

Magnificat

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News from
HOLY TRANSFIGURATION SKETE
Society of St. John
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Behold, the time of salvation is drawing near.

○ Cave, prepare yourself,
for the Virgin is coming to give birth.

○ Bethlehem, ○ land of Judah,
adorn yourself and rejoice
since the Lord will shine forth from you.

○ mountains and hills and lands around Judah,
hearken, for Christ is coming
that He may save His creation
because He is the Lover of Mankind

From Vespers of the Sunday before Christmas

We are a Catholic Monastery of the Byzantine Rite, under the jurisdiction of the Eparchy of Chicago, and belonging to the Ukrainian Metropolis in the United States of America, which is in union with the Pope of Rome, supreme pastor of the universal Church. We embrace Evangelical poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability of life, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the traditions of the Christian East. In our skete at Jacob's Falls, on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, we devote ourselves to a common life of prayer and work for the praise, love, and service of God and for the upbuilding of His Kingdom through the arts.

A Mystery Divine and Marvelous

The event we celebrate at Christmas lies at the very center of the Christian faith. The Incarnation is the foundational mystery of salvation. From the joining of Divinity and Humanity in the person of Christ flows the saving power of all the subsequent events of His life. In introducing the feast to the Christians of Antioch in the year 386 or 388, St. John Chrysostom calls it the "mother of all feasts," for "from the Nativity of Christ, all the other feasts flow like different streams from the same source. This feast justly occupies first place not only because of this, but also because the event which this day commemorates is, of all events, the most worthy of wonder."

The Eastern Church contemplates this wonder throughout the course of the year, particularly in her reflections on the Virgin Mary. With the approach of Christmas, she meditates ever more profoundly upon the mystery:

O Virgin Mother,
 you conceived the Son of God without seed
 by the will of the Father
 and the power of the Holy Spirit.
 He was begotten by the Father
 without a mother, from all eternity.
 Yet for our sake
 He was born of you in the flesh
 without a human father,
 and you nursed Him as an infant
 with your milk.

Therefore never cease to entreat Him
 to deliver our souls from affliction.

from the Aposticha of Vespers
 Sunday of the Holy Forefathers
 (the second Sunday before Christmas)

In her various services for the pre-festive days of Christmas, the Church bids joyful preparation for the coming Feast. As early as Vespers for the Feast of St. Nicholas, December 6, she proclaims

the great wonder and fervently exhorts us
 along with all creation:

O Cave, prepare yourself
 to receive the Mother
 who bears Christ within her womb.
 O Manger, receive the Word
 Who destroyed the sins of all.
 O Shepherds, keep watch
 and then bear witness
 to the awesome wonder.
 O Magi, come from Persia,
 and bring the King your gifts
 of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
 For the Lord has appeared
 from a virgin Mother;
 yet she bowed to Him as a servant
 and spoke to Him within her bosom:
 How were You conceived in me?
 How did You grow in me,
 my God and Savior?

from the verses at Psalm 140

O Zion, be happy; rejoice, O Jerusalem,
 the City of Christ our God;
 welcome the Creator
 Who rests in a manger in a cave.
 Open your gates, O Jerusalem,
 and I will enter so that I may see Him
 Who holds all creation in His hand,
 even though He lies in a manger
 wrapped in swaddling clothes.
 The angels ever praise this life-giving Lord
 Who is the only Savior of all.

from the verses at the Litija

Christmas celebrates an event of cosmic significance. Through the Incarnation, God not only acts upon His creation, He actually enters into it and becomes a part of it. In becoming Man, God forever joins His nature with ours, adopts it, so that we may come to share His divinity. Human nature is thereby redeemed, raised to a higher level than it had before the Fall. Having been touched

by divinity, our fallen nature, indeed, all creation is no longer the same, the old relationships and separations no longer apply.

I contemplate a mystery,
divine and marvelous:
Heaven has become a cave;
the Cherubim throne, a virgin;
and the manger, an honorable place
in which lies Christ God,
the incomprehensible.
Let us praise and extol Him.

from the Canon at Matins
Feast of St. Nicholas

Just as all creation shared in the shame and sorrow of our original Fall, it now shares in the joy and glory of our Redemption. Because of the Incarnation, creation is restored to its original state of goodness. By the grace of God, created things, too, may now become vessels of the Divine. Here is the source not only of our respect and caring for nature, but also of sacramentality and the theology of icons.

