



## Homily on the Nativity of Christ<sup>1</sup>

by our Father among the Saints  
Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa

“Sound the trumpet at the new moon,” says David, “even in the notable day of your feast.”<sup>2</sup> The commandments of Divinely-inspired teaching are assuredly a law for those who hear them. Therefore, since the notable day of our feast is at hand, let us, too, fulfill the law and become heralds of the solemnity. The trumpet of the law, as the Apostle bids us understand, is the word. For the sound of the trumpet, he says, should not be uncertain, but its notes should be distinct so that the hearers may clearly perceive it.<sup>3</sup> So let us produce a clear and audible sound, brethren, one that is no less noble than that of the trumpet. For the Law, prefiguring the truth in the shadowy types, enjoined the sounding of the trumpet at the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>4</sup> Now, the theme of the present Feast is the mystery of the true Tabernacle. For on this day did He Who vested Himself with humanity for our sake pitch His human tabernacle; on this day our tabernacles, which had disintegrated through death, are reconstituted by Him

<sup>1</sup> The original Greek text of this oration, which has not hitherto appeared in English translation, is found in *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLVI, cols. 1128A-1149C. Note: All Old Testament references are to the Septuagint.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 80:3

<sup>3</sup> Cf. I Corinthians 14:7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leviticus 23:24.

Who constructed our habitation from the very beginning. Let us utter the words of the Psalm, joining in chorus with the loud-voiced David: “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> How does He come? He crosses over into human life, not by boat or by chariot, but through the incorruption of a Virgin. This is our God, this is our Lord, Who appeared to us to ordain a Feast with thick branches, even unto the horns of the altar.<sup>6</sup>

We are assuredly not unaware, brethren, of the mystery contained in these words: that all of creation is a single temple of the Master of creation. But since, when sin intervened, the mouths of those overcome by evil were stopped, the voice of rejoicing fell silent and the harmony of those who keep festival was interrupted, as human creation no longer celebrated with celestial Angel-kind, for this reason there came the trumpets of the Prophets and the Apostles, whom the Law calls horns, because they are formed from the true Unicorn.<sup>7</sup> By the power of the Spirit they made the word of truth resound with piercing clarity, so that the ears of those who had been made deaf by sin might be opened up and so that there might be one harmonious celebration, echoing in unison through the thick covering of the tabernacle of the lower creation with the sublime and preëminent Hosts that stand around the Heavenly Altar. For the horns of the noetic Altar are the sublime and preëminent Powers of the noetic nature, the Principalities, Authorities, Thrones, and Dominions, to which human nature is joined by participation in the Feast through its resurrected tabernacle, which is “thickly covered” by the renewal of our bodies. For “to be

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 117:26.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 117:27.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Numbers 23:22.

thickly covered” means the same as “to be adorned” and “to be encompassed,” as those who understand these matters interpret it. Come, then, let us rouse our souls to spiritual rejoicing, and let us appoint David the head and leader of our chorus; and let us say with him that sweet verse which we have just chanted.

Let us repeat it yet again: “This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”<sup>8</sup> On this day darkness begins to diminish, and the duration of the night is contracted by the waxing of the sun’s rays. Not fortuitously or arbitrarily did God ordain, in connection with this Feast, that the Divine life should now be made manifest in human life. For those who are more discerning, the creation describes a certain mystery through natural phenomena, well nigh giving utterance and teaching those capable of hearing what is meant by the waxing of the day and the waning of the night at the advent of the Master. For it seems to me that I hear the creation setting forth an explanation of this kind: “When you see these phenomena, O man, understand that hidden mysteries are disclosed to you through things that are apparent. Do you see the night advancing to its greatest length, stopping in its course, and again receding? Reflect that the evil night of sin, having increased as much as it could and having reached the utmost magnitude of wickedness through the contrivance of every kind of vice, is today prevented from spreading any further, and is henceforth driven to eclipse and extinction.

