

by Melissa K. Tsongranis

O Christ, what shall we offer You for Your coming on earth as a Man for our sake? Every creature that has its being from You give thanks to You: the angels offer hymns of praise, the heavens give a star: wise men present their gifts, and the shepherds, their wonder; the earth provides a cave and the desert a manger. As for us, we offer You a Mother, a Virgin Mother. O God who are from all eternity, have mercy on us!
—from the service of Great Vespers

The presents have been opened, the food has been eaten, and the Christmas tree is really starting to shed—yes, your house is showing the effects of Christmas Day. Now you begin to focus on putting your house and life back together from the hectic pace you have likely kept since Thanksgiving. But while the “holiday season” may be winding down—for Christians the Christmas season is just getting started. You’ve heard of the 12 days of Christmas, right? This is when they begin!

The 12 days of Christmas refer to the period between Christmas and the Eve of Theophany/Epiphany (January 5). This is a time of celebration—rejoicing in the birth of our Lord and Savior! As the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

The 40 day fasting period before Christmas is meant to be a preparation for the coming of Jesus! The messages on television and in magazines tell us generally to “rejoice” and “be merry” (which they usually equate with material gifts) but as Orthodox Christians we must remember the reason for the rejoicing and the merriment comes from the birth of God the Word—Jesus. Once the Christ child enters this world, then, we have something to celebrate!

So, how do we celebrate the 12 days of Christmas in our homes? We strive each and every day to remember the joyous gift we received on Christmas. As we read in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” In recognition of the Feast, the Church has designated no fasting during these days except for January 5th, the eve of Theophany, which is a strict fast day. Here are a few things you can do with your family to keep the celebration going for the full 12 days of Christmas.

Nativity Greetings

At Pascha, we all know that we greet one another by saying “Christ is risen!” and responding “Truly He is risen!” for 40 days. Did you know that there is a similar greeting for Christmas? We should greet everyone after the Divine Liturgy on the



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Nativity by proclaiming “Christ is born!” The response is “Glorify Him!” Continue using this greeting the entire 12 days of Christmas. Add the beautiful Katavasia of the Nativity, which this greeting comes from, to your family prayer during this period:

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

Christ comes from heaven; meet Him.

Christ is on earth exalt Him.

O you earth, sing to the Lord.

O your nations, praise Him in joy for He has been glorified.

Giving Thanks

Take time to give thanks for all of your blessings in life. Each night when you say prayers as a family, have each member share one thing they are thankful for that happened during the day. Discuss ways that you can show gratitude to God for all of His blessings. Consider making thanksgiving ornaments using left-over wrapping paper, ribbon, and markers. Write the different things you are thankful for in life on the wrapping paper, cut them out in different shapes, and use the ribbon to hang them on your tree. Also, this would be a good time to write those Christmas thank you notes to relatives and friends who have honored you with gifts—both material and otherwise throughout this past year.

Be Mindful

Remember the reason for the season by keeping your mind focused on Christ and His Church. One way of doing this is to keep aware of the different saints celebrated each day and as well as the daily scripture readings. You can find much of this information at www.onlinechapel.goarch.org. The lessons you and your children learn from the lives of the saints and Scripture will be precious gifts from God. Here are a few of dates to look out for during the 12 days of Christmas:

December 27th (St. Stephen Archdeacon and First Martyr) – You can read about St. Stephen in the Epistle reading for the day Acts 6:8-7:5, 47-60 (perhaps shorten the reading and adapt it for young children). Notice his extreme faith as he was being martyred. Discuss how we can look to him as an example of faith and love.

January 1st (St. Basil the Great) – St. Basil is a wonderful saint from which learn about wisdom and charity. We can honor him by attending the Divine Liturgy on his feast day, reading about him, participating in the tradition of the Vasilopita, and giving to those in need.

