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Sargis Vardapet Kund

An Armenian Nativity Ode

Thoughts on the Incarnation

Theophany: December 25th or January 6th?

The Great and Wondrous Mystery of Christmas



Volume 2

Number 1

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THE FELLOWSHIP OF ST. VOSKI

Nor Voskiank/Նոր Ոսկեանք is a fellowship of men and women working toward the revival and restoration of Armenian Orthodox theology and life within the Armenian Church at large. The fellowship is named after St. Voski and his companions (the Voskians) who were a group of Christian martyrs and monastics from the first century, many of whom were students of St. Thaddeus. According to tradition, St. Thaddeus ordained as their leader a priest called Chrysos (Greek for “gold”, Armenian “voski”), and thereafter the group came to be known as the Voskians. In the spirit of the Voskians, Nor Voskiank seeks to support the cultivation of a thriving, united, worldwide Armenian Christian community through prayer, fellowship, and the publication of practical educational resources covering the entire breadth of Christian life as lived, interpreted and testified to by the Armenian Church since ancient times. The Treasury/Գանձարան is published quarterly and subscriptions are available by request. To contact us or donate, please visit us at

www.StVoski.org

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INCARNATION AND EMMANUEL

Welcome to the 2015 winter issue of *The Treasury*/ Գանձարան. Not only are we proud to present our fifth release of *The Treasury*/Գանձարան, packed with inspiring articles and reflections, but we are also thrilled to announce the one-year birthday of the Fellowship of St. Voski/Նոր Ոսկեանք. It has truly been a joy to share with our readers the “treasures” of our ancient and beloved Armenian Orthodox faith, and we wish to extend our heartfelt gratitude for all the encouragement and support that we have received over the past year. God continues to inspire and prepare our team to bring you the best of our efforts.

In the current edition of *The Treasury* you will find several articles on the topics of Christmas (Սուրբ Ծնունդ/*Soorp Dznoont*) and Theophany (Աստուածայայտնություն/*Asdvadzahaydnootyun*) in accordance with the season's main celebration. It never ceases to amaze me how the holiday of Christmas can be an endless source of inspiration and reflection for the Christian. Every year around this time, thousands of priests and pastors prepare captivating homilies on the topic of Christmas, and Christian authors pen fresh words of spiritual wisdom and illumination for various literary venues. Even non-Christians have joined the pious in speaking or writing about the joy, love and peace that the Christmas season ushers in every year. Although for many the idea of God becoming human (the Incarnation) and being present with us (Emmanuel) is too difficult a reality to grasp, there is still a clear recognition that the world was dramatically changed forevermore by the birth of a little infant to an unknown family in an obscure Jewish town in the Middle East over 2000 years ago.

How shall we respond to this yearly reminder of God's physical entry into our dimension? Is it with the mandatory stress of frenzied gift buying, party hosting and event attending? To be sure, there is nothing wrong with showing one's love for others by purchasing gifts or arranging get-togethers to spend time with family and friends. But amidst the controlled chaos of the season's celebrations, as Christians we must commit to slowing down and pondering the significance of the mystery of The Incarnation and the wonder of Emmanuel, which are the fundamental miracles of The Nativity event.

The Armenian Orthodox Church recognizes that this reflective exercise is no simple or brief task, and designates substantial time during its liturgical year for Christmastime reflection. The fifty days prior to January 5th, known as Յիսուսկ (*Hisnag*/Advent), are set aside for the preparation of heart and mind in anticipation of the coming Savior of the world. This is followed by Christmas Eve (Jan 5th), Theophany/Epiphany (Jan 6th, the beginning of the entire liturgical year), and then an additional seven-day celebration dedicated to continued contemplation and celebration of the arrival of the King of Kings at our world's doorstep.

Let us immerse ourselves in this church-led reflective period, paying special attention to our Church's carefully selected daily Scripture readings which serve to guide us in our meditations. In this way, as we participate in the merriment of the season, our hearts and minds will remain steadfastly moored to the true “reason for the season”, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.





ST. NICHOLAS

THE SLAP HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

By Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian

St. Nicholas of Myra (270-343), also known as Santa Claus, was one of 318 bishops who attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The council was called together to discuss the beliefs of Arius. While Arius was defending his blasphemous teachings of Christ being created by God the Father and thus, being lesser and inferior, St. Nicholas, being filled with the love of Christ, arose from his seat, approached Arius and smacked him across the face.

The bishops present, stunned by the actions of St. Nicholas, stripped him of his episcopal symbols, namely the Gospels and the omophorion (an episcopal vestment) and then Emperor Constantine placed him in prison. During the night, in a dream, St. Nicholas was visited by Christ, who asked him, "Why are you here?"

St. Nicholas responded, "Because I love you, my Lord and my God." Christ then gave him the Gospels and then St. Mary, the Mother of God, bestowed upon him the omophorion. The next morning, when the bishops gathered together to discuss how they slept, one recalled a dream he had. In it Christ and the Mother of God granted the imprisoned St. Nicholas the Gospels and the omophorion. Upon hearing this, another bishop said he had the same dream. Then another and another until they realized that all the bishops had the same dream.

Recognizing the miracle that took place, they raced to the prison to find the sleeping St. Nicholas in his jail cell with the Gospels and omophorion placed neatly at his side. Emperor Constantine freed him from prison and the bishops reinstated him to his episcopate.

The slap that St. Nicholas laid on Arius's face was one of the first times a Christian would defend the Christian faith with his hands – and it would not be the last. Throughout history, especially Armenian history, Christians have defended their faith so that future generations could worship the Holy Trinity. From the battle of Avarayr and the Genocide to the War for Artsakh and the present day war in Syria, Christians use their hands to defend their faith and the Gospel.

Yet how many of us defend our faith or are willing to protect it? How many of us sit back and let others disgrace and ridicule our faith? How many of us watch and wait for others to defend it, while Christ is waiting for us to defend Him? We are called to be preachers of the Gospel and also defenders. Let us make an effort, in the coming new year, to stand up for Christ, the Gospel and our faith. Let us follow St. Nicholas's example, so that when Christ asks us why we have defended Him, we may respond, like St. Nicholas, by saying, "Because I love you, my Lord and my God."

