

"The Uncontainable is contained by flesh." Christ accepted the humility of childhood to counterbalance Adam's choice of self-exaltation. When the Virgin received in her womb the Word of God, her womb became a noetic paradise [noetic, from the Greek nous, meaning mind or intellect]. Her womb was thus a place of encounter between God and humanity. The ewe-lamb carried the great Shepherd in her womb; and then in the cave, Christ—the Tree of Life—blossomed from the Virgin. The wall of partition separating humanity from God and earth from heaven is now removed. Heaven announces this to the earth through "the voice of the star" and "the starry host"—the angels. The stable itself becomes a royal palace, and the manger a royal throne. Jesus is bound in swaddling clothes in order to unbind humanity from the chains of sin. Although it had been fallen, the royal image of humanity is now being renewed to its fullness in the Resurrection.

- 194 Fulfilling the decree of the Roman Emperor that all people in the empire be enrolled, Joseph, who was of the line of David, sets out with Mary to Bethlehem, the home town of King David, to be recorded in the census rolls. There, in a cave in Bethlehem of Judea, Mary gave birth to the Child (see Lk 2:1). Fulfilled are the words of the prophet Micah about the Messiah, the son of David who shall come forth from Bethlehem (see Mi 5:2). Obedient to the word spoken by the angel of the Lord, Joseph names the Child Jesus, which means God saves, "for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). The shepherds come to the newborn Child (see Lk 2:15-18), and Magi from the East also arrive (see Mt 2:1-11). The fact that the magi—representatives of all humanity—worship Christ, points to the universal character of salvation. In the Son of God, God the Father offers salvation to all the nations of the earth.
- 195 Creation joyfully welcomes God in the flesh, bearing gifts for the newborn Child: angels—their song; the heavens—a star; the magi—gold, frankincense, and myrrh; the shepherds—their wonder; the earth—a cave; the deserted place—a manger; humankind—the Virgin Mother. The mystery of the Nativity, namely God's entry into human history, continues to this day: "Today has God come upon earth, and the human race gone up to heaven."¹⁶⁶
- 196 In our Church's tradition, the Eve of the Nativity feast, also called Holy Eve (in Ukrainian, *Sviat vechir*), is honoured with particular solemnity. Every home becomes a *Bethlehem of the family*: the table symbolizes the

¹⁶⁶ Menaion, Nativity of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ (December 25/January 7), Great Complines: Stichera for Lytia.

manger; straw is placed under the tablecloth, and upon the tablecloth are placed the prosphora (Communion bread), a symbol of the Child Jesus. A lit candle is placed next to the prosphora to symbolize the star of Bethlehem. With a meatless supper, the family gathers around the table to prayerfully honour the incarnate Son of God. Christmas carols are sung by the faithful. In hospitality, homes open their doors to everyone who celebrates the Nativity of Christ. The high point of the celebration of the Nativity feast is the solemn divine service, for which all parishioners gather. The Eucharistic Supper at the Divine Liturgy crowns the family supper.

c. Theophany

- 197 At the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan, the public ministry of the Saviour begins (see Mt 3; Mk 1). John the Baptist points to Christ in the Jordan and identifies Him as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). During the baptism of Jesus, the Most Holy Trinity is made known: "Worship of the Trinity was revealed; the voice of the Father bore witness to You, naming you the beloved Son, and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the word's certainty."¹⁶⁷ "The voice of the Father" is the voice of the Heavenly Father, and the "Spirit in the form of a dove" is the Holy Spirit, who descends upon Christ, revealing him to be the Son of God. For this reason, Church tradition refers to the Baptism of Jesus Christ as the Theophany (from the Greek, meaning divine appearance).
- 198 The Theophany at the Jordan is liturgically connected with the feast of the Nativity. In her celebration of both these events, Church tradition emphasizes that both the Incarnation and the Baptism of the Lord are when God appears (in Greek, theophania). In accordance with the text of the Great Blessing of Water at Theophany, "in the preceding feast we have seen you as a babe, and in this present feast as perfect human, appearing as our perfect God." At the Nativity, God the Word "was born," but now he "appears in the flesh to the human race." At the Nativity, the "Sun of Righteousness" rose, and now it "shines forth." In the liturgical tradition of the Church, the feast of Theophany is also called the feast of Illumination. The sticheras of the feast of Theophany elucidate the bond between the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany. What was announced by the angel is now announced to the people by the Baptist; the spilling of infant blood caused Bethlehem to become childless, but through the sanctified waters of baptism, the Jordan now

¹⁶⁷ Menaion, Holy Theophany of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ (January 6/19), Troparion.