

30th Sunday After Pentecost Sunday before the Nativity of Christ.

18 / 31 December

Resurrection Tropar, Tone 5: Let us, the faithful; praise and worship the Word, / Co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, / born for our salvation from the Virgin; / for He willed to be lifted up on the cross in the flesh, / to endure death, / and to raise the dead / by His glorious Resurrection!

Tropar of Martyr Sebastian & Companions, Tone 4: In their sufferings, O Lord, / Thy martyrs received imperishable crowns from Thee our God; / for possessed of Thy might, / they set at nought the tormentors and crushed the feeble audacity of the demons. // By their supplication save Thou our souls.

Troparion of the Forefeast Tone 2: Great are the accomplishments of faith, / for the Three Youths rejoiced in the fountain of flames as though in the waters of rest; / and the prophet Daniel appeared / a shepherd to the lions as though they were sheep. // So by their prayers O Christ God save our souls.

Resurrection Kondak, Tone 5: Thou didst descend into hell, O my Savior, / shattering its gates as almighty; / resurrecting the dead as Creator, / and destroying the sting of death. / Thou hast delivered Adam from the curse, O Lover of Man, / and we all cry to Thee: "O Lord, save us!"

Kontakion of the Forefeast Tone 1: Rejoice, O Bethlehem! Ephratha, make ready! For behold, the ewe-lamb hasteneth to give birth to the Great Shepherd Whom she carrieth in her womb. And seeing Him, the Godbearing Fathers rejoice, and with the shepherds praise the virgin who giveth suck.



Matins Gospel VIII

Epistle: Hebrews 11: 9-10, 17-23, 32-40

By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," Concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command. And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented-- Of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

BY FAITH ABRAHAM OBEYED

Great indeed was the faith of Abraham ...It was necessary to go beyond human reasoning... to manifest also something more. For what was of God seemed to be opposed to what was of God; and faith opposed to faith, and command promise. I mean this: He had said, 'Get out of your country and from your kindred, and I will give you this land' (Gen. 12: 1-7) ...Do you see how what was done was opposed to the promise? Again He said, 'In Isaac shall your seed be called' (Gen. 21:12), and he believed: and again He says, Sacrifice to Me this one, who was to fill all the world from his seed. You see the opposition between the commands and the promise? He enjoined things that were in contradiction to the promises, and yet not even so did the righteous man stagger, nor say he had been deceived. For you indeed ...he promised rest and gave tribulation ...And he shows another thing too by saying 'God tempted Abraham' (Gen. 22:1). What then? Did not God know that the man was noble and approved? Why then did he tempt him? Not that He might Himself learn, but that He might show others, and make his fortitude manifest to all And here also He shows the cause of trials, that they may not suppose they suffer these things as being forsaken of God.

St. John Chrysostom. Homily XXV on Hebrews XI. I, 2. B#58, pp. 477-478

Gospel: St Matthew 1: 1-25

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram. Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon. Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David the king. David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon begot Rehoboam, Rehoboam begot Abijah, and Abijah begot Asa. Asa begot Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat begot Joram, and Joram begot Uzziah. Uzziah begot Jotham, Jotham begot Ahaz, and Ahaz begot Hezekiah. Hezekiah begot Manasseh, Manasseh begot Amon, and Amon begot Josiah. Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon. And after they were brought to Babylon, Jeconiah begot Shealtiel, and Shealtiel begot Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel begot Abiud, Abiud begot Eliakim, and Eliakim begot Azor. Azor begot Zadok, Zadok begot Achim, and Achim begot Eliud. Eliud begot Eleazar, Eleazar begot Matthan, and Matthan begot Jacob. And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

As we approach the celebration of the feast of our Lord's birth, we are reminded that the incarnation was not something that was suddenly or casually approached by God, but something that had been in preparation since before the foundations of the world were laid. We see this preparation clearly in the remembrance last Sunday of the Holy Ancestors of Christ and this Sunday of the Holy Fathers who came before Christ. In these two Sundays we recall the physical and spiritual preparation of mankind and of the world for the coming of God in the flesh. God guided the course of the existence of the whole world so that it would come to a particular point of perfection. That peak of perfection is the Most Holy Virgin Mary. She is the product of generations of growth and refinement embodying the best possible effort of fallen mankind to fulfill our destiny to be like God. She is the perfect vessel put forth by the efforts of all of creation to receive the Son of God into the world.