AN ARMENIAN ODE FOR THE HOLY NATIVITY GOOD NEWS!

by Very Rev. Fr. Michael Daniel Findikyan



The Armenian Church is endowed with a rich treasury of Christmas songs. Alongside the few *sharagans*/*շարակաւի* that we are accustomed to hearing in church on the Feast of Theophany (*Աստուածայայտնութիւն / Asdvadzahaydnootyoon*), our devout ancestors also composed many other types of sacred hymns to be sung during the Christmas season. These pieces come from deep within the Christian soul of the Armenian people. They are love songs that contemplate and celebrate the mystery of Emmanuel, God-with-Us.

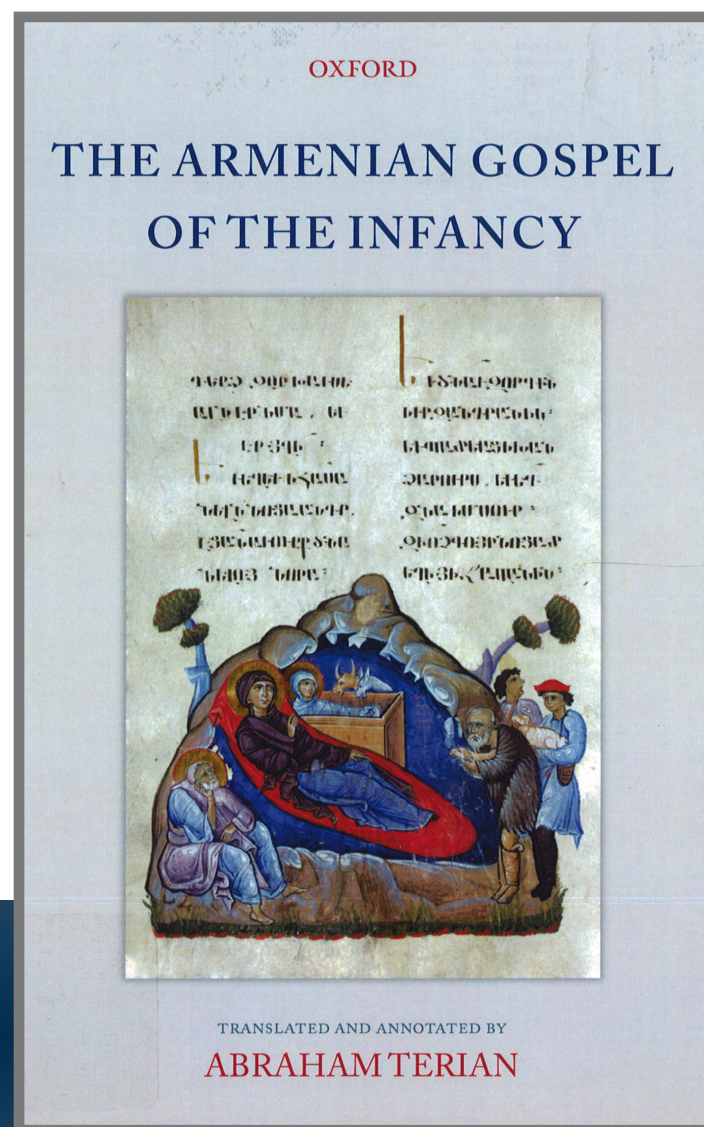
The hymn that begins, *Today is the Feast of the Holy Nativity* (*Aysor don eh soorp dzununtyan*), is a *dagh* / *դաղ* or “ode.” The *daghs* developed relatively late in the long history of the development of the Armenian Church’s liturgical music. Most *daghs* date after the 14th century. Among the hundreds of *daghs* that have come down to us, our Nativity *dagh* is one of the very few that is occasionally heard today. The internet contains a few renditions of this *dagh* sung by chanters and choirs around the world.

Like all *daghs*, *Today is the Feast of the Holy Nativity* is a metrical composition containing a long chain of verses. In the original Armenian, each verse consists of two rhyming lines in which each line has exactly 8 syllables. In most *daghs* a short response or refrain caps each line. Each line of our Nativity *dagh* ends with the word *Avedees* / *Աւտնիս*, which means “Good News.” That is how the angel that appeared to the shepherds described the birth of the Savior: “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy” [Luke 2:10]. In this translation I have tried to render faithfully the meaning of the words while preserving both the meter and the rhyme—no easy task!

Compared to the *sharagans*, which can be theologically very sophisticated, *daghs* are generally simpler meditations on the story of a Christian feast or saint. Our Nativity *dagh* rehearses many of the details of the Christmas stories from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We encounter Mary and Joseph, the manger, the swaddling cloth, the wise men from the East (referred to here as “Hindustan,” the land of the Hindus!), the shepherds, the star, Herod and of course the baby Jesus. While retelling the stories we know so well, the *dagh* makes observations that are largely drawn from a close reading of the Bible. In fact, like all *sharagans* and *daghs*, this hymn is a Bible Study. The anonymous composer was a master of sacred Scripture. The composer freely makes connections between the Christmas story and other episodes of the Old and New Testaments that shine light on the deeper meaning of the birth of the Son of God and its consequences for humanity. How many Biblical references and allusions can you find in each verse?

But our *dagh* also reveals many surprising details about the birth of Jesus that one won’t find in the Bible. They come from ancient stories that were collected and treasured by all of the ancient churches, but which never made it into the Biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus. The Armenians incorporated these traditions into a delightful work known as *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*. Dr. Abraham Terian has published a complete, annotated English translation of this work. There you will find the source of a number of peculiar episodes and details recounted in our Christmas *dagh*.

