

## COMMENTARY ON THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

—by St. Nikolai Velimirovic—

**"But the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1:18).**

Prior to this verse, the Evangelist had given the genealogy of the Lord Jesus—more precisely, that of righteous Joseph—from the tribe of Judah and the house of David. In this genealogy, the Evangelist listed men who were born from men in a natural way, such as all mortal men on earth are born. He then suddenly begins to describe the Lord's birth in the following way: "But the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows..." With this *but*, he wants to show the unusual and supernatural nature of His birth, which is completely dissimilar from the manner of birth of all Joseph's recorded ancestors.

Mary, His mother, was betrothed to Joseph. In the eyes of the world, this betrothal was seen as an introduction to married life; but in the eyes of Mary and Joseph it could not be seen like this. Sought with tears from God, the Virgin Mary was consecrated to God by her parents' vow. She, on her part, voluntarily took this vow made by her parents upon herself, as is seen in her many years of service in the Temple at Jerusalem. Could she have followed her own inclinations, she would undoubtedly have spent the rest of her life in the Temple, like Anna the daughter of Phanuel (Lk. 2:36-37). However, the law ruled otherwise, and so it had to be. She was betrothed to Joseph not to live in marriage with him, but in order to escape marriage. St. Ignatius says that the Virgin was betrothed "that His birth should be concealed from the devil. So that the devil should think of Him as born of a married woman and not a virgin."

"Before they came together..." These words do not mean that they afterwards came together as man and wife, or that this was in the Evangelist's mind. The Evangelist is, in this case, interested only in the birth of the Lord Jesus, and nothing more. He writes the above words in order to show that Christ's birth was without the coming together of man and woman. Therefore, understand the wise words of the Evangelist as though they had been written thus: "and without their coming together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit."

How did Joseph react to the knowledge of the Virgin Mary's pregnancy?

**"Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly" (Mt. 1:19).**

He acted, as we see, in obedience to God's law. He was obedient to God's will insofar as it had up till then been revealed to the Israelites. He also acted in humility before God. "**Justify not thyself,**" warns the wise Sirach (**WSir. 7:5**). That is, do not force too much justice on those who sin, but feel your own weakness and your own sins, and strive with mercy to lighten justice towards sinners. Imbued with this spirit, Joseph did not consider giving the Virgin Mary over to justice for the suspected sin. "**And not willing to make her a public example, he was minded to put her away secretly.**" This plan of his shows us what an exemplary man Joseph was: exemplary in justice and in mercy, such a one as the spirit of the old Law was able to instruct. With him, all things were as simple and clear as they could be in the soul of a God-fearing man.

From what the angel announced to Joseph, it is clear that the Virgin Mary had told him nothing of her earlier encounter with the great archangel, as it is clear that now, when Joseph intended to put her away, she did not justify herself in any way. The angel's message, as all the heavenly mysteries that were gradually revealed to her, "**she kept, and pondered ... in her heart**" (**Lk. 2:19 & 2:51**). In her faith to God and obedience to Him, she shrank from no humiliation at the hands of men. "If my sufferings are pleasing to God, why should I not endure them?" said some of the Christian martyrs later. Living in constant prayer and pondering on God, the Most-Pure Virgin was also able to say, "If my humiliation is pleasing to God, why should I not endure it? Only let me be righteous before God, who knows the heart, and the world can do what it likes with me." She knew this: that the world could do nothing to her unless God allowed it.

What gentle humility before the living God this is, and what wonderful devotion to His will! And further—what a heroic spirit is seen in this delicate maiden: "**The Lord is the strength of them who fear Him**" (**Ps. 24:13**). While sinners in our day, as in all days, bring even false witnesses to testify for them, the Virgin Mary who had no man to testify for her, other than God almighty, did not justify herself. She was not disturbed, but remained silent and waited for God, in His good time, to justify her. And God hastened to justify His chosen one. This same angel who had revealed to her the great mystery of her conceiving, made haste to speak now in place of the silent Virgin.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel had commanded him, and took the Virgin Mary to himself again, "**and did not know her until she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus**" (**Mt. 1:25**).

When we read the Gospels, we must enter into the Evangelists' mind, and not project our mind into the Gospel. The Evangelist himself marvels as he speaks of the wonder of the Savior's birth, and his main task is to show that this

birth came about in a miraculous manner. The above verse is the fourth proof used by the Evangelist Matthew to emphasize this in today's Gospel. Firstly, he says that the Virgin Mary was only betrothed to Joseph; secondly, that she found herself with child of the Holy Spirit; thirdly, that the angel, in a dream, showed that her pregnancy was wondrous and supernatural; and, fourthly, we see here that the angel now repeats this same thought with the words that Joseph "did not know her until she had brought forth her firstborn Son." It is, therefore, clear as day that the Evangelist had no intention of saying that, after this birth, Joseph had carnal relations with Mary. That which was not so until she had brought forth her Son was not so afterwards either, when she had borne Him.

If we say of someone that, during the celebration of the Liturgy in church, he paid no attention to the priest's words, we do not mean that, once the service was over, he became attentive to them. Similarly, when we say that a shepherd sings while the sheep graze, we do not think that he stops singing when the sheep stop grazing. Blessed Theophylact notes, "When it was said at the time of the Flood that the raven did not return to the Ark **'until the waters dried up from the earth' (Gen. 8:7)**, it naturally did not return to it afterwards. Similarly, when Christ said, **'I am with you always, until the end of the age'** (Mt. 28:20), does that mean that He will not be afterwards?"

It is said of St. Ammon (whose feast day falls on October 4<sup>th</sup>) that he spent eighteen years in wedlock without having physical relations with his wife. The holy martyr Anastasia (December 22<sup>nd</sup>) also spent a number of years married to Publius, a Roman senator, without consummating the marriage. We quote here only two instances among the thousands of others. By her most pure virginity—before, during, and after giving birth—the Virgin Mary has turned thousands of girls and young men to a life of virginity throughout the Church's history. Looking to her virginity, many married people have broken off their marriage and devoted themselves to virginal purity. Looking at her, many leading a deeply immoral life have turned from their immorality, cleansing their mired souls with tears and prayer. How, then, could it be imagined that the most pure Virgin, the pillar and inspiration of Christian purity and virginity through the ages, was on a lower level of virginity than that of Saints Anastasia, Thecla, Barbara, Catherine, Paraskevi, and all the rest? Or how would it be possible to imagine that she who bore in the flesh her passionless Lord could have ever known the shadow of physical passion? She who carried and gave birth to God "was a virgin, not only in the flesh, but also in the spirit," as St. Ambrose states.