

In the Name of the Father & the Son & the Holy Spirit.

As many of you know Fr. Philip has lead a discussion group after services for the past month or so using the book titled An Introduction to God, Encountering the Divine in Orthodox Christianity. I know that there are not many people who are able to attend, myself included, because of commitments and responsibilities, young children, or animals left at home, which need attention after being away for a long period of time already while attending church in the morning. Yet, whether you attend the discussions or not, the book is definitely worth reading. Just so I have an idea before continuing, how many here in the congregation have read at least part of this book? Well, since not everyone has read the book, I will continue.

In the preface the author describes how he arrived at the title of the book. It came from a discussion with a catechumen who was an actor and musician with somewhat of a following. When asked by his priest, the author, how he would explain his new interest in Orthodox Christianity and God to his fans, the man replied that he would not try to “explain God” but rather would seek to help to provide a space so someone could “encounter” God.

What a simple, true, and profound introduction to Holy Orthodoxy.

So here we are today and each of us should ask ourselves, am I honestly preparing for an encounter with God? Because this is the only good purpose for being here today!! All that surrounds us, the other-worldly icons, the sweet smelling incense, the majestic vestments, the beautiful music (in which we are both able to hear and to sing), the poetic and inspired texts filled with theology, etc. are all before us to draw us into an encounter with God and the world in which He dwells.

There is another book worth pulling off the shelf again which probably many of you have read before called Winter Pascha by Fr. Thomas Hopko which goes through this period of time immediately before and following the Nativity. Though Lent is more encompassing and strict in all its aspect than Advent, both Lent and Advent have many similarities. Both have dedicated Sundays prior to the Feast to help focus our attention; both have a very similar liturgical pattern

celebrating the Feasts (Royal Hours, vesperal liturgies, vigils), followed by another special feast 40 days following (Meeting of the Lord in the Temple is 40 days after Nativity and Ascension is 40 days after Pascha), there are also special hymns from the beginning of the fast period which point to the culmination of the Feast, and, of course, both have a 40 day period of fasting in preparation. As all of you know, we Orthodox (individually and collectively) voluntarily make the effort to purify our bodies, hearts, minds, and souls for these special times. For we know, as Fr. Philip mentioned last year at this time the 5 p's (proper preparation prevents poor participation). Even though the Nativity Fast is much less strict than Great Lent (there is fish, wine and oil allowed on all weekends and several times even during the week) to me this has always seemed like a harder fast. A big part of that reason is because of the world around us. The world does not purify and prepare, as we do, in hopes of gaining a greater insight into a higher reality or to seek to change our ingrained bad habits through repentance. Rather, too often, holidays are simply excuses to justify indulging in all kinds of excesses of food, drink, and frivolities. And why wait for the holiday itself, let's get started now!! So, is it any real surprise then that so many people are depressed immediately after Christmas when those indulgences brought only temporary and no lasting satisfaction? Yet in that backward environment, we struggle to live our Orthodox faith and at the same time befriend co-workers, neighbors, friends or family members acting like leaven.

So how does the Church help us in this difficult struggle?

Very soon after we begin the Nativity Fast, we have the celebration of the Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, which we served this week with a vigil on Wednesday evening , early morning liturgy Thursday morning and which we are still celebrating today. This feast commemorates the fulfillment of the promise that the aged Joachim and Anna made that if they were ever blessed to have a child, they would dedicate him or her to the service of the temple. So at a young age they took Mary to the Temple and she joyfully ran up the steps to begin her life in the service of God. During the vigil the irmoi of the Canon of the Nativity is sung as Katavasia, just like we sing the Paschal canon on the Sunday of Forgiveness as a foreshadowing of the coming feast even as we begin our period of preparation. These Irmoi are also sung throughout Fast.

Next week on this coming Saturday, the Church has before us the Feast of Apostle Andrew (the first called). Accordingly to the Gospel of St. John, John the Baptist pointed out Christ as the Lamb of God to two of his disciples and Jesus invited them to “Come and see”. This is a fitting reminder to us that all the time, but particularly during the preparation for Nativity, Christ is inviting us too to “Come and see” if we are desirous.

The feast of St. Nicholas, the wonderworker and Bishop of Lycia, we celebrate the week following. And again even more pre-feast hymns of the Nativity are heard. We, of course, are all familiar with St. Nicholas his generosity, his goodness, defender of the Truth, and holiness which over the centuries has been a model or archetype of the fulfillment of the Christian life.

Then we celebrate another Feast of the Theotokos with her Conception by St. Anna, followed by the Holy Forefathers of the Old Testament who through Divine inspiration foretold of the coming of Christ. Then the Sunday immediately before Nativity with the ancestors of Christ (the Holy Fathers) which reminds us that Christ too had a lineage and family, with both holy and profane people, not unlike all of us.

I think you probably get the idea that there are many opportunities for us to prepare if we truly want to have an encounter with God and begin to appreciate and embrace the unknowable reality that the pre-eternal, and All powerful God, willing took on flesh for our salvation and became incarnate as a man as the means to save us.

So I encourage you, make an effort to attend the services, take some time to be quiet and reflect on the miraculous event of our Savior’s birth, read some of the Holy Fathers concerning the Nativity (St. Athanasius, St. Gregory, or more contemporary authors like the books mentioned earlier), seek to be merciful (like our Lord in the Gospel today) and generous with your time and money to those less fortunate, emulating our beloved St. Nicholas.

Who can predict when and how we will begin to see, believe and understand? There is a great quote from C.S. Lewis in the very beginning of An Introduction to God, that goes something like this “I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven someplace one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God and when we

reached our destination I did.” If we are willing to make an effort to be involved in what the Church offers, it will not be for naught.

Let us travel then together with genuine expectancy to see, believe, and glorify the birth of our Savior this Nativity. Amen.