

Orthopraxis

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

The Christmas Pudding....Orthodox?

Oh, why not? It's a pious and delicious tradition practiced by Orthodox Christians throughout the U.K., Australia, Canada, and other Commonwealth countries. The plum pudding's association with Christmas takes us back to medieval Britain and the Church's decree that the 'pudding should be made on the twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity, that it be prepared with thirteen ingredients to represent Christ and the twelve apostles.' Meat, or nowadays at least suet, was included to celebrate the incarnation of Christ. On "Stir-Up Sunday," the first Sunday of the Christmas fast, every family member should be present to stir it in turn from east to west to honor the Magi and their journey in that direction.' Banned by the Puritans in the 1660s for its rich ingredients, and "popish" associations, the pudding and its customs came back into popularity during the reign of George I. Known sometimes as the "Pudding King," George I requested that plum pudding be served as part of his royal feast when he celebrated his first Christmas in England after arriving from Hanover to take the throne in 1714. By 1740, a recipe for 'plum porridge' appeared in Christmas Entertainments. In the Victorian era, Christmas annuals, magazines, and cookbooks celebrated the sanctity of family as well as the sanctity of Jesus' birth, and the tradition of all family members stirring the pudding was often referenced...Poorer families made the richest version of plum pudding that they could afford...Even workhouse inmates anticipated a plum pudding on Christmas Day."

Recipes? There are lots of them out there. Fr. Basil and Matushka Joanie will be happy to share their own recipe with you!

Focus on the Faith

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

On the Nativity Fast - the Preparation of the Soul

'Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away...'

This is how the herald of the pending miracle begins. It is the Eve of the Nativity as these words are sung. The transformation of the world, the birth of God, is but hours away, and it is through such words that the faithful are called into attentiveness and anticipation. 'Make ready, O Bethlehem!' We can see the radiant lights of the feast just beyond the horizon, we can taste the sweetness of the miracle that took place beneath a star; and through the words sung around and within us in the Church, the great eve of the birth of God is made a reality in our present experience. We make ready, and we wait.

But this is not the first moment of preparation for the Feast. For 'forty days', with the usual adjustments to that length for Sabbaths and Sundays causing it to begin on 15 November, the Church has been setting herself in readiness, drawing her attention to the mystery to come, waiting in expectation. She has made use of the great joy that will arrive on Christmas day as occasion to take up the task considered by so many as opposite to joy: fasting, with all its rigor, its harshness, its discomfort. These are the steps which, for Orthodox Christians throughout the world, lead to the radiant wonder of the Nativity of Christ. Whence the spirit of this fast, which each year 'stands in the way' of our arrival at Christmas rejoicing? The question itself helps guide the way to an answer: the fast seems awkward because so often we see Christmas as joy alone and do not appreciate fully the deep and profound mystery that is at the heart of our rejoicing. 'Hark, the herald angels sing!' we are eager to recall, but quietly we forget the universal significance of the event that is the cause of their singing. It is not just that a babe is born: He who is without birth is born. He who created all

is made a created child. He who holds the universe in the palm of His hand, is held in the hands of a tender mother.

'Before Thy birth, O Lord, the angelic hosts looked with trembling on this mystery and were struck with wonder: for Thou who hast adorned the vault of heaven with stars hast been well pleased to be born as a babe; and Thou who holdest all the ends of the earth in the hollow of Thy hand art laid in a manger of dumb beasts. For by such a dispensation has Thy compassion been made known, O Christ, and Thy great mercy: glory to Thee.'
(Sticheron of the Third Hour, Eve of the Nativity)

We do not tremble when we think of Christmas, we are not always struck with the wonder of the Nativity. Instead, we buy gifts and plan parties, catching a glimpse of the joy of the Feast, but without a heart immersed in its wonder. Thus the fast becomes that which we must 'get through' in order to reach that joyful day. When we arrive there, however, if this has been our attitude, we are caught askance by the hymns the Church feeds into our hearts. We find ourselves joined to a celebration of triumphal release from bondage, but we little understand what that bondage means. We sing songs of joy for deliverance, but we do not truly comprehend how we are enslaved. We find ourselves suddenly transported to the mountaintop, but without having climbed there from the valley far below, the scene we see is only another beautiful picture casually set before our eyes, and not the vision for which we have worked and struggled and longed with all our being. We may feel joy, perhaps even Christmas joy; but we will know, deep inside, that our joy is not like that which is exalted in the hymns of the Church.

