

Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

‘The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary was the hope and the daybreak of salvation for all the world.’

(Post-Communion Prayer for the Feast)

I have a friend, an ex-Anglican and now an Orthodox Priest, who has recently written on Facebook expressing his puzzlement as to why Orthodox Christians should publicise and celebrate their birthdays with such gusto whilst relatively neglecting their name days, the feast of the Saint after whom they are named. Unlike the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who do not celebrate birthdays at all because, they say, only pagans in the Bible celebrated birthdays, my friend does celebrate them – indeed, he has just had his 65th birthday party. But he maintains they are less important, or should be, than our saints days.

I do sympathise with him, and at times I send name-day cards to my children on the feasts of their patron saints, but I have to admit we do make more fuss about birthdays.

Today we celebrate a birthday which is worth making a fuss about. Usually the saints are feasted on their heavenly birthdays, the days on which they died and were received into heaven. Only two are commemorated also on their earthly birthdays, as I’m sure you know – John the Baptist on 24 June, and Our Lady today. It is perhaps understandable why we celebrate the Baptist’s Nativity, because it is

described in the Gospel of St Luke.¹ (And of course I haven't forgotten that we have the major Feast of Our Lord's own Nativity on Christmas Day.) But why the Birth of Mary? Nowhere is this described in Holy Scripture, or even alluded to. We have only early tradition to go on, which began to flower following the Council of Ephesus in the year 431, as Mary's role in our salvation history was appreciated more widely. This tells us that Mary was the child of Joachim and Anna, who gave birth to her after a long period of being childless.² Mary was a miracle child, we might say. She was raised in a pious family – in fact, some Orthodox Christians would say that hers is the true Holy Family. Because Jesus was not the son of Joseph but was conceived of a Virgin, theirs is hardly a typical family, whereas the family of Joachim, Anna and Mary may be an example to all Christian families. They have been called the First Holy Family of Nazareth, a 'family of the flesh' like our own, but preparing the way for Jesus' birth into His human family, the family of 'mind and purpose'.³

So I guess that is one reason – probably a novel one to us of western tradition – why we should celebrate the birth of Mary. Her family life can be an inspiration to our own. But there are other reasons why we celebrate our own birthdays and those of family

¹ Luke 1.5-25

² Cf. Protevangelium of James

³ Cf. *Mystagogy Resource Center* at www.johnsanidopoulos.com

members and friends.

A birthday presents an opportunity. Firstly, an opportunity to be thankful. For children to give thanks for their parents, and parents their children. To be grateful for our own lives up to this point, however difficult they may have been. To thank God for His many blessings to us through our families, whether it be our natural family, or church or other community of friends. A birthday is a time, not to go out and get drunk, as so many birthday cards these days seem to suggest, but to count our blessings. It's true that those of us of more mature years may not look forward so eagerly to our birthday as the young do, but in fact we have more to be thankful for.

The reason for that reticence is that we know that each birthday, each year we are older, brings us closer to death. But it is not such a bad thing to be reminded of our mortality, of the need to get our lives straight, and to look to the future with confidence. I was much inspired by a book by Michael Mayne, entitled *The Enduring Melody*, published just a few days before his death in 2006, in which he catalogues the progress of his life with terminal cancer, but seeing it as an opportunity to live life even more to the full, seeing his final months and weeks not as a slippery slope to death, but as in uphill climb to the peak of his life, which would be fulfilled when he would

be drawn up into Christ. If we could only see our birthdays in later life with that/perspective of joy and faith.

Birthdays also function in bringing families and friends together, to celebrate each other, sometimes from far and wide if it is what we call a 'significant' birthday. We like to mark these milestones in life as they concentrate our thoughts on our relationships which are so important to us, and hopefully help to cement those relationships.

Reflecting on the Birth of Our Lady has led me to ponder these things. But of course our main focus today is to celebrate the family of the Church, of which Mary is Mother. It is a title which has been adopted for the chapter of priests of the Society of Mary, Mother of the Church. Here today we gather to mark our relationship with Jesus, with Mary and with each other in one family. We offer thanks for all that has been given to us through the Church, how it has formed us spiritually through joyful and though challenging times, and especially that in His wisdom God willed to bring to birth her who would be the Mother of His Son, and so set in train our own salvation. And we set before ourselves the example of Mary's family, that 'Holy Family of the flesh', which can be an inspiration to our own families of faithfulness, prayer, hopefulness and willingness to trust in the power and goodness of God.

I don't often quote the Bishop of Manchester – in fact, I've never quoted the Bishop of Manchester – but I'm going to now. In the latest issue of the Diocesan magazine CRUX he starts his reflections by saying, 'For many, September marks a time of fresh beginnings,' and he goes on to talk about children moving into new classes at school, or moving schools, and students starting or returning to university. Forgive me for mentioning the Orthodox churches yet again, but for Christians of eastern tradition the New Year begins not at Advent, but in September. The reason is that the cycle of our redemption can be said to begin with the Birth of Our Lady (and of course, end with the Feast of the Assumption in August). As St Andrew of Crete says, 'Let the whole creation sing praise and dance and unite to celebrate the glories of this day.'⁴ As we join in that celebration of her Nativity, may the cycle of our redemption, the journey of salvation, the deepening of our relationship with Mary and Jesus, begin once more.

Fr David Sutton, NW Ward Superior, 08/09/18

⁴ Office of Readings for the Feast in *Divine Office* vol 2 p.248*