**The Divine Services**

**Celebrating the Nativity of Christ (Christmas) in the Orthodox Church**

**The Nativity Fast (Advent) — A Time of Preparation**

Orthodox Christians begin the celebration of the Nativity of Christ with a forty-day time of preparation, called the Nativity Fast, which begins on November 15. The purpose of each fasting season is to prepare soul and body to enter into the spiritual reality of the great feasts of Jesus Christ.

The Nativity Fast is not as intense as that of Great Lent. It is instead a joyous Fast, anticipating the first light of the greatest possible joy — the coming of God into His world.

**The Sundays of the Forefathers and of Christ’s Ancestors**

On the two Sundays preceding Christmas, the Church commemorates the Forefathers and the Ancestors of Christ. These are the prophets and the saints of the Old Testament as well as the very real and very human family tree of Jesus Christ. All of these prepared for the coming of the Lord into the world, which has made possible the salvation and reconciliation of mankind with God.

**The “Forefeast” of the Nativity**

The Church begins the Forefeast period of the Nativity on December 20. The most significant liturgical services of this period are those that usually take place on December 24 (or on Friday if the Feast of the Nativity falls on a Sunday or Monday): (1) Matins, (2) the Imperial (or “Royal”) Hours, and (3) the Vesperal Divine Liturgy, or Great Vespers.

**Matins and the Imperial Hours:**

The two principal daily services of the Orthodox Church in parishes and monasteries are (1) Vespers (Evening Worship) and (2) Matins (Morning Worship) immediately followed by the Divine Liturgy.

In the monastic liturgical tradition prayers are also offered at 6:00 am (First Hour), 9:00 am (Third Hour), noon (Sixth Hour), and at 3:00 pm (Ninth Hour). On the Forefeasts of the Nativity, of Theophany, and of Pascha these four “Hours” are recited as one Service: the Imperial Hours.

On the morning of December 24th (or of Friday in certain years), we celebrate Matins and immediately following the Imperial Hours. Each of the four Hours is comprised of Psalms, prayers, and Scripture readings which proclaim the joy and power of Christ coming into the world.

The Imperial Hours are one last meditation on the cosmic meaning of the Nativity: on the decisive and radical change that the Birth of Christ brought about for the entire creation.

**Vesperal Divine Liturgy (or Great Vespers):**

Following Matins and the Royal Hours (in most years) the Church celebrates the Vespers of the Feast combined with the Divine Liturgy. When the Feast of the Nativity falls on a Sunday or Monday, we do not celebrate a Vesperal Liturgy, but only Great Vespers of the Feast on the evening of December 24th.
The Orthodox liturgical day always begins at sunset with Vespers. This corresponds to the Scriptural account of creation in which first darkness was over the earth and then God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:2,3).

At the “vigil service” of either Great Vespers or the Vesperal Divine Liturgy we prepare for the great celebration of the Nativity. The hymns chanted express great joy for the gift of the Incarnation — of God becoming man. The Old Testament readings proclaim that Christ fulfills all prophecies, and that His Kingdom is the Kingdom “of all ages.”

The Feast of the Nativity

We celebrate the Feast of the Nativity (“Christmas”) at Matins and the Divine Liturgy on the morning of December 25.

Matins of the Nativity:

At the Katavasiai of Matins we sing one of the most beautiful and majestic hymns in Orthodox worship: “Christ is borne; glorify Him; Christ comes from heaven, meet Him; Christ is on earth, be exalted; all the earth, sing unto the Lord; O you peoples sing praises in gladness, for He is glorified.”

The Divine Liturgy of the Nativity:

The Divine Liturgy on the Feast of the Nativity was at one time the baptismal liturgy at which catechumens were Baptized, Chrismated, and integrated into the Church, the Body of Christ. We therefore do not sing “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal …,” but instead the baptismal hymn, “Those who in Christ have been baptized, have put on Christ; alleluia” (Galatians 3:27).

The Post-Feast

The Post-Feast period of the Nativity extends to December 31. On the second day, December 26, we celebrate the Synaxis of the Theotokos, which is probably the most ancient feast of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition. Combining the hymns of the Nativity with those celebrating the Mother of God, the Church points to Mary as the one through whom the Incarnation was made possible, for the humanity of Jesus Christ — our humanity — was received concretely and historically from Mary His Mother.

The third day, December 27, celebrates the Feast of Saint Stephen, the First Martyr of Christianity. Finally, December 31 is the Apodosis (Leave-Taking or Dismissal) of the feast on which we repeat the full Nativity services.