Our Nativity ode is found in many printed editions known as *Dagharan* / *Տաղարան* (Book of Odes). Yet there are minor differences in the lyrics among the various editions. This is a sure sign that the *dagh* was a hymn of the common folk more than a formal liturgical composition of the clergy. Even the number of verses varies from book to book. The version here is almost certainly incomplete. There can be no doubt that additional verses exist somewhere, whether they were composed by the original composer, or by unknown others who became energized by the *dagh*’s infectious meter and rhyme, and instinctively carried on their own meditations about the great mystery of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This translation is based on the Jerusalem, 1985 and Constantinople, 1701 editions of the *Dagharan*.



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 հնչեա՛ զքնարն քո եւ խայտա՛. աւետիս:
 Զոր ասացեր նախագուշակ. աւետիս:
 կատարեցաւ յոյժ զերունակ. աւետիս:
 Թէ ի Սաբայ եւ Յարաբայ. աւետիս:
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 որ երեքեանն անուանին. աւետիս:
 Մելքոն Գասբար եւ Պաղտասար. աւետիս:
 որք ի Սաբայ եւ Յարաբայ. աւետիս:
 Ոսկի՛ կնդրուկ՝ զըմռտ նմա. աւետիս:
 ունին երեք ազնիւ ընծայ. աւետիս:
 Ոսկին զպատիւն արքայական. աւետիս:
 կնդրուկն զգարդ աստուածութեանն. աւետիս:

Today is the Nativity. Good News!
 And God our Lord's Epiphany. Good News!
 Today the Sun of Righteousness, Good News!
 Appeared to mortal ones like us. Good News!
 Today the holy Virgin pure, Good News!
 A king she bore who will endure. Good News!
 From heav'n above the angels came. Good News!
 The timeless King we all acclaim. Good News!
 Today hell trembled, shocked and scared. Good News!
 The evil ones slumped in despair. Good News!
 Today the evil demons grieved. Good News!
 And Adam's kin rejoiced, relieved. Good News!
 A radiant, blazing, precious star, Good News!
 In Hindustan shone from afar. Good News!
 Great monarchs gathered many strong, Good News!
 With scribes and princes a great throng. Good News!
 They saw the star, and stupefied, Good News!
 They scanned it yet were mystified. Good News!
 Come Moses and behold Sinai! Good News!
 The burning bush that does not die. Good News!
 Rejoice! Rejoice great David King. Good News!
 Make music with your lyre and sing. Good News!
 What you foretold in ages past, Good News!
 Has come to be, your peace at last. Good News!
 In Sheba, Seba, they will bring— Good News!
 A holy gift, an offering. Good News!
 Behold! Three kings set out and came. Good News!
 "The Three" as they are known by name. Good News!
 Melkon, Caspar and Baghdasar, Good News!
 The kings of Sheba, Seba far. Good News!
 Gold, frankincense and costly myrrh, Good News!
 Three splendid gifts for Him they were. Good News!
 Gold for His kingly honor, laud. Good News!
 And frankincense befitting God. Good News!

Զըմուռն որ էր անապական. անտիս:
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 ի խանձըրորն փատութեցին. անտիս:

And myrrh, most pure, pristine and fine. Good News!
 His death and resurrection's sign. Good News!
 They were twelve thousand strong those men, Good News!
 Who stormed into Jerusalem. Good News!
 The Virgin in the star they grasped. Good News!
 She held Our Lord tight in her lap. Good News!
 Jerusalem quaked all around. Good News!
 When they all heard the thunder pound. Good News!
 King Herod, paralyzed in dread. Good News!
 His wicked hand to them he spread. Good News!
 The palace pillars toppled down. Good News!
 He hurt and cast them to the ground. Good News!
 Yet then in love they went their way. Good News!
 They turned toward Bethlehem that day. Good News!
 They leaped for joy and merriment. Good News!
 They played their dulcet instruments. Good News!
 Then they saw Joseph, Mary there. Good News!
 But awestruck they fled in despair. Good News!
 The godly angel came to tell, Good News!
 Of coming woes, impending hell. Good News!
 But Temple of the Word, be strong! Good News!
 God's only Son they praise in song. Good News!
 They turned and went into the cave. Good News!
 Wherein God's Son was born to save. Good News!
 The shepherds of the simple flock, Good News!
 With angels praised the Lord our Rock. Good News!
 The Lamb from heaven Lord is He. Good News!
 To God the Lamb gifts they concede. Good News!
 Today the Lord of all that graze— Good News!
 Lies in a trough while livestock gaze. Good News!
 Today the most Magnificent— Good News!
 In swaddling clothes, an indigent. Good News!

Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan, PhD, is Professor of Liturgical Studies
 at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary.



Ի Սրբութիւն Սրբոց: Great Figures in the Life of the Armenian Church

SARGIS KUND

(1100?-1185?)

“To those whose palate has been trained to appreciate it, the intangible food of the soul is sweeter and more appetizing than the tangible food of the body.”

– Sargis Vardapet Kund

As a general rule, Armenia's saintly teachers and leaders were not forthcoming about the details of their lives. To us this seems surprising. For us, life is a fascinating thing, and the working of the Divine through our own life events is something we trace with relish. In more ancient times, this was not the case. When, where and exactly how things happened was not so interesting as their ultimate significance, what they revealed about the greater picture of God's grace at work on the historical stage of the world. Thus, the details of when a great spiritual teacher was born and what took place in his life were not meaningful per se: the significance of a teacher's life was illustrated by the things his learning produced – that is, his writings, and the persons and accomplishments of his students. These were the things that manifested divine grace for the good of the Church, Christ's body.

Sargis Kund is a great example of a teacher who fully embraced the idea that his life's significance did not reside in the details of his biography. What mattered to him, in terms of his own life trajectory, were three things.

First, who his teachers were—the people to whom he owed his formative learning and of whose life-significance it was his responsibility to be the living proof.

Second, the setting where he taught and developed his spiritual practice.

Third, his writings and his students. It was into his books and his disciples that he poured his life and learning; upon his students he conferred the right to teach in a manner worthy of his lineage, and in his books he distilled the essence of what that lineage had to offer.

These, in fact, are the only three things that have been passed down to us by history concerning Sargis. Not much, we might say, for one of the greatest teachers of his day. And yet, it is enough.

