

## On Epiphany, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Christmas remained connected to the feast of Epiphany, in the early Church, until the fourth century. After Christianity became a recognized religion in the Roman Empire, and then the state religion, the Church made the birth of the Lord in the flesh an independent feast, separated it from Epiphany, and appointed the feast of the sun as its date. The feast of the sun was a popular pagan feast, accompanied by celebrations unworthy of Christians. The Church had baptized, or Christianized, the pagan feast and shifted its center from the visible sun to Christ, the “sun of justice,” as the Church chants in the apolytikion of Christmas. In the Orthodox Churches, theologically, attention is focused more on the feast of the Epiphany than on Christmas. The theological significance of the Feast of the Epiphany makes it the third feast, after Easter and Pentecost.

The feast of Epiphany is popularly called the “diving” (in Arabic, *ghattas*). The verb “diving” is parallel, in meaning, to the verb “baptized” in the Greek language. Hence, the literal meaning of the word “baptism” in Greek is “immersion.” Therefore, Orthodox people consider this holiday as a feast for everyone whose name is “Ghattas,” like our metropolitan of Baghdad and Kuwait. In Orthodox countries, it is customary for a priest to go out with the faithful people, after the Holy Liturgy on the morning of the feast to a lake, seashore, or river, where he throws a metal cross. Young people dive into the water to retrieve it. This tradition is still alive today.

However, the ecclesiastical name is Epiphany, because the Hypostases (Persons) of the Holy Trinity were clearly revealed to mankind, for the first time, during the baptism of Christ. Mankind heard the voice of the Father, saying: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17), the Son was present and baptized, and the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove, which descended on him. This revelation is obvious in the well-known apolytikion of the Feast: “By Your baptism O Lord...” The hymn of preparation for the feast talks about the appearance of Christ and its cause: “Christ appeared wanting to renew all creation.”

It is also called the Feast of Lights, in ancient Greek tradition, because, according to the Christian faith, baptism is illumination by the light of God. Our liturgical tradition calls those who are ready to receive baptism “those who are ready for enlightenment.” We pray that “the Lord will enlighten them with the light of knowledge and true worship.” While the kontakion of the feast brought the two themes together: “Today you have appeared to the world, O Lord, and your light has been shined upon us.”

St. John the Baptist prepared the way for Christian baptism. His call to repentance was thus: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark 1:3). His baptism was a declaration of repentance, and a call to abandon a life of sin, while Christian baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and the acquisition of the grace of divine sonship. The Master, who is innocent of sin, humbly accepted the fulfillment of John’s baptism, “for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15), presenting himself as a model to those for whose salvation he came.

The Gospel of St. Matthew says that “heavens were opened” (Mt. 3:16) immediately after Jesus’ baptism. It’s the first time this expression had been used. After Adam and Eve fell from Paradise, heaven was closed to man, and now it opens again with the coming of the Messiah, who will restore the divine glory man had lost when he refused to live in God’s bosom and care. Also, when heaven was reopened, the voice of the Father was heard, and the Holy Spirit descended. God clearly reveals his Trinitarian mystery to humankind. From that moment on, he no longer only invites humanity to know him, but he will give it, through Christ, the desired salvation and reopen the way for it. Heaven is no longer far away; God is among us.

## On Epiphany, Part Two

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

This feast is an occasion for the believers to examine themselves about the activation of the grace of baptism in their personal lives. The day of our baptism is the day of our true birth, in which we have acquired the sonship of God, and we have put on Christ, as the famous hymn says: “You who are baptized in Christ, in Christ you have been clothed” (see Gal. 3:27). After baptism, the baptized person becomes Christ-like, and must therefore preserve this grace, keep it, and even develop and grow in it, in order to reach the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Saint Gregory Palamas says: “Just as a child takes from his parents the possibility of becoming a man, inheriting parental property upon reaching the appropriate age, but loses it if he dies in the process, so the Christian obtains, by baptism, the ability to become a child of God, an heir of eternal goods, if he (she) does not die spiritually in the course of his (her) life, which is sin.” Sin causes us to lose the graces that we received through baptism.

Use this teaching to reflect on the greatness of the sacrament of baptism and its importance to Christians. This feast invites us to review ourselves and our behavior, in two ways. The first is to preserve the graces of baptism and to cultivate them in us, lest we lose them. It is an occasion to return to the meaning of baptism, to prove the mettle, to preserve it in us, and to live it in its fullness.

The second is the evaluation of our practice of the fulfillment of the sacrament of baptism. The first of these evaluations is to stop choosing the godfather or godmother because of kinship, friendship, or the desire to “whiten the face.”<sup>1</sup> We must choose a godly believer who will take this responsibility seriously and be truly a spiritual father or mother. Evaluating the completion of this sacrament means removing it from the prevailing folklore in the way we deal with it and considering it a very serious and important work. We prepare for it by prayer and fasting, and we complete it in a spirit of piety and reverence. We do not consider it a social occasion, nor do we delay it for social or personal reasons. It is an event in which

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<sup>1</sup> An Arabic-language expression that means to maintain social graces.

our son or daughter takes the most important thing that a person can receive: the grace to be clothed in Christ and become a son or daughter of God.

The issue of blessing our homes and dedicating them to God comes after the festal liturgy. It is an authentic, honorable Christian tradition. Holy water is a way to bring divine blessing to the home, and we must not lose this practice. Today, this authentic tradition is subject to many obstacles, especially in cities, due to their expansion, living conditions and the schedules of the family. It is imperative for both faithful and priests to strive to find the best way to schedule house blessings. For example, the faithful take the initiative to contact the priest, in order to determine the appropriate time for both, to complete the blessing of the house, and the priest urges the faithful to complete this matter, by pursuing them and communicating diligently with them.

It is necessary for the priest to wear his epitrachelion (stole) while blessing homes with water, treating this as a sacramental act. The epitrachelion symbolizes God's grace descending through the sprinkling of holy water and prayer. When putting it on, the priest says, just like he vests in preparation for the Divine Liturgy: "Blessed be God who pours out His grace upon His priests like the oil of myrrh upon the head, descending upon Aaron's beard, down to the fringe of his raiment."

Then, the priest chants, with the people of the household that he blesses, the apolytikion of Epiphany, "By Your baptism, O Lord, in the Jordan River..." Children should learn to recite it for the sake of the household.

Let us not allow these holy days to pass without taking advantage of them spiritually. This is why we have them.