

The Paramony of Christmas

In Byzantine Catholic Churches, the day of Christmas Eve is referred to as Paramony ("preparation"). It is the conclusion of the Nativity Fast and is celebrated as a day of strict fasting by those devout Byzantine Christians who are physically capable of doing so. In the Italo-Greek Catholic tradition, the liturgical celebration begins earlier in the day (or the evening before) with the celebration of the Royal Hours. Following Royal Hours- on Christmas Eve- is observed the praying of the Office of Vespers; the celebration of the Litija, and then the Divine Liturgy.

The Byzantine services of Christmas Eve are intentionally parallel to those of Good Friday, illustrating the theological point that the purpose of the Incarnation was to make possible the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In the Italo-Greek Catholic tradition, the Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy begins with praying the Office of Vespers. Following Vespers, the Litija (Celebration of the Joy of the Patriarchs who knew God's promised Messiah would come) is celebrated. During the Litija, a 3-branched candlestick (Trikiria) stands unlit on the Tetrapod in the center of the Church building while the clergy and faithful make a procession outside and around the Church building, re-entering it again through the front doors. Upon re-entry of the Church, the 3 candles are found to be lit, signifying Christ's Incarnation and that Light has come into the world.

The concept that Christ's Incarnation was to make possible his Crucifixion and resurrection is also usually illustrated in Eastern icons of the Nativity, in which the Christ Child is shown wrapped in swaddling clothes, which are a portent of his burial wrappings. The child is also shown lying on a stone, rather than in a manger, representing the Tomb of Christ. The Cave of the Nativity is also a reminder of the cave in which Jesus was buried. The services of Christmas Eve are also similar to those of the Eve of Theophania, and the two Great Feasts are considered one celebration.

The next morning- Christmas Day- the Divine Liturgy is celebrated again, but with special features that occur only on Great Feasts of the Lord. After the dismissal of this Liturgy, the faithful customarily greet each other with the kiss of peace and the words: "Christos Genii!" (Christ is Born), to which the one being greeted responds: "Doxa Kyrie!" ("Glorify Him"). This greeting, together with many of the hymns of the feast, continues to be used until the leave-taking of the feast on December 29.

Byzantine Christians observe a Christmas festal period of twelve days, during which no one in the Church fasts, even on Fridays, which is a normal fasting day throughout the year. During this time one feast leads into another: December 25-31 is the afterfeast of the Nativity; January 2-5 is the forefeast of Theophania.