

God is Wonderful in His Saints

Orthodox Saints commemorated in December

DECEMBER 1

Holy Prophet Nahum (7th c. BC)

He was a Galilean of the tribe of Simeon. The Old Testament book that bears his name foretells the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, by the Medes, and the restoration of the Kingdom of Judah; all of this came to pass. Nahum is counted as the seventh of the Minor Prophets. He reposed in peace. His name means 'consolation' or 'repose.'

Five of the Minor Prophets (Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Daniel) are commemorated in December. At one time a Feast of the Twelve Prophets was celebrated on December 4 at the Church of the Resurrection, but this feast is no longer on the calendar. The days leading up to Christ's Nativity contain many commemorations of the faithful remnant of Israel, all of whose hopes were fulfilled in the birth of the Messiah.

Saint Philaret the Merciful of Constantinople (762)

He was a wealthy landed gentleman who lived in the countryside near Constantinople during the reign of the Empress Irene. God had given him great wealth and a large family with which to enjoy his later years in contentment. A true lover of God, he gave without hesitation to all the poor and needy who came to him, and freely offered hospitality to every traveler passing through his lands.

But his fortunes changed dramatically, and after a series of disasters he was reduced to poverty, with only a small piece of land, a pair of oxen, a donkey, a horse, a cow and a calf and a few beehives to sustain himself and his family. Without complaint, he took up the life of a simple farmer, laboring to support his family with his few means.

His reduced fortunes in no way changed his open-handed character; and when he met a peasant lamenting the death of his two oxen, he immediately gave him his own, leaving himself no way to till his field. When his wife and children expressed their dismay, he answered with Christ's words, 'Do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink... but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.' He asked his wife and children to be patient, for soon they would see a treasure that he was keeping hidden.

Continuing in every way as generous as he had been when wealthy, he had soon given away his horse, then his cow and calf, then his donkey (with a load of grain it was carrying at the time), to the few people he met who were poorer than himself. Without any means of feeding himself or his family, he received a generous gift of provisions from a wealthy friend; he divided the gift among his family members, then gave his own portion to the poor. He then gave away his beehives, and finally the coat from his back to a beggar who asked him for food. Thus he was left completely stripped of possessions, depending only on God to care for himself and his family.

At that time, emissaries from the Court of Constantinople passed through the neighborhood, sent out to seek a fair maiden of good family to be considered as a bride for the young Emperor Constantine VI. Philaret received them in his once-splendid house and, impressed by his virtues and those of his family, they asked two of his grand-daughters to return to the Court with them. There, the two ladies' physical and spiritual beauty shone so brightly that one of them was wed to the Emperor, the other to one of his chief courtiers. The Emperor summoned Philaret and the rest of his family to the Palace, where he appointed Philaret Consul and gave him greater riches than he had possessed in former days. The Saint, restored to prosperity, continued in generosity as before: His first act was to give a lavish feast to which he invited the poor, old and disabled of the City. He then spent his days walking the streets of the City, distributing alms to the poor, giving to all who asked with no consideration of the merits of their case. (He brought with him a servant who carried three bags of coins: one of gold, one of silver, and one of copper. When he met a needy person, the Saint reached at random into a bag and gave him a handful of coins, thus letting God decide the size of the gift).

When the Saint drew near to death, he gathered his family and urged them to distribute all the remainder of his wealth to the needy. 'My children, do not forget hospitality; visit those who are sick or in prison, watch over widows and orphans; see to the burial of those who die in poverty; do not covet the goods of others; speak no ill of anyone, and do not be glad of misfortunes that befall your enemies; always do as you have seen me do in my life, so that God will keep you under His protection.' Then, his face shining with joy, he gave up his soul to God.

Our Venerable Father Eligius (Elod), Bishop of Noyon (660)

He was born to a Christian family near Limoges in Gaul (modern-day France) in 588. He became a goldsmith, worked for the royal mint, and in time became a trusted counselor of King Chlothar II. Despite (or because of) the honors and riches that surrounded him, Eligius came to despise all of them and gave away all his property but what he considered essential

for everyday life. He devoted all his income to almsgiving and to ransoming prisoners of all nationalities from the slave markets. Many of these became his attendants and disciples in gratitude. Eligius' compassion became so well-known that when visitors asked for directions to his house, they would be told 'Look for the house surrounded by a crowd of beggars. That is where Lord Eligius lives.' The Saint washed the feet of the poor who came to him, served them at his own table and fed himself on what they left. If he ran out of money, he would give away furniture or even his clothing.

When King Chlothar died in 629, Eligius became the counselor of his successor King Dagobert I. He founded monasteries for men at Solignac and for women in Paris, telling the King 'These are the ladders by which we will both be able to climb up to the Kingdom of Heaven.' As a royal counselor he helped to re-establish peace between France and Brittany, and improved the law of the kingdom to make it more just.

When Dagobert died in 639, Eligius devoted himself entirely to the service of God as Bishop of Noyon in Flanders. His diocese was still mostly pagan, and Eligius traveled untiringly to preach the Gospel of Christ, often at risk of his life. Having foreseen his approaching death, Saint Eligius reposed in peace in 660. When his tomb was opened a year later, his body was found incorrupt and gave forth a fragrant scent.

DECEMBER 2

Holy Prophet Habbakuk (Abbacum) (7th c. BC).

He prophesied in the time of Joachim, just before the Jewish people were taken into captivity in Babylon. He himself escaped captivity, and after Jerusalem was destroyed, returned to his homeland. Once he was taking some food to his harvesters when an Angel transported him to Babylon to feed the Prophet Daniel in the lions' den, then bore him back to Judea (this is told in the full version of the book of Daniel, ch. 6 LXX). The third chapter of his prophecy is used as the Fourth Ode of the Matins Canon (the Ode is usually sung in full only in monasteries during Lent, but the eirmos of Fourth Ode, sung in many parishes, usually refers to the Prophet). His holy relics were found through a revelation in Palestine during the reign of Theodosius the Great, and a chapel built there. His name means "Father of the Resurrection."

Holy Martyr Myrope (Myropea) of Chios (251)

She was born in Ephesus. At baptism, she was consecrated by her mother to serve at the shrine of St Hermione, one of the four daughters of the Apostle Philip. Many pilgrims came to be anointed with a miracle-working myrrh that flowed from St Hermione's body — and from her service at the shrine Myrope received the name by which she is known. Later, she and her mother went to the island of Chios to flee the persecution of the Emperor Decius.

When the holy martyr Isidore (May 14) was beheaded, Myrope secretly recovered his body and gave it honorable burial. The governor Numerius was furious, and ordered his soldiers to find the body or themselves be beheaded. Unable to let innocent people suffer for her act, Myrope presented herself to the governor and told him where she had buried the body. At Numerius' order, the holy girl was tortured and thrown in prison. There a heavenly light illuminated her cell and St Isidore himself appeared to her with a company of angels, saying 'Peace to thee, Myrope: thy prayer has ascended to God, and thou shalt soon be with us and receive the crown prepared for thee.' Myrope, filled with joy, gave up her soul to God at that moment. One of the guards who had witnessed these events believed in Christ, and not long afterward was baptized and received a martyr's death.

Our Holy Father Athanasius "the Resurrected," Recluse of the Kiev Caves (1176)

After many years of ascetic struggle, Athanasius died and was prepared for burial. After lying dead for two full days inexplicably came back to life; the monks who came to bury him were astonished to find him sitting up and weeping. The brethren gathered around him and asked him many questions about what he had seen of the next world, but he would only answer 'Save yourselves!' When they pressed him further, he said 'If I told you, you would not believe me or want to listen to me.' His final reply was 'Repent every moment, and pray to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His most pure Mother.' He then shut himself in his cell and lived another twelve years, taking only bread and water and never speaking again to anyone.

Saint (Stephen) Uroš, King of Serbia (1367)

"The son of King Dušan, he ruled during the difficult time of the fall of the Kingdom of Serbia. Humble, pious and gentle, he refused to attempt to restrain the power of the powerful nobles by force. Amongst these was Vukašin, who brought about his death. Good King Uroš suffered a martyr's death on December 2nd, 1367, at the age of thirty-one. Killed by men, he was glorified by God. His wonderworking relics were preserved in the monastery of Jazak in the Fruška Gora, whence they were taken to Belgrade in 1942, during the Second World War, and placed in the Cathedral beside the bodies of Prince Lazar and Despot Stephen Štiljanović. During the reign of this benevolent king, the monastery of St Nahum was built beside Lake Ochrid by one of Uroš's nobles, Grgur." (*Prologue*)

DECEMBER 3

Holy Prophet Zephaniah (Sophonias) (7th c. BC)

He is ranked ninth among the Minor Prophets. He lived in Jerusalem in the reign of King Josiah (640-609), and according to some was the great-grandson of King Hezekiah. His name means "The Lord Protects" or "The Lord's watch-post."

Our Venerable Father John the Silent, Bishop of Colonia (558)

He was born into a Christian family at Nikopolis in Armenia. When he was eighteen his parents died, and with twelve other young men he established a small monastery. After a few years, much against his will he was made Bishop of Colonia, but he continued to live the ascetic life of a monk. After nine years of service as bishop, discouraged by the worldliness and intrigue around him, he secretly left for Jerusalem to live as a monk. He was divinely guided to the monastery of St Sabas, who received him and, knowing nothing of his rank, assigned him a lowly place among the new monks. Saint John cheerfully undertook whatever task was given to him and served the other monks in humility and silence. After completing his novitiate he was given a cell where he lived in total silence, fasting five days a week. On Saturdays and Sundays he joined the brethren for prayer, Communion and meals; but even at these times the other monks were edified by his silence and unceasing compunction. Saint Sabas desired to make him a priest and took him to be ordained by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Saint John asked the Patriarch for a private meeting and explained that he could not be ordained because he was already a bishop. The Patriarch returned St John to St Sabas, telling him only that it was impossible for him to ordain John, who should be allowed to live in silence and solitude. Saint Sabas was perplexed (thinking that some sin prevented the monk from being ordained), but soon received a revelation of John's true rank. &temp; After many years of reclusion, St John withdrew further to a cave in the desert for nine years. He became known as a divinely-enlightened counselor and a wonderworker, and cheerfully received all who came to him for guidance or prayer. In 509 he returned to the monastery, where he lived as an anchorite in his cell, communicating with the world only through one of his disciples. For many years he lived only on thin porridge, into which he would mix ashes. One day a disciple saw him pouring ashes into his food, and John abandoned the practice, not wanting to be known for the practice of any virtue.

Once he asked God for a sign revealing whether he would be granted to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Taking a fig-seed, he placed it on a bare rock outside his cell. Without soil or water, the seed brought forth a plant, put forth leaves and flowers, and produced three figs, which St John shared with his disciples. The Saint then made ready for death. He reposed in peace, at the age of 104.

