joachim, and only bring down condemnation on ourselves. We are taught about how potent faith is. If we have true faith, it is capable of doing truly incredible things. Revealed to us is how important a role grief can play in our spiritual growth. Accepting God's will with faith and humility and without grumbling in things that He allows to happen to us only makes us stronger spiritually and more close to God. Joachim and Anna are astounding saints who teach us much about how to live truly spiritual lives that bring us closer to God.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this Sunday's holiday is such a joyous one, but one that only can be appreciated and truly experienced together with everyone during the church services

for this holiday. Therefore, I pray that all of you will be able to come to the services for both the vigil on Saturday night and Sunday morning. It is the birthday of our glorious Heavenly Mother. Let us honor her by being together with her during her special day.

With Love in Christ,

Archpriest Serge Kotar