Do you see how the light shines more clearly and how the sun sits higher in the sky than usual? Ponder on the Advent of the true Light, Who illumines the entire inhabited earth with the rays of the Gospel. One might

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 117:24.

perhaps reasonably suppose that the reason why the Lord did not manifest Himself at the outset of creation, but bestowed the revelation of His Divinity upon human life in the latter times, is that He Who was going to unite Himself to human life in order to cleanse it of evil was bound to await the blossoming of all the sin planted by the enemy. Thus, it was then that He laid the axe to the root, as the Gospel says.<sup>9</sup> For those physicians who are eminent in their art, while the fever is still consuming the body from within and gradually being aggravated by those factors that cause the disease, yield to the malady, until the suffering has reached its acme, giving no relief to the sufferer by way of food. But when the evil comes to a halt, when the entire disease has been exposed, then they bring their skill to bear. Thus, He Who heals those who are ill in soul waited for the evil from the disease which held the human race in its grip to become manifest in its entirety, lest any hidden evil remain unhealed, which would be the case if the doctor cured only what was visible. For this reason neither in the times of Noah, when all flesh had become corrupted by unrighteousness, did He apply the remedy of His own appearing, because the shoot of Sodomite vice had not yet budded, nor did the Lord reveal Himself in the time of the destruction of Sodom, for many other evils were still lurking in human nature. Indeed, where was the God-fighting Pharaoh? Where was the indomitable wickedness of the Egyptians?<sup>10</sup>

Not even then—in the era of the Egyptian wickedness, I mean—was it opportune for the Corrector of all things to associate with our life. No, for it was necessary for the

<sup>9</sup> St. Matthew 3:10.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 29, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 76AB.

iniquity of the Israelites to be exposed. It was still necessary for both the kingdom of the Assyrians and the smouldering arrogance of Nabucodonosor to be made manifest in human life. It was necessary for the foul murder of the righteous ones to spring up like some wicked and thorny plant from the Devil's evil root.<sup>11</sup> It was necessary for the raging fury of the Jews against the Saints of God to be revealed: they slew the Prophets and stoned those sent by God, and finally perpetrated the murder of Zacharias between the Temple and the altar.<sup>12</sup> Add to this list of enormities the slaughter of the children by Herod.<sup>13</sup> When, therefore, the full force of evil had emerged from its wicked root and had proliferated, running riot in a variety of ways in the behavior of those in every generation notorious for their depravity, it was then, as Paul says to the Athenians, that God, overlooking the times of ignorance,<sup>14</sup> came in the latter days, when there was no one who understood Him or sought after Him, when all had gone astray and had alike become good for nothing,<sup>15</sup> when all things had been enveloped in sin;<sup>16</sup> when iniquity had multiplied, and when the darkness of evil had increased to the highest degree.<sup>17</sup> Then did Grace appear, then did the radiance of the true Light<sup>18</sup> dawn. Then did the Sun of righteousness appear to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death;<sup>19</sup> then did He crush the many heads of

<sup>11</sup> This may be an allusion to the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven Maccabee youths during the occupation of Judæa by Antiochos IV Epiphanes.

<sup>12</sup> St. Matthew 23:35.

<sup>13</sup> St. Matthew 2:16.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 17:30.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 13:2.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Galatians 3:22; Romans 11:32.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 29, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 76B.

<sup>18</sup> St. John 1:9.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 9:2; Psalm 106:14.

the dragon,<sup>20</sup> stepping on him with His foot, through His human flesh, dashing him to the earth and trampling on him. Let no one, looking at the present state of the world, suppose that we are speaking falsely when we say that the Lord has shone upon our life in the latter times.

Perhaps someone will say, by way of objection, that it is natural for one who waits some years for evil to manifest itself, so that he can pull it up by the roots once it is fully developed, to destroy it completely, so that no remnant of it will survive. Now, however, people dare to commit murders, thefts, adulteries, and all manner of villainy. But let him who observes this state of affairs dispel his doubt with a familiar example. For, just as when we kill a snake, we can see that the hinder part of its coil is not immediately deadened along with its head, but whereas the head is dead, the tail still pulsates with its own life and is not deprived of vital movement,<sup>21</sup> so also He Who slew the dragon, when the beast had become large enough, increasing in size with each generation of mankind, destroyed its head, that is, its power to ruin what is good—which itself possesses many heads—but took no account of the rest of its body, allowing the motion that lingered in the dead beast to serve as a means of training for future generations.<sup>22</sup> What, then, is the head that is crushed? The head that brought death into the world by an evil counsel,<sup>23</sup> injecting deadly venom into man through its bite.

Therefore, He Who destroyed the might of death, crushed the power contained in the serpent's head, as the Prophet

<sup>20</sup> Psalm 73:13.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 30, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 76C.

<sup>22</sup> That is, to teach them how to cope with adversity.