DECEMBER 4

† Holy Great Martyr Barbara (290)

Saint Barbara was from Heliopolis of Phoenicia and lived during the reign of Maximian. She was the daughter of a certain idolater named Dioscorus. When Barbara came of age, she was enlightened in her pure heart and secretly believed in the Holy Trinity. About this time Dioscorus began building a bath-house; before it was finished he was required to go away to attend to certain matters, and in his absence Barbara directed the workmen to build a third window in addition to the two her father had commanded. She also inscribed the sign of the Cross with her finger upon the marble of the bath-house, leaving the saving sign cut as deeply into the marble as if it had been done with an iron tool. When the *Synaxarion* of Saint Barbara was written, the marble of the bath-house and the cross inscribed by Saint Barbara were still preserved, and many healings were worked there. When Dioscorus returned, he asked why the third window had been added; Barbara began to declare to him the mystery of the Trinity. Because she refused to renounce her faith, Dioscorus tortured Barbara inhumanly, and after subjecting her to many sufferings he beheaded her with his own hands, in the year 290. (Great Horologion)

† Our Righteous Father John of Damascus (760)

This divinely-enlightened Harp of the Spirit was at the same time one of the Church's greatest hymnographers and one of Her greatest theologians and defenders of the Faith.

The city of Damascus in Syria fell to the Muslims in 635. At the time of the Caliph Abdul-Malik, responsibility for government of the Christian population was given to Sergius Mansur, a prominent Christian of the city. This Sergius strove to govern in a godly way under the many disabilities imposed by the Caliph, and devoted his wealth to almsgiving and to ransoming Christian prisoners. His son John was born in 675, and along with his adoptive brother Cosmas (October 14) was brought up to love and serve Christ.

John, whose exceptional education included a perfect knowledge of both Greek and Arabic, entered the civil administration and eventually succeeded to his father's position under the Caliph. When the Emperor Leo the Isaurian began to attack the holy icons, Saint John undertook a spirited defense of the Faith through letters to correspondents

throughout the Empire. Normally the Emperor would have killed or exiled the Saint directly, but since he lived in Muslim lands the Emperor could not touch him (an interesting example of Islam unwittingly contributing to the defense of the Christian faith). So the wicked Emperor circulated a forged letter which made it appear that John was plotting against the Caliph. When this letter fell (as planned) into the Caliph's hands, he was furious, and ordered that the Saint's right hand be cut off. That evening John placed his severed hand before the icon of the Mother of God and prayed with tears that it might be restored. On awaking he found that his hand had been miraculously restored to him. The miracle convinced the Caliph of his counselor's innocence, and John was restored to favor; but now John wanted nothing more of worldly honor and wished only to be a monk. Giving up his position, he distributed his fortune among the poor and left for Jerusalem to become a monk at the Monastery of St Sabas.

The Abbot of the monastery put John under an Elder who ordered him to have nothing to do with philosophy, science, poetry, chanting or reading, but to give himself uncomplainingly to menial tasks so as to advance in humility. This the Saint did. Some time later, however, a monk grieving over his brother's death persuaded John to write a funeral hymn for his consolation. Out of compassion, John wrote the hymn which is used to this day in the Funeral Service. For his disobedience, John was given the job of cleaning all the latrines of the monastery by hand, which, again, he did without complaint. A few days later the Theotokos appeared to the Elder and told him to allow John to compose hymns and poems which, she told, him, would surpass the Psalms of David in beauty and grace.

Thus the monk John began to write the large body of inspired hymns which grace the Church's services. Among these are the Canon chanted at the Pascha Service, as well as most of the Resurrectional hymns of the *Octoechos*.

Saint John's poetical gifts were matched by his gifts for expressing the Church's theology: he composed a powerful defense of the icons (in print under the title *On the Holy Images*), a complete exposition of the Orthodox Faith (*On the Orthodox Faith*), and the first written refutation of Islam, which he had come to understand well while serving in the Caliph's court.

In old age, John was ordained a priest by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. He reposed in peace in 760 at the age of eighty-four.

Saint Gennadius, Archbishop of Novgorod (1505)

He was of noble birth, but entered monastic life at Valaam. He lived as a hermit on the island of Solovki from 1430 until 1447, when he was appointed abbot of the Chudov Monastery in Moscow. In 1484 he became Bishop of Novgorod. He found that the Tatar invasions had so disrupted the Church that a complete text of the Holy Scriptures could hardly be found in all of Russia. He ordered and oversaw the publication of the first printed Slavonic edition of the Holy Scriptures, set up schools for the instruction of the clergy, re-established order in the divine services, and fought various heresies. His devotion earned him enemies, and he resigned his episcopate to withdraw once again to a monastery. He reposed in peace in 1505.

DECEMBER 5

† Our Venerable, Godbearing Father Sabbas the Sanctified (533)

"This Saint was born in 439 in Moutalaska, a small village of Cappadocia. He entered the arena of the monastic life from childhood and was under that master trainer of monastics, Euthymius the Great, the teacher of the desert. He became the spiritual father of many monks and an instructor for the monasteries in Palestine, and was appointed leader (archimandrite) of the desert-dwellers of Palestine by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. In his old age he went to Constantinople, to the Emperors Anastasius and Saint Justinian the Great, in behalf of the Orthodox Faith and the dogmas of the Council of Chalcedon. Having lived ninety-four years, he reposed in 533. The Typicon for the ecclesiastical services had its beginning in the monastery established by this righteous one." (*Great Horologion*)

St Cosmas the Protos of Mount Athos and his companions (~1274)

"Determined to impose the union of the Churches accepted under pressure at the Council of Lyon (1274) to secure Papal support for the Byzantine Empire Michael VIII Palaeologos sent troops to Mount Athos, the stronghold of Orthodoxy and centre of opposition to his policy, with orders to take sanguinary measures against monks who would not recognize the false union.

"When the Emperor's soldiers reached Karyes, the capital of Athos, which was organized as a lavra in those days, they seized the Protos of Athos, who had been an example to all of what a steadfast monk should be. They put him to the sword together with many other fathers there, and in their fury ransacked and fired the Church and monastic buildings, leaving rack and ruin behind them. Emerging from the wild places and thick forests where they had taken refuge, the Orthodox monks buried the holy Martyrs at the entrance to the Church of the Protaton. Through the centuries, generations of monks piously lit the lamp each day above the 'tomb of the Protos'; but it was not until 5 December 1981 that his relics were solemnly taken from the earth, and that a service was held in his honour in the presence of a great crowd." (*Synaxarion*)

DECEMBER 6

† Our Father among the Saints Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra (345)

Our beloved holy Father Nicholas is, along with St George (and second to the All-holy Theotokos), probably the best-loved Saint of the Church. His numberless miracles through the ages, on behalf of the countless Christians who have called on him, cannot be told.

He was born in Lycia (in Asia Minor) around the end of the third century, to pious Christian parents. His love of virtue, and his zeal for observing the canons of the Church, were evident from his infancy, when he would abstain from his mother's breast every Wednesday and Friday until the evening. From early youth he was inclined to solitude and silence; in fact, not a single written or spoken word of the Saint has come down to us. Though ordained a priest by his uncle, Archbishop Nicholas, he attempted to withdraw to a hermit's life in the Holy Land; but he was told by revelation that he was to return home to serve the Church publicly and be the salvation of many souls.

When his parents died, he gave away all of his inheritance to the needy, and thereafter almsgiving was his greatest glory. He always took particular care that his charity be done in secret. Perhaps the most famous story of his open-handedness concerns a debt-ridden man who had no money to provide dowries for his daughters, or even to support them, and in despair had resolved to give them into prostitution. On three successive nights the Saint threw a bag of gold into the window of the man's house, saving him and his daughters from sin and hopelessness. The man searched relentlessly to find and thank his benefactor; when at last he discovered that it was Nicholas, the Saint made him promise not to reveal the good deed until after he had died. (This story may be the thin thread that connects the Saint with the modern-day Santa Claus).

God honored his faithfulness by granting him unparalleled gifts of healing and wonderworking. Several times he calmed storms by his prayers and saved the ship that he was sailing in. Through the centuries he has often done the same for sailors who call out to him, and is considered the patron of sailors and all who go to sea.

He was elected Bishop of Myra not long before the great persecutions under Diocletian and Maximian (c. 305), and was put in prison, from which he continued to encourage his flock in the Faith. When the Arian heresy wracked the Church not long after Constantine came to the throne, St Nicholas was one of the 318 Bishops who gathered in Nicea in 325. There he was so incensed at the blasphemies of Arius that he struck him on the face. This put the other bishops in a quandary, since the canons require that any hierarch who strikes anyone must be deposed. Sadly, they prepared to depose the holy Nicholas; but in the night the Lord Jesus and the most Holy Theotokos appeared to them, telling them that the Saint had acted solely out of love for Truth, not from hatred or passion, and that they should not act against him.

While still in the flesh, he sometimes miraculously appeared in distant places to save the lives of the faithful. He once saved the city of Myra from famine by appearing to the captain of a ship full of grain, telling him to take his cargo to the city. He appeared in a dream to Constantine to intercede for the lives of three Roman officers who had been falsely condemned; the three grateful soldiers later became monks.

The holy bishop reposed in peace around 345. His holy relics were placed in a church built in his honor in Myra, where they were venerated by throngs of pilgrims every year. In 1087, after Myra was conquered by the Saracens, the Saint's relics were translated to Bari in southern Italy, where they are venerated today. Every year, quantities of fragrant myrrh are gathered from the casket containing his holy relics.

New Martyr Nicolas Karamos of Smyrna (1657)

He was a Christian living in Smyrna under Ottoman rule. One day he lost his temper in an argument and exclaimed that he would "turn Turk" before he would give way in the dispute. Immediately, some Turks watching the argument seized Nicolas and brought him before the judge to honor his promise. Nicolas, who had come to his senses, declared 'If it please God, I will never deny my Lord Jesus Christ, the true God who will come to judge the living and the dead.' The judge had the humble confessor flogged and tortured through thirty-six days, but he remained firm in his confession of Christ, despite even the tears of his mother and his wife. Finally, the judge had him hanged on March 19 1657. His torments and faithfulness were seen by some Western visitors; so moved were they that they recovered his body from the sea (where it had been cast after hanging) and took it to Europe.

St Maximus, Metropolitan of Kiev & Vladimir (1305)

He was one of the bold Confessors who opposed the false Union of Lyons perpetrated by the Emperor Michael VIII in 1274. In 1283 he became Metropolitan of Kiev (and thus of the whole Russian Church). At that time the Principality of Kiev had been reduced to ruins by the Tatar invaders. Saint Maximus received a revelation from God that he should transfer the metropolitanate from Kiev to Vladimir. On the night following the move to Vladimir, the Most Holy Theotokos appeared to the Saint, saying 'You have done well, Maximus my servant, in coming to live in my city!' She then put a mantle on his shoulders which he found when he awoke.

