

CHALLENGE

THE PULSE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH

GIFTS OF THE INCARNATION

by Aalin Bellinger

As Christmas rolls towards America this year, we begin to experience the inevitable deluge of media showering us with images of flashy and luxurious gift-items that we and our loved ones 'deserve'. While there is nothing wrong with the custom of gift-giving as such, in this season we as God's people concern ourselves more with a different level of gift, the gift to mankind of Christ's incarnation and birth at Bethlehem.

So what are the gifts given to man by Christ's incarnation? To ponder this, we first remember the old story of man's creation and fall. On the sixth day, after making heaven, the earth, and all other creatures, "God said, 'Let us make man in Our Image, according to Our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26). This is the true and original nature of man: God's Image, a share in His love, power, and rational nature, which includes free choice and a vocation for eternal communion that mirrors the fellowship of the trinity.

The story goes on, however, to the great tragedy of man's fall. In order to shield Adam and Eve from their dangerously powerful freedom before maturity, God set them one commandment: "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat; for in whatever day you eat from it, you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). However, our first parents disobeyed and ate, bringing them, their posterity, and all creation under the law of sin and death. From here on man's history descends from bad to worse, from fratricide, to war, sexual immorality, idolatry, materialism, demon-worship—the law of sin and death reigning in the world and the original, Divine Image soiled and all but obliterated in men's hearts.

In what St. Athanasius calls this 'divine dilemma,' what is the good and loving God to do? He cannot simply repeal the law of death while remaining consistent with Himself, Who is Truth; and yet in love for

man, He would not see His creatures and His Image in them perish. The wondrous solution is the incarnation. As St. Athanasius explains,

"For this purpose, then, the...Word of God entered our world...taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for man." (Athanasius, II.11).

So this is the first gift of the incarnation, the release of tortured mankind from the law of sin and death through the crucifixion of Christ's body which He took up for this purpose.

But this is not all, for beyond freeing men from the law of sin and death which prevented them from doing what is right; He also renews in us the Divine Image and power for right actions and communion. St. Athanasius uses this analogy:

"You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is redrawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-Holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself," (Athanasius, III.18).

By taking up a human body and nature and joining it to His Divine Nature, the Word of God restores and sanctifies mankind, joining him and through him all of creation to God with an even more profound and intimate connection than before.

Finally, as well as abolishing death and

recreating man's Divine Image, through taking flesh Jesus is able to teach and solicit the faith of confused men who had become entangled in the fleshly things of the world. As St. Athanasius says, "He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body" (Athanasius, III.19). For worshippers of creation, He walked on water and calmed tempests. For those concerned with food, He multiplied loaves in the wilderness. For spirit-worshippers, He cast out spirits and demons. Not content with restoring our bare ability to follow God, through His human body the eternal Word preached, taught, and worked miracles, that man might be given every possible help toward accepting the salvation God wills to give.

What great gifts! What undeserved and overwhelming generosity. In this season of gift-giving, let us not forget to partake of the greatest of gifts: our deliverance from sin and death, the restored Divine Image in our hearts, and the guidance of Christ's teachings and His church to bring us into these. In our preparation and celebration of the Nativity this year, may each of us be born into greater communion with the God who was born among us. Amen.

(All Bible quotes from The Orthodox Study Bible, 2008 Ed. All St. Athanasius quotes from his work On the Incarnation, from Readaclassic.com, Layout and Cover Copy 2008)

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CHRISTMAS PARTIES WITH A PURPOSE

Naturally, Christmas is a time where we gather with family and friends to celebrate and enjoy each other's company. We gather to eat, we sing a few carols, and we exchange gifts. But the purpose of Christmas is much more than a retail holiday or vacation time. In this beautiful season, we are given the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ. We are also blessed to have our communities, families, friends, and our youth groups. With all of these blessings, why not share in the joy?

FOR PARENTS AND YOUTH WORKERS

- Did you know that we have resources for Christmas and New Year's Day? Visit the Youth Department website for sessions and retreats: www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/youth/youthworkers/sessions/sessions
- Don't forget to sign up for the YOUTH WORKER PULSE! This is the weekly listserv of the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Subscribers will receive valuable tips, tools, and resources for creating a successful and transformative youth ministry experience. Sign up today at www.youth.goarch.org.