When God created mankind, even then at the dawn of our existence, He already knew that He would become man and so draw all of mankind and the whole world into union and communion with Himself. With Adam and then Eve our first parents, He began this preparation, placing them in the worldly paradise of the Garden of Eden and communing with them daily so that they might more rapidly

come to the place where they - and through them the whole world - were ready to receive Him in the flesh. But Adam and Eve sinned and departed from the plan of God, however, God did not give up His plan or abandon His creation. Even the fall of Adam and Eve into sin was used by God as an occasion to make His coming incarnation into an event of even greater glory by making it the means by which sin and death, brought into the world through the sin of our first parents, would be defeated and destroyed.

Throughout the whole of the history of the Old Testament we see how God gradually guided the course of the world, gradually molding and shaping fallen man towards the pinnacle of perfection through which He Himself would come into the world. From the very beginning we see God choosing righteousness over sin, teaching, by long and thorough lessons, what is good and what is evil. When the time was right, God chose a particular people, the patriarch Abraham and then Isaac and then Jacob as the line from which He would draw this perfect vessel. The children of Israel, were then given the law to guide them and the prophets to ever push them into the application of the law. With each generation, the chosen people became more and more adept at living within the law and becoming as perfect as man was able to become on his own. Finally this progression towards perfection found its ultimate peak and its ultimate expression in the birth of the Virgin Mary who was the chosen vessel, the ultimate perfect human being produced by the efforts not only of one family or of one generation, but by the whole of the human race from Adam and Eve on through the Patriarchs and chosen people; again through the kings and priests and finally through the ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna. The Holy Virgin Mary was brought by her parents to the temple as an offering to God and the High Priest and Prophet Zacharias received her and by the grace of God saw her to be the perfect vessel, the pinnacle of perfection which the world had produced to offer to God. Thus the High Priest Zacharias led her not only into the temple, but placed her in the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the covenant had once stood for she would become the new Ark of the Covenant, the throne of God who would come into the world through her womb, be carried in her arms as though born by the Holy Angels and sit upon her lap as upon a throne.

The Holy Virgin Mary is the peak of the perfection of the created world. She is the best that creation could ever offer to the creator. But even the perfection of the world, brought about throughout the whole span of history and with the guiding hand of God upon mankind was not sufficient to enter into union and communion with God. She could not, of her own essence bring forth into the world the God/man. As perfect and holy as she was, she reveals to us how far short the perfection of the world is when compared to the perfection of God. She shows us the great unbridgeable distance between the creature and the Creator. She is the pinnacle of perfection of the whole human race and of the whole world - but she was insignificant before God. In herself, she was as empty as the Holy of Holies in which she sat and prayed. That emptiness would have to be filled not by her, nor by another human being, but by God Himself. Only God could bridge the gap between Himself and His creation. Only God could perfect the imperfection of the human race by His presence. Only God could offer His own essence to the world. And so out of His love and His compassion He did all of this. God, seeing the perfection of the world offered to Him as a vessel for His coming into the world, accepted this offering as insufficient as she was, and filled the Holy Virgin with Himself through the Holy Spirit. In this moment, as the Virgin was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, the life of God began to grow in her, uniting God with her own flesh and through her to the whole world. Accepting her as the ultimate expression of perfection of which the created world was capable, God made up that which was lacking by uniting Himself to the world through her. Through the Virgin Mary, He took flesh, became man, came into the world and dwelt among us. He Himself became the most perfect man that ever lived for only by uniting God and man could man ever be truly perfect. Even the most Holy Virgin Mary produced by the world after ages of refinement and labor as the highest expression of worldly perfection could not come close to the perfection which was brought about by the union of God and man. Nor can such perfection ever be overtaken by any effort of the world. Only by the union of God and man can men ever become perfect.