First, his lineage. Sargis was the disciple of the great teacher Hovhannes Sarkawag Vartabed. This meant that Sargis was not only accepted as a student at Haghbat Monastery, the most prestigious institution of learning in his era, but he was selected to become a long-term disciple and associate of the most renowned intellectual master in Armenia at that time. His teacher, Hovhannes Sarkawag, was famed for his erudition: “his knowledge was of mythic proportions,” says the late scholar monk Norayr Bogharian in his book *Armenian Writers* [Հայ գրողներ]. Another scholar, Manuk Abeghian, describes him as a major figure

in the high medieval renaissance not only of philosophy but also of art, mathematics and musical studies in Armenia. So Sargis benefited from intensive study with a man who knew more than anyone else about a wide range of subjects.

It must have been with some trepidation that Sargis accepted the responsibility to become a living proof of his teacher's efficacy, enlightenment, and ability to both amass knowledge and stimulate others to acquire breadth and depth of learning. Later, others affirmed that Sargis had lived up to his responsibility as Sarkawag's student: “He was a diligent and valiant husbandman of the Lord, erudite and brilliant with the Spirit's wisdom.”

Second, the setting in which Sargis chose to live, worship, write and teach after his mentor's death in 1129. Although it would not have been unusual for a stellar student such as himself to go off at once and found his own school, Sargis seems to have remained at Haghbat for a time when Hovhannes Sarkawag died. Ultimately, however, he moved to the Monastery of Teghenik', on a forested mountainside north of the village of Buzhakan in the Kotayk' province. At the time when Sargis arrived there, the ancient complex of Teghenik', initially founded in the 6-7th century, was either in the process of building its new mother church or had recently completed it. The edifice was a wonder of artistry and elegance. Sargis spent his closing years surrounded by the finest of Armenia's visual theology, worshiping and teaching in a state of the art facility.

At Teghenik', if not before, Sargis' reputation as a notable teacher and preacher became widespread. One colophon to a manuscript of Sargis' works tells the story of a Muslim named Hovsep' of Duin. After being severely beaten by his father for becoming a Christian, he “secretly left his parents and went to Teghenik'” to see Sargis. The teacher encouraged him in his faith, and sent him off to visit monasteries. Hovsep's first destination was Sargis's former home, Haghbat. Hovsep's fidelity to his new faith, whose seeds were watered if not planted by Sargis, led to his martyrdom in 1170.

Over and above his teaching, Sargis was also a prolific and original writer. He is considered to have been the first Armenian teacher to produce a Biblical commentary that brought together relevant writings from the previous generations of Church fathers, clearly identified, in a handy compendium. This format made it possible for students who did not have the advantage of a stellar library to benefit

from the thinking of many authoritative figures on whatever topic they were preparing to teach or preach.

Obviously, a compendium of the thought of many Church luminaries could only be the fruit of a lifetime's study. Why such devotion to amassing everything possible about how the Church has interpreted Scripture? In his colophons, Sargis mentions that his were "turbulent times". This was true on many fronts. The Armenian capital of Ani fell to the Seljuk Turks when Sargis was a young man, and there was ongoing fighting between them and the Georgian Bagratuni rulers, who also had claims on the region. In addition to the unrest, there were earthquakes and disasters. To the south, European crusades came and went, changing the landscape of the Middle East. The Armenian diaspora of Cilicia, which lay on the crusader path to Jerusalem, was busy carving out a kingdom for itself in parts of what is now Lebanon and Syria — with all the political and military agitation that such ambition implied. In Sargis' old age, the clash of cultures between Cilicia's catholicosate and the clergy of the homeland became acute. Relations between the two halves of the Armenian world were marred by the power games of strong personalities, differences in policy and attitudes, and unfortunate events. Although later generations would look back on Sargis' lifetime as "the silver age," it hardly seemed like precious "silver" to the people who lived through it.

Sargis began his commentary project in 1146 when he was nearly fifty years old. At that point, he already had spent seventeen years in preparatory study and teaching subsequent to his teacher Hovhannes Sarkawag's death. As he aged amid the turbulence of his times, the project invigorated Sargis: He says, "I forgot my age and mental

weakness in the urgency of my enthusiasm." He finished his commentary on Luke's Gospel when he was in his seventies, bringing together the thought of at least a dozen universal Church fathers: his marginal notes and colophons mention Ephrem the Syrian, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Theophilus, Epiphanius of Cyprus, Evagrius, Nana the Syrian and the more controversial father Severian. In addition, he cited a further half-dozen or more native Armenian authoritative interpreters of Scripture.

Simultaneously with his compilation on Luke's Gospel, Sargis produced commentaries on the Gospel of John, on the Catholic Epistles, and on the Prophecy of Isaiah.

It was his enthusiasm for Scripture, in other words, that saw Sargis through the dark days of his lifetime. And it became his legacy. Nourished by the "intangible food of the soul," he knew its sustaining power, and he diligently labored to make that life-giving sustenance available to others who might find themselves living through their own lean times of trial and tribulation. He bequeathed to future generations the food of Scripture not only for their survival, but for their delectation, enjoyment and growth.

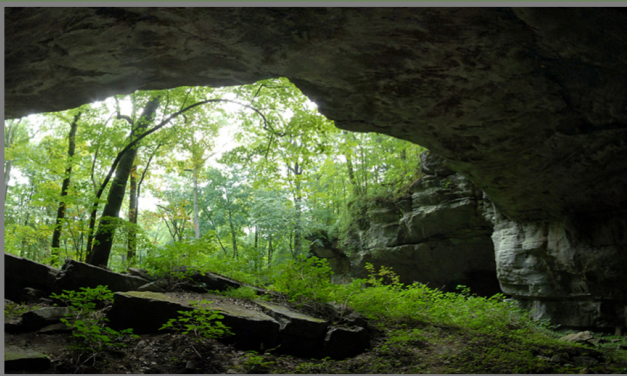
For further information in English on Sargis' writings, the reader may consult Vahan S. Hovanessian, "A Medieval Armenian Scholion on the Catholic Epistles," in Vahan S. Hovanessian, ed., *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East*, NY: Peter Lang, 2007, 121-132, 162-166.