Saint Maximus reposed in peace in 1305. His body, interred in the Cathedral of Vladimir, was found to be incorrupt in the nineteenth century.

DECEMBER 7

Our Father among the Saints Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (397)

This illustrious light of Orthodoxy in the Western Church was born in Gaul in 349, but his widowed mother took the family to Rome while he was still a small child. Brilliant and well-educated, he was made a provincial Governor in 375 and took up residence in Milan. In those days, the Arian heresy was still dividing the Church, despite its repudiation at the Council of Nicaea in 325. When the time came to elect a new Bishop in Milan, the Orthodox and Arian parties were so divided that they could come to no agreement on a new Bishop. When Ambrose came as Governor to try to restore peace and order, a young child, divinely inspired, called out "Ambrose, Bishop!" To Ambrose's amazement, the people took up the cry, and Ambrose himself was elected, though he tried to refuse, protesting that he was only a catechumen (it was still common in those days to delay Holy Baptism for fear of polluting it by sin). He even attempted to flee, but his horse brought him back to the city. Resigning himself to God's will, he was baptized and, only a week later, elevated to Bishop. Immediately, he renounced all possessions, distributed all of his money to the poor and gave his estates to the Church. Straightaway, he entered into a spirited defense of Orthodoxy in his preaching and writings to the dismay of the Arians who had supported his election. Soon he persuaded Gratian, Emperor of the West, to call the Council of Aquileia, which brought an end to Arianism in the Western Church. (Arianism, however, continued to prosper among the barbarian nations for many years; see the Martyrs of Africa, also commemorated today).

Several times the holy Bishop was called upon to defend the Church against domination by the secular powers. Once, putting down an uprising in Thessalonika, the Emperor Theodosius punished the city by ordering the massacre of thousands of its residents. When the Emperor later visited Milan and came to the Cathedral to attend the Liturgy, Saint Ambrose stopped him at the door, condemned his crime before all the people, forbade him entrance to the church and excommunicated him for eight months. The Emperor went away weeping, and submitted in humility to the Church's discipline. When he returned after long penance to be restored to Communion, he went into the sanctuary along with the clergy, as had been the custom of the Emperors since Constantine the Great. But again the holy Ambrose humbled him in the sight of all the people, saying "Get out and take your place among the laity; the purple does not make priests, but only emperors." Theodosius left without protest, took his place among the penitents, and never again attempted to enter the sanctuary of a church. (When the Emperor died, it was Bishop Ambrose who preached his funeral eulogy).

Saint Ambrose, by teaching, preaching and writing, brought countless pagans to the Faith. His most famous convert was St Augustine (June 15), who became his disciple and eventually a bishop. Ambrose's many theological and catechetical works helped greatly to spread the teaching of the Greek fathers in the Latin world. He wrote many glorious antiphonal hymns which were once some of the gems of the Latin services.

Saint Ambrose reposed in peace in 397; his relics still rest in the basilica in Milan.

The Martyrs of Africa, who suffered during the Vandal persecution (429 and following)

In the year 429, Eighty thousand Vandals crossed from Spain into Africa and, in the course of ten years of massacre and pillage, gained control of most of the Roman territories of North Africa. Many people picture these barbarians as primitives, but they were in fact Arian heretics, who under their leader Genseric began a fierce persecution of the Church where they encountered it. The tortures that many thousands endured in their confession of the Faith are too horrible to describe here; the clergy were singled out for special cruelty.

Today we especially commemorate the Orthodox faithful whom the Vandals burned to death in their church, who went on singing hymns and praising God until the moment of their death. We also commemorate the three hundred Martyrs in Carthage who died by the sword rather than submit to Arian baptism.

The death of Genseric in 454 brought little relief, for after a short hiatus his successors Huneric (477-484) and Gonthamund (494-497) continued the persecution as viciously as before. Christian Africa lived under the Vandal yoke for almost 100 years: freedom from persecution was not secure until Justinian's forces overcame and drove off the Vandals in 523-525. The African Church, once a beacon of Christianity, never recovered its former vitality.

Our Venerable Father Antony of Siya (1556)

Saint Anthony is one of the holy protectors of iconographers.

He was born in 1477 in a Russian village near Archangel. From an early age he devoted himself to reading sacred books and making icons. When his parents died, he entered the service of a wealthy lord in Novgorod, and later married the lord's daughter. But less than a year after his marriage he was widowed. Despairing of earthly consolations, he gave his wealth to the poor and, owning only the clothes that he wore, went to become a monk at the Monastery of St Pachomius.

There he excelled in prayer, vigil and asceticism, praying for most of the night, taking on the heaviest work by day, and eating only every second day. After a short time he was ordained to the priesthood.

Some years later he and two companions, seeking a more secluded life for prayer, traveled to the frigid shores of the White Sea and established a small monastic brotherhood where the River Siya enters Lake Mikhailov. They lived in utter poverty, staying alive by gathering mushrooms and wild berries. Many times they heard the sound of bells, though there was no church or habitation anywhere nearby. In time other brethren were attracted to the site, and a monastery was founded with the help of the Grand Prince of Moscow. When the monastery church burned down, an icon of the Holy Trinity painted by St Antony miraculously survived unscathed, and later worked many miracles. The Saint himself withdrew into the forests, living alone for many years until he was called back by his spiritual children to serve as the monastery's abbot. Having foreseen his own end, he reposed in peace in 1556. He asked that his body be thrown into the lake, but his disciples, obedient in every other way, did not fulfil his request. His tomb was the source of many miracles in the coming years.

DECEMBER 8

Our Venerable Father Patapius (6th or 7th c.)

He was born at Thebes in Egypt, and at a young age left his pious parents, his inheritance and his acquaintances to dwell in the Egyptian desert, devoting himself to ceaseless prayer. After many years, his reputation spread and, despite his desire for solitude, throngs of pilgrims would seek him out for his prayers and counsel. To escape the attentions of men, he did a surprising thing: he abandoned the desert and moved to Constantinople, settling in the Blachernae district, where, amid the bustle of the city, he was able to pass unnoticed, more secure in his solitude than he had been in the caves of Egypt.

As he grew in obedience to the commandments of Christ, the grace of working miracles grew in him, and once again he gradually became known. Once a blind man cast himself before Patapius on the street, and the Saint cured him instantly by calling on the name of Christ. Once he healed a man crippled by dropsy, anointing him with the oil from a vigil lamp and signing him with the Cross.

After blessing the Church for many years with his prayers and miracles, St Patapius fell asleep in peace, and was buried in the church of the Monastery of the Egyptians near Constantinople. In 1904 his precious and incorrupt relics were uncovered in the course of some building at a small monastery near Corinth. From that time the monastery has been dedicated to St Patapius, and many miracles are worked there.

Holy Apostles Sosthenes, Apollos, Tychicus and Epaphroditus, Cephas and Caesar

All of these Apostles are mentioned in the New Testament. Sosthenes was the ruler of the Synagogue in Corinth, and was converted through the preaching of St Paul. After traveling with St Paul for years, he became Bishop of Colophon near Ephesus. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, well educated and with a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. He was brought to the fulness of the Christian faith by Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, and went out preaching the Gospel among the pagans. His eloquence was so admired that for awhile the gentile Church divided into two factions, one for Paul and one for Apollos. Saint Apollos later became Bishop of Caesarea.

(The Synaxarion lists Cephas and Caesar here; but some believe that St Paul's reference to Cephas in 1 Cor 1:12 refers to the Apostle Peter, not to a separate companion of St Paul; and that "those of Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22) refers to Christians in the Emperor's palace in Rome, not to a Christian named Caesar.)

DECEMBER 9

† The Conception of the Most Holy Mother of God

"In accordance with the eternal purpose of God, who willed to prepare a most pure habitation for Himself in order to take flesh and dwell among men, Joachim and Anna were prevented from having children for many years. Their barren old age was symbolic of human nature itself, bowed down and dried up under the weight of sin and death, yet they never ceased begging God to take away their reproach. Now when the time of preparation determined by the Lord had been fulfilled, God sent an Angel to Joachim in solitude on a mountain, and to Anna in her affliction weeping in her garden, to tell them that the ancient prophecies were soon to be fulfilled in them: a child would be born to them, who was destined to become the veritable Ark of the new Covenant, the divine Ladder, the unburnt Bush, the living Temple where the Word of God would take up his abode. Through the conception of Saint Anna, the barrenness of human nature itself, separated from God by death, has on this day been brought to an end; and by the wondrous birth-giving of her who had remained childless until the age when women can no longer bear fruit, God announced and testified to the more astonishing miracle of the Conception without seed, and of the immaculate coming to birth of Christ within the heart and the womb of the Most Holy Virgin and Mother of God.

"Even though the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary took place through a miraculous action of God, she was conceived by the union of man and woman in accordance with the laws of our human nature, which has fallen through Adam's transgression and become subject to sin and corruption (cf. Gen. 3:16). As the chosen Vessel and precious Shrine prepared by God since the beginning of time, she is indeed the most pure and the most perfect of mankind, but even so, she has not been set apart from our common inheritance nor from the consequences of the sin of our first parents. Just as it was fitting that Christ, in order to deliver us from death by his own voluntary death (Heb. 2:14), should by His Incarnation be made like to men in all things except sin; so it was meet that His Mother, in whose womb the Word of God would unite with human nature, should be subject to death and corruption like every child of Adam, lest we not be fully included in Salvation and Redemption. The Mother of God has been chosen and preferred among all women, not arbitrarily, but because God foresaw that she would preserve her purity and keep it perfect: conceived and born like all of us, she has been worthy to become the Mother of the Son of God and the mother of us all. So, in her tenderness and compassion, she is able to intercede for us with her Son, that He may have mercy upon us.

"Just as the Lord Jesus Christ was the fruit of the virginity of the holy Mother of God, so she herself was the fruit of the chastity of Joachim and Anna. And by following the same path of chastity we too, monks and Christian married people, can bring Christ to be born and grow in us." (*Synaxarion*)

In the Latin church, this day is called the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, reflecting the erroneous Latin view of the conception of the Holy Theotokos.

"The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception proclaimed by the Roman Catholics in 1858 is rejected by the Orthodox Church; but without in any way detracting from the dignity of the Mother of God. In fact, according to the Fathers, the inheritance from Adam consists not in a personal responsibility of all men for original sin, but simply in the inheritance of the consequences of sin: death, corruption and the passions (including procreation and fleshly union). Hence the Orthodox have no difficulty in recognizing that the Mother of God was heir, like us, of all the consequences of Adam's sin — Christ alone was exempt — but at the same time pure and without personal sin, for she freely kept herself from all attraction for the world and for the passions, and she voluntarily co-operated in God's purpose by obeying His will with docility: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word, she replied to the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38)*" (*Synaxarion*)

St Hannah (Anna), the Prophetess, the mother of the Prophet Samuel (12th c. BC)

Her story opens the First Book of Samuel. Though barren, she kept all the commandments and prayed with fervor that her reproach might be taken from her, vowing that if God granted her a son she would dedicate him to God's service. When her prayers were answered, she brought her child Samuel to live with Eli the High Priest as soon as he was weaned. Her beautiful song of praise and thanks (1 Sam. 2:1-10) has become the third Biblical Ode of the Matins Canon; today it is only sung in full in monasteries during Lent. Despite her age, God granted her three sons and two daughters. She reposed in peace.