This then is our salvation, our perfection - that is the union of God and man, the perfect communion of the creature and the Creator. Having come into the world through the Holy Virgin our Lord showed that His perfection is available not only to the one who was perfect by worldly standards but to all men. He chose as His own disciples and apostles men who were not perfect, but who had their own flaws and deficiencies. By His grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He united Himself with them and those imperfections were overcome by the perfection of God and they were united with Him. Neither did He reject she who was the vessel of His coming into the world, but she also embraced His grace and the union and communion with Himself that He now offered to the whole world. This grace, because of her union with God as the instrument of the incarnation, found in her fertile ground and took root and grew to produce the most beautiful flower of paradise, the fragrant bloom of the Mother of God and Ever Virgin Mary - glowing now not with the perfection of the world, but shining with the grace and

perfection of Heaven. As this new perfection, she shines as a beacon for us of the grace and love of God, marking for us the path to the perfection of union and communion with God.

From the dawn of time and the first instant of the existence of the world, God began preparing a place for Himself in the world. Our first parents Adam and Eve were made by God as the crown and pinnacle of all creation and through them He began to prepare the means by which He Himself would be united to His creation. Even though they fell into sin, still God did not give up His plan to come into the world, but worked throughout all of our history to make His incarnation even more glorious and more triumphant. He guided mankind throughout all of history, choosing those who were righteous out from those who had given themselves up to evil. Choosing for himself a people, the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Choosing from among those people the line of priests and kings as those who would serve Him. He guided His chosen people by the law and the prophets leading them finally to the moment in all of history when the perfect human being would be produced by them – the Virgin Mary. And through her, He Himself entered into the world, spanning in His incarnation the chasm between creation and Creator that even the perfection of the world could not begin to bridge. The God/man Jesus Christ brought true perfection into the world – the perfection brought about by the union of God and man. He brought this same perfection, this same union and communion with God to all of us by sending down upon us the Holy Spirit. Freeing us from the enslavement to sin and death, by His own death and resurrection, He then offers to all of mankind union and communion with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In this union of God and man, we too are able to participate and through the grace of the Holy Spirit the path is opened to us to rise to the heights of perfection brought about by the union of God with us surpassing the perfection of the world and entering into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Archpriest David Moser (<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/propoved/info>)

Saints of the week

18 / 31 December - Nativity Fast (Fish allowed) - The Holy Martyr Sebastian and those with him - This glorious saint was born in Italy and brought up in the city of Milan. While still young, he dedicated himself to military service. Being educated, handsome and courageous, he received the favour of Emperor Diocletian, who appointed him captain of his imperial guard. Secretly he confessed the Christian Faith and prayed to the Living God. As an honourable, just and merciful man, Sebastian was greatly beloved by his soldiers. Whenever he could, he saved Christians from torture and death, and, when he was unable to do so, he exhorted them to die for Christ the Living God without turning back. Two brothers, Marcus and Marcellinus, who had been imprisoned for Christ and were already on the verge of denouncing Him and worshiping idols, were confirmed in the Faith by Sebastian, who strengthened them for martyrdom. As he spoke with them, encouraging them not to fear death for Christ, his face was illumined. Everyone saw his shining face, like that of an angel of God. Sebastian also confirmed his words by miracles: he healed Zoe, the jailer Nicostratus's wife, who had been mute for six years; he brought her, Nicostratus and his entire household to baptism; he healed the two ailing sons of Claudius the commander and brought him and his household to baptism; he healed Tranquillinus, the father of Marcus and Marcellinus, of gout and pains in his legs which had troubled him for eleven years, and brought him to baptism together with his entire household; he healed the Roman eparch Chromatius of the same illness and brought him and his son Tiburtius to baptism. The first of them to suffer was St. Zoe, whom they seized at the tomb of the Apostle Peter, where she was praying to God. After torturing her, they threw her into the Tiber River. They then seized Tiburtius, and the judge placed live coals before him, telling him to choose between life and death, that is, either to cast incense on the coals and to cense the idols or to stand barefoot on the hot coals. St. Tiburtius made the sign of the Cross, stood barefoot on the hot coals, and remained unharmed. After this, he was beheaded. Nicostratus was killed with a stake, Tranquillinus was drowned, and Marcus and Marcellinus were tortured and pierced with spears. Then Sebastian was brought before Emperor Diocletian. The emperor rebuked him for his betrayal, but Sebastian said: "I have always prayed to my Christ for your health and for the peace of the Roman Empire." The emperor ordered that he be stripped naked and shot through with arrows. The soldiers shot him through with arrows until the martyr was so completely covered with arrows that his body was not seen because of them. When all thought that he was dead, he appeared alive and completely healthy. Then the pagans killed him with staves. He suffered gloriously for Christ his Lord and took up his habitation in the Kingdom of Christ in the year 287 at the time of Diocletian the Emperor and Gaius the Bishop of Rome.