The Fast of the Nativity is the Church's wise solace and aid to human infirmity. We are a forgetful people, but our forgetfulness is not unknown to God; and our hearts with all their misconceptions and weakened understandings are not unfamiliar to the Holy Spirit who guides and sustains this Church. We who fall far from God through the magnitude of our sin, are called nonetheless to be close to Him. We who

run afar off are called to return. Through the fast that precedes the great Feast of the Incarnation -- which itself is the heart and substance of our calling -- the Church helps draw us into the full mystery of what that call entails. Like Great Lent, the fast of the Nativity is a journey. 'Come, O ye faithful, and let us behold where Christ is born. Let us join the Magi, kings from the east, and follow the guiding star.' Let us 'join the Magi', let us 'follow' and 'behold'. On the fifteenth of November, the Church joins together in a journey toward that salvation first promised to Adam in God's curse laid upon the serpent (Gen 3.14-15). The One who will crush the head of the serpent, of sin and the devil and all that is counter to the life God offers, is Him to whom the star leads us. The fast of the Nativity is our journey into the new and marvelous life of the Holy Trinity, which is offered by God but which we must approach of our own volition. In this act, we are joined to the story of our fathers. The gift of a new land and great blessings was freely given by God to Abraham, but in order to obtain it, 'Abram went, as the Lord had told him' (Gen 12.4).

A journey is, by its nature, naturally ascetic. Unless my life is already very humble, I cannot take the whole of my possessions on a journey. I cannot transport social and political ties along a journey's path. I can never be too reliant on the plans I have made for my journey: a control lying beyond the self must be admitted and accepted. This is the spirit to which the fast calls us. A journey is, by its nature, an act of movement, of transportation, of growth. What is old is left behind, newness is perceived and embraced, growth of understanding takes place. And even if the journey comes to a close in the same physical location from which it began, that place is transformed for us by the journey through which we have re-approached it. The homeless shelter in San Jose is no different after a journey to Mexico; but after witnessing there first-hand the struggles and torments of poverty, of suffering, of sorrow, the meaning and importance of that shelter is indeed different for me. Here is the importance of the fast. As the Nativity approaches, that great feast of cosmic significance and eternal, abounding joy for which heaven and earth together rejoice, the fast calls me to consider: do I rejoice? Why do I rejoice? The hymnography of the Church makes it clear that this is a feast for all the world, for all creation; and the fast calls me to take my

place in that creation, to realize that, despite all my infinite unworthiness, Christmas is a miracle for my soul too.

"Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away; born of a Virgin, God has appeared to men, formed as we are and making godlike the garment He has put on. Therefore Adam is renewed with Eve, and they call out: 'Thy good pleasure has appeared on earth to save our kind'."

Adam and Eve, all of humankind, are renewed and made alive in the Incarnation of God in Christ, who 'appeared on earth to save our kind'. Fallen flesh, so long bound to death, so long yearning in for growth and maturation into the fullness of life, is sewn into the garment of Christ and at last made fully alive. There is a pleasing old saying, with perhaps more than a touch of truth to it, that humankind drew its first full breath at the infant Christ's first cry. We are called, then, to approach this great mystery as God's condescension into our own lives, personally and collectively. The Canon of Matins for the Nativity lays it out clearly: 'He establishes a path for us, whereby we may mount up to heaven.' The Nativity is not only about God's coming down to us, but about our rising up to Him, just as sinful humanity was lifted up into the person of Christ in the Incarnation itself. We are called to arise, then, during the fast that is the journey into this Feast. 'O blessed Lord who seest all, raise us up far above sin, and establish Thy singers firm and unshaken upon the foundation of the faith.' The faithful take up this call through the abandonment of those things which bind, rather than free, in order that a focus on God as 'all in all' might become ever more real and central to daily life. Meals are lessened and regimented, that a constant, lingering hunger may remind us of the great need we each have for spiritual food that goes beyond our daily bread. The number of Church services is gradually increased, that we might know whence comes that true food. Sweets and drink are set aside, that we might never feel content with the trivial and temporal joys of this world. Parties and social engagements are reduced, that we might realize that all is not so well with us as we often take it to be. Anything which holds the slightest power over us,

whether cigarettes or television, travel or recreation, is minimized or -- better -- cast wholly aside, that we might bring ourselves to be possessed and governed only by God. The fast is an ascetic time, designed by the Church to strip away common stumbling blocks into sin, to provide us with the means of self-perception that we lack in our typical indulgence, and to begin to grow the seeds of virtue. All these are necessary if we are ever to know even partially, or appreciate even menially, the 'depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.' We must take up the task of our own purification, gifted by God and achieved only through His grace, that we might approach Him on Christmas Day as did the Magi and the shepherds in Bethlehem:

