KENOSIS

A Byzantine Understanding of Christmas

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"Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away. Born of a virgin, God has appeared to men, formed as we are and making godlike the garment He has put on. Therefore Adam is renewed with Eve and they call out, 'Your good pleasure has appeared on earth to save our kind'."

St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem

"God became man so that man could become God." With this sentence St. Athanasius summed up the entire Bible. The liturgical year in the Byzantine tradition is a prolonged celebration of the two truths contained in those few words. During the first half of the year, from September 1 to February 2 we rejoice in the first mystery: God become man. During the Lenten and Paschal seasons we contemplate the second mystery: man becomes God.

The main focus in preparing for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord in the Byzantine tradition is on the incarnation of the Son or Word of God: in other words, God becoming man. In order to more fully enter into the meaning of this mystery, we must reread the Genesis account of the creation and fall of man.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'... So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them."

(Genesis 1:26-27)
The Church recognizes certain of its earliest teachers as having received the divine gift of interpreting the Holy Scriptures and Tradition in the orthodox (i.e. correct) manner, and calls them the ‘Fathers of the Church’. The Eastern Fathers made the above passage from Genesis the cornerstone of their anthropology or doctrine of man. In the plural pronouns "Let us make...in our image, after our likeness" they saw a prefiguring of the Holy Trinity.

The patristic tradition (i.e. the thought of the Fathers) also saw profound implications in the words "in our image" and "after our likeness". They conceived of the image as something static or unchanging. Either it was there or it wasn’t, but the likeness was something dynamic or changing: it could become greater or less. In other words man was created such that he bore a resemblance to God in a way that could grow more and more like God.

Now perhaps the temptation of the serpent in Genesis 3:1-5 is clearer. The serpent

"...said to the woman, ‘Did God say, "You shall not eat of any tree of the garden"?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’"

How clever is the Evil One! He knew that Adam and Eve had been created in the likeness of God and that they
desired nothing so much as to become more like God; so he tempts them to achieve a good end by an evil means. Know good and evil and you will be more like God. That was the essence of the temptation.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate."

(Genesis 3:6)

The act of eating involves taking something outside of you and, by ingesting it, making it part of you. Thus eating the
fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil means that Adam and Eve made evil part of themselves:

"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons."

(Genesis 3:7)

Their first reaction was one of guilt. They who, up till then, had rejoiced in their natural nakedness, now that they had ingested evil, felt guilt and, in their embarrassment, covered their nakedness. The Fathers saw this as the darkening of the image of God in man. As a mirror when mottled reflects a distorted image, so was the image of God in man distorted beyond recognition.

Recall that Genesis tells us that there were two trees in the center of the garden. If man, now fallen, had eaten of the second tree, the Tree of Everlasting Life, he would have made his perdition eternal. Out of His boundless loving-kindness, God "sets up repentance for salvation" and exiles man from Paradise, not so much as a punishment but precisely to lead man along the path of repentance, purify him from the effects of the fall, and lead him back from exile restored, to feast on the fruit of the Tree of Everlasting Life in unending beatitude. And so God says to the serpent:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

(Genesis 3:15)

God promised that a descendant of Eve would bruise the head of the serpent, which is to say destroy the source of
that evil. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of that hope for the deliverance or redemption promised by God to man in paradise.

A descendant of Eve, a man, will deliver us from evil. But who will restore the distorted image and bring the likeness to the highest degree? The closest that one thing can resemble another is that the one actually participates in the life of another. Or, as St. Peter says,

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion and become partakers of the divine nature."

(2 Peter 1:3-4)

In other words, God intends us to be so much like Him that we will actually share in His being. The process of becoming sharers in the divine nature is called Theosis (deification or divinization). This is what is meant by St. Athanasius when he says, "...so that man might become God". But who can give us this power? Only God can give us a share in Himself. And so only God can fully redeem man. If God promised that a descendant of Eve - i.e. a man - will crush the source of evil and if only God Himself can restore His image and likeness in mankind, then only the God-Man, Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, can accomplish the mystery of our salvation.

Since he is the eternal Son of God, He must take upon Himself a human nature and become man, so that the Divine
Image in fallen man might be restored and the likeness dynamically oriented to sharing in His nature. God becomes man so that man might become God.

The mystery of God-becoming-man is called the Incarnation, the enfleshment, from St. John's Gospel: "And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (John 1:14). But the Eastern tradition has a special fondness for another word to describe this mystery and its implications for us: Kenosis or self-emptying, from St. Paul's words in the epistle to the Philippians:

"Though He was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

(Phil 2:6-7)

The Second Person of the all-holy Trinity "emptied Himself" and took the form of a servant, that is, became man. He did not count equality with God the Father a thing to be clutched. Our thoughts go back to Adam and Eve in Eden grasping at the forbidden fruit because they thought it would make them more like God. Now it is God the Son, the Word of God, who does not grasp at the Divinity, but is born in the likeness of men to give us as a gift what we tried to steal in paradise: likeness to God.