19 December / 1 January — Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyr Boniface - Martyrdom for Christ makes sinners into saints. This is shown by the example of St Boniface. He was at first servant to a wealthy and dissolute woman, Aglais, in Rome, and had unclean and unlawful relations with her. They were both

pagans. Aglais evinced the desire to have the relics of some martyr in her house as an amulet against evil, so she sent her servant to Asia to find and buy for her what she desired. Boniface took some slaves with him and a fair amount of money and, at the moment of parting, said to Aglais: 'If I can't find any martyrs and if they bring you back my body, martyred for Christ, will you receive it with honour? Aglais laughed, and called him a drunken old sinner, and so they parted. Coming to the city of Tarsus, Boniface saw many Christians undergoing torture: some were having their legs cut off, some their hands, others their eyes put out, yet others were dying on the gallows and so forth. Boniface's heart was changed, and he repented of his sinful life with tears. He called out among the Christian martyrs: 'I too am a Christian!' The judge took him for interrogation and ordered that he be harshly flogged, then that boiling lead be poured into his mouth and, as this did him no harm, that he be beheaded. The slaves then took his body back to Rome. An angel of God appeared to Aglais and said: 'Take him who was at one time your servant, but is now our brother and fellow-servant; he is the guardian of your soul and the protector of your life.' Aglais went in wonder to meet them, took Boniface's body, built a church for his relics and placed them there. She then repented, gave away all her goods to the poor and withdrew from the world, living a further fifteen years in bitter penitence. St Boniface suffered in the year 290. St Gregory, Bishop of Omir; St Boniface the Merciful, Bishop of Ferentino; Our Holy Father Elias of Murom; St. Manirus, b, apostle of Nth. Scotland; St. Winebald the Pilgrim, abbot and missionary of England and Heidenheim, Germany (761).

‡ **Scripture Readings - Hebrews 11:7-23, 27-31; Mark 9:42-10:1** ‡

20 December / 2 January — Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ - Nativity Fast - Repose of St John of Kronstadt. - a great luminary of the Russian Church. A married priest, he served in the Cathedral of St. Andrew's in Kronstadt, a busy port near St. Petersburg. A great man of prayer, he served Divine Liturgy every day and read the entire cycle of daily services. He visited the poor and the sick, generously giving alms, himself often going without. He and his matushka lived as brother and sister. He taught and advised all those who came to him, young and old, rich and poor. Such was the love of the people for him throughout Russia that the Kronstadt post office had a special section just for St. John! Even during his lifetime hundreds were healed through his holy prayers. In 1906, he became very ill and suffered with this sickness until his death. Nevertheless, he continued to serve daily. On December 20, 1908, he quietly reposed in the Lord. A crowd of 60,000 attended his funeral, an unprecedented event in Russia. He was formally glorified as a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad on June 3, 1964. Holy blessed Father John, pray to God for us!

Tropar, 4th Tone: With the apostles thy sound hath gone forth unto the ends of the world; / with the confessors thou didst endure sufferings for Christ; / thou didst liken thyself unto the holy hierarchs in the preaching of the Word; / and with the venerable hast thou shone forth in the grace of God. / Therefore, the Lord hath exalted the depths of the humility higher than the heavens, / and hath given us thy name as a source of most wondrous miracles. / Wherefore, O wonderworker, who livest in Christ forever, / lovingly have mercy upon those amid misfortunes, / and hearken unto thy children that call upon thee with faith, / O Righteous John, // our beloved pastor.

