

Philip's Fast / Advent

Who do you say that I am?

Roy Jensen, Editor of Christbearers - Meditations for the Pre-Christmas Fast, Christmas, and Theophany



"But you", He said, "Who do you say that I am?" Then Simon Peter spoke up, "You are the Christ," he said, "the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:15,16 "Who do you say that I am?" Was there ever such a penetrating question? Our answer to this question reveals not only who we think Christ is, but also who we are. Many of those who first heard Jesus ask this question were men and women of the Law. This is why they thought Jesus only a prophet. But Simon Peter could truly see Jesus for Who He Is. In his answer Peter revealed himself to be a man of God.

What of our answers to the question of Jesus? What do our answers say about us? Are we men filled with the Holy Spirit? One of the most ancient titles Christians give themselves was "Christ-bearers." From the very first we have been aware that we are called "to bear the mysteries of God," to bear Christ to the world. As we prepare to greet Christ in His Nativity and His Baptism in the Jordan, we should look to our life. Do we bear Christ in all of our life, or only in those parts of our life we consider "religious" or "spiritual"?

May our life during this season bear witness to the reality that "Christ is among us!" May our life answer that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God."

(Abridged from the original)

The Preparatory Season for the Nativity of Our Lord - The Phillipian Fast

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The oldest Christian feast is the Resurrection of our Lord (Pascha). This Holy Day includes a whole cycle of feasts such as the Ascension and Pentecost. It is the great feast of our redemption and sanctification. Later Holy Days followed slowly until the fourth century. After the Church won official recognition and full freedom of worship and evangelization, our present calendar of festal celebration began to develop. This development was motivated by the Church's desire to honor both the events in the life of our Lord and the memory of the holy martyrs. Eventually the Church established a full year Christian calendar. We are familiar with the preparatory period before the Resurrection. This is the "Great Fast" or the "Holy Forty Days' Fast". The celebration of the birth of our Lord cannot be ascertained before the middle of the fourth century. The Church at Rome was the first to celebrate our Lord's birth. Many think that the date of December 25 was chosen to supplant the feast of the god Mithra and the solemn celebration of the birth of the invincible sun god. Others think that the date was chosen for the same reason that the Roman pagans honor the victory of the sun. It is around this date that the sun overcomes the darkness and the days become longer. Several times the prophets call Jesus Christ "Sun of Justice." It was deemed proper to choose the day when the sun begins its victorious cycle of light by shortening the duration of the night.

According to some sermons of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, he introduced this feast into the Eastern Church about the year 379 or 388. After his departure from Constantinople the celebration of Christ's Nativity on December 25 was neglected. In 395 Emperor Honorius reinstated the celebration. St. John Chrysostom tells us how he introduced this feast at Antioch sometime around 380. He explicitly says how he introduced it in imitation of the Church at Rome. St. John believed that the Roman Christians knew the date of Christ's birth better than anybody else since the imperial city archives were accessible to them. The first mention of a preparatory period before Christmas is mentioned in a decree of the Council of Saragossa (380). The Council Fathers stated that every Christian should daily go to church from December 17 until the Theophany (January 6th). At the Synod of Mac (581) in present day France it was decreed that from November 11, the day of St. Martin, until December 24 every Christian should fast 3 times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday).

Our pre-Nativity period of preparation developed rather late. Scholars do not agree about the exact time it began. Some hold that it began in the sixth century. Others believe it began in the seventh or eighth century. The present liturgical pre-Nativity season was finally established at the Council of Constantinople (1166). The Council decreed that the fast would begin on November 15 and last until December 24 inclusive. Thus, there was created another 40 day fast.

The pre-Nativity fast is often called "Phillip's Fast" because it begins on the day after the feast of St. Phillip. The fast was introduced to prepare the Church for a worthy celebration of the great and holy day of the Birth of Christ. The regulations for the fast were far more lenient than the Great Fast before Pascha. Only Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were days of strict fasting without meat, dairy products or oil (in Slavic countries). On Sundays fish was permitted. Laymen were at first permitted to eat fish on other days, too, until the monastic rigoristic influence prevailed. It is interesting to observe that the famous 12th century Byzantine canonist Balsamon expressed the opinion that it would be enough if laymen fasted only one week before Christmas. In 1958 a modern Greek author, Christos M. Enislides, welcomes Balsamon's suggestion and believes that the best solution would be for the Church at large to abstain from meat and dairy products for 33 days. During the last seven days of the fast everybody should observe the strict fast. To worthily meet our Lord and Savior, we should sanctify this pre-Nativity season of the Phillipian Fast. Sanctifying means spending our time in faith and in the service of God and in kindness towards our neighbor, especially those who are in need of our assistance. And we should think of what we would have been had Christ not come to our lowliness and poverty. Together with the whole of the Byzantine Church we should try to meet Christ as he deserves to be met and as it will, in His mercy, best serve our spiritual benefit!

Why Do We Keep Phillip's Fast?

Steve Puluka

Unlike the Great Fast before the Feast of the Resurrection (Pascha), the Phillipian fast is seldom known or practiced in the Byzantine Church. Often it is confused with the Roman Catholic practice of Advent.

Since the Nativity / Theophany events hold less importance than Pascha - the Feast of Feasts - (the Resurrection), a detailed structure never evolved for the Phillipian Fast. Yet the Phillipian Fast is an ancient practice in preparation for



the Incarnation and Theophany of the Lord Jesus Christ. This 40 day fast is important and should be preserved and practiced. The Phillipian Fast can help us to better understand and appreciate all of God's saving plan.

Without the structure and public events to guide us, the practice of the Phillipian Fast has gradually fallen off. Theologically, the birth and the public ministry of Christ are inextricable linked. The Phillipian Fast was created to prepare us to receive Christ into the world and begin His public ministry. They are two sides of a single coin. The Phillipian fast prepares us to receive the public ministry of Christ announced at Theophany.

On arriving at Bethlehem and the Nativity on December 25th, we begin to prepare for the Theophany. We do not stop at the Nativity. In our joy at God's arrival, we press forward and see the Theophany. With Theophany we experience the beginning of Christ's revelation to us of the mysteries of God. Most important of all, this event points out the Mystery of the Trinity, a mystery long hinted in the Old Testament.

Taken from: Christbearers - Meditations for the Pre-Christmas Fast, Christmas and Theophany. The booklet is available from the Office of Religious Education of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Pittsburgh.

Coming to Terms

Advent - The term used by the Roman Church to describe the preparation period for Christ's Birth. It means "Coming".

Phillip - Apostle, born in Bethsaida on the shore of the Lake of Tiberias, the place of origin of Andrew and Peter. He was called in Galilee after Jesus had been baptized by the Forerunner John. (Cf. Matt 10:3, John 1:43-48, John 6:5-7, John 14:8-12) The Nativity / Theophany Fast begins at sundown at the conclusion of the day on which we celebrate his memory.

Phillip's Fast, Nativity Fast, Byzantine Advent - terms designating the 40 day preparation period before the Christmas / Theophany season. It begins at sundown on November 14th (when the Church begins a new day) and concludes at Christmas.

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