It is surely a divine irony that it is to a thief who says, "Remember me, O Lord, when You come into Your kingdom," that Jesus, the New Adam, answers, "Son, today you will be with me in Paradise". Thus the drama that began in a garden ends in the garden of the empty tomb.
During the Christmas Preparation Period, the Byzantine Churches invite the faithful to enter into the spirit of this mystery by experiencing the expectation felt by the first-chosen people as they awaited the coming of the Savior. But this Savior is God and man: He is the God-Man. And so the period of preparation focuses on these two natures of our Savior. He is true God: He is born of the Father before all ages, the pre-eternal Word of God. In His divine nature He has a Father but no mother. He is also true man. He did not merely appear in human form: He really took upon Himself a human nature.

In His humanity He has a mother, but no father. This mystery finds expression in the sublime dogma of the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos. Mary is a virgin because her child was not conceived through a human father, but by the Holy Spirit. As Mary’s virginity was not taken away when she conceived and bore her Son, neither will our humanity be destroyed when we are made sharers in the divine nature. God’s contact with man does not destroy, annihilate, smother. It lifts up, brings to perfection, carresses.
II - SIGNS OF THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

Mary's Son is God Himself. No one can understand this truth fully, and yet it is our faith. We can only receive it with gratitude and celebrate it with joy. To help us do so, the Church escorts us through the ages of expectation, bidding us contemplate the images that prefigure the maternity of the Theotokos: some of them point to Christ's divinity while others look to His humanity.

THE BUSH UNBURNED

The first figure that foreshadows this mystery is the Bush Unburned. Let us reread the passage from the Book of Exodus where it occurs.

"Now when Moses was feeding the flock of Jothor, his father-in-law, the priest of Madian led them below the wilderness and came to the mount of Choreb. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in fire blazing out of a bush. And when he saw that the bush blazed with fire but was not consumed, Moses said, 'I will go near and see this great sight: why the bush is not consumed.' But when the Lord saw that he drew near to look, the Lord called to him out of the bush, saying 'Moses! Moses!' He answered, 'What is this?' And He said, 'Come no nearer. Loose the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' Then He said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' At this Moses turned away his face, for he was afraid to gaze at God."

(Exodus 3:1-6)
Now listen to this troparion from the fourth ode of Orthros on the Feast of the Annunciation:

"The bush that blazed with fire and yet remained unburned, disclosed the secret mystery that shall come to pass in you, O pure maiden full of grace. For after childbirth you shall remain ever-virgin."

But how does this mystery apply to ourselves? In this way: as Mary preserved her virginity before, during and after giving birth to Jesus Christ, so will we remain ‘intact’ as ourselves even after we become fully sharers in the Divine Nature in heaven.
THE THREE YOUNG MEN

Among the Old Testament types foreshadowing the coming of the Son of God which we recall during the period of preparation are the stories of Daniel and the three youths in the fiery furnace. Recall the episode of the prophet Daniel cast into the lions' den, emerging unharmed on the third day. Our Fathers saw this as indicating the three-day burial and resurrection of Christ. The story of Ananias, Azarias and Misael is even richer in symbolism. Refusing to worship an idol, they were threatened with fiery death, but they remained steadfast in their hope of deliverance and faced their expected martyrdom courageously.

"Then King Nabucodonosor was astonished and rose up in haste. He said to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?' They answered the king, 'True, O king.' He answered, 'But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not harmed; and the appearance of the fourth is like a Son of God.'"

(Daniel 3:24-25)

Listen to our holy father Romanos the Melodist celebrating this figure in song:

"The men appointed for this duty seized the children, bound their hands and feet, and let them fall into the furnace. It received their root with three branches, but it did not burn them, fearing the One who planted them. In fact the flame changed into a divine breath of dew, and thus it refreshed the holy branches."
Throughout the Old Testament fire is seen as an image of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke will use the same image in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of fiery tongues. But it is not a fire that destroys, rather it is like a refreshing dew, "for the fire becomes a spring of water, and the furnace is refreshed with dew, for those who believe in Him who flee sin."
Again hear St. Romanos' description of the king's confusion:

"We threw three men in there, and now I see four; and the aspect of the fourth troubles my heart for I do not know to what I can compare such a being. Am I to say that He is mortal? No, He is the Son of God. The fire was worsted justly by Him, for the flame could not resist the fiery being. The furnace was quenched in befitting manner, for it was unable to sustain the brilliance of the One whose glance was like lightning."

