



My Beloved Ones,

Here in Atlanta, and across much of the Holy Metropolis, we are experiencing the beginning of cold weather, which reminds me of the saying, *“Απ’ τα Νικολοβάρβαρα αρχίζει κι ο χειμώνας. At Nikolobarbara, the winter begins.”* In Greece, the *Nikolobarbara* refers to the first week of December, when we celebrate the feasts of St. Barbara (December 4th), St. Sabbas (December 5th) and St. Nicholas of Myra (December 6th) As we prepare our homes for the cold, shorter days of winter, we look to the lives of these saints, as we would to a candle in the darkness, or to a fire for warmth.

In commemorating St. Barbara, we look for strength to preserve our faith in a fallen world. St. Barbara was a secret Christian whose pagan father, Dioscorus, kept her locked away in a tower. Before leaving on a journey, he commanded that two windows be added in a bathhouse he was building. After her father left, St. Barbara asked that a third window be added, for the Holy Trinity. When Dioscorus returned, his daughter confessed Christ, and he prepared to kill her. However, her fervent prayers opened the tower, and she escaped. Dioscorus pursued and discovered his daughter, who was cast into prison and tortured. Such was her holiness however, that every morning, she would appear in perfect health. Eventually, Barbara was condemned to death and Dioscorus carried out the punishment himself. For the beheading of his daughter, Dioscorus was killed by a bolt of lightning, and St. Barbara’s tomb became the site of many miracles.

In celebrating St. Sabbas, we honor a great ascetic, who even from childhood wished to serve God. Forsaking his parents hopes that he might marry, he became a disciple of St. Euthymius the Great, eventually journeying with him into the wilderness each year on January 14th, and only returning on Palm Sunday. When St. Euthymius fell asleep in the Lord, St. Sabbas withdrew into a cave near the lavra. His spirituality made him a great teacher to many young monastics, and he created not only the Great Lavra which would come to have his name, but also first typicon for monastic church services. Among the monasteries he founded, many are known to be the sites of miraculous healings.

According to Tradition, one of the many examples of St. Nicholas of Myra’s compassion and charity towards the poor happened when he learned of a man who, being unable to afford dowries for his three daughters, was faced with the possibility of selling his children into slavery. Determined to help, St. Nicholas waited until night and threw bags of coins through the open window. From this remarkable act, the secular world has created the legend of Santa Claus and the act of children leaving stockings.

As we prepare our homes and hearts for the coming season, including the Nativity of our Lord let us not forget the examples these saints provide through their witness, their inner spiritual lives, and their acts of charity. May they intercede for us, and for the whole world, this *Nikolobarbara*, and always.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta