



My Beloved Ones,

We are still in the season where we have been called to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I say “coming” for we strongly believe, in our Orthodox Church, that His Birth comes *every* year, not just once two-thousand years ago. The Nativity is therefore the celebration of an event that takes place in the present, “Χριστός Γεννάται δοξάσατε! Christ is Born! Glorify Him!”

Understanding that this event is a present one requires a certain kind of preparation for the Orthodox Christian. The Nativity Fast is meant to serve as a means to preparing ourselves to meet our Creator.

Unfortunately, sometimes we misunderstand the ways in which we can prepare ourselves. For example, the habit of exchanging Christmas gifts is indeed a Godly oriented practice, for we commemorate the gift that *we* will receive on Christmas: God’s Only Begotten Son. However, in all this searching for “the perfect gift” it can become too easy to forget ourselves, and what we can give to God.

There is a beautiful story concerning St. Ieronymos, who in the midst of all the festive Christmas spirit, was instead crying out to God, feeling that he had nothing to offer. Suddenly, he heard a voice, “*Yes, my son, you have the greatest gift of all.*” This made the Saint cry all the more, believing he had misplaced a gift. “*What is it, so that I might offer it?*” “*Your sins,*” the voice replied. God expects only our purified and contrite hearts, in return for all His Goodness.

The Ancient Greek philosophers were known to say, γνῶθι σαυτὸν, “Know thyself.” This is a struggle that God expects us to undertake, despite its difficulty. In order for us to know Jesus Christ—to truly prepare for His coming—we must examine our actions; our past and present, in order to live a better future as more compassionate and charitable human beings.

The Birth of our Lord is the gift of love coming into this world. Therefore, let us practice these wonderful virtues toward our fellow men and *ikons* of God. In this way, we will be truly prepared to experience the joy of Christmas.

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Metropolitan of Atlanta