The fourth man in the fiery furnace points to the Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself, who steps into the midst of the fiery furnace of our humanity. He brings with Him the Holy Spirit, the Giver of life, who causes the fire to refresh like dew. As in the figure of the Bush Unburned, this image reinforces the theme that contact with the Divine Energies does not destroy or consume but rather restores to life.

THE THRICE-SEALED PORTAL

A final image often recalled during this time of expectation is to be found in the prophecy of Ezechiel:

"Afterwards [God] brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the East, and the sound of His coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with His glory...then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces east and it was shut. And the Lord said to me, 'This gate shall remain shut. It shall not be opened and no one shall enter by it; therefore it shall remain shut. Only the Prince may sit in it to eat
bread before the Lord. He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way.' Then He brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; and I looked, and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple of the Lord."

The temple filled with the glory of the Lord is the Mother of God bearing the Son. The gate, we are told three times, is shut. This foreshadows the virginity of Mary before, during and after childbirth. Recall that Mary’s virginity is a sign that the Son born of her is God the Son, begotten of the Father before all ages.
III - SIGNS OF THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

Since God in Genesis promised that a "descendant of the woman" would crush the serpent's head, our fathers took pains to impress on us that the Son and Word of God really became man. Like us, He has a history. He has ancestors whose lives foreshadow aspects of His own, many of whom are mentioned in the liturgy of the two Sundays in preparation for Christmas. Now let us contemplate two of them: Ruth and David.

RUTH, ANCESTOR OF DAVID

One of the most beautiful stories in the Bible is the Book of Ruth, a tale so short and charming that we can lose sight of its true message. The great-grandmother of King David was not of the Jewish people. She was a Gentile like us. Against all odds and plain common sense, she threw in her lot
with the Chosen People and found in Boaz her "kinsman redeemer". From their union arose the royal house of David whence the Messiah would come. In the same way we place our hope in Jesus Christ, a human being as we, our kinsman, to redeem us from sterile lives of sin.

DAVID, TYPE OF THE CHRIST

Is anyone unfamiliar with the story of the shepherd David, who defends the honor of his people in combat with the giant Goliath? But have you ever reflected on the story as a figure or type of Christ. Jesus was of the house of David. He was born in David's city. He referred to Himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. Like David He is a king and the founder of a royal people, the Christian nation.
He too fights with the giant Goliath, symbol of a barbaric power to enslave, and vanquishes him with the invincible weapon of the cross.

These figures are only two of the portraits in the family album of the Son of Man. They stand for all the generations of ancestors that led up to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is true God and true Man. This is the message of the Fast in preparation for Christmas. In His divine manhood we see an icon of our own divinization. Thus, to celebrate Christmas is not just to recall the birth of our Lord 'way back then' but to reapply the reality of Christ’s being to the continuing process of rebirth in our hearts that is the orthodox way of salvation. As the process by which the Son of God became the Son of Man involved ‘kenosis’ or self-emptying, a similar kenosis is required of us if we are to be remade in the image and likeness of God. This self-emptying is achieved by prayer, repentance, fasting, and the works of charity. When thus purified we can become, like St. Paul, chosen vessels. Into these living chalices are worthily placed the divine body and blood of Christ, so that, as St. Leo the Great says, through these Holy Mysteries we may be transformed into that which we consume.
IV - THE CHRISTMAS FAST IN YOUR FAMILY

The above images can become the basis of our preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth for us and for our families. Adults can read and reflect on the following scriptural passages which have been summarized and explained in this booklet:

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Parents can share this time with their children according to the ability of each one to understand. Younger children will enjoy reading the stories in a children’s Bible. The American Bible Society, P.O. Box 5677, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 publishes a series of six inexpensive Scripture Activity Books, including The Story of Ruth and The Story of David. Each booklet presents the Scriptural text along with puzzles, quizzes, and coloring activities on the story.

If your family has a VCR, you may obtain copies of these tales on videocassettes. The Hanna-Barbera series, The Greatest Adventure (available from Tabor Publishing, PO Box 7000, Allen, TX 75002) contains segments on the stories of
Moses, Daniel, David and Ruth. A *Family Activity Book* with further stories, activities, and prayers accompanies the videocassettes.

In either case, in addition to telling the story, parents can point out how each of these figures is a prefiguring of the coming of Christ by retelling the contents of the sections in this book in your own words.

All of this takes time. You must make that time by restricting the time spent in less important activities during the Christmas Preparation Season: television, visiting, parties, just 'killing' time. But if you make the effort, you have God's promise to bring forth in your heart "a new born child who is God before time began".