Kontakion, 4th Tone: O thou who from infancy wast chosen by God, / and in childhood didst miraculously receive from Him the gift of learning, / and wast gloriously called to the priesthood in a vision during sleep, / thou didst prove to be a wonderful shepherd of the Church of Christ, / O Father John, namesake of grace. / Pray to Christ our God // that we all be with thee in the kingdom of the heavens.

The Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-Bearer - This holy man was named the 'God-Bearer' because he always carried the name of the living God in his heart and on his lips. Also, by tradition, he was thus named because he was held in the arms of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. On a day when the Lord was teaching His disciples humility, He took a child and set it among them, saying: 'Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:4). This child was Ignatius. He was later a disciple of St John the Theologian, together with Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. As bishop in Antioch, he governed the Church of God as a good shepherd, and was the first to introduce antiphonal singing into the Church, in which two choirs alternate. This way of singing was revealed to St Ignatius from among the angels in heaven. When the Emperor Trajan passed through Antioch on his way to battle with the Persians, he heard about Ignatius, summoned him and urged him to offer sacrifice to idols, so that he could be made a senator. The Emperor's urgings and threats being in vain, holy Ignatius was put in irons and sent to Rome, escorted by ten bestial soldiers, to be thrown to the wild beasts. Ignatius rejoiced to be suffering for his Lord, and prayed to God that the wild beasts should be the tomb for his body, and that none should hinder his death. After a long and difficult journey from Asia through Thrace, Macedonia and Epirus, Ignatius reached Rome, where he was thrown to the lions in the circus. They tore him to pieces and devoured him, leaving only a few of the larger bones and his heart. This glorious lover of the Lord Christ suffered in the year 106 in Rome, in the time of the Emperor Trajan. He appeared many times from the other world and worked wonders, helping to this day all who call on him for help. St Danilo, Archbishop of Serbia.

‡ **Scripture Readings - Matthew 6:1-13 (Matins Gospel); Hebrews 12:25-26; 13:22-25; Mark 10:2-12; Hebrews 4:14-5:6 (St. John); Matthew 5:14-19 (St. John); Hebrews 4:14-5:6 (Hieromartyr Ignatius); Mark 9:33-41 (Hieromartyr Ignatius) ‡**

21 December / 3 January — Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ - Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyr Juliana and the 630 martyrs with her - This glorious virgin martyr was born in Nicomedia of pagan parents. Hearing the Gospel preached, she turned to Christ with all her heart and began to live in exact observance of the Lord's commandments. A certain senator, Eleusius, was her betrothed. In order to free herself from him, Juliana told him that she would not marry him unless he became eparch of that city. She said this thinking that the young man would not be in the least likely to attain to such a high position, but Eleusius worked at it, and, by flattery and bribes, gained the post of Eparch of Nicomedia. Juliana then revealed to him that she was a Christian, and could not enter into marriage with him unless he accepted her faith, saying: 'What would it profit us to be united physically but divided in spirit?' Eleusius was exasperated, and denounced her to her father. Her furious father poured scorn on her and whipped her, and then handed her over to the eparch for torture. The eparch ordered that she be harshly beaten, then she was thrown into prison all torn and bleeding. But the Lord healed her in the prison, and she appeared before the eparch whole and unharmed. He then put her into a glowing furnace, but the fire did not burn her. Seeing this wonder, many came to believe in Christ the Lord. Five hundred men and a hundred and thirty women were converted. The eparch condemned them all to death, and ordered that they be beheaded with the sword, and their souls entered into Paradise. Then the wicked judge condemned holy Juliana to be beheaded with the sword. Rejoicing in spirit, Juliana went out to the scaffold, prayed on her knees to God and laid her head on the block. Her head was cut off, and her soul went to Christ's eternal Kingdom of light, in the year 304. God's punishment quickly fell on Eleusius: sailing over the sea, his ship broke up and he fell into the water. He did not find death in the waves, but swam to an island, where the dogs tore him to pieces and devoured him. The Holy Martyr Themistocles; In England near Oxford at the village of Bampton, St. Berenwald, priest, m. and at Shaftesbury, St. Elgiva, queen, nun.