St Stephen the New Light (Neolampes) of Constantinople (912)

He seems to have lived in Constantinople for his entire life, but lived there as if in the desert, devoting himself entirely to solitude, fasting and prayer. For most of his adult life he ate only a few vegetables without salt once or twice a week; by his prayers many miracles were wrought in the City.

In time he was made a priest and served in the church of St Antipas, where he lived in seclusion. When the church was destroyed in the earthquake of 879, he withdrew to a dank pit in the ruins where the air was so unwholesome that he lost his hair and teeth and was almost paralyzed. He only emerged from this asceticism after twelve years. Thereafter he served the Divine Liturgy only on Feasts of the Lord, allowing himself some water and fruit after the service; otherwise he spent his time alone in silent prayer. He reposed in peace in 912 at the age of seventy-three.

DECEMBER 10

Holy Martyrs Menas, Hermogenes and Euphrasius (235)

Menas was an Athenian, a courtier of the Emperor Maximinus, and a secret Christian. Once there was an outbreak of civil unrest in Alexandria, brought about by various political factions, and by the increasing success of Christian missionaries in turning the Alexandrian people from the idols. The Emperor sent Menas to reconcile the parties and settle the dispute. On his arrival, Menas quickly resolved the political troubles and restored peace to the city; but instead of putting down Christianity as the Emperor had desired, he did everything in his power to protect the Christians and encourage the spread of the Gospel. When word of this came to the Emperor, he sent another trusted courtier, Hermogenes, to re-establish Imperial authority and to execute Menas if he would not renounce Christ. Hermogenes followed these orders scrupulously: he subjected the godly Menas to various horrid tortures in the public arena. But Menas was miraculously preserved through them all, and when he finally appeared in the arena, flanked by two shining Angels, Hermogenes repented and

confessed Christ. He in turn became such a fervent advocate for the Gospel that he was soon made a Bishop (1). Finally the Emperor decided that the only solution was to come to Alexandria himself. There he had both Menas and Hermogenes cruelly tortured to death in secret, lest they perform any public miracles; but when the Emperor presented himself before the people at the arena the following day, the two Saints, miraculously preserved, appeared there also, causing the people to cry out "Christ is the only true God!" At the sight, Menas' scribe Eugephus declared himself a Christian, leaped into the arena and publicly demanded the honor of dying with them. All three were beheaded. Their precious relics were later taken to Constantinople, where they worked many miracles.

DECEMBER 11

Our Venerable Father Daniel the Stylite (490)

He was from Samosata in Mesopotamia, and became a monk at the age of twelve. As a young monk he visited St Symeon the Stylite (September 1) to receive his blessing. Years later he moved to the neighborhood of Constantinople at the request of the holy Patriarch Anatolius (July 3), whom he had healed of a deadly ailment through his prayers. For a time Daniel lived in the church of the Archangel Michael at Anaplis, but nine years later St Symeon the Stylite appeared to him in a vision and told him to imitate Symeon's asceticism of living on a pillar. For the remaining thirty-three years of his life the Saint did just that. He stood immovably in prayer regardless of the weather: once after a storm his disciples found him standing covered with ice. He was much loved by several Emperors (including Leo the Great), who sought him out for counsel. He reposed at the age of eighty-four, having lived through the reigns of three Emperors.

Saint Nikon the Dry of the Kiev Caves (1101)

He was a monk in Kiev, taken into slavery by a band of Polovtsi (Turkic raiders who were troubling the country at that time) along with the holy Martyr Eustratius (March 28). He humbly refused to be ransomed by his family and therefore suffered a harsh captivity for three years. Despite this, he prayed constantly for his captors, worked miracles for their sake, and once healed their leader from a deadly illness. One day St Eustratius appeared to him in a vision and told him that he would be set free in three days. When he told his captives, they severed the tendons of his knees and ankles and kept him under guard. But at the appointed time he was miraculously transported to Kiev, where he suddenly appeared in church among his astonished brethren. The Saint did not want his chains removed until his Abbot said "Brother, if the Lord wanted to see you in these chains, he would not have delivered you from captivity!" He was so withered from his hardships that he became known as Nikon the Dry. Later, the captor whom he had healed came to the Monastery of the Caves and became a disciple of his former slave.

Our Venerable Father Luke the New Stylite (979)

He was an Anatolian, and in his youth served in the Byzantine army in the war against the Bulgar Tsar Symeon. After the war, he left the army to become a monk, and was in time ordained to the priesthood. For a time he served as an army chaplain, living even more austere than he had as a monk and distributing all his possessions to soldiers in need.

He entered the Monastery of St Zacharias on Mount Olympus in Bithynia, where he was appointed steward. Here his ascetical labors reached new levels. He kept a large stone in his mouth so that he would be unable to speak, and spent each night in a tree. When his exploits threatened to attract admiration, Luke fled to his homeland and lived for a few years in an isolated cave. Then, following in the footsteps of Symeon the Elder (September 1), Symeon the Younger (May 24), Daniel (today) and Alypius (November 26), he began to live as a stylite, dwelling on a tall pillar near Constantinople. Here he became a powerful intercessor for those who flocked to him for healing or counsel, and countless miracles were worked through his prayers.

Saint Luke lived on his pillar for more than forty years without interruption, and fell asleep in peace, aged more than one hundred. He was buried in the Monastery of St Bassian.

DECEMBER 11-17

† Sunday of the Holy Forefathers (commemorated on the Sunday that falls between the 11th and 17th of December)

On this Sunday, in preparation of the Nativity of our Lord, we remember the Patriarch Abraham and his lineage, ancestors of Christ. The story of Abraham and his faithfulness should be read in the Book of Genesis.

"Through the connection of the holy Ancestors and Patriarchs, Our Saviour Jesus Christ is Himself also, in a way, the fruit of the faith of Abraham. So, when God makes his voice known to each of us while we are still in the strange land of the passions and worldly vanities, we must like Abraham unhesitatingly leave all that is ours, and follow the divine calling with faith until we reach the Promised Land where, in our turn, we shall be able to give birth spiritually to Christ. For, planted in us by faith and Baptism, He has to grow in us through the virtues so as to shine in the light of contemplation. We descendants of Abraham, 'children of the promise' as Isaac was, having become 'sons of God' through the gift of the

Holy Spirit, out therefore to see Christ form in us... Let us then for our part become forebears of Christ and continue steadfast in the faith, so that we may keep the feast of his Nativity, saying: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (*Synaxarion*)

DECEMBER 12

† St Herman, Wonderworker of Alaska (1836)

He is also commemorated tomorrow, December 13. See his life there.

† Our Holy Godbearing Father Spyridon the Wonderworker (348).

He was a humble shepherd who lived on the island of Cyprus with his wife and his one child, a daughter named Irene. Though he was poor himself, his house and table were always open to travelers and those in need. He kept his money in a box which he left open and available to all, not concerning himself with who took from it or whether they were deserving or not. In time, his wife died and, with less worldly cares, he redoubled his prayers and his almsgiving.

He became so well-loved on the island that, when the bishop of the town of Tremithos died, the faithful unanimously chose Spyridon to succeed him, and he thus became a shepherd of rational sheep as well as the beasts he had tended. Despite his sudden elevation in rank, he kept to his former manner of life, traveling everywhere on foot, tending his animals as before, while fulfilling all the duties of a bishop as well. (To portray this godly humility, his icon shows him wearing bishop's vestments and a peasant's woven straw hat.)

His compassion for others was boundless. Though he was very strict with himself, he would always break a fast to give comfort to a traveler. Once a band of robbers broke into his sheepfold by night, but found themselves confined there by an invisible force. When Spyridon found them in the morning, he freed them, admonished them to live honestly, and gave them two sheep in compensation, he said, for their keeping an all-night vigil.

Pages could be filled with stories of the miracles wrought by the holy bishop for the good of his flock: by his prayers he ended a drought, turned a snake to gold to help a poor man, and even raised the dead son of a poor widow. His radiant virtue touched the consciences of those he met so that many would spontaneously fall at his feet and confess their sins.

When the Emperor Constantine summoned the First Ecumenical Council in 325, Spyridon attended, dressed in his simple peasant's garb. At one of the sessions, a proud Arian philosopher challenged the Orthodox to a debate about the Holy Trinity, and was amazed when the simple Spyridon stepped forward to accept the challenge. He and all the other bishops were far more amazed when the uneducated peasant bishop confounded all the Arian's arguments with his eloquent, Spirit-inspired words. The humbled philosopher admitted that he was convinced, embraced the Orthodox faith, and called upon the other Arians to abandon their human wisdom and embrace the true and life-giving Faith.

The holy bishop always celebrated the Divine Liturgy with joy. Once, serving in a remote, almost empty church, he turned to the invisible congregation and said "Peace be unto all!", and his disciple heard a choir of angels respond "And with thy spirit!"

Saint Spyridon reposed in peace in 348 at the age of seventy-eight. His incorrupt and wonder-working relics poured forth miracles for the people of Cyprus until the seventh century, when they were moved to Constantinople to escape the Arab invasion; when the City fell to the Turks, the relics were again moved to Corfu, where they are venerated to this day. Even after 1,500 years, the holy relics remain incorrupt and work many life-giving wonders. Saint Spyridon is venerated as the Patron of Corfu.

St Finian of Clonard (549)

"St Finian, known as the 'Tutor of the Saints of Ireland,' stands with St Enda of Aran at the head of the patriarchs of Irish monasticism. He showed great zeal and piety for God from his youth. He had already founded three churches before he set off for Wales to study at the feet of St Cadoc at Llancarfan (September 25, †577). In Llancarfan he became close friends with St Gildas (January 29, †570), another of St Cadoc's disciples. Upon his return to Ireland, he founded the great Monastery of Clonard during the same year the great St Enda (March 21, †530) reposed in Aran. A multitude of illustrious and holy men studied under St Finian, including the famous 'Twelve Apostles of Ireland.' St Finian founded many other monasteries during his lifetime, including the famous island monastery of Skellig Michael off the southwest coast of Ireland." (*Saint Herman Calendar 2003*)

DECEMBER 13

† St Herman, Wonderworker of Alaska (1836). First Martyrs of America Juvenaly (1796) and Peter the Aleut (1815)

St Herman, for many the Patron of North America, was born near Moscow around 1736 to a pious merchant family, and entered monastic life at the age of sixteen, at the Trinity - St Sergius Lavra near St Petersburg. While there he was attacked by a cancer of the face, but the Mother of God appeared to him and healed him completely. He was tonsured a monk in

1783 with the name of Herman (a form of Germanos), and was received into Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga. After some time, he was allowed to withdraw to the life of a hermit in the forest, and only came to the monastery for feast days.