"Come, O ye faithful, inspired by God let us arise and behold the divine condescension from on high that is made manifest to us in Bethlehem. Cleansing our minds, let us offer through our lives virtues instead of myrrh, preparing with faith our entry into the feast of the Nativity, storing up treasure in our souls and crying: Glory in the highest to God in Trinity, whose good pleasure is now revealed to men, that in His love for mankind He may set Adam free from the ancestral curse."
(Sticheron of the Sixth Hour, Christmas Eve)

Lives of the Saints

November 8

Synaxis of the Chief Captains of the Heavenly Host, Michael and Gabriel, and of the other Bodiless Powers of Heaven

The holy Scriptures, from beginning to end, are filled with mentions and descriptions of the Heavenly Host: not to believe in angels is not to believe in the Bible. In the heavens they behold the face of God, eternally hymning His glory. They are intimately involved with mankind as well: an angel is appointed guardian over every nation, and over every individual Christian. The Archangels Michael and Gabriel, whom we especially commemorate today along with all the other

bodiless powers, have served as messengers to man. "Michael" means "Who is like God?"; "Gabriel" means "God is mighty." Gabriel especially was appointed to announce the coming of Christ in the flesh.

There is no reckoning the number of the Heavenly Host, though we know that they are a great multitude. They are ranked in nine orders, called Thrones, Cherubim, Seraphim, Dominions, Powers, Authorities, Principalities, Archangels and Angels. "Angel" means "herald" or "messenger" and is properly applied only to those who serve as messengers from God to man; but the name is often applied to the entire host of bodiless powers.

Though bodiless, the angels are finite in knowledge, extension and power.

November 9

Our Father among the Saints Nectarius (Nektarios), bishop of Pentapolis, Wonderworker, and founder of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity on Aegina (1920).

"Saint Nectarius was born in Selyvria of Thrace on October 11, 1846. After putting himself through school in Constantinople with much hard labor, he became a monk on Chios in 1876, receiving the monastic name of Lazarus; because of his virtue, a year later he was ordained deacon, receiving the new name of Nectarius. Under the patronage of Patriarch Sophronius of Alexandria, Nectarius went to Athens to study in 1882; completing his theological studies in 1885, he went to Alexandria, where Patriarch Sophronius ordained him priest on March 23, 1886 in the Cathedral of Saint Sabbas, and in August of the same year, in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Cairo, made him Archimandrite.

Archimandrite Nectarius showed much zeal both for preaching the word of God, and for the beauty of God's house. He greatly beautified the Church of Saint Nicholas in Cairo, and years later, when Nectarius was in Athens, Saint Nicholas appeared to him in a dream, embracing him and telling him he was going to exalt him very high.

"On January 15, 1889, in the same Church of Saint Nicholas, Nectarius was consecrated Metropolitan of Pentapolis in eastern Libya, which was

under the jurisdiction of Alexandria. Although Nectarius' swift ascent through the degrees of ecclesiastical office did not affect his modesty and childlike innocence, it aroused the envy of lesser men, who convinced the elderly Sophronius that Nectarius had it in his heart to become Patriarch. Since the people loved Nectarius, the Patriarch was troubled by the slanders. On May 3, 1890, Sophronius relieved Metropolitan Nectarius of his duties; in July of the same year, he commanded Nectarius to leave Egypt.

"Without seeking to avenge or even to defend himself, the innocent Metropolitan left for Athens, where he found that accusations of immorality had arrived before him. Because his good name had been soiled, he was unable to find a position worthy of a bishop, and in February of 1891 accepted the position of provincial preacher in Euboia; then, in 1894, he was appointed dean of the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School in Athens. Through his eloquent sermons, his unwearying labors to educate fitting men for the priesthood, his generous alms deeds despite his own poverty, and the holiness, meekness, and fatherly love that were manifest in him, he became a shining light and a spiritual guide to many. At the request of certain pious women, in 1904 he began the building of his convent of the Holy Trinity on the island of Aegina while yet dean of the Rizarios School; finding later that his presence there was needed, he took up his residence on Aegina in 1908, where he spent the last years of his life, devoting himself to the direction of his convent and to very intense prayer; he was sometimes seen lifted above the ground while rapt in prayer. He became the protector of all Aegina, through his prayers delivering the island from drought, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Here also he endured wicked slanders with singular patience, forgiving his false accusers and not seeking to avenge himself. Although he had already worked wonders in life, an innumerable multitude of miracles have been wrought after his repose in 1920 through his holy relics, which for many years remained incorrupt. There is hardly a malady that has not been cured through his prayers; but Saint Nectarius is especially renowned for his healings of cancer for sufferers in all parts of the world." (Great Horologion)