Christmas is also a profound celebration of sacrificial love. In assuming our nature, God accepts it completely in its fallen state, with all its limitations, trials, and pains. He comes to us as a helpless infant, His very life depending on His Mother's milk and on the swaddling clothes with which she protects Him from the cold. He enters the world in the lowest of human conditions, being born in a cave and resting in a trough where animals feed. He shares everything that is ours, except for our sinfulness. He must learn to walk and talk; He must grow in stature, in knowledge, and in wisdom. He feels pain and sorrow, He endures temptation, He suffers and ultimately dies the most degrading of deaths. In becoming one of us, God pours Himself out for our sake, spends Himself totally, out of love for us all.

How can we prepare for so great a celebration? How can we open ourselves to the understanding of such a mystery? How can we even begin to express our thankfulness for such a gift or, for that matter, to become capable of accepting it? How, in the midst of all we must do, of all the distractions of this busy time of year, can we even think about it?

Perhaps the answer to all this is that we cannot, that it is only by the grace of God that we get any glimmer of understanding concerning these things. We can only purge ourselves of the things that hinder that grace, free ourselves of the sinfulness and selfishness that obscure our minds and harden our hearts, and be open to the message the Church lays before us in her liturgies. Above all, we can try to go about our various tasks with love in our hearts, with a generosity and openness to others that is unreserved and self-emptying.

In this, perhaps, our noisy and frantic culture, with its all too materialistic emphasis on Christmas gift-giving, is not so far off the mark. Christmas is the celebration of God's having given Himself to us. What better way can there be to prepare ourselves to receive Him than by emptying ourselves in the love of others?

For the rest we must trust in the loving mercy of Him Who pours Himself out for us, Who gives us the undeserved gift of sharing in His nature.

May He grant us all a joyous and worthy celebration of His coming:

Christ is born; let us glorify Him.
Christ comes down from heaven;
let us go out to meet Him.
Christ lives on earth; let us exalt in joy.
All you faithful, sing to the Lord,
for He has been glorified.

from the Canon at Matins
Feast of St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

Of all the holy men and women of every time and place who plead for us before the throne of God, few have had a popularity as enduring and widespread as St. Nicholas of Myra.

This may seem all the more surprising to us in that we know almost nothing about him. That he was Bishop of Myra in what is now Turkey during the middle of the fourth century is about all we can say of him with any degree of historical certainty. The earliest known account of his life dates from about five hundred years after his death and seems to consist mostly of pious legend. Still, fifteen hundred years of continuous devotion say something; we cannot totally discount what may seem legendary.

It is recounted that St. Nicholas was born at Patara in the region of Lycia and that he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land during his youth. Shortly after his return he was elected Bishop of Myra and, as leader of the Christians in the area, he suffered imprisonment during the final persecutions under the Emperor Diocletian. He was released when the persecutions ceased under the Emperor Constantine I, and is said to have attended the Council of Nicaea where he vigorously opposed the Arian heresy.

Having come into a large inheritance at

an early age, he is said to have resolved to devote his fortune to works of charity and was particularly known for his great generosity. It is recounted that he anonymously supplied sizable dowries for three young women whose father had fallen on hard times, thereby saving them from lives of ill-repute. There are many other stories illustrating his great kindness and generosity.

But it was his fame as a wonder-worker that won St. Nicholas the devotion of so many. During his lifetime, he is said to have miraculously intervened on several occasions to secure the freedom of people unjustly imprisoned. He likewise is said to have appeared to storm-tossed sailors who had invoked his aid and to have guided them safely into port. Another legend recounts how he restored to life three children who had been murdered.

As his legends grew over the centuries, he came to be regarded

as a special protector by many different groups of people. Thus, his intercession was often sought by those imprisoned. He was considered the patron of mariners in the Greek speaking East where sailors often would wish one another a safe voyage by saying, "May St. Nicholas hold the tiller." In Slavic lands his protection of mariners was often extended toward all those who were endangered by the ele-

Rejoice, O saintly Father,
temple of the Trinity;
pillar of the Church,
protector of the faithful,
helper of all in trouble.