Saint Peter the Wonderworker, Metropolitan of Russia - Peter was born in the province of Volhynia and embraced the monastic life at the age of twelve. He was a wonderful ascetic and iconographer. He founded a monastery on the river Rata and became its abbot. Against his will, he was appointed Metropolitan of Kiev and consecrated in Constantinople by Patriarch Athanasius. As metropolitan, he endured much at the hands of the envious and the heretics. He governed the Church for eighteen years as a good and zealous shepherd. During his lifetime he built a crypt for himself in the Church of the Dormition, where his holy and miracle-working relics repose even today. He entered into rest in the year 1326 and went to his true homeland.

‡ **Scripture Readings - John 10:1-9 (Matins Gospel); James 1:1-18; Mark 10:11-16; Hebrews 7:26-8:2 (St. Peter); Luke 6:17-23 (St. Peter) ‡**

22 December / 4 January — Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ - Nativity Fast - The Holy and Great Martyr Anastasia, the Deliverer from Bonds, and those with her - This great heroine of the Christian faith was born in Rome into a wealthy senatorial family, her father being a pagan and her mother a Christian. From her early youth, she clave in love to the Lord Jesus, guided in Christian teaching by a devout teacher, Chrysogonus. Under pressure from her father, Anastasia married a pagan landowner, Publius, but, using the pretext of woman's weakness, she never had physical relations with him. For this, her husband tortured her harshly by imprisonment and starvation, and laid even heavier tortures on her when he discovered that she went secretly to the prisons of the Christian martyrs, ministering to their needs, washing their wounds and loosening their bonds. But, by God's providence, she was freed from her wicked husband. Publius was sent to Persia by the Emperor, and was drowned on the voyage. Then St Anastasia began to minister openly to the Christian martyrs and, from her great inheritance, helped the poor with alms. The Emperor Diocletian was once in the town of Aquileia, and commanded that Chrysogonus, the confessor of Christ, be brought to him. As he was being brought, Anastasia followed him on the way. Holy Chrysogonus was beheaded at the Emperor's command, and then three sisters, Agapia, Chionia and Irene (April 16th) suffered, the first two being cast into fire and the third shot through with arrows. St Anastasia took their bodies, wrapped them in white linen and, anointing them with aromatic spices, gave them burial. Then Anastasia went to Macedonia, where she ministered to those who were suffering for Christ. There, she became widely-known as a Christian, for which she was seized and taken for interrogation before various judges. Desiring to die for her beloved Christ, Anastasia constantly clung to Him in her heart. A certain pagan high priest, Ulphian, tried to touch St Anastasia's body out of lust, but he was suddenly blinded and gave up the ghost. Condemned to death by starvation, St Anastasia lay in prison for thirty days, nourishing herself only with tears and

prayers. After that she was put in a boat with several other Christians to be drowned, but God saved her from this death. She was finally tied hand and foot to four wheels over a fire, and thus gave her holy soul into God's hands. She suffered and entered into Christ's Kingdom in 304. The Holy Martyr Theodota with her three Children; In Wales, St. Amaethlu, founder of Llanfaethlu in Anglesey.

‡ **Scripture Readings - James 1:19-27; Mark 10:17-27 ‡**

23 December / 5 January — Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ - Nativity Fast — The Ten Holy Martyrs of Crete - They suffered for Christ the Lord during Decius's persecution, in the year 250. Their names were: Theodulus, Saturninus, Euporus, Gelasius, Eunician, Zoticus, Pompey, Agathopous, Basilides and Evaristus. They were all honoured and eminent citizens, the cream of the cream. When they were taken to the scaffold, they were filled with joy and discussed among themselves who would be the first to be beheaded, because each wanted to be the first to go to his beloved Christ. Then they prayed: 'O Lord, forgive Thy servants and accept our outpoured blood on our own behalf and that of our kinsfolk and friends and all our fatherland, that all may be released from the darkness of ignorance and come to know Thee, the true light, O eternal King!' They were beheaded and entered into the Kingdom of glory, to eternal rejoicing. St Niphon the Wonderworker; Our Holy Father Nahum, the Wonderworker of Ochrid; At Hexham, St. Frithbert, b. At Abernethy. St. Mazota, virgin

