

THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Nativity Encyclical
of His Eminence Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

To the Beloved Orthodox Clergy, Monastics and Faithful of our Holy Metropolis of Boston:

I am come to send fire on the earth, and what will I, if it be already kindled?

Luke 12:49

As we approach the holy feast of our Lord and Saviour's Nativity, my beloved, these holy words from the Gospel according to the Apostle and Evangelist Luke raise a very special question.

What is this "fire" that our Saviour speaks of, and what is the meaning of the term "earth"? With his God-inspired words, St. Symeon the New Theologian helps us understand this passage. He writes:

Fire I have come to send on earth,
Said the Lord and Master.
Upon what earth, pray tell me?
Upon all men that think of things earthen.

Born of earth, living on earth, and, after our departure, returning to the earth, we are "the earth" of which our Saviour speaks. "I am but earth and ashes," says the Patriarch Abraham (Gen. 18:27). The Prophet Job says, "Thou hast counted me as clay, my portion is in earth and ashes" (Job 30:19), and later, "I esteem myself earth and ashes" (Job 42:6). In the Wisdom of Sirach, the author asks, "Why doth earth and ashes vaunt itself?" (Wis. Sir. 10:9), and again, further down, he observes, "All men are but earth and ashes" (Wis. Sir. 17:32).

It is clear, therefore, that we are the "earth" of which our Saviour speaks.

But it is on this earth — this lowly and inconsequential substance that we tread underfoot — that the Fire of the Godhead descends. As it says in the Hymns of Ascent, in Plagal of First Tone, for Sunday Matins: "In the House of David awesome things are accomplished; for there is fire there, burning every shameful mind." In the Incarnation and Nativity of the Son of God, the Sun of Righteousness, this Fire of the Triune God descended into the House of David — that is, into the pure and virginal womb of the holy Theotokos, who was of the lineage of David, to burn away the evil thoughts of earthen mankind and present it to God in a state of purity. Even as fire destroys the thorns and briars that cover a field, making it suitable for cultivation and the sowing of seed, so too is this divine Fire.

The grace of this Fire of the incarnate Word of God purges the thorns and briars of false beliefs and earthly passions, and plants the seed of the word of God within the furrows of our hearts, and, as we witness in the Saints, it consequently bears fruit a hundred fold, sixty fold, and thirty fold, as we are taught in the parables of our Saviour.

On hearing and seeing the "awesome things" that are accomplished by this Uncreated Fire in the disciples of Christ, the faithful also cry out in wonder and amazement, as they begin to experience within themselves the awesome works of the incarnate God:

"Did not our heart burn within us?"

(Luke 24:32)

This is the Fire that is kindled upon the earth, my beloved. This is the Fire that kindles our hearts on this holy feast.

Christ is born! Give ye glory!

Your fervent suppliant unto God,
✠Ephraim, Metropolitan

Nativity of our Saviour
December, 2005
Protocol Number 2509