

NATIVITY ENCYCLICAL OF
METROPOLITAN EPHRAIM OF BOSTON

To the Beloved Presbyters, Deacons, Monastics and Faithful Flock of our Metropolis

My beloved Orthodox Christians,

When I was a young monk in the monastery, one of my obediences was chanting in the church services. Over the years, as I sought to learn more of the musical compositions that have come down to us through the centuries, the hymns that especially endeared themselves to me were the beautiful communion hymns of the Divine Liturgy. The communion hymns are the long melismatic anthems that are chanted while the clergy are receiving Holy Communion in the sanctuary, just before the communion of the faithful.

Like other hymns of the Church, the communion hymns vary according to the day of the week, or the season of the year. During the two Sundays before the feast of our Saviour's Nativity in the flesh, we celebrate the saints of the Old Testament and also our Saviour's genealogy. The communion hymn that is appointed to be chanted in their honor is "Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous; praise is meet for the upright." Like almost all communion hymns, this hymn is taken from the Psalms of the Prophet-King David. The melody for it was composed in the 1700's by Peter the Peloponnesian; it is a very compunctionate hymn that expresses an overwhelming nostalgia and longing for these heroes and saints of the Old Testament. Truly, who will not marvel when reading of the exploits of Abraham and the other Patriarchs, of Moses and the events in Egypt and at the Red Sea, the pillar of fire, the manna, the crossing of the Jordan River, the fall of Jericho, the feats of Samson, the Prophet Samuel, David and Goliath, the Prophets Elias and Elisseus, Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the Three Children in the fiery furnace, Ruth, Judith, Sarah, Rebecca, and the Maccabees?

By his masterful composition, the composer of the communion hymn for these saints captures the esteem and yearning that we have for these outstanding and incredible heroes of the Faith; and yet, as magnificent as this hymn may be, it cannot compare to the triumph and joy expressed in the communion hymn composed for our Saviour's Nativity: "The Lord hath sent redemption unto His people!" This, too, is taken from the Book of Psalms.

Indeed, the Lord has sent redemption to His people in the Incarnation and Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. No matter how marvelous the saints of the Old Testament were, they could not escape Satan's kingdom of death. Only with the arrival of the Liberator could these holy people of the Old Testament times find their freedom and redemption. Seeing our sorry plight, and the plight of the saints of all ages past, our Saviour in His

ineffable love deigned to become like one of us so that He might snatch us from the grasp of the Evil One.

In one of his talks to his monks, Saint Symeon the New Theologian, describing our Saviour's love for mankind when we were under the tyranny of the Devil, says the following:

Nearly all men reject the weak and the poor as objects of disgust: an earthly king cannot bear the sight of them, rulers turn away from them with revulsion and loathing, while the rich ignore them and pass them by when they meet them as though they did not exist; nobody thinks it desirable to associate with them. But God, Who is served by myriads of Heavenly hosts without number, Who "sustains all things by the word of His power" [Heb. 1:3], Whose majesty is beyond anyone's ability to endure, has not disdained to become the father, the friend, the brother of those rejected ones. He willed to become incarnate so that He might become "like unto us in all things except for sin" [Heb. 4:15] and free us, and make us to share in His glory and His kingdom. What stupendous riches of His great goodness! What an ineffable condescension on the part of our Master and our God!

*(St. Symeon the New Theologian,
Discourse 2:4)*

No wonder, then, that the communion hymn for the feast of the Nativity of our Redeemer is so full of joy and triumph! Christ has proved to be our "father, and friend, and brother" in our time of need. He is truly "the Friend of man." This, indeed, is a cause for celebration and joy. "The Lord hath sent redemption unto His people!"

To Him be glory and honour unto the ages of ages. Amen!

Christ is born! Give ye glory!

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠ Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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