‡ **Scripture Readings - Hebrews 1:1-2; Matthew 1:18-25; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 2:1-20; Hebrews 1:10-2:3; Matthew 2:1-12; Hebrews 2:11-18; Matthew 2:13-23 ‡**

24 December / 6 January — The Eve of the Nativity of Christ - Nativity Fast - Our Holy Mother, the Martyr Eugenia, and those with her - the daughter of Philip, Eparch of all Egypt, she was born in Rome. At that time, the Christians had been driven out of Alexandria and were living outside the town. The maiden Eugenia visited the Christians and received their Faith with all her heart. She fled from her parents with her two faithful eunuchs, was baptised by Bishop Elias and, wearing man's clothing, went to a men's monastery where she received the monastic habit. She so purified her heart by voluntary asceticism that she received from God the gift of healing the sick, and thus healed a rich woman, Melanthia. After this, though, the woman conceived a physical passion for her, not suspecting that she was a woman. Being firmly repulsed by Eugenia, this wicked woman, out of revenge, went to the Eparch and slandered her just as Potiphar's wife had slandered chaste Joseph. The eparch ordered that all the monks be bound and thrown into prison together with Eugenia. When they were brought out for trial, Eugenia revealed herself to her father as his daughter. The overjoyed Philip was baptised, with his whole household, and Philip was chosen as Bishop of Alexandria. Hearing of this, the Roman Emperor sent a wicked general, Terence, who, coming to Alexandria, secretly killed Philip. Then St Eugenia moved to Rome with her mother and brothers. In Rome, she fearlessly and zealously brought pagans to the true Faith, especially maidens, and thus brought a beautiful maiden, Vassilia, to the Faith. Vassilia was quickly beheaded for Christ, as Eugenia had foretold to her, and then her two eunuchs, Protus and Hyacinthus, were beheaded. Finally, martyrdom came to Eugenia, whose presence had caused the Temple of Diana to fall in ruins. The torturers first threw her into water and then into fire, but God preserved her. The Lord Jesus Himself appeared to her in the prison and told her that she would suffer on the day of His Nativity. And so it came about. She was beheaded with the sword on December 25th, 262, in Rome. After her death, Eugenia appeared to her mother in great glory, and comforted her. Our Holy Father Nicolas the Soldier; In E. Scotland, St. Caranus, bishop.

‡ **Scripture Readings - Galatians 3:15-22; Matthew 13:31-36; Hebrews 1:1-12; Luke 2:1-20 ‡**

HYMN OF PRAISE - The Holy Martyr Sebastian

Holy Sebastian was covered with arrows- With a hair shirt of arrows his body was clothed. But, beneath the arrows, his soul was unscathed; His heart was raised to the heavens in prayer.

Sebastian endured suffering for Christ. What are mighty kingdoms, what are great riches, Compared with this honor, compared with this illumination- To be struck by arrows for the sake of the Living God?

Wonderful Sebastian desired this: To be crucified for the crucified Savior, To confirm the truth by suffering and blood, To witness the Faith before heaven and earth.

The All-seeing Lord, Who sees all creation, Measured and counted every drop of blood, And rewarded Sebastian in the Eternal Kingdom, Showering him with blessings without measure.

O Martyr most-glorious, who suffered for Christ, And by your suffering enlarged the Church: Pray to God for the Church on earth, That it become ever more beautiful, and all the more great.

