

# St. Philip's Fast: Me...Fast?!?

By Hieromonk Maximos of the Holy Resurrection Monastery, St. Nazianz, WI, USA

**WHAT KIND OF CRAZY RELIGION** asks you to fast for six weeks before Christmas? Why, with all the parties that we have to go to, all the presents to buy, the family to deal with, the crises to fend off, the hurt feelings to smooth over, why should the Church give us one more thing to worry about? Isn't life hard enough without making us jump through one more stupid hoop?

Let me offer a different perspective. I want you to think about the possibility that the invitation to fast in preparation for Christmas may offer you the best chance for that new perspective on life, one that shows you where the real craziness lies, and the real sanity. Imagine what would happen if we Christians spent the Nativity season becoming more deeply attached to reality rather than trying to escape it by indulging artificial desires? What if, instead of running away from the world, we spent this time loving the world more deeply? What if we spent this time, not disengaged, but vastly more engaged as creatures within this astonishing creation?

The strangest criticism I ever heard of fasting is that it is a form of "denying the world." On the contrary, fasting is a way of being joined much more intimately to the world. When we fast, we experience the world in a new way.

That's the whole point! When we fast, it is impossible to take the world for granted. We allow the world to hurt us, gently of course, but firmly. It pressed in on us, it insists on its truth, its presence, its needs, its intimate connection with our bodies and our minds. When we fast perhaps we can begin (for the first time?) to see the world as God sees it: as beautiful in itself, holy, sacred. When we fast, for Christ's sake, every mouthful of food is made consecrated, sacramental. Yes, fasting can be done badly. But when it is done well, as the Lord commands us, with bright faces and with anointed heads (see Matthew 6: 16), fasting makes us thankful, connected, free, joyful. It helps us to love. Imagine what could happen if Christians spent the Nativity season loving the world as God does, that same God Who "so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

Just imagine how different everything would be if we lived as though that love were something real, more real than the faked smiles and forced hypocrisy of holiday indulgence. Imagine, in other words, what would happen if we Christians began to see the world as something lovable, far too lovable to be exploited for the few moment's enjoyment, to be used up and thrown away like wrapping paper enclosing the briefest of pleasures. The world says, "party!" but doesn't really seem to know why. The Church also wants us to enjoy these holy days, but goes further than the world. By offering us the gift of fasting, the Church actually gives us both a means and a reason to really — and I mean really — enjoy ourselves. Thank God for our crazy religion! Thank God for the Nativity Fast!



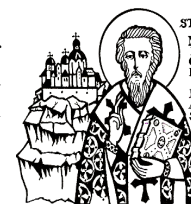
## *Celebrating Our Faith*

Byzantine Catholic Worship: *Our Church, Its Customs and Rich Heritage*

### *A Beautiful Example to Follow*

**A**MONG THE VARIOUS FEASTS of the Saints whose memory we commemorate during the Church Year, one merits special consideration. From earliest times our holy Father, St. Nicholas, enjoyed great veneration and universal respect among the Ukrainian people. Not a single home in our homeland was without an icon of St. Nicholas, and his image is almost always seen among the icons on the iconostases of Byzantine churches. Our people venerate him as though he were a native Saint.

We do not know very much about the life of St. Nicholas, but what we do know for certain is that he was a bishop for many years in Myra, a city in the province of Lycia, in Asia Minor, that he took part in the First Ecumenical Council in 325 at Nicea, and that he died around the year 343. We also know that his whole life was dedicated to works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual. Even during his lifetime he was called "the father of orphans, widows, and the poor." After his death, the Lord glorified him with the gift of working miracles, for which he received the title "Great Wonder-worker."



Although nearly one thousand six hundred and seventy-five years have passed since his death, because of his works of charity and merciful generosity, he continues to live in the hearts of millions of people. Every year on his feastday, December 6 (December 19 on the Julian calendar), his love of neighbour continues to live symbolically throughout the world, as thousands upon thousands of children receive gifts in his name. The secret of his great and continuous admiration among all the Christian nations lies in the fact that he has become a symbol of sacrificial love and compassionate mercy. This is attested by the history of his following, our church services and the fervent veneration of his icons.

Source: *A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year*

#### *Troparion of St. Nicholas (Tone 4)*

The truth of your deeds made you for your flock a rule of faith and an image of meekness, a teacher of continence. And so you gained the heights through humility, riches through poverty, father and bishop Nicholas. Intercede with Christ our God for the salvation of our souls.

#### *Kontakion of St. Nicholas (Tone 3)*

In Myra, O holy one, you proved yourself a priest. You fulfilled the Gospel of Christ, O venerable father. You laid down your soul for your people and saved the innocent from death. And so you were sanctified as a great initiate of God's grace.

