

The Nativity and Almsgiving, Part One

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The hymn of the angels at the Nativity of Christ is the key verse to the practical meaning of this feast. The angels of heaven sing: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among men' (Luke 2:14). God is always glorified in the highest, and through His presence, peace is achieved on earth and goodwill enters the hearts and souls of mankind.

If the glory of God in the highest, the peace on earth, and the goodwill among men are interconnected, then the responsibility for achieving them falls primarily on the believers. The incarnation of the Lord Jesus teaches us to be messengers of peace and apostles of joy. This great responsibility is not fulfilled by excessive concern for the appearances of the holiday, but by working seriously to make the Lord ever present in and directing our lives.

Hence, this feast gains priority among believers in knowing how Jesus Christ was born in their souls. If they remain during the feast and after it as they were before, this means that the feast has not achieved its goal inside of them. Church feasts are stations for self-examination, and new beginnings to a more advanced extent in the life of virtue and the fruition of the Holy Spirit.

Today, Christmas is an essential moment to think about bringing joy to the hearts of despondent, sad, displaced and suffering people all around us. Unfortunately, their population is on the rise. The most important question is: How do we bring them joy? The answer is simple: by giving – morally, spiritually, emotionally and materially. Reviewing the customs associated with this feast is necessary and essential for all believers. On this feast, let us invite each other to activate our participation in bringing joy to our brothers and sisters in God.

How do we return the customs of this feast to their origin? Consider the popular tradition of exchanging gifts and distributing alms to the needy on this blessed holiday. The origin of this tradition goes back to the Christian belief that God has presented humanity the greatest gift at Christmas, the second person of the Holy Trinity, His Word, His Son, in order to save it. Therefore, believers offer gifts to one another as a token of gratitude to God for His greatest gift: Jesus Christ.

Like everything transcendent, the concept of giving is distorted by sinful humans and diverted from its original meaning. In like manner, this tradition has become disfigured with excessive consumerism where exchanging gifts is now a mere imposed seasonal tradition. Anyone can see the excess in this area. Gifts should not be exchanged between people just because "it is Christmas," regardless of the receivers and their needs. Nevertheless, it remains a beautiful custom, although it needs more spirituality and personalization.

Believers first present themselves as pure offerings to the Lord. The Lord came to us to save us, so we, in turn, present ourselves to Him pure and clean with sincere repentance and a noticeable change for the better.

Then, we present to our brothers, sisters, loved ones and friends a simple, thoughtful and joyful offering. Hence, it has become customary on the eve of this feast for all family members to gather for Christmas dinner.

The most important thing is for believers to visit the grieving, the needy, and the neglected, bringing whatever they can provide them during the Nativity Fast.

This feast is an occasion to practice giving. God gave us Himself, so we give Him ourselves. God visited us with His great mercy, so we visit others with our love derived from His love.

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This simple reflection on Christmas leads us to the Christian concept of giving. The first attitude required of Christians is to be open to the gift of God, because when they accept the divine gift and appreciate its importance and role in their life, they become worthy to practice giving in turn. “By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16).

The Bible urges us to give and places great importance on giving. In the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 26), giving tithes was an expression of man’s gratitude to God for the gifts He has given us. In the New Testament, this concept extends beyond tithes to giving everything. The Lord says, “Give to anyone who asks of you” (Matthew 5:42), meaning that Christ asks His disciples to keep their hearts and hands open. Ears unwilling to hear are a sign of hardness of heart, unbecoming of a disciple of Christ.

Christian giving does not have a certain limit; it is open to perfection. Humans give according to their ability. But this ability is determined by their love for the Lord, and their appreciation for what He has done and is doing for them. It is also determined by the degree of their freedom from the love of possession, and their awareness of the importance of almsgiving to the extent where almsgiving will become their joy.

Many people give in order to fulfill the divine commandment, while others give to gain God’s blessings and to please God. Both types of giving are acceptable, but incomplete. Giving is linked to the spiritual level that the giver has reached. There are those who have reached the point of imitating Christ literally by giving everything, even offering their entire lives. The love of almsgiving grows in us exponentially as we grow in the love of God.

Some refrain from giving for many reasons. These people have not experienced the joy of giving and its effect on them. People often think that giving gladdens the hearts of those who receive it. This is undoubtedly true, but does it not gladden the heart of the giver more? The Bible says: “A generous soul will be enriched, and he who waters will himself be watered” (Prov. 11:25). It has been said: “The Lord loves

a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). The joy of the gift’s recipient is a double joy for the givers, because God blesses them.

Giving does not stop at material things. It is a state that believers experience constantly, until it becomes permanent. Do not deprive yourself of giving, and do not make any excuses, lest you remain closed to yourself. Your sincere smile may provide refreshment for a sad soul. Your look of tenderness and compassion may revive a suffering person who lacks love and care. The warm touch of your hand may restore the spirit of someone feeling neglected and lonely.

No one is exempt from the virtue of giving. Let us remember the widow's mite. The lesson lies in your willingness to give before the quality and quantity of gifts. Imitate your incarnate Lord for your sake and for your salvation. Respond to His amazing giving by imitating it as much as you are able, and you will see how many blessings you will reap for yourself. Giving frees you from selfishness, isolation, self-love and fear, which can kill. Christ did not come to keep you captive; He came to liberate you and give you the fullness of life. Throw yourself before Him and pile the dust of your selfishness at the feet of the Divine Child. Open your hands to be filled with His gifts, so that you can happily pass them on to your brethren, and the celebration of the feast will truly begin.