In 1793, in response to a request by the Russian-American Commercial Company for missionaries to Alaska, Valaam Monastery was told to select a company of its best monks to travel to America. Eight were chosen, of whom the hermit Herman was one. The company crossed all of Siberia and, almost a year later, first saw Kodiak Island in September 1794. The missionaries set about their work, and found the native Aleut people so receptive to the Gospel of Christ that in the first year about 7,000 were baptized and 1,500 marriages performed.

Despite severe hardships, the missionaries covered huge distances, on foot and in small boats, to reach the scattered fishing settlements of the Aleuts. In general they found a warm reception, but many of the pagan shamans opposed their message and sometimes stirred up the people against them. It was thus that the Priest-monk Juvenaly was killed in 1796, becoming the First Martyr of North America.

Despite such opposition, the missionaries' major difficulty was with the Russian traders and settlers, who were in the habit of exploiting the Aleuts as they wished, and who had oppressed and disgusted the native people with their immoral behavior. When the missionaries came to the defense of the natives, they were repaid with the opposition of the Russian-American company, whose leadership put countless obstacles in the path of their work. In time, several of the company died at sea, and several more abandoned the mission in discouragement, leaving the monk Herman alone.

He settled on Spruce Island near Kodiak, and once again took up the hermit's life, dwelling in a small cabin in the forest. He spent his days in prayer and mission work, and denied himself every fleshly comfort: he fasted often and lived on a diet of blackberries, mushrooms and vegetables (in Alaska!). Despite these privations, he founded an orphanage and a school for the natives of the island, cared for the sick in epidemics, and built a chapel where he conducted divine services attended by many. (He was not a priest, but God made up the lack in miraculous ways: at Theophany, Angels descended to bless the waters of the bay, and the Saint would use the holy water to heal the sick). Asked if he was ever lonely or dejected in his solitude, and replied: "I am not alone; God is here as everywhere, and the Angels too. There is no better company."

Saint Herman reposed in peace on Spruce island, at the age of eighty-one, in 1836. At the moment of his departure, his face was radiant with light, and the inhabitants nearby saw a pillar of light rising above his hermitage. His last wish was to be buried on Spruce Island. When some of his well-intended disciples attempted to take his relics back to Kodiak to be buried from the church there, a storm rose up and continued unabated until they had abandoned the plan and buried him as he desired. He was officially glorified in 1970, the first canonized American Saint.

Saint Peter was a young Aleut convert to the Orthodox faith. In 1812 the Russian-American Company set up a post in California, where Russians and Aleuts farmed and traded to supply the needs of the Alaskans; Peter was one of these. The Spanish, who at the time ruled California, suspected the Russians of territorial ambitions, and in 1815 captured about twenty Orthodox Aleuts and took them to San Francisco. Fourteen of these were put to torture in an effort to convert them to the Roman Catholic faith. All refused to compromise their faith, and Peter and a companion were singled out for especially vicious treatment: Peter's fingers, then hands and feet, were severed, and he died from loss of blood, still firm in his confession. The Latins were preparing the same fate for the others when word came that they were to be transferred; eventually they returned to Alaska. When he heard a first-hand account of Peter's martyrdom, Saint Herman crossed himself and said "Holy New Martyr Peter, pray to God for us!" Saint Peter the Aleut is the first recognized Saint of American birth.

St Herman appears several times on the Church's calendar. The Synaxis of St Herman and the American Protomartyrs is celebrated today. St Herman is commemorated on November 15, the day of his repose; but (partly because pilgrimage to Alaska is so difficult in the winter) the day of his glorification, July 27 / August 9 is kept there as his primary feast day.

Following is a fragment of a conversation between St Herman and some officers of a Russian ship, recorded by his disciple Yanovsky; it includes perhaps the most familiar quotation from St Herman.

"But do you love God?" asked the Elder. And all answered: "Of course we love God. How can we not love God?" "And I, a sinner, have tried to love God for more than forty years, and I cannot say that I perfectly love Him," answered Father Herman, and began to explain how one must love God. "If we love someone," he said, "then we always think of that one, we strive to please that one; day and night our heart is preoccupied with that object. Is it in this way, gentlemen, that you love God? Do you often turn to Him, do you always remember Him, do you always pray to Him and fulfill His Holy commandments?" We had to admit that we did not. "For our good, for our happiness," concluded the Elder, "at least let us give a vow to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this minute, we shall strive above all else to love God and to do His Holy Will!"

Saint Herman is also commemorated on December 12.

† Martyrs Eustratius, Auxentius, Eugene, Mardarius, and Orestes at Sebaste

"These five courageous men shone like five resplendent stars in the dark days of the anti-Christian Emperors Diocletian and Maximian. St Eustratius was a Roman general in the city of Satalios, Eugene was one of his comrades in arms and Orestes likewise a respected soldier. Auxentius was a priest and Mardarius a simple citizen who came, like Eustratius, from the town of Aravraca. The imperial governors, Lysias and Agricola, tortured Auxentius first as he was a priest. Beholding the innocent suffering of the Christians, Eustratius presented himself before Lycias and declared that he also was a Christian. While Eustratius was being tortured, Eugene stood up before the judge and cried out: 'I am a Christian too, Lycias!' When they were driving Eustratius and the other martyrs through the town, Mardarius saw them from the roof of his house, and he took leave of his wife and two frail daughters and hastened after them, shouting into the faces of their tormentors: 'I am a Christian too, like the Lord Eustratius!' Orestes was a young and handsome soldier, who stood head and shoulders above all the other soldiers. One day, when he was at target practice in Lycias's presence, the Cross he was wearing fell from his breast, and Lycias realised that he was a Christian. Orestes openly confessed his faith, and was martyred with the others. Auxentius was beheaded, Eugene and Mardarius died under torture, Orestes was exposed on a red-hot iron grid and Eustratius died in a flaming furnace. St Blaise (see Feb. 11th) gave Communion to St Eustratius in prison before his death. Their relics were later taken to Constantinople, and are preserved in the church dedicated to them — The Holy Five Companions. They were seen alive in that church, and St Orestes appeared to St Dimitri of Rostov (see Oct. 28th). A beautiful prayer by St Eustratius is extant, which is read at the Midnight Service on Saturdays: 'I glorify Thy majesty, O Lord for Thou hast regarded my lowliness and hast not shut me up in the hands of my enemies, but hast saved my soul from want...' " (*Prologue*)

Holy Virgin Maryr Lucy of Syracuse (304)

During Diocletian's persecutions, the Christian maiden Lucy went with her mother on pilgrimage to the tomb of St Agatha (February 5), to pray for her mother's healing from an ailment. Saint Agatha appeared to Lucy in a dream and said, 'my sister, why do you ask from me what your own faith can obtain? Your mother is healed. You will soon be the glory of Syracuse as I am of Catania.' Lucy's mother was healed from that day, and Lucy determined to consecrate herself entirely to God. She broke off an engagement to a nobly-born young man and gave her large dowry of land and jewels to the poor. Her would-be husband angrily denounced her as a Christian to the Governor of Syracuse.

At the tribunal, Lucy firmly confessed her faith in Christ and refused to make sacrifice to the gods. The Governor ordered that she be placed in a brothel, but his minions were unable to move her from the place where she stood, even when they tied her with ropes and attempted to drag her with oxen. The Governor asked what witchcraft she used, to which she answered 'I do not use witchcraft — it is the power of God that is with me. Bring ten thousand of your men if you wish; they will not be able to move me unless God wills it.' The men then lit a fire around her, but it did not harm her. Finally they beheaded her where she stood. With her last words, she predicted the deaths of Maximian and Diocletian, and the coming of peace to the Church.

DECEMBER 14

Holy Martyrs Thyrsus, Leucis and Callinicus (250)

These martyrs contested in Asia Minor during the reign of Decius. Thyrsus and Leucis were executed after horrible torture for confessing themselves as Christians and rebuking the Governor for his slaughter of their brethren. Callinicus was a pagan priest, converted by witnessing the martyrdom and miracles of St Thyrsus; he was beheaded.

Holy Martyrs Philemon, Apollonius, Arian and those with them (3rd c.)

"During the reign of Diocletian (284-305), the Governor of Antioch in the Thebaid of Upper Egypt was Arian, a fierce persecutor who had sent many Christians to a violent death, among them Saints Timothy and Maura (see May 3) and Saint Sabine (Mar. 16). When he had imprisoned thirty-seven Christians for their confession of faith, one of them, named Apollonius, a reader of the Church, lost his courage at the sight of the instruments of torture, and thought how he might escape torments without denying Christ. He gave money to Philemon, a flute-player and a pagan, that he might put on Apollonius' clothes and offer sacrifices before Arian, so that all would think Apollonius to have done the Governor's will, and he might be released. Philemon agreed to this, but when the time came to offer sacrifice, enlightened by divine grace, he declared himself a Christian instead. He and Apollonius, who also confessed Christ when the fraud was exposed, were both beheaded. Before beheading them, Arian had commanded that they be shot with arrows, but while they remained unharmed, Arian himself was wounded by one of the arrows; Saint Philemon foretold that after his martyrdom, Arian would be healed at his tomb. When this came to pass, Arian, the persecutor who had slain so many servants of Christ, himself believed in Christ and was baptized with four of his body-guards. Diocletian heard of this and had Arian and his body-guards brought to him. For their confession of Christ, they were cast into the sea, and received the crown of life everlasting." (*Great Horologion*)

DECEMBER 15

† Holy Hieromartyr Eleutherius, Bishop of Illyria, and those with him (126)

His name is a form of the Greek word for "freedom." He was a native of Rome whose father died at a young age, leaving him to be brought up by his mother Anthia, a Christian who reared him in the fear of God and the love of holiness. His virtue and ability were so evident that he was ordained a priest at the age of seventeen and at twenty was made Bishop of Illyria, a large see roughly comprising modern-day Serbia.

The young bishop's pastoral and evangelistic work was so successful that many pagans were converted to the Faith through him. His growing reputation drew the attention of the Emperor Hadrian, who sent one of his senior officers named Felix to arrest the holy bishop. But when Felix saw and heard Eleutherius, he was captivated by his teaching, believed in Christ, and was baptized. He and the St Eleutherius returned and presented themselves together before the Emperor, fearlessly confessing their faith.