Gleanings on the Nativity of Christ, from Sargis Kund's *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*

The most lasting part of Sargis' legacy has been his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. Within that lengthy commentary on Luke's twenty-four chapters, pride of place goes to the commentary on chapters 1-2, which describe the events surrounding Christ's nativity. So it seems fitting to share here a small sampling of the comments Sargis collected on that blessed moment when,

The One whom all creation
cannot contain was born in a
small cave, in order to re-open
the whole expanse of Paradise.



as he describes it, the light that shone round the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night on a Bethlehem hillside announced the end of darkness and the dawn of a new day of divine grace for all humanity, lit by the Sun of righteousness.

The commentary proceeds in order through the chapter, pausing to offer comments on each verse, or sometimes on one part of a verse. At the end of each of the following excerpts, the name of the Church father whom Sargis credits with the insight is given in parentheses.

2.2 His birth happened in the days of the first census under Caesar Augustus

[How appropriate it was that Christ should be born in the time of a census enrolling people in the earthly kingdom of Augustus Caesar] when it is He who has enrolled us in heaven! As St. Gregory the Theologian said, "Respect the census that made it possible for you to be enrolled in heaven!" It is obvious that the God who holds everything became a human born of a virgin and was listed among [the subjects of] the king who held the whole earth, in order to list us in the book of eternal life. That listing is not written with black ink made from soot, but with His own blood on the Cross.

(Step'anos Siwnets'i)

2.7 And she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.

God, the ancient of days, the One who was with the Father beyond time, is a newborn infant! He chose to make Himself small, so that we would have the boldness to approach Him, the One whose exceedingly glorious light the cherubim were unable to gaze on.

God, the ancient of days, the One who was with the Father beyond time, is a newborn infant! He chose to make Himself small, so that we would have the boldness to approach Him, the One whose exceedingly glorious light the cherubim were unable to gaze on.

Today, He chooses humility, the antidote to the pride that caused us humans to lose our original glory.

The Creator of Eve today becomes her grandchild, in order to remove her curse and its birth pains.

There could be no greater grace than this, that the Creator of all, the One who holds everything in His hand, should come to be born as a human, and be wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Here, everything comes back to its original order, and the desire of our first mother [Eve] is fulfilled: she desired to become god, [and on this day, God has become human].

By lowering Himself to be born as a child and laid in a manger, Christ has raised her up to His own divine glory. The One whom all creation cannot contain was born in a small cave, in order to re-open for [Eve and her offspring] the whole expanse of Paradise.

(Step'anos Siwnets'i)

2.8 And there were shepherds in that place, in the open air.

Why did the angels appear to shepherds? ... To the shepherds was entrusted the keeping of flocks. In the same way, the disciples of the newborn King were going to be entrusted with the keeping of rational flocks; to chase away harmful wild beasts from them, and to protect the flock of Christ – like the Lord who described himself saying, “I am the good shepherd.” [John 10:11, 14]

(Clement)

[These things took place] in order to remove the sadness of His mother and Joseph, by means of the radiant light, the appearance of the angels, and the adoration of the magi. He chose to reveal the miracle [of His birth] to the shepherds just as He chose to conceal the miracle of His resurrection from many and reveal it only to those whom He wished. He chose the shepherds to become witnesses to this new miracle because they were simple-minded and without guile.

(Ignatius)

2.10 And the angel said to them, “I give you good news; great joy!”

There has never been a joy greater than this! The care of God for humanity has been shown to be incalculable, and the exceeding value of His gifts surpasses human measure. For this reason, many have doubted that God’s nature really united [fully] with ours in order to take away our primal sorrow at having been undone by sin, and give us back our original glory and joy [even more] expansively.

(Ignatius)

2.13 And suddenly with that angel there was a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God

Alongside the angel’s announcement to the shepherds were a multitude of hosts witnessing to [its truth] in order to verify the shepherds’ belief in what they had heard.

(Clement)

Then the light grew even brighter above the cave, and the multitude of angels appeared in order to reveal who it was that they were serving. For wherever many angels are, there God is. They serve him in great groups; when Daniel

describes his vision, he says, “hundreds of hundreds stood before Him, and ten thousand ten thousands served Him.” In the same way they appeared here, so that everyone seeing the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger would be awestruck. The heavenly, invisible ranks [of angels] descended to earth and sang God’s praises because [that infant] was God appearing as a human being, born of a virgin.

2.14 and saying, “Glory to God in the heights, and on earth peace.”

On this occasion, when the divinity came down and put on humanity, the angels sang out peace on earth. When He ascended into heaven, his humanity being swallowed up in divinity as He sat down at the Father’s right hand, the children of the Church would sing before Him “in heaven, peace – glory in the heights!” As the Apostle says, “He made peace through the blood of His cross, both in heaven and on earth.” [Col 1:20]

In the same way that the grace of His mercy made sinners glad on earth, the repentance [of a single sinner] makes the angels rejoice in heaven. [Lk 15:7]

(Ephrem the Syrian)

Peace on earth!

Not to wild beasts and animals is this good hope, but to the children of humanity – because through the King who is born this day, the angels have come down and spread out across the earth, and human beings have joined their ranks.

(Clement)

With the removal of sin, the conflict between God and human beings has also been removed. Christ came and in His flesh put to death the enemy, and to those both far away and near at hand He gave the good news of a peace [made] through His own mediation [Col 1:22, 1 Tim 2:5, Eph 2:15-17 and Is 57:19].

(Ignatius)

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ՍԱՓՈՐ = SAVOR ⇒ PITCHER

By Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian



She held the very
water that every
man, woman
and child seeks
in their life...

Throughout the hymns and prayers of the Armenian Church, Christ's mother, the Virgin Mary, is referred to by many different titles. We see this in one of the hymns for the Feast of the Birth of St. Mary:

"Today, all the churches of the universe celebrate with blessing and song the memory of your birth; O Mother to the Lord of the majestic seraphim and the cherubim who are furnished with many eyes; [you who are] bearer of God, a tabernacle of fire, a golden pitcher and a mystical altar for the Word of the Most High Father."