## As the People Were Filled With Expectation...

**TO BE IN A STATE OF EXPECTATION** is to be on alert. We find ourselves in a condition of readiness. Such expectation can be positive or negative, filled with joy or filled with dread. Expectation can cause us to flee from a visit to the dentist or to rush toward a holiday at the beach.

"The people were in expectation," Luke's Gospel says. They were waiting for the Messiah. However, they had a definite expectation concerning the Holy One of Yahweh. Namely, He would be the One to drive out the hated Romans and restore the glory that once reigned in Israel under King David. Whenever a charismatic leader appeared, the people's expectations were heightened. Unfortunately these expectations were soon dashed. The higher the expectations, the deeper the sense of disappointment.



During the Christmas fast (Advent or Pylypiwka), a sense of expectation grows in intensity. The Advent prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" takes on a sense of urgency. Yet the feeling of expectation turns back to us:

Whom are we expecting? What are we expecting? Will we be disappointed by what we find? Will our hearts' deepest longing be satisfied by the One in the manger? These are not academic questions which touch the mind, but rather questions that challenge us to be open to the grace of God. Such an openness is the willingness to risk being surprised by grace. We don't come to the end of the Advent season with a detailed program of expectations. We arrive with an expectant heart that says, "Come, Lord Jesus! Come as You are and fill my heart with your presence and peace!"

## Feast of the Conception of St. Anne ~ December 9



**HOW WONDERFULLY** and marvellously God prepared her who was to be the Mother of our Saviour. She — full of grace, holy, most pure and immaculate — became the worthy tabernacle, in which the Son of God dwelt. Our ancient Slavonic Prologue contains the following instruction for the feast of the Conception of St. Anne: "Beloved, today is the beginning of our salvation. In the womb of the righteous Anne, after the annunciation of the angel, the grand-daughter of the Just Jesse, of the line of David, is conceived...And know beloved, that today

we are celebrating the Conception of our Lady the Most pure Queen — the God-bearer, Mother of God. Therefore, let us hasten to her church with joy, and remain there in awesome prayer; with a vigil let us open the doors of the heavenly chamber, and let us beautify ourselves with prayer, alms, and fasting. Thus let us celebrate the holy Conception of the Most Pure Lady the Mother of God devoutly and with joy, for She unceasingly prays to her Son and our God for us."

## Propers of the Divine Liturgy

**QUESTION:** Who are the 'thrice-blessed youth' that are referred to in the Kontakion from the two Sundays that precede Christmas (Sunday of the Holy Forefathers and Sunday of the Holy Fathers)?

**Answer:** In the years following 600 B.C., Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians, the Temple built by Solomon was destroyed, and many of the Israelite people were led away into the Babylonian Captivity. Among the captives were also the illustrious youths Daniel, the fourth of the major prophets, and Ananias, Azarias and Misael.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered that they be instructed in the Chaldean language and wisdom, and dressed them in finery. Handsome children of princely lineage were often chosen to serve as pages in the palace. For three years, they would be fed from food from the king's table. After this they would be allowed to stand before his throne. Daniel was renamed Baltasar, Ananias was called Shadrach, Misael was called Mishach, and Azarias was known as Abednego. But they, cleaving to their faith, disdained the extravagance of court, refusing to defile themselves by eating from the king's table and drinking his wine. Instead, they lived on vegetables and water.

During these times King Nebuchadnezzar ordered a huge statue to be made in his likeness. It was decreed that when people heard the sound of trumpets and other instruments, they should fall down and worship the golden idol. Because they refused to do this, the three holy youths Ananias, Azarias and Misael were cast into a fiery furnace. The flames shot out over the furnace forty-nine cubits, felling the Chaldeans standing about, but the holy youths walked in the midst of the flames, offering prayer and psalmody to the Lord (Daniel 3:26-90).



The Angel of the Lord appeared in the furnace and cooled the flames, and the young men remained unharmed. This "Angel of Great Counsel," as he is called in iconography, is identified with the Son of God (Daniel 3:25, Isaiah 9:6). In the first Canon for the Nativity of the Lord (Ode 5), the Church sings: "Thou hast sent us Thine Angel of Great Counsel." The emperor, upon seeing this, commanded them to come out, and was converted to the true God.

The prophet Daniel interceded for his people before King Cyrus, who esteemed him highly, and who decreed freedom for the Israelite people. Daniel himself and his fellows Ananias, Azarias and Misael, all survived into old age, but died in captivity. According to the testimony of Saint Cyril of Alexandria (June 9), Saints Ananias, Azarias and Misael were beheaded on orders of the Persian emperor Chambyses.

*Armed by the Being that defies description, You defied the man-made idol,  
O thrice-blessed youth. In the midst of the unbearable flames  
you stood and cried out to God: "In Your mercy, O gracious One,  
hasten and come to our aid," for You can do whatever You will.*