Eleutherius was subjected to brutal torture, during which the city prefect Coremonus, who had suggested some of the tortures, was enlightened through the Saint's prayers for his enemies, and proclaimed Christ. He was baptized by Eleutherius and later beheaded. After a time, when it became clear that fire and torture would not move the holy bishop, he was taken to the amphitheater and beheaded. At the moment of his death, his mother Anthia rushed forward and took his body in her arms. There she also was beheaded by the executioners.

Pregnant women call on St Eleutherius that they may have a safe delivery.

Holy Martyr Eleutherius the Cubicularius (4th c.)

He was from a noble family in Constantinople, and rose to the rank of *Cubicularius* (Chamberlain). He was not only a counselor to, but a close friend of, the Emperor (probably Julian the Apostate). But Eleutherius was increasingly moved by a desire to become a Christian; so, obtaining a leave from the Imperial court, he moved to the countryside in Bithynia, where he was baptized. There he built a house that concealed an underground chapel.

When Eleutherius returned to court, some jealous courtiers denounced him to the Emperor, who visited Eleutherius' country house and was furious to discover the underground church. When the Saint would not renounce his faith in Christ, the Emperor, ignoring all previous bonds of friendship, had him beheaded.

Holy Martyr Bacchus the New (787)

During the reign of Constantine VI and Irene, restorers of the holy icons, the Holy Land was under the control of the Muslim Arabs. Many Christians there apostatized, putting honors and security in this world above their eternal joy. One of these was the father of this Saint, who brought up seven children as Muslims. His wife however, never renounced her Faith and prayed constantly for the conversion of her husband and children. Upon the death of the father, her third son Dachak declared that he wished to become a Christian. He was baptized in the Monastery of St Sabas near Jerusalem, receiving the name Bacchus, and determined to be a monk. But the abbot, fearing reprisals against the Monastery, sent him back to his home in Jerusalem. His brothers, seeing his joy and boldness in confessing the Faith, decided to receive holy Baptism, except for one, who denounced Bacchus to the authorities. He was arrested and brought before the judge and, when he proved steadfast in his confession of Christ, was beheaded.

Our Venerable Father Tryphon of Kola, apostle of Laponia (1583), and his disciple the Holy Martyr Jonah (1590)

Saint Tryphon was the son of a priest from Novgorod. The *Synaxarion* records that, at the moment of his birth, the verse *blessed is the life of those who dwell in the desert* was being sung in the Matins service. In 1525 he was moved by a divine revelation to flee to the far north of Russia and live as a hermit. He settled near the River Kola, where he devoted his nights to prayer, his days to proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to the native peoples there. The pagans were hostile at first, but his patience and humility won them over, and he baptized many. He built them a church with his own hands on the shores of Lake Ladoga, and later founded a monastery there. Saint Tryphon reposed in 1583. He predicted his own death and the coming destruction of the Monastery by the Swedes, which came to pass in 1590. All the monks were massacred. The first victim, Starets Jonah, worked many miracles at the Monastery after its restoration.

DECEMBER 16

Holy Prophet Haggai (~520 BC)

He was born in Babylon, of the priestly tribe of Levi, during the captivity of the Jews. After their return to Jerusalem, the Jews began to rebuild the Temple and to worship there according to the Law, but were discouraged by opposition from the local population (many of them Jews who had not gone into captivity). So God raised up the holy Prophets Haggai and Zachariah (February 3) to stir the people to complete their sacred work. Haggai's prophecies reveal that the drought that the Hebrews were suffering was brought about by their failure to complete the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and would only end when they rededicated themselves to their work. He is ranked tenth among the minor Prophets.

Holy Empress and Wonderworker Theophano (893)

She was born to noble parents in Constantinople. Beautiful and pious, she was chosen by the Emperor Basil (867-886) to be the bride of his son Leo VI the Wise. When Leo ascended the throne, the Empress showed no attraction to the honors and pleasures of the royal life, but devoted her days to prayer and almsgiving. She fulfilled all the duties of her Imperial station while living a life of austerity whenever out of the world's sight. Beneath her rich garments she wore coarse haircloth, and kept fasts and vigils as if she were living the monastic life. She was humble and respectful to all, and would address even her servants as 'Master' or 'Mistress.' At night, after her servants had left her alone, she would leave her fine bed and sleep on a mat on the floor, rising often during the night to pray.

After her daughter Eudocia died in 892, she wished to leave the world and enter a monastery, but her spiritual father St Euthymius (August 5) would not give his blessing. Nonetheless, her time in the world was not long: only three years later she died, before she had reached the age of thirty. Immediately after her funeral in the Church of the Holy Apostles, her holy relics became the source of many miracles and healings, and are venerated to this day in the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

DECEMBER 17**Holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Holy Youths Ananias, Azarias and Misael**

Their wonderful story is told in the Book of Daniel, in which the coming of Christ is prophesied and prefigured in several places. Large portions of the book are missing from the protestant Bible: make every effort to obtain and read the full version. The Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace have become the Seventh and Eight of the Old Testament Odes of the Matins Canon; the Odes are sung in full only in monasteries during Lent. The Three Youths' sojourn in the fiery furnace is prominent in Orthodox hymns and devotions, for their passage through the flames unharmed is a type of the holy Virgin's incorrupt birth-giving: receiving the divine Fire within her womb, she was not consumed but remained ever-virgin.

According to the Synaxarion, Daniel reposed in peace at the age of eighty, two years after the return of the Hebrew people from their captivity in Babylon. The Three Youths also reposed in peace. But St Cyril of Alexandria writes that all of them met a martyr's end, by beheading.

According to tradition these four were among the righteous dead who rose at Christ's Crucifixion and were seen by many (Matthew ch. 27).

The Three Holy Youths were named, in Hebrew, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael; the names given above are Greek renderings of the Hebrew names. Their captors also gave them Babylonian names, by which they are also called: Shadrach, Abed-nego, and Meshak, respectively. Daniel was given the Babylonian name Belteshazzar.

Our Holy Father Dionysius the New of Zakynthos (1624)

He was born to pious and wealthy parents on the island of Zakynthos. Early in life he renounced his wealth and worldly honors to enter monastic life. His virtue became so well known that he was appointed Archbishop of Aegina, where he served for many years. In time, in order to retire to a life of solitude and struggle, he resigned and returned to his homeland where he entered a monastery in the mountains. Here he received the grace of performing miracles, and worked many healing and saving wonders among the people of Zakynthos.

A story from the *Synaxarion* reveals his character as one truly united to Christ: "He excelled above all in love of neighbour and in meekness. One day the murderer of the Saint's own brother, fleeing the law and the members of his victim's family, arrived at the monastery and begged Dionysius for asylum, little knowing to whom he was speaking. On gathering the reason for his flight and that his own brother was the victim, the man of God resisted with all his strength his natural grief and the temptation to avenge the crime. Imitating Christ, who pardoned his enemies and prayed for his persecutors, he received the fugitive with compassion, comforted him, exhorted him to repent and hid him in an out-of-the-way cell. When his pursuing kinsmen reached the monastery with the dreadful news, the Saint did not reveal that he knew it already, but did his best with words of peace to allay the wrath of his relatives and their desire for vengeance. As soon as they moved off, he let out the murderer (who was amazed and terror-struck before such superhuman goodness) and having provided him with victuals and money for his journey, he sent him away to work freely at the salvation of his soul."

The holy bishop reposed in 1622 after a long and painful illness. He has continued to work signs and miracles and to appear from time to time to the people of Zakynthos, who venerate him as their protector and patron.

DECEMBER 18**Holy Martyr Sebastian and those with him (237)**

He grew up in Milan and became an army officer, where he distinguished himself so well that the Emperor Diocletian

made him captain of the Praetorian Guard not suspecting that Sebastian was a Christian. In Rome, while fulfilling the duties of a courtier, he used his position to comfort and encourage his imprisoned fellow- Christians. By his labors and example he brought many to faith in Christ, including Chromatius, the Prefect who was charged with persecuting the Roman Christians.

Sebastian had upheld two brothers, Mark and Marcellinus, who were awaiting execution for their faith. When the day of execution came, their father Tranquillinus who had been a pagan but through Sebastian's example had converted presented himself to Chromatius and announced that he too was a Christian. His testimony was so powerful that the hard heart of the Prefect was melted, and he himself resolved to become a Christian.

Caius, Bishop of Rome, gathered the new brethren (both men and women — not all of Sebastian's converts have been mentioned here) to embrace them and baptize them, but also to warn them of their coming Martyrdom. He instructed some to flee the city and others, headed by Sebastian, to remain in Rome, devoting their days to fasting, prayer and thanksgiving as they awaited their death. As the "company of Martyrs" did this, many came to them and were healed of ailments, and many joined them in confessing Christ.

When the time of martyrdom came, each member of the company was subjected to imaginatively cruel tortures before his execution. Sebastian himself was made to witness the deaths of all his companions, then to endure his own trial. He serenely confessed his unshaken faith before Diocletian himself before being taken to the place of execution. There he was tied to a post and made the target of a band of archers until his body bristled with arrows like the quills of a porcupine. He was left for dead, but when Irene, widow of St Castulus, came to bury him, she found him alive and tended his wounds. Amazingly, he recovered, and presented himself once again to the Emperor. Astonished and outraged, the tyrant ordered that Sebastian be beaten to death with clubs and thrown into the city's sewer. That evening, a pious Christian woman was told in a vision to retrieve his body and bury it in the catacombs. After St Constantine brought peace to the Church, Pope Damasus built a church over the site in the Saint's honor. For hundreds of years, many miracles were worked there through St Sebastian's intercessions.

Holy Hieromartyr Modestus I, Archbishop of Jerusalem (634)

His parents were pious Christians from Sebaste in Asia Minor, who died in prison while Modestus was still an infant. The child was raised by pagans, but when he learned that his parents had died for Christ, he secretly became a Christian also. When his adoptive parents died, he traveled to Athens, where he was taken in by a Christian goldsmith and his wife, and became a Christian at the age of thirteen. Modestus' almsgiving and love for the poor soon earned him renown, but aroused the envy of the goldsmith's sons, who sold Modestus into slavery during a trip to Egypt. But Modestus was able to bring his new master to faith in Christ and regain his freedom.

Some time later he made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre opened at his prayers, and the people, taking this as a sign from God, chose Modestus as Archbishop of Jerusalem. (Accounts of his life do not mention his having been anything but a layman before this.) He served his flock tenderly and zealously, encouraging all to abound in spiritual gifts, and working many miracles. His prayers were effective not only in healing the faithful, but even in curing the ailments of their cattle and other animals. For this reason, it is still customary on this day to sprinkle animals pens and stables, and even houses in which pets dwell, with holy water, asking the Saint's protection.

Saint Modestus served his flock faithfully into old age. According to some accounts he reposed in peace. According to others, in his old age he was delivered up to the pagans by his enemies, and beheaded by them after many torments.

