

HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX CHURCH

THROUGH THE CROSS JOY HAS COME INTO ALL THE WORLD

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ONE OF US!

PRAISING CHRIST
WITH THE HYMNS OF THE NATIVITY

By Bogdan Gabriel Bucur



In case the title startled you a bit, you can relax: I've taken the liberty to quote from Joan Osborne's 1995 hit, "One of Us," but "just a slob like one of us" is nowhere to be found among the hymns chanted in the Orthodox Church! Osborne's song, nonetheless, is a beautiful piece of music, with intriguing lyrics. If I am allowed to pick

and choose, these are the verses I like best: "What if God was one of us? Just like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home? . . . If God had a face, what would it look like? God is great, God is good, yeah, yeah, yeah!"

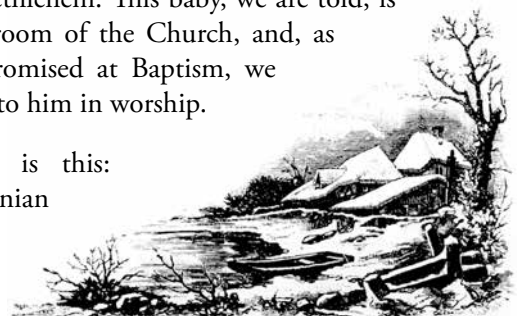
I am often reminded of this song during the tiresome Christmas bustle at Walmart, with the crowds of compulsive shoppers (of whom I am first), and with the jingles and the commercials repeated ad nauseam. Too much of all that and I start feeling lonely and lost, like Osborne's stranger on the bus, wondering how much of God's face can still be discerned in this merry-go-round of special offers, reindeer, the obligatory new Christmas movie, "Ho-Ho-Ho" and the Santas at the mall. I also think that, while this song expresses a very deep and pure yearning — wrapped, certainly, in the cynicism and disillusionment of our age — it leaves us, at best, with only a trace of an anonymous and faceless God, who might or might not have been there on the bus.

Our Christmas hymns, the witness of the apostles and martyrs and saints, by contrast, speak boldly of "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we observed and touched with our own hands" (1 John 1:1): a God great and good precisely because he came to be "just a slob like one of us." Here is what we sing at the Great Hours of the Nativity:

Today is born of a virgin He who holds the whole creation in His hand. He whose essence none can touch is bound in swaddling clothes as a mortal man. God, who in the beginning fashioned the heavens, lies in a manger. He who rained manna on his people in the wilderness is fed on milk from His mother's breast. The bridegroom of the Church summons the wise men; the Son of the virgin accepts their gifts. We worship Thy birth, O Christ! We worship Thy birth, O Christ! We worship Thy birth, O Christ! Show us also Thy holy Theophany. (Eve of the Nativity, sticheron at the Ninth Royal Hour)

A Palestinian baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, sucking milk at his mother's breast — one of us! The point of this hymn, however, is that this baby is also the maker and fashioner of the universe ("who holds creation in the hollow of his hand," "who established the heavens"); he is also the Lord God of Israel, who freed his people from slavery, led it and fed it miraculously in the desert. He is also the light of all mankind, who summons the pagan stargazers, and, as another hymn (the Nativity troparion) says, he taught them to worship the sun of righteousness rising in Bethlehem. This baby, we are told, is the Bridegroom of the Church, and, as we have promised at Baptism, we bow down to him in worship.

The point is this: that Palestinian baby is no less than God. The



icon of the Nativity – as a matter of fact, any icon of Christ – teaches the same truth, by showing a halo around the baby’s head, inscribed with Greek words declaring “He Who Is.” This is the name that God reveals to Moses on Mount Sinai: ego eimi ho on, “he who is,” “the existing one.” Those in the Church more philosophically inclined referred to this God as “the one beyond being” – beyond any affirmation and negation, beyond the grasp of human language, thought, feeling or imagination. Christianity does not begin, however, with metaphysical speculation, but with the amazing news of the Nativity: “Today the Virgin gives birth to the one beyond being!” Today, “he who is,” who spoke to Moses in the burning bush, and who inspired the lofty thought of all those who searched for him throughout the ages, has come to us as a baby. Wrapped in swaddling clothes, sucking at the breast – one of us!