Yet the most interesting of these titles is *սափոր ոսկի/sapor vosgi/golden pitcher*.

All the names our Church fathers have given her help us to better understand our Christian theology, St. Mary's relationship to Christ, and what this means to us. At first glance, the title *սափոր ոսկի/golden pitcher* may not seem very impressive or theological, but when we look at it from another point of view, we become enlightened.

Today, few families use a water pitcher during their meals, but rather bring it out when guests or company visit. In ancient times and until relatively recently, however, every dining table had a water pitcher on it. Nowadays people use water bottles or just fill their glasses with water from the sink faucet or refrigerator. It was not too long ago when there were no water faucets in kitchens or water bottle companies, when servants would have to go to the river or well and bring water back in a pitcher.

Pitchers of water were essential for meals and households because they contained one of the main building blocks of life in them: water. A man will physically die after a couple of days without water, but he will spiritually die even sooner without Christ.

Christ says, *"If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"* [John 7:37-38] Christ is that living water, the One that grants us life and sustains us. The one that held Christ, the Living Water, was Mary, the *սափոր ոսկի/golden pitcher*.

She is like a pure metal, unadulterated, untarnished and shining radiantly and brilliantly when light shone upon her. She held the very water that every man, woman and child seeks in their life: Christ. It was through her that the Living Water was poured out onto the world so that all that thirst can drink.

Today our world is thirsty for that Living Water again. Of course, the *սափոր ոսկի/golden pitcher* no longer walks among us, but she has helped bring Christ to the world so that each of us could drink and have eternal life. It is our calling as Christians to bring that Living Water to others, not as the *սափոր ոսկի/golden pitcher* did, but as cup-bearers.

Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian is the pastor of St. Sarkis Armenian Orthodox Church in Dallas, Texas.



THE GREAT AND WONDROUS MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

Archbishop Yeghishé Gizirian*

The miracle of the manger in Bethlehem became the source of a great blessing in human history. For humanity that was groping in the shadow of powerful light was needed to break through the gloom. That was precisely the light that shone within an inglorious cave in Bethlehem in a feeding trough for animals. It was the birth of religion's Light, the premier revelation to the world of the God-Light. In the words of the sacred *sharagan* [hymn], this nativity was a "great and wondrous mystery."

The Creator of the universe came down from heaven to earth. He became human so that we in turn might rise to heaven and become God. In the person of Jesus, God was

born in the midst of humanity. He took for himself a human body in order to kill the sin that was in that body, that is, to eliminate the gulf that separated God from creation.

This Epiphany that was made to mankind in Christ fundamentally changed humanity's perception of God. Through Christ, mankind entered into a real and living relationship with God. Without Christianity it was impossible for human beings to come to know the true God.

Through a new moral and religious life and appreciation, Christianity became a rebirth for humanity,

which morally was dying. Under the influence of Christianity the greed and the narcissism, the sensual hedonism, and the depravity that had taken hold during the time of Jesus' contemporaries gave way to love, fellowship, good sense, and purity.

The crown of humanity's rebirth absolutely necessitated high, moral fiber and true spiritual values. Without faith and moral concepts there can be no upstanding, vibrant and progressive, civilized society. Religion and faith are the source of sublime creativity and life's dignity. Life is built and guided by moral and spiritual principles and ideas. Our life becomes meaningless if we lack spiritual values and illustrious ideals, which lift us up from life's sordid conditions and ruinous impulses to dazzling heights, toward the numinous, toward what is moral and spiritual.

Jesus' birth changed the shape of the old world. It elevated humanity and human beings from their fallen way of life and opened their eyes to new horizons of spiritual life. The highest Good, the Beautiful and the True came down from the heavenly realm and became the possession of humanity.

Christ's birth is a call or a summons to us to discover in what way, and by what inspiration, and by means of what commitments we will be able to find the true value of our life.

Unfortunately, it is generally not Jesus' simple and liberating lessons that guide our personal and social life

today. Instead of the divine child of Bethlehem, people worship the false gods of their own manic compulsions. But how much would our lives be enriched and blessed if we fully committed ourselves to the principles that Christ preached and lived. Today more than ever before the world needs Christ's light so that it can live a life of love, fellowship, justice and peace.

What good is it if Christ was born for us but we are neither born nor live for Christ? To grasp the "great and wondrous mystery" of the Holy Nativity, we must each be born in Christ every day.

The outward splendor associated with Christmas—the magnificent hymns, the lighting of hundreds of candles and lights—all of it is in vain if we do not open the darkness of our lives to the rays of love emanating from Christ; if spiritual renewal, the awareness of spiritual rebirth does not ring in our ears.

It is to achieve this spiritual rebirth that the Armenian Church repeats the message of the Lord's redemptive birth by means of the delightful eight-day celebration of Christmas. For our blessed ancestors the Holy Nativity really was a time of spiritual joy and elation. Our ancestors were truly able to recognize the "great and wondrous mystery" of Christmas.

May this Christmas celebration, with its bells and hymns of salvation shake up the entire universe. May it rouse the human spirit to receive the graces of salvation and lead us and all of humanity truly to know God.



* Archbishop Yeghishé Gizirian is one of the senior clergymen of the Armenian Church. Upon graduation from the Seminary of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, the young priest was invited to serve in the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America by then Primate Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan. Father Gizirian served as Pastor of several parishes in the United States before being appointed Diocesan Vicar under during the Primacy of Archbishop Torkom Manoogian. This essay originally appeared in Հայաստանայց Եկեղեցի [Hayasdanyayts Yegeghetsi], the official monthly of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Vol. 27, No. 1, January, 1965), when Hayr Yeghisé was serving as editor. In 1982 Hayr Yeghishé was consecrated bishop in Holy Etchmiadzin by Catholicos Vasken I. He served as Patriarchal Legate of the Armenian Church of England for 25 years. He lives in New York, where he preaches frequently at St. Vartan Cathedral and other Armenian Churches in the New York metropolitan area, and serves as a spiritual advisor to many clergy and seminarians. This essay was translated from the original Armenian by V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan.