DECEMBER 18-24

Sunday before Nativity

"On the Sunday before the Nativity (which falls between the 18th and 24th of December), the Holy Fathers have instituted the Commemoration of the Genealogy of our Saviour Jesus Christ, in which we include not only His ancestors according to the flesh from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed of the Mother of God, but all the Righteous and the Prophets, who, by their words or deeds, announced the coming in the flesh of the Son of God." (*Synaxarion*)

As baptized Christians, we ourselves are by adoption children of the Father and brethren of Christ, as the Apostle says, and are therefore a continuation of this spiritual lineage. May we be made worthy!

Since the Jews did not trace genealogies in the mother's line, the Scriptures do not give us the lineage of Christ according to the flesh, which was through his mother Mary; but instead list the forebears of Joseph the Betrothed, who served according to the Law as husband of Mary and father of Jesus. According to the Fathers, the blessed Virgin was the daughter of Joachim, son of Bar-Panther, son of Panther, son of Levi, son of Nathan, son of King David. Thus as prophesied, the Messiah was of the house and lineage of David.

DECEMBER 19

Holy Martyr Boniface (290)

He lived in Rome during the reign of Diocletian. He was slave to Aglais, the daughter of a Senator, and served as steward of her household and her large fortune. He also lived in fornication with her, and was addicted to drink. Despite these sins, he was kind, hospitable to strangers, and generous toward the needy.

In time, Aglais became troubled in her conscience over her way of life, and began to think of the account that she would have to give to God for her sins. Some Christians told her of the holy Martyrs and, moved by their accounts, she ordered Boniface to travel to Tarsus and bring back relics of these holy ones. Boniface, still deaf and blind to the things of God, said jokingly, "And will you honor me as a Saint if I bring back my own body to you as a relic?"

Boniface traveled to Tarsus with a large escort, well supplied with gold. He went straightaway to the Amphitheater, where he beheld a number of Martyrs being subjected to awful torments for the pleasure of the crowd, but bearing them all with patience and serenity. At the sight, the dissolute steward was touched by grace and felt his heart melt within him. He ran to the Martyrs, fell at their feet and kissed their chains, and loudly declared that he too was a disciple of Christ. So he too was put in chains, subjected to frightful tortures, and finally beheaded, rejoicing and praising God.

Boniface's escort, mystified by his long absence, made inquiries and were astonished to discover that their godless and sinful companion had met a Martyr's death the day before. They paid fifty pounds in gold for his body and brought it back to Rome, thus fulfilling Boniface's own unwitting prophecy.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Aglais and said, "Arise and go to meet him who was once your servant and companion in sin, but has now become our brother. Receive him as your master for, thanks to him, all your sins are to be forgiven." Rejoicing, Aglais received her former lover's holy relics and built a church in his honor, where many miracles were wrought. Aglais gave away her fortune, devoted herself to asceticism and prayer, and was herself granted the great work miracles. She reposed in peace thirteen years later, assured that the sins of her past had been effaced through the intercessions of the holy Boniface.

DECEMBER 20

Beginning of the Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ

Holy Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-bearer, Bishop of Antioch (107)

There is a tradition that it was the young boy Ignatius whom Christ took upon his knee to explain to His followers that they must become as children to enter the Kingdom. He knew the holy Apostles personally and, with St Polycarp (February 25) was a disciple of St John the Evangelist. He succeeded Evodius as second Bishop of Antioch, the capital of Syria and at that time one of the largest cities in the world. Here, during the persecutions of Domitian, he strengthened the faithful, brought many pagans to Christ, and prayed that he himself would be granted the crown of martyrdom. His flock called him the Godbearer, a title that he did not refuse, for he said that all Christians after their Baptism are truly Bearers of Christ, clothed in the Holy Spirit.

When peace was restored to the Church for awhile, the holy Bishop devoted himself to organizing the young Church on strong foundations at a time when the last of the Apostles had only recently passed away. He established the principle that the Grace imparted to the Apostles at Pentecost was handed down to the bishops appointed by them, and so on through the generations: the Apostolic Succession.

The Emperor Trajan, passing through Syria to make war in Armenia, spent some time in Antioch and initiated a persecution of Christians. Rejoicing that the time of martyrdom had at last arrived, Ignatius presented himself before the Emperor and eloquently declared his faith in Christ.

"So you are a disciple of the one crucified under Pontius Pilate?" asked the Emperor.

"I am the disciple of Him who has nailed my sin to the Cross, and has trodden the Devil and his devices underfoot."

"Why do you call yourself the Godbearer?"

"Because I carry the living Christ within me!"

"Therefore, let the bearer of the Crucified One be taken in chains to Rome, there to be fed to the lions for the amusement of the people."

And so it was. During the long and difficult journey to Rome, cruelly mistreated by his guards, the Saint wrote a series of letters to the young churches which remain one of the treasures of the Church. In Smyrna, he was able to meet with his fellow-disciple Polycarp and entrust to him the care of the churches whose shepherd he had been. As Trajan had ordered, in Rome he was taken to the amphitheater and, as the Synaxarion says, "entered the arena as though approaching the holy altar to serve his last Liturgy in the presence of the faithful, who were crowded among pagans on the steps of the amphitheatre." In a few moments he was completely devoured by the lions, save for a few bones. These were gathered by

the faithful and returned to Antioch.

In his *Letter to the Romans*, the holy Bishop wrote to some who wished to rescue him from his martyrdom: "I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found to be the pure bread of God."

Repose of Our Holy Father John of Kronstadt (1908)

His main commemoration is on October 19.

DECEMBER 21

Holy Martyr Juliana of Nicomedia and those with her (304)

She was the daughter of a prominent family in Nicomedia during the reign of the persecutor Maximian (286-305). Her parents betrothed her to a nobleman named Eleusius, but without his knowledge, or that of her parents, she had already committed her life to Christ, and consecrated her virginity to him. To put off her suitor, she told him that she would not marry him until he became Prefect. Eleusius went to work using his fortune to bribe and influence those in power, and succeeded in being appointed Prefect of Nicomedia. When he went to Juliana to claim her as his wife, she was forced to confess herself a Christian, saying that she would never marry him unless he gave up the worship of idols and embraced the faith of Christ. For her confession, she was arrested and taken before the Prefect: Eleusius, her once-ardent suitor. He was now filled with an ardent rage toward her and, when she would not renounce her faith, had her subjected to the most sadistic tortures imaginable. Miraculously, she endured these without harm. Witnessing this wonder, 500 men and 130 women from among the pagans confessed Christ. The enraged Prefect had all of them beheaded immediately, followed by Juliana herself. She was eighteen years old when she won the Martyr's crown.

Our Holy Father Peter, Metropolitan of Moscow (1326)

Saint Peter was born in Volhynia in 1260 and entered a monastery there at the age of thirteen. Making the Ladder of Saint John Climacus his guide in the monastic life, his obedience, meekness and willingness to undertake tasks that were repugnant to his brethren made him beloved of them all. He also painted icons and was the originator of the Muscovite style of Russian iconography. After some years, he left for the small Monastery of the Transfiguration in order to find the quiet favourable to prayer. Saint Maximus, the metropolitan of Kiev (6 Dec.) visited this monastery and was greatly edified by the virtues of Peter, whom he decided should be his successor as head of the Russian Church. He was confirmed in this resolve by an apparition of the Mother of God, and he made the request to the Patriarch of Constantinople on whom the Russian Church depended. In 1325 therefore Saint Peter was consecrated Metropolitan of Kiev, of which the see had been transferred to Vladimir by Saint Maximus, after the sack of Kiev by the Tatars. Peter's election was confirmed by a Council, but he immediately encountered opposition from the Russian princes, who were vying with one another for influence over the leader of the Church. Peter's meekness and charity towards his enemies won him their respect; but although conciliatory in all that concerned himself personally, he was nonetheless strict as regards the faith and moral uprightness. He energetically opposed intense Muslim propaganda, and travelled throughout Russia to confirm the faith. He did not hesitate to risk his life for the sake of making peace among the princes and, foreseeing that Russia would reunite around the principality of Moscow, he transferred his Metropolitanate see to that city and began the construction of the renowned Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin. He gave up his soul to God while at prayer on 21 December 1326, and many miracles of healing were wrought at his tomb." (*Synaxarion*)

Saint Procopius of Vyatka, Fool for Christ (1627)

"Saint Procopius, the son of devout peasants, first feigned madness to escape a marriage that was being urged on him. He spent his life in the streets half-naked, slept wherever night overtook him and would never accept the shelter of a house. He used signs to make himself understood and never spoke a word, except to his spiritual father, with whom he would converse normally as a man in possession of all his faculties. When he was given an article of clothing, he wore it for a while out of obedience and then gave it away to someone poor. When he visited the sick, he set fire to the beds of those who were going to get better, and rolled up in their sheets those who were going to die. He made many predictions, often by means of disconcerting prophetic signs, whose meaning became clear with the event. He spent thirty years in foolishness for Christ and, having foretold his death, fell asleep in peace in 1627." (*Synaxarion*)

DECEMBER 22

Holy Great Martyr Anastasia the Widow, the Deliverer from Potions (290)

She was born in Rome to a wealthy and prominent family. Though her father Pretexatus was a pagan, her mother Fausta instructed her in the things of God. Her father married her against her will to Publius, a prodigal and impious man lacking in Christian or pagan virtue. Anastasia was in the custom of dressing herself as a poor working woman and going out by night to visit and comfort the many Christians in prison (this was the time of Diocletian's persecution). When Publius

discovered this, he was furious that his wife was demeaning herself by consorting with the despised Christians, and had his wife locked in the house with so little food that she came close to death by starvation. She was able to get a letter to her spiritual father Chrysogonus, who was also in prison, and their correspondence helped to sustain her through her ordeal. After three months her husband died in a shipwreck and she regained her freedom. Immediately she redoubled her work for the suffering Christians and their families, devoting all her time and wealth to their comfort and care.

One day Diocletian declared that all Christians in his prisons should be slain, and his command was carried out in one night. The next day Anastasia came to visit her beloved companions and, learning that all were dead, fell sobbing by the gate, no longer caring to conceal her Christian faith from anyone. Almost immediately she was arrested and brought before the authorities, who subjected her to every form of abuse. One prefect offered to marry her if she would bow to the idols, but to have her tortured to death if she would not. When she was unmoved, he attempted to rape her, but was struck blind and died miserably. She then briefly escaped to Nicaea and found refuge with the pious St Theodota, but was seized again along with Theodota and her children. After further trials and torments Anastasia, Theodota and her children, and others who had been converted to Christ through Anastasia's example, were executed.

Saint Anastasia's relics were taken to Rome, where a church was built in her honor. The relics were later translated to Constantinople and placed in another church bearing her name, where they worked many miracles. Because she has healed many through her prayers from the effects of poisons and potions, she is called Pharmocolytia, "Deliverer from Potions."