You are a star whose rays of prayer
dispel the darkest trouble.

You are a quiet harbor
for the storm-tossed,
for all adrift in the sea of life.

Pray to Christ to save our souls
with His great mercy.

*from the Aposticha at Vespers
Feast of St. Nicholas*

ments. In the West, particularly in northern Europe, he was commonly revered as patron and protector of children.

Devotion to St. Nicholas has a long history. As early as the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian I had built a major church dedicated to his honor in Constantinople. The seventh century Jerusalem Canonarium notes his commemoration on December 6, as do the Greek menologies of the ninth century; this date became fixed in Byzantine civil law by decree of the Emperor Manuel Comnen in the twelfth century. The Church, both East and West, celebrates his feast on the sixth day of December to this day.

In Rome Pope Nicholas I dedicated a church in honor of St. Nicholas in the ninth century. Devotion to the Saint spread to Germany during the tenth century. By the late middle ages there were some two thousand churches dedicated to him in France and Germany alone, with an additional four hundred in England.

It is testimony to his fame at the time that in 1087 a group of Italian merchant sailors stole his remains from their resting place in the cathedral at Myra, which had since fallen into Moslem hands, and brought them to Bari, the principal city of Apulia, a region in southern Italy where there was still a large Greek speaking population. A large basilica was built to his honor there which enshrines his relics to this day.

Many regions and nations have claimed St. Nicholas as their special patron. He is held in particular esteem by the Slavic Byzantine Churches, which, in addition to his universal feast on December 6, also celebrate a feast on May 9 in honor of the translation of his relics to Bari. In addition to the two feasts, the Byzantine Churches also commemorate him in the Divine Office each Thursday and at the Proscopedia in each celebra-

tion of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. He is regarded as Patron of the Byzantine Catholic Church.

Because of his special patronage of children, it has been the custom in many places to give gifts to children in his name on December 6, the Feast of St. Nicholas. Having been brought to this land by Dutch settlers, the custom survives here in a largely de-Christianized form. The gifts now arrive on Christmas Eve, and the good Saint has been transformed into a "jolly old elf" named Santa Claus.

We might, perhaps, be justified in decrying this secularization, this turning of a holy man into a quasicomic character, as something typical of the frivolity of our times. In all fairness, however, we must note that, despite the alteration of name and clothing, despite the change of homeland from the Middle East to the North Pole, he is still very much a saint. He still expends himself tirelessly in the service of others; his greatest attribute is still his generosity.

While not discounting the efficacy of his intercession — after all, all those churches would not have been built in honor of someone who had proved unhelpful — we can perhaps find in this the source of the Saint's long standing veneration. St. Nicholas is an enduring symbol of sacrificial love and compassionate mercy. His love of neighbor is universal, all-embracing, and ready to assist in any need of body or soul. Like the Savior he follows, he empties himself in service of those who seek his aid.

Our Holy Father Nicholas remains a powerful intercessor before the throne of God. He is a helper for those in need and a protector of those in trouble. Through his example and prayers may we be brought to a greater generosity and mercy in our dealings with one another, may we truly follow the Lord Jesus whose coming we prepare to celebrate.

Before the Snow

Although not without its share of frustrations and disappointments, the past year proved truly fruitful in many hopeful and exciting ways.

During the winter we again spent six grace-filled weeks with our sponsors and mentors at Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Redwood Valley, California. While there we passed several important milestones, as reported in our last issue of *Magnificat*.

The year before, we had left shortly after the New Year and had found ourselves scrambling to accomplish the many year-end tasks before departing. Inevitably, some had gone undone and had been left until our return; as things often go, a number had ended up being neglected until well into the summer, a time when we should have been concentrating



on other things. This time we resolved to allow ourselves more time to get them done and also to enjoy some of the winter peace before undertaking our pilgrimage.

Praise God! This year we actually got to experience quite a bit of winter before our departure. It had arrived in early

November and had been very much with us throughout the heaviest part of the shipping season; we had had to expend many extra hours on snow removal to allow the UPS truck to reach our door. It had already been with us a good ten weeks when we set out, on the tail end of a blizzard, in late January.