WHY JANUARY 6TH?

by Eric Vozzy



One of the more obviously distinctive features of the Armenian Church is the celebration of Christmas on January 6. While the rest of the Christian world celebrates the birth of Christ on December 25, the faithful of the Armenian Church wait almost two more weeks before they celebrate the birth and baptism of Christ on the feast of «Աստուածայայտնութիւն» (Theophany). But what is the reason the Armenian Church celebrates Christmas on January 6 rather than December 25?

MORE THAN A BIRTHDAY

Ironically, the birth of Jesus was of no interest to Christians for centuries after the event. That is to say that the nativity of Christ was not viewed as the “birthday” of Jesus Christ the same way we tend to view birthdays. Before the fourth century, the emphasis was on Christ’s death and resurrection rather than His birth. Yet looking back at His birth from the perspective of His death, the nativity takes on meaning, not as the birthday of a person, but as the coming of salvation into this world embodied in a person – Jesus Christ. So Christmas is more correctly the celebration of the incarnation of the Son of God.

ROME

The celebration of Christmas, the nativity of Christ, on December 25 was unique to the city of Rome in the early part of the fourth century. At this time, the rest of the world celebrated Christmas on January 6. The Roman tradition of celebrating Christmas on December 25 eventually and gradually spread to other parts of the Christian world beginning with nearby North Africa.

THE EAST

By the late fourth century we have evidence that Antioch, Constantinople, and other Christian centers shifted the celebration of Christmas from January 6 to December 25 following the example of Rome. Again, reasons are various and disputed, but this calendrical shift resulted in the nativity of Christ being celebrated on December 25 and His baptism being celebrated on January 6.

JERUSALEM

It was not until the mid-fifth century that Jerusalem followed the pattern of the rest of the Christian world in moving its celebration of Christmas to December 25, thus making Jerusalem the last place in the East to adopt the Roman practice.

ARMENIA

Around this time Armenia was building its liturgical tradition from the model of Jerusalem, a place of fascination for Christian Armenians. In the mid-fifth century, under St. Mesrob Mashdots and his colleagues, not only the Holy Bible, but also vast volumes of liturgical material including the liturgical calendar from Jerusalem with its original Theophany date of January 6, were translated into Armenian.

Also around this time, controversies were raging in the Christian East regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The Christian Armenians were becoming increasingly insistent that separating the revelation of Jesus' divinity at His baptism from the revelation of His humanity in His birth as a human was tantamount to causing division in the one person of the Son of God.

So why does the Armenian Church celebrate Christmas on January 6? While the Armenian Church was forming its liturgical tradition, it adopted January 6 from the tradition of the Holy City of Jerusalem prior to its decision to shift the date to December 25, and also to maintain the authentic incarnational theme of Theophany as the revelation of God through the person of Jesus Christ.

What is an apparent oddity in our tradition leads us into the heart of our deepest Christian convictions. Blessed is the revelation of Christ!

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* In the spirit of St. Gregory of Nazianzen's monumental work, *Keerk Hartsnants* (Book of Questions), the department *Ech Hartsnants* (Page of Questions) will provide answers to interesting and frequently asked questions in the Armenian Church.



THOUGHTS ON THE INCARNATION

By André Markarian

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Gospel of John 1:14

Sleigh rides and jingle bells. Yuletide cheer everywhere. Good old St. Nick (or Gaghan Baba) coming down the chimney to stuff kids’ stockings with presents. The smell of peppermint and evergreen filling the house. These are some of the heart-warming images that fill the days of the Christmas season. Christmastime has become one of the most joy-filled seasons of the year, yet even the mildest of scrooges can’t help but notice that the true message of Christmas is easily lost among the hustle and bustle of gift-buying, decorating, holiday parties and Christmas TV specials. In North America Christmas has joined its cultural counterparts of Hanukah and Kwanza in a parade of year-end festivities that usher in the New Year (note the capital letters). Even the meaning of the name of the holiday itself, Christmas, has become estranged from its original definition of “the mass or festival of Christ”.

After all, isn’t Christmas about celebrating Jesus’s birthday? I mean, isn’t that why we give gifts to each other, in remembrance of the Magi bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the newborn king? Or perhaps our celebratory efforts are misdirected? Is Christmas really about celebrating the birth of a 2000 year old Jewish baby boy who was eventually hailed as the Messiah? Maybe part

of the reason that the holiday of Christmas has slipped into the clutches of advertisers and toy manufacturers is because we followers of Jesus have not looked past the merriment of a famous person’s birthday celebration for its true significance.

So what exactly happened in that remarkable year when time switched from BC to AD that should keep us in daily amazement and awe? The twelfth century Armenian theologian, hymnographer and church father, St. Nersess the Graceful (*Shnorhali*), provides us with some thoughtful insights into the remarkable miracle and mystery of Christmas. Within the long list of his prodigious literary and hymnal compositions is an extraordinary epic work entitled *Jesus the Son* / Յիսուս Որդի. Written in 1152, *Jesus the Son* is a prayerful masterpiece of 4000 verses that traverses the course of human history until the brink of eternity. Although not written specifically as a Christmas composition, *Jesus the Son* describes some of its author’s deep spiritual wisdom on the significance of Christmas. In a few simple verses nestled within this great lyrical poem, Shnorhali brilliantly reveals to us that Christmas is not a birthday celebration, but rather the wondrous recognition of God becoming human: the Incarnation of the Son of God. We read:

Ապա որդիդ Հօր միածին.
Կամաւ իջեալ յորովայնին:
Ճշմարտապէս առեր Մարմին.
Աստուած եւ մարդ մի երկոքին:
Ծընար մարմնով ըստ մարդկային.
Որ ի Հօրէ նախ անմարմին:
Լուծեր զերկունս նախաստեղծին.
Ջտերեւապատն ի խանձարրին:
Բանդ ի մըսուրըն անբանից.
Գոյ կերակուր բանականին:

Then you, the only begotten Son of the Father,
Did willingly descend into the womb.
And did truly take on a body,
God and man together as one.
You who were first born without a body from the Father,
Were born with a body like a human.
Through your swaddling clothes, you eased the birth pangs
Of the first created who were girded with leaves.
O Word, in the manger of irrational beasts,
You became food for those endowed with reason.