CHRIST IN THE NATIVITY HYMNS

In the Orthodox Church, one becomes familiar with “Christology” – what we confess about Jesus Christ – by participating in the Church’s worship. Explaining who this baby born at Bethlehem is constitutes precisely the liturgical program of Nativity: Bethlehem, make ready; Eden, open thy gates; for He Who Is [Exodus 3:14] becomes that which He was not, and the Fashioner of all creation is fashioned . . . (Sunday before Nativity, Sticheron at Litya). As another hymn explains, born in Bethlehem is He who fashioned all creation, yet reveals Himself in the womb of her that He formed (Eve of the Nativity, Sticheron at the Sixth Royal Hour). Indeed, to the discerning eye of faith, the cave holds far more than a helpless “baby Jesus.” We hymn Christ, who comes to save the man He fashioned (Sunday before Nativity Vespers, Apostichon at Lord I have cried). This is the very Lord God who separated the waters and suspended the earth upon the void (Job 26:7): When creation beheld Thee born in a cave, who hast hung the whole earth in a void above the waters, it was seized with

amazement and cried: “There is none holy save Thee, O Lord!” (Compline Canon of the Forefast of the Nativity, Ode 3, Eirmos).

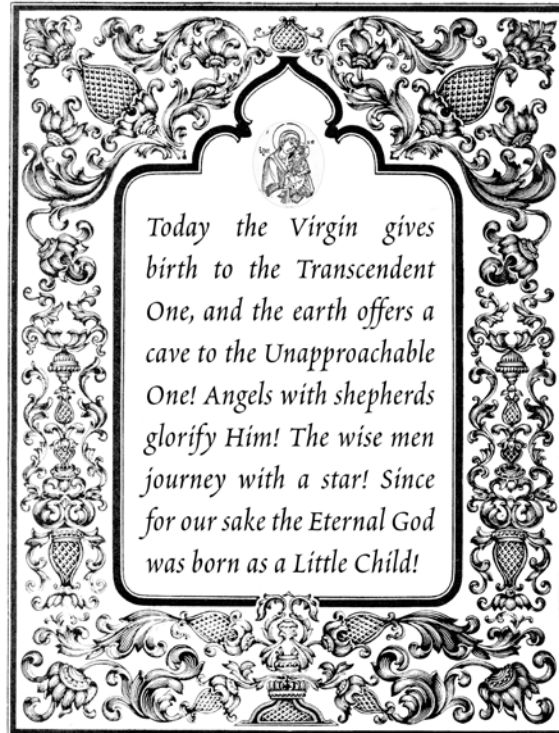
The Virgin Theotokos offers, in the words of the hymnographer, the pattern of our worship of the baby: “O, sweetest child, how shall I feed Thee who give food to all? How shall I hold Thee, who holdest all things in Thy power? How shall I wrap Thee in swaddling clothes, who wrap the whole earth in clouds?” So cried the all-pure Lady whom in faith we magnify ... (Matis Canon of the Forefast of the Nativity, Ode 9, Sticheron 5).

Indeed, it is Christ who bowed the heavens (Psalm 17:10/18:9), and holds the creation in the hollow of his hand (Isaiah 40:12):

Open to me the gates, and entering within, I shall see as a child wrapped in swaddling clothes Him who upholds the creation in the hollow of His hand, whose praises the angels sing with unceasing voice, the Lord and Giver of Life who saves mankind (Vespers of the Forefast of the Nativity, Apostichon).

Very often the hymns speak of Christ as occupying the

throne of God. This is common biblical language. Scripture depicts the God of Israel as the ruler of a heavenly world: seated on a fiery throne of cherubim – a living throne, as it were – in the innermost sanctum of a heavenly temple attended by thousands upon thousands of angels, who perform their celestial liturgies according to precisely appointed times and rules. This imagery looms large in the Psalms and in prophetic and apocalyptic literature (e.g., Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7), as well as in the New Testament and later Christian literature. “Throne” implies divine status: only God is depicted as seated on his heavenly throne; all others – angels and archangels, patriarchs, prophets, and saints – stand before him. To say that Jesus Christ is enthroned amounts, therefore, to proclaiming him as Lord and God. As Christians, we do not worship a mere human being, nor have we invented a second



God: rather, in Jesus Christ we have the very image – the Face, as it were – of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; cf. Matthew 18:10). This is also true of the Nativity hymns, which have a very precise Christological message:

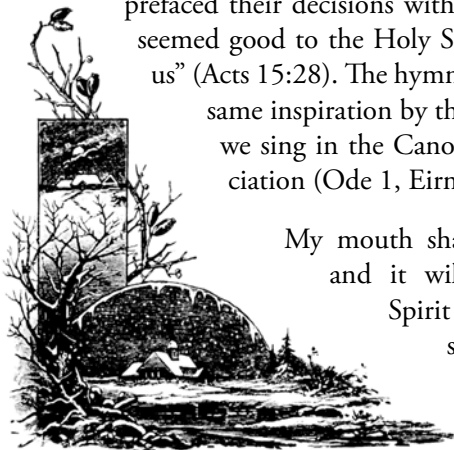
Make merry, O Bethlehem! . . . Christ, the shepherd of Israel, who rides on the shoulders of the cherubim, has come forth from you for all to see . . . (Canon of the Nativity, Ode 3, Sticheron 4); Before Thy birth, O Lord, the angelic hosts looked with trembling on this mystery and were struck with wonder: for Thou who hast adorned the vault of heaven with stars hast been well pleased to be born as a babe; and Thou who holdest all the ends of the earth in the hollow of Thy hand art laid in a manger of dumb beasts (Eve of Nativity, Sticheron at the Third Royal Hour).

If the manger holds no less than the Lord, who in heaven is enthroned on the living cherubic throne, what of the Virgin? A strange and most wonderful mystery do I see: the cave is heaven; the Virgin – the throne of the cherubim (Canon of the Nativity, Ode 9, Eirmos). The virgin mother, truly “Theotokos” (God-bearer), is herself a living throne. This “strange and most wonderful mystery,” however, is not her exclusive privilege. It is rather the mystery of our call to what theologians call “deification,” that is, the vocation to an ever-increasing growth in the likeness to God. We too, as we sing at Liturgy, “represent mystically the cherubim”; we too, therefore, are called to be God-bearers.

DOXOLOGICAL CHRISTOLOGY

The Christology – the teaching about Christ – that is found in the hymns complements that set forth by the ecumenical councils, and the Church views both as divinely inspired. Beginning with the apostolic council in Jerusalem, around 45 A.D., councils have prefaced their decisions with the formula, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and also to us” (Acts 15:28). The hymns lay claim to the same inspiration by the Holy Spirit. As we sing in the Canon of the Annunciation (Ode 1, Eirmos),

My mouth shall I open wide,
and it will thus be with
Spirit filled. A word
shall I then pour
out unto the
Mother and



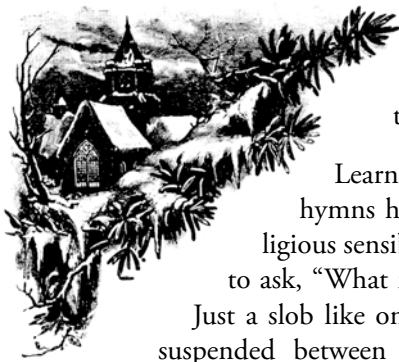
Queen. I will joyously attend the celebration and sing to her merrily, praising her miracles.

But there is a distinction between the Christology of the hymns and that of the councils. The latter were compelled to articulate the faith of the Church in the face of heretical distortion, by using definitions of faith to delimit authentic Christian faith from false experience and belief. In doing so, they used the language most apt as instruments to formulate the definitions, borrowing from disciplines such as philosophy, logic, or medicine. With the hymns, however, the situation is quite different. Leaving aside the special of category “dogmatic hymns,” the hymns I have quoted so far are not engaged in demonstration, clarification or, polemics, but in worship. They do not address the adversaries of faith, but give expression to the spiritual intimacy between the Bride and the Bridegroom, the Church and Christ, constantly recalling their covenant recorded in the Scriptures. This is “doxological language,” the language of praise. In the absence of heresies (which forced the Church to express her faith in a more precise and technical language), doxology may very well have been the only Christology. Of course, these two types of language – doxological and dogmatic – are often intertwined, and have always coexisted. One finds a perfect illustration in the person of St. John of Damascus, hailed both as the author of the Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith and as an inspired hymnographer.

HYMNS ARE THEOLOGY

In “performing” the hymns in worship, theology comes alive, becomes praise, becomes a dialogue with God. Its vantage point is no longer outside the event to which it refers, but rather the event itself, made present liturgically and encompassing worshippers past, present and future: “Today, He who holds the whole creation in the hollow of His hand is born of the Virgin”; or, at Pascha, “This is the Day of Resurrection.”