We returned in late March to more snow than we had previously seen in our thirteen winters by the shore of the Great Lake. A few days later, on the Feast of the Annunciation, an-



other blizzard descended upon us. We were grateful to have been given a few days respite to unload, open the house, and get it heated up before the storm hit.

The winter that had come early decided to stay late. Snow continued well into April, and we had to hire a front end loader to dig us into the Jampot in order to begin the season's production. A pile of snow blocked the entrance to the parking lot almost until Memorial Day.

Despite an unusually cool and rainy summer and fall, Jampot again showed a healthy increase in revenue. It posted record breaking sales during the already very busy summer months of July and August and for the nearly three weeks of October its doors were open. The first two Saturdays of October proved the busiest days of our history. All this, coupled with more efficient acquisition of stock, allowed Jampot to return more funds to the monastery than ever before. This has been a real blessing, particularly since the need this year is so great.

Shortly after our return this spring, we began to seek financing for the expansion of our buildings that had so long been necessary to our growth as a monastery: an adequately sized storage building for the Jampot and a new chapel and residence addition for the monastic community. We counted it sign of hope and a real blessing that a local financial institution was willing to extend us credit in the amount we needed to undertake this large and vitally important project.

As the warehouse slowly took shape during the summer, we squeezed time from the busy days to plan out the addition and chapel. After several false starts and changes of concept, we were pleased to arrive at a solid and workable plan to accommodate our needs and the peculiarities of our site. The new building, would provide the monastery about 3800 square feet of added living space and nearly 2000 square feet devoted to worship. This

would amply address our present needs and allow for significant future growth.

As of this writing (early November) the warehouse is already in service. The new freezer has been installed and is holding our inventory of berries against next season's production. Provision of heat and the erection of shelving during the coming week will allow us to fill the new storage room with non-freezable stock and to begin operating out of the new shipping room just in time for the busy holiday season.

The new warehouse comes also just in time to allow us to receive a major gift of surplus office and lobby furniture and kitchen equipment from Providence Hospital in Southfield, Michigan. A fifteen ton partial shipment arrived a few days ago, with the balance to follow in a week or so. The warehouse, which no longer seems so big, will shelter these various items until they can be distributed to the Jampot, to guest cabins, or to the residence addition.

Various logistical circumstances of weather, design work, and the securing of permits conspired to delay the start of the chapel and residence addition until recently, but work on the project is now underway. The area has been excavated, the septic system has been rerouted to a temporary holding tank, and forms have been set for the footings. A week of high winds and cold temperatures, which resulted in several power outages here and and nearly a foot of snow at some of the higher elevations in our area, recently hindered progress. But the weather has now moderated and the work can again move forward.

We find ourselves engaged in a desperate race against winter. For the work to continue uninterrupted until completion, we must accomplish certain critical objectives before the coming of the permanent cold and snow. God willing, they should be finished by the time you receive this issue. St. Nicholas, help of those endangered by the elements, pray for us!

A Good Beginning

This fall, in the midst of all the other projects in hand, we undertook the unfamiliar effort of a capital funds campaign. Although we had often enough in the past made our needs known through the pages of **Magnificat**, this was only our second attempt in ten years at an appeal letter. We firmly believed, and still believe, that the proper way for monks to survive is by the work of their hands, as St. Benedict and the other early monastic legislators attest. But the task at hand, so important to the future of the monastery, seemed well beyond the immediate capacity of our work. So, with more than a little trepidation, we dispatched a begging letter to our acquaintances in late September.

To date, more than five hundred people have responded to that appeal. Despite some necessary disbursements for items not covered by the construction loan, and our building fund now stands at slightly more than ten percent of our goal of \$500,000.00.

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We are pleased, and we thank God for this good beginning. Through the generosity of those who heed His promptings, He has provided us with a vital pool from which to draw as the many expenses come due. We pray the generosity of His holy ones continues and increases; we have yet a long way to go.

Many necessary items not included in the construction loan remain to be purchased. Unforeseen design requirements have pushed construction costs beyond what had originally been anticipated. And interest payments on the loan begin in late December, just when our earned income enters a lull of several months.

Your generosity at this time helps make it all possible. Your gift represents the vital margin that will bring this important work to a successful and swift conclusion. We earnestly beg your help and support in this time of need.

In faith and gratitude we offer up our earnest prayer.

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