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 3:1-6.

says.<sup>24</sup> The rest of the beast's body, dispersed in human life, as long as mankind is motivated by evil, always roughens life with the scales of sin. The serpent's power is now dead, since its head has been rendered useless, but as time passes and things endowed with motion come a standstill at the awaited consummation of this life, then the tail, the enemy's last remaining part, that is, death, is annulled. In this way evil will completely disappear, when all are recalled to life through the resurrection: the righteous will immediately be transported to celestial bliss, while those held in the grip of sins will be consigned to the fire of Gehenna.

But let us return to the present joy, which the Angels proclaim to the shepherds, which the heavens declare to the Magi, which the spirit of prophecy announces through many and sundry utterances, so that the Magi become heralds of Grace. For He Who makes the sun rise on the just and on the unjust, Who sends rain on the evil and on the good,<sup>25</sup> has brought the ray of knowledge and the dew of the Spirit even to the mouths of foreigners, so that the truth is confirmed all the more for us by the testimony of our adversaries. You hear the soothsayer Balaam declaring to the foreigners by a higher inspiration that "a Star shall rise out of Jacob."<sup>26</sup> You see the Magi, who derive their ancestry from him, observing, according to the prediction of their forefather, the rising of the novel star, which, contrary to the nature of all other stars, alone partook of motion and rest,<sup>27</sup> proceeding according as it had need of either of these states. For whereas, among the other stars, some stand fast once and for all in the sphere

<sup>24</sup> See note 18.

<sup>25</sup> St. Matthew 5:45.

<sup>26</sup> Numbers 24:17.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. St. Matthew 2:9.

of the fixed stars, having obtained an immovable position, while others never cease from moving, this one both moved, preceding the Magi, and stood still, indicating the place.<sup>28</sup> You hear Isaiah exclaiming that “unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.”<sup>29</sup> Learn from the Prophet himself how the Child was born, how the Son was given. Now, was it in accordance with the law of nature? No, says the Prophet. The Master of nature is not a slave to the laws of nature. But how was the Child born? Tell us. “Behold,” says the Prophet, “a Virgin shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel,”<sup>30</sup> “which being interpreted is, God with us.”<sup>31</sup> O the wonder! The Virgin becomes a mother, and yet remains a virgin. You see the innovation in nature. Among other women, as long as one is a virgin, she is not a mother. But when she becomes a mother, she no longer possesses virginity. But in this case, the two names coincide. For the same woman is both a mother and a virgin; and neither did her virginity prevent her childbirth nor did her maternity annul her virginity. For it behooved Him Who was to enter human life in order to make all things incorrupt that He should receive His beginning from the incorruption that served His birth. Men are in the habit of calling one who has no experience of wedlock incorrupt. It seems to me that the great Moses understood this in advance through the light wherein God appeared to him, when the fire touched the bush and the bush was not consumed: “I will pass over and see this great sight.”<sup>32</sup> By “pass over,” he means, I think, not a local movement, but the passage of time; for

<sup>28</sup> That is, where Christ was born.

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 9:6.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>31</sup> St. Matthew 1:23.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Exodus 3:3.

that which was then prefigured in the flame and the bush was, with the passage of intervening time, clearly revealed in the mystery of the Virgin. For, just as there was a bush there, and the fire touched it and it was not burned, so here, too, there is a Virgin, who gives birth to the Light and suffers no corruption.<sup>33</sup> If a bush prefigures the God-bearing body of the Virgin, do not be ashamed of the type. For all flesh, on account of our acceptance of sin, by the very fact that it is only flesh, is sin; and sin in Scripture is called by the name “thorn.”<sup>34</sup> Now, provided we do not digress too far from our subject, it is perhaps not inopportune to adduce Zacharias, who was slain between the temple and the altar,<sup>35</sup> as a witness to the incorruption of the Mother of God. This Zacharias was a priest; and not only was he a priest, but he was also endowed with the gift of prophecy, his power of prophecy being declared expressly in the Book of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup> When the Grace of God was preparing the way for men not to think that birth from a Virgin is incredible, it set the stage for the assent of unbelievers by means of lesser miracles: a child was born of a barren woman advanced in years. This was a prelude to the miracle of the Virgin Birth. For, just as Elizabeth became a mother not by the power of nature—for she had grown old in barrenness—but the birth of her child is ascribed to the Will of God; so also, the incredibility of a virginal parturition gains credibility with reference to the Divine.

Since, therefore, he who was born of the barren woman preceded Him Who was born of the Virgin, and, in response

<sup>33</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Life of Moses*, Bk. II, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIV, col. 332D