CHRIST IS BORN,
GLORIFY HIM!!

Why not make your youth group Christmas celebrations serve a greater purpose?

Here are a few ideas for Parties with a Purpose.

FEED OTHERS FIRST

Before you sit down to have a Christmas party meal, make dinner and take it to a local shelter or halfway house. Or take your youth group to prepare meals at the local soup kitchen. You can also bake Christmas cookies, package them up in nice cookie tins, and deliver them to shut-ins and elderly people in nursing homes. After feeding others, then sit down to enjoy a meal together as a family.

GIVE TO OTHERS FIRST

Instead of having a gift exchange, contact the local shelter or children's hospital to see if there are families with wish lists. Then, as a youth group, go shopping to fulfill the needs of some of the families. Bring items back to wrap or prepare for delivery. Then after delivering the gifts, go grab a bite to eat as a group and discuss how you can contribute throughout the year.

BE WITH OTHERS FIRST

There are those who do not have family or friends to join at a Christmas party. So take the Christmas joy and fellowship out into your community. Have a Traveling Party... Ask your parish priests about families and individuals who could use a

friendly face, a warm greeting, and a few Christmas carols.

Other ways to have a Christmas Party with Purpose

- 1) Ask everyone to bring a bag of canned goods to take to the local food pantry.
- 2) Connect with your parish Philoptochos or other local philanthropic organizations to organize a Christmas fundraising event. Funds can go to any charity or cause you can imagine... IOCC, OCMC, Feeding America, Make-A-Wish Foundation, etc.
- 3) Gather together and make cards/icons to send to those who serve in the Military OR to send to missionaries throughout the world.

WEBSITE OF CHARITIES AND PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS

- Feeding America Website – www.feedingamerica.org
- IOCC Website – www.iocc.org
- Make-a-Wish Foundation Website – www.wish.org
- National Ladies Philoptochos Society – www.philoptochos.org
- Nothing-But-Nets Foundation Website www.nothingbutnets.net/nets-save-lives
- OCMC Website – www.ocmc.org
- Red Cross "Holiday Mail for Heroes" Website – www.redcross.org/holidaymail
- Soles4Souls Shoe Recycling Charity Website – www.soles4souls.org

Registration Open for Youth Worker, Camp Conference

The 11th Annual Orthodox Christian Camp & Youth Worker Conference provides an arena for Orthodox youth workers from different jurisdictions to share and provide resources. The conference will include keynote and guest speakers, educational presentations, break out sessions and fellowship. All Orthodox parish and diocese youth workers, camp directors and staff, and OCF chaplains are invited to attend.

Location: Austin, Texas Conference Dates: January 24-26, 2013

This year's conference is being hosted by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America National Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Events will be held at the Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit one of the two links below:

- Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries website www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/youth/camping/2013

- Orthodox Christian Camp Association website www.orthodoxcamps.org/conference.html

Early Bird Registration Ends Jan. 1

OCF – Orthodox Christian Fellowship

The Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) is the official collegiate campus ministry program under the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America. The mission is to support fellowships on college campuses, whose members experience and witness to the Orthodox Christian Church through community life, prayer, service to others and study of the Faith. Here are two opportunities for students to join in fellowship, service, and faith:

2012 OCF College Conference

Each year during Christmas Break OCF College Conferences host hundreds of college students from across North America for four days of fellowship, prayer, and some of the best Orthodox Speakers around. Conferences are currently held at the Antiochian Village in Pennsylvania and St. Nicholas Ranch in California. For more information or to register, visit: www.ocf.net/wikis/programs/college-conference.aspx

2013 OCF Real Break

The Real Break program provides an alternative to the "traditional" Spring Break. It exists to provide the most authentic experience possible, modeled as a full Christian lifestyle, which includes fellowship, prayer within community, witness and service. OCF organizes both domestic and international trips to give College students the opportunity to serve those less fortunate and to do something "real" for themselves and for God. OCF's Real Break has been running since 2000 with over a thousand students participating in these life-changing trips. Past trips have included: Mexico, Guatemala, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Raphael House, Saint Basil Academy, Greece, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Romania, Buenos Aires, Alaska, and more.