DECEMBER 23

The Ten Holy Martyrs of Crete (250)

All ten suffered for Christ together on Crete during the reign of the Emperor Decius. They were tormented and hurriedly executed for thirty days, but bore their trials with such serenity that the Governor feared that others would be converted to the Faith, so had all of them beheaded.

Our Venerable Father Paul, Archbishop of Neocaesarea (4th c.)

This holy bishop was so revered that he was summoned by the Emperor Licinius himself, who attempted to turn him from the Faith. When this failed, the Emperor ordered that molten metal be poured on the bishop's hands, which left them paralyzed and horribly disfigured. Years went by, Christianity was legalized by Constantine the Great and, when the Council of Nicaea was summoned, St Paul was among those bishops who were called to attend. Many of the bishops who attended bore in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus (Gal. 6:17): noses, ears or eyes lost, scars and burns from their trials for Christ. At the Council, the Emperor Constantine knelt before St Paul and kissed his hands as holy relics, saying 'I will never tire of kissing these hands which have lost their life for the sake of my Christ.' After the Council, the holy bishop served in Neocaesarea for several more years, then reposed in peace.

Our Holy Father Nahum of Ochrid, Wonderworker and Enlightener of the Slavs (~900)

He was a disciple of Saints Cyril and Methodius (May 11), and traveled with them on their missionary journey to the Slavs. With them and their other companions, he endured many trials, including several imprisonments at the hands of the Latin Franks, who were seeking to seize control of the region of Moravia in order to impose the Latin language and to spread the heresy of the *filioque*. For a time their troubles were relieved by Pope Hadrian II, who supported the mission and made St Methodius Archbishop of Pannonia, with jurisdiction over the Eastern European Slav lands. But when St Methodius died, St Nahum and his companions were imprisoned once more, then sent into exile, where they finally found shelter in the Orthodox Kingdom of Bulgaria. There they were able to continue their work of evangelization in the Slavonic language. Saint Nahum founded the Monastery that bears his name on the shore of Lake Ochrid. After his repose his relics were brought there for burial, and are venerated there today.

DECEMBER 24

Eve of the Nativity of Christ

A strict fast is kept today.

Holy Virgin and Martyr Eugenia and her companions (~190)

"This Martyr was the daughter of most distinguished and noble parents named Philip and Claudia. Philip, a Prefect of Rome, moved to Alexandria with his family. In Alexandria, Eugenia had the occasion to learn the Christian Faith, in particular when she encountered the Epistles of Saint Paul, the reading of which filled her with compunction and showed her clearly the vanity of the world. Secretly taking two of her servants, Protas and Hyacinth, she departed from Alexandria by night. Disguised as a man, she called herself Eugene [Eugeneios -ed.] while pretending to be a eunuch, and departed with her servants and took up the monastic life in a monastery of men. Her parents mourned for her, but could not find her. After Saint Eugenia had laboured for some time in the monastic life, a certain woman named Melanthis, thinking

Eugene to be a monk, conceived lust and constrained Eugenia to comply with her desire; when Eugenia refused, Melanthi slandered Eugenia to the Prefect as having done insult to her honour. Eugenia was brought before the Prefect, her own father Philip, and revealed to him both that she was innocent of the accusations, and that she was his own daughter. Through this, Philip became a Christian; he was afterwards beheaded at Alexandria. Eugenia was taken back to Rome with Protas and Hyacinth. All three of them ended their life in martyrdom in the years of Commodus, who reigned from 180 to 192." (*Great Horologion*)

DECEMBER 25

† The Nativity according to the Flesh of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ

The *Synaxarion's* account includes this tradition from the Protoevangelium of James: "When Joseph had found a place for Mary in Bethlehem, he went out to look for a midwife. On his way, he noticed that the whole of nature had suddenly become utterly still as though seized with astonishment: the birds hung motionless in mid-air, men and beasts stopped in their tracks, and the waters ceased flowing. The continuous movement that leads everything from birth to death and imprisons it in vanity (cf Pss. 38:6-7; 102:15. Eccles. 1) was suspended, for at that moment the Eternal entered within the heart of time. The pre-eternal God became a newborn child. Time and history now took on a new dimension."

The Shepherds who saw the Lord

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:8-14)

The Veneration of the Magi

See Matthew ch. 2. According to the verses of the Feast and most of the Holy Fathers, the Magi were astrologers from Persia or Babylonia (The Scripture says only that they came "from the east.") The star which they followed was no inanimate object, but one of the Angelic Powers of heaven, appointed to lead them to the Savior. From the very beginning, the Good News of Christ was proclaimed to the nations.

DECEMBER 26

† Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos.

"Yesterday, together with the Angels, the Magi and the Shepherds, we offered our worship to God made man, and born a little child for our Salvation; and today we rightly pay homage to His Mother, the All Holy Virgin Mary. The Church sets her before us in the cave beside her Son as the new Eve, the first and pre-eminent representative of the renewed human race, chosen and prepared by God throughout all generations, for the fulfilment of the Great Mystery of His Incarnation." (*Synaxarion*)

Here we follow the pattern of most major Feasts: on the day following feast, we honor those who also played a part in the accomplishment of God's plan.

The Flight into Egypt of the Holy Family

See Matthew ch. 2. Though St Matthew's account may leave the impression that the flight into Egypt was almost immediate, it would have been at least forty days after Christ's birth, following His Presentation in the Temple (Luke ch. 2). Christ, his holy Mother and his adoptive father St Joseph probably remained in Egypt for several years, until the death of Herod the Great.

St Nikolai Velimirovic (in the *Prologue*) relates the following tale: the holy family, fleeing into Egypt, were accosted by robbers, one of whom, seeing the Christ Child, was amazed at his supernatural beauty and said 'If God were to take human flesh Himself, He would not be more beautiful than this child!'. The robber told his companions to take nothing from the family. In gratitude the Mother of God told him 'This Child will reward you richly for having spared Him today.' Thirty years later it was this robber who was crucified at Christ's right hand, and was granted to hear the words 'Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise.'

Our Holy Father Euthymius the Confessor, Bishop of Sardis (340)

Bishop Euthymius was one of those assembled at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 787; it was he who formulated the Council's official declaration on veneration of the holy icons. During the reign of Nicephorus I (802-811), Euthymius' enemies made false accusations against him that led to his being deposed and exiled for several years. He was called back to Constantinople by the iconoclast Emperor Leo the Armenian (813-820), who sought his support in

attacking the icons; but Euthymius refused, and was exiled once more. On Leo's death, he was summoned before another iconoclast Emperor, Michael II (820-829), who in turn asked the Saint's support in his blasphemous campaign against the icons. The holy bishop not only refused, but cried out 'Let anyone who does not worship Our Lord Jesus Christ represented in image according to His humanity, be anathema!' The enraged Emperor exiled him again (his third exile), imprisoning him in a foul dungeon at the far east of the Black Sea for three years. He was then summoned to appear before his third Emperor in succession, the iconoclast Theophilus (829-42). For holding firm in the Faith once delivered to the saints, the holy bishop was mercilessly flogged with rods, then with the sinews of oxen until his body swelled up 'like a wineskin.' He was then thrown into a dungeon where, after eight days in terrible pain, he gave up his soul to God.

The Saint's precious relics worked many miracles, and were venerated in Constantinople until the City's fall in 1453, when they were taken to Cherson in the Crimea, then to Chilia near Chalcedon. When most of the Greeks were expelled from Asia Minor in 1922, the people of Chilia brought the Saint's skull to Greece, where a church was built in his honor in Pireus; the holy relic may be venerated there today.

Our Holy Father Constantine of Synnada (7th c.)

His parents were Jews living at Synnada in Phrygia. One day when he was nine years old, he saw a Christian merchant make the sign of the Cross in the marketplace; and in imitation, without understanding its meaning, he began to make the sign. This became a habit with him, and he began to imitate other practices of the Christians around him, still without any understanding of the Christian faith. But by the power of the Cross, the grace of Christ began to grow in him secretly. He began to hear a voice within him revealing some of the mysteries of Christianity, and he began to be filled with a fervent love for the Savior.

After the death of his mother, he fled his home town to escape an arranged marriage, and came in time to a monastery in Nicaea. He told his story to the abbot, who baptized him, giving him the name of Constantine. When the sign of Cross was made on his head at baptism, a cross appeared visibly on his forehead, where it remained for the rest of his life.

The holy Constantine devoted the rest of his days to the ascetical life, excelling in every virtue. It is said that a delightful scent would fill any place that he went, and that church doors would open spontaneously at his approach. He comforted many by healing their ailments through his prayers, and was granted the gift of discerning the secrets of hearts. After living for some time in Nicaea, he travelled to Mt Olympus in Bithynia where he lived as a hermit. Seeing that there were many Jews living in that area, he strove for a time to preach the Gospel to them, but was unable to win many of his former brethren to faith in Christ. He foretold the date of his death eight years beforehand. His final words to his disciples were 'The Lord is coming to invite me to the feast of Joy.' He then died, and a fragrant scent filled his cell. His relics gave off a healing myrrh for many years.

DECEMBER 26-31

December 26-31. Sunday after Nativity: Holy Prophet and King David; St Joseph the Betrothed; St James the Brother of the Lord

If no Sunday falls within December 26-31, the commemoration of Sts David, Joseph and James is kept on December 26.

Holy Prophet and King David. For the story of David the King, Prophet and Ancestor of God, read 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1-2, and 1 Chronicles 10-29. He is the primary author of the Psalter, which can be called the foundation of all the Church's praise of God. It was the hymnal of Old Israel, of the Apostles, and of Christ himself. Every one of the Church's services abounds with passages from the Psalter.

St Joseph the Betrothed. Like Mary his betrothed, he was of the house of David. A carpenter by trade, he had seven children by his first marriage: his sons James, Josea, Judas (Jude) and Simon (or Symeon); and his daughters Esther, Martha and Salome, the wife of Zebedee and mother of the Apostles James and John. He was widowed in middle age and, in his old age, was chosen by the high priest to be the protector of the holy Virgin Mary. He was not warned of her wondrous virginal conception, and so was dismayed when she was found to be with child; but an Angel of the Lord revealed the mystery of the Incarnation to him in a dream. In a dream he was also instructed to flee with the holy Theotokos and the infant Christ to Egypt, thus escaping Herod's murderous designs.

We know that St Joseph lived at least until Christ's twelfth year (see Luke 2:41-52); the Fathers say that he reposed just before the Lord began his earthly ministry, and that his final words were these: *The pains and the fears of death encompass me; but my soul has become calm again since I have heard Thy voice, Jesus my Defended, Jesus my Savior, Jesus my refuge, Jesus whose Name is sweet to my mouth and to the heart of all who love Thee.*

St James the Brother of the Lord. See October 23.

DECEMBER 27