REFLECTION

In this life, man is given a choice: either the earthly kingdom or the Kingdom of Heaven. God imposes no pressure on this choice, but each one freely decides. When the brothers Marcus and Marcellinus were condemned to death, the pagan judge allowed them a month to contemplate either renouncing Christ and His Kingdom or being put to death. Then their kinsmen came to the prison with one kind of advice, and St. Sebastian with another. The kinsmen wept and implored them to do as the judge willed and to spare their youth. Their tearful father showed them his grey hairs and his infirmity; their mother swore by the food of her breasts by which she nourished them; their children wept around them. In essence, all of them proposed that they should renounce the Heavenly Kingdom for the sake of the earthly kingdom, but St. Sebastian counselled them to the contrary, saying: ``O courageous soldiers of Christ, do you want to lose the eternal wreath for the sake of the flattery of your kinsmen? Do you want to relinquish the victorious banner for the sake of women's tears? This life is transient; it is so unstable and unfaithful that it can never save even those who love it. What is this life worth even if one lives for a hundred years? When the last day arrives, do not all our past years and all earthly delights seem as though they had never existed? It is indeed unreasonable to fear to lose this quickly passing life, when one will receive that eternal life in which delights, riches and rejoicing begin and never end, remaining eternal to the ages of ages. Remember the Lord's words: *A man's foes shall be they of his own household.*" With these and many other words, St. Sebastian prevailed. The holy martyrs loved the Kingdom of Heaven more than the earthly kingdom, and they joyfully went to their deaths for Christ.

CONTEMPLATION

Contemplate Joseph's chastity (Genesis 39): 1. How Potiphar's lustful wife urged Joseph to sin; 2. How Joseph rejected her out of fear of God and respect for his master; 3. How the woman grabbed his garment, but he left the garment and fled naked with his holy soul.

HOMILY on Ruth

Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God ... naught but death shall part thee and me (Ruth 1:16,17).

These are wonderful words, whether they are spoken by a son to a father, a daughter to a mother, or a wife to a husband. But they are three times more wonderful when a daughter-in-law says them to her mother-in-law. Blessed Ruth spoke these words to Naomi, her sorrowful mother-in-law. When both of Naomi's sons died in the land of Moab, where they lived as immigrants, the aged mother wanted to return to Bethlehem, her native land, and there to lay her bones to rest. And Naomi, noble in her grief, counselled her young daughters-in-law to remain in their own land and to remarry. Orpah remained, but Ruth said: *Naught but death shall part thee and me*. Behold a most beautiful example of how a mother-in-law can tenderly love her daughters-in-law, and again how a daughter-in-law can be wholeheartedly devoted to her mother-in-law. But in Bethlehem someone had to feed these two souls. Who would feed them? God and the diligent hands of Ruth. *Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn* (Ruth 2:2), said the daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law. And Naomi replied: *Go, my daughter* (Ruth 2:3). In a strange field, with strange reapers, she had to glean the ears of grain. That was not only toil but also shame. However, Ruth took upon herself both toil and shame out of love for her aged mother-in-law. The All-seeing God saw these two sweet souls and rejoiced. Their Creator rejoiced and rewarded and glorified them, as only He knows how to reward and glorify those who fear Him. And God, in His providence, provided that Ruth should enter the field of the wealthy Boaz to gather the gleaned ears of grain, and Boaz saw Ruth and asked Naomi for her hand in marriage. Of this marriage was born Obed, the father of Jesse and grandfather of David the King. So it was that Ruth had humbled herself to being a beggar but God made her the ancestress of the great king (David), from whom came many kings and finally the King of kings, our Lord Jesus Christ.

O All-seeing and Gracious Lord, how wonderful art Thou in Thy providence toward the righteous and the merciful. Do Thou guide us also and have mercy on us.

To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen.

Words of Wisdom

He was a baby and a child, so that you may be perfect human. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, so that you may be freed from the share of death." He was in a manger, so that you may be in the altar. He was on earth that you may be in the stars. He had no other place in the inn, so that you may have many mansions in the heavens. "He, being rich, became poor for your sakes, that through his poverty you might be rich. Therefore his poverty is our inheritance, and the Lord's weakness is our virtue. He chose to lack for himself, that he may abound for all.

The sobs of that appalling infancy cleanse me, those tears wash away my sins. Therefore, Lord Jesus, I owe more to your sufferings because I was redeemed than I do to works for which I was created..

You see that he is in swaddling clothes. You do not see that he is in heaven. You hear the cries of an infant, but you do not hear the lowing of an ox recognizing its Master, for the ox knows his Owner and the donkey his Master's crib."

St. Ambrose