Get the entire family involved in making the Vasilopita. Begin with a prayer and read about the tradition and the life of St. Basil. If you have never made this sweet bread, consider asking an older family

member or member of your community to come and teach you how to make it. Discuss ways you as a family can be charitable like St. Basil. To learn more about Saint Basil and the tradition of the Vasilopita, visit the website of St. Basil Academy at www.stbasil.goarch.org.

January 4th (The Synaxis of the 70 Holy Apostles) – Did you know that the Lord did not just appoint 12 disciples? As we read in the Gospel, “...the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go. Then He said to them, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:1-2). Discuss how we can add to the “laborers” by living as apostles spreading the Gospel of Christ.

Capture the Memories

Create a Faith Capsule during the 12 days of Christmas. Use some sort of container and place an item in each day that will remind you of this year’s celebration of the birth of our Lord (i.e. a clipping from your tree, a piece of wrapping paper, a paper icon, pictures, quotes, etc.). Have each person in the family create a thank-you note or drawing to God for giving us the gift of His Son. After you share with one another, place these in the time capsule, and store it where it will not be disturbed until next year. Decide which day you will open it next year and write it on your calendar.

Wrap it up with a Splash!

Make a point to attend Vespers of Theophany as a family. If work and school permits, attend the Divine Liturgy with the Great Blessing of the Water the next day as well. For more information on celebrating Theophany, read Diving in: Living Theophany in the Orthodox Christian Home by Nichola Krause which can be found at: www.family.goarch.org/art-feastdays.asp. Don’t forget to schedule a time for your priest to come and bless your home.

These are just a few suggestions on ways you can celebrate the 12 days of Christmas. Be creative and come up with your own family traditions for this period as well. Remember that this celebration shouldn’t run you ragged. Keep it simple and enjoy the time together as a family. But more importantly enjoy the time you spend glorifying our Lord and rejoicing in His birth. Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

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A Story for Families: The Fourth Wise man

Three wise men, led by a star, went to worship the Baby of Bethlehem and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They say there was another wise man, called Artaban. He was to meet the three Wise Men in Babylon and then start the journey to find and worship the newborn Baby. Artaban sold all his possessions, bought three jewels—a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl—to present to the Baby, and set out to join the other three Wise Men.

On his way, Artaban saw an unknown injured man and stopped to help him. To do this he had to sell his sapphire and was delayed in his journey. By the time he reached Babylon, he found that the other three Men had already departed. He set out alone again, but when he arrived in Bethlehem, he found that Joseph of Nazareth and his family had fled to Egypt.

“I will leave immediately for Egypt to worship the new King,” exclaimed Artaban. But during his journey he met a soldier on his way to slay a woman’s child on orders from Herod. Artaban gave the soldier his ruby and the infant’s life was saved. He then hurried to Egypt where he wandered in vain, searching for the King. Old and weary, after 33 years, Artaban finds himself in Jerusalem, learning that a so-called King of Israel was to be crucified that very day. Thereupon he determines to ransom Him with his pearl.

On his way to Golgotha, Artaban was stopped by a young girl who was being dragged off by two brutal soldiers. He then gave his last jewel, the pearl, to the soldiers to save her. A little while later, when Jesus was dying on the Cross, Artaban realized that he could neither ransom Him nor pay tribute to Him, as he did not have any jewels left. Artaban collapsed from sorrow, but when he was lying face down, he heard a soft voice, saying: “I was hungry and thirsty and you gave me food and drink; I was naked and sick and you clothed me and visited me.”

“Not so, my King,” protested Artaban. “Thirty-three years I have looked for You, but I have never seen Your Face, nor served You, my Lord.” But the voice replied: “Whatever you have done unto one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me.”

—Taken from *Lovely Little Stories for People of All Ages* by Metropolitan Polizoides

New Resource for Family Ministry

The Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese announces the publication of the Parish Family Night program. Thanks to a generous donation from Leadership 100, this resource has been sent to each parish in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. This resource includes 12 detailed sessions and information on how to plan a family night at your parish. Each session includes family activities, age specific break-out sessions, and take home handouts to continue the learning at home. For further information on this program, contact familycare@goarch.org.



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