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It is one thing for humans to have been made in the likeness of God, but it is an entirely different thing that God was made into the likeness of man.

The first insight that St. Nersess provides is that the Son of God *descended*, or more correctly *condescended*, when he determined to come into St. Mary's womb to be born a human. Prior to becoming a man, the Son of God lived in eternal glory with the Father, enjoying all the benefits of total omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and complete self-existence. For the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to take on the feeble form of humanity, become limited in time, space, knowledge and power, and then be placed in a feeding trough for livestock for warmth tells us volumes about the humility of our God and Creator. Furthermore, to live a life as a simple first-century carpenter and itinerant preacher, culminating in mockery, torture and crucifixion, sharply contrasts with the majesty from which He came. The depth to which the Savior was willing to reduce himself to show his immeasurable love for mankind was first made apparent, very dramatically, in that humble scene in the relatively unknown town of Bethlehem during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

The second insight given by St. Nersess is that He did all this *willingly*. The Incarnation refers to the deliberate, voluntary choice and action of a pre-existent divine Being, namely the Son of God, to become a human being. No binding cosmic law required our transcendent God to reach out to his creation and lower himself the way a parent gets down on both knees to play with its child. No compulsory covenantal agreement required the eternal Deity to rescue humanity from its wayward state. No mandatory action was required from the Son of God to restore mankind to the elevated position from which it chose to fall, as he could have simply turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the cries of humanity and created another more perfect race. Yet, according to His infinite wisdom and great love, God determined to become man and enter into our dimension to live with us for a time.

The third insight Shnorhali offers is that He took our true human body. In other words, God was *truly* and completely made incarnate: skin, bones, blood, muscles and all the rest. It is one thing for humans to have been made in the likeness of God, but it is an entirely different thing that God was made into the likeness of man. Not only did the Son of God take on body, but along with it he adopted consciousness, emotion and everything else that goes into being really human (and not in semblance as we proclaim weekly in our Sunday morning recitation of the Nicene Creed). Jesus did not lay there in a manger and contemplate differential calculus or theoretical physics. He came to share in the harsh reality of the human condition. As a newborn, he was cold, hungry, and scared. When he fell as an older child, he would bleed and limp. When he was tempted by the Adversary in the wilderness, he felt the enticements of sin and consciously resisted its seduction (it is not necessary to sin to be fully human). When he walked all day preaching in the streets and synagogues, his feet hurt and

his back ached. When all his disciples deserted him in the Garden of Gethsemane, he experienced total rejection. When he hung on the cross after being beaten and mocked, he agonized in pain and humiliation. And when he cried out to God the Father in Heaven “Why hast thou forsaken me?” he felt utterly abandoned and deserted. This is the burden Jesus the incarnate Christ bore: forfeiting all the splendor and power of divinity for the frailty and baseness of a human existence. While at any moment when the going got tough, Jesus could have snapped his fingers and straightened out any difficulties that he was confronted with, or simply returned to the comforts of his divine dwelling in Heaven. Yet he didn’t. He lived his human life to its ignominious and inevitable end.

The fourth insight reminds us how Jesus Christ, through his incarnation, initiated a reversal of the curse that humankind brought upon itself in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve disobeyed God. As we read in the book of Genesis, God proclaims His just verdict upon our first parents for their transgression: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children”, followed by “Cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”[3:16-19] St. Nersess describes how Jesus, through his incarnation (metaphorically represented by his swaddling clothes), began the process of taking upon himself the consequences of humanity’s disobedience. Not only would he remove the pains of childbirth (the start of life) and toil of daily living (“sweat of your face”), but through his crucifixion and death, he would destroy death itself. The incarnation of the Son of God ushers in God’s ultimate remedy for humanity’s malady of sin, which is fully actualized in his death and resurrection.

In the concluding lines of this excerpt from *Jesus the Son*, St. Nersess reveals a final insight into the purpose of the Incarnation: *You became food for those endowed with reason*. The Son of God loved humankind so much that he entered into our world so that through his incarnation, crucifixion, death and resurrection, he would defeat death and restore us to life by feeding humanity with his life-giving self. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink

blood, you have no life in you.”[6:53] Just as everyday food and drink function to sustain our physical bodies in our earthly existence, the Son provides eternal life-sustaining food and drink through the giving of his incarnate self, thereby fulfilling the “ideal” purpose of food and drink. It is *his* flesh that sustains a new quality of real, actual, physical and spiritual existence in this world and into eternity. The mystical reality of Jesus’s flesh and blood preserving us for eternity is no less concrete than the need for actual food and drink to keep us alive on this earth, and it is in the sacrament of Holy Communion (Յաղորդութիւն) where we regularly meet the risen Christ to receive his body and blood in faith. Holy Communion becomes then a point of contact with a divine, spiritual reality, where the Son offers his authentic tangible self (flesh and blood) to impart life-giving grace to believers.

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation expresses the conviction that God was made fully known, specifically and personally, by taking our human nature, without in any way ceasing to be the eternal and infinite God. In perfect humility, he embraced his beloved but wayward creatures in our totality by becoming human like us, with all our frailties and vulnerabilities - and in three days he rose again, defeating death and imparting to believers salvation and eternal life through the same flesh and blood that walked this earth. St. Nersess Shnorhali reminds us that at the very heart of the yearly celebration of Christmas is a timeless miracle and mystery: the Incarnation of the Son of God. The Incarnation is God’s gift of immeasurable love for humankind, wrapped in total humility, ribboned with a red bow of complete self-sacrifice, and offered to each and every one of us for our redemption and restoration. Let us receive and fully embrace the gift of the incarnate Son this and every Christmas with overflowing joy and gratitude, for “onto us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” [Isaiah 9:6]

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The Birthplace of Christ
The Church of the Holy Nativity, Bethlehem

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