The hymns anchor all of us in the living experience of Israel’s walk with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Law-giver and “God of our fathers” – the same one whom the hymns proclaim Jesus Christ, the Lord. There is no need to argue for the importance of the hymns in Christian devotion – this is quite self-evident. But it is worth repeating that, in the Orthodox Church, hymnography can never be isolated from doctrinal inquiry: hymns are theology! They are bearers of an elaborate Christology, which essentially proclaims the same mystery of Christ that the ecumenical councils sought to defend, yet in a language



very different from that of conciliar definitions.

Learning theology from the hymns helps reeducate our religious sensibility. It is not enough to ask, "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us?" and remain suspended between the obligatory cynicism of our time and the hope that Christmas will remain somehow "magical." And Nativity is certainly about much more than our pious emotions before "sweet baby Jesus" in the crib, just as Holy Week is about much more than our pious emotions aroused by the sufferings of an innocent. The Byzantine hymns invite us rather to approach both crib and cross with the awe that the people of Israel approached Mount Sinai, where Christ spoke to them in flashing light and rolling thunder: This is the "fear of God, faith, and love" with which the Divine Liturgy bids us approach the Son of God become son of the Virgin.

Christ is born, glorify Him!

Bogdan Gabriel Bucur is a member of the community at St. George Orthodox Cathedral in Pittsburgh. He is also an assistant professor of Theology at Duquesne University, where he teaches Bible and Patristics.

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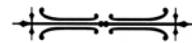
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Moleben on our property: We will continue serving a weekly short prayer service on our property in Kernersville. This is a service of supplication (Molieben) that Archbishop Dimitri of blessed memory blessed for the use of parishes in the diocese. Fr. Christopher will be serving it on Friday mornings at 10 AM except where noted in the calendar. Our property is located at 1320 Masten Drive in Kernersville.

Sisterhood of the Holy Myrrhbearers: The Sisterhood will meet on Tuesday, Dec 26th at the Mellow Mushroom in Greensboro at 7:00PM.

Men's Group: There will be no Men's Group meeting this month.

Order Gift Cards Through Holy Cross! Scrip cards are available from hundreds of retailers and don't cost any more than the face value of the gift card. It's a "free" fundraiser to benefit the Holy Cross building fund! Contact Karen Brudnak-Slate.



FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Financials for November 2017

	Actual	Budget
Income	\$7,281.20	\$10,630.00
Expense	\$7,994.72	\$9,001.23

Thank you for your generous gifts!

HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX CHURCH



Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 Nativity Fast 10AM Prayers at the Property	2 Nativity Fast 6 PM Great Vespers 7 PM OCAT Sr. Social
3 Nativity Fast 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy	4 Nativity Fast	5 Nativity Fast	6 Nativity Fast	7 Nativity Fast	8 1Nativity Fast 10AM Prayers at the Property	9 Nativity Fast 6 PM Great Vespers
10 Nativity Fast 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy 11:30 Visit from St. Nicholas	11 Nativity Fast	12 Nativity Fast 7:30 PM Choir Rehearsal	13 Nativity Fast	14 Nativity Fast 6:30PM Parish Council	15 Nativity Fast 10AM Prayers at the Property	16 Nativity Fast 6 PM Vespers
17 Nativity Fast 9AM Church School 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy 1 PM Caroling at Adams Farm Rehab 7PM OCAT House Meeting	18 Nativity Fast	19 Nativity Fast 6:30PM Prefeast Vespers	20 Nativity Fast 6:30PM Prefeast Vespers	21 Nativity Fast 6:30PM Prefeast Vespers	22 Nativity Fast 10AM Prayers at the Property 5 PM Open Door 6:30PM Prefeast Vespers	23 Nativity Fast 6 PM Prefeast Vespers
24 Nativity Fast 8:30 AM Baptisms & Chrismations 10AM Divine Liturgy 5:30 PM Holy Supper Lenten Meal 7 PM Nativity Vigil	25 NATIVITY of our Lord Jesus Christ 9 AM Divine Liturgy	26 7:00PM Sisterhood	27	28	29 10AM Prayers at the Property	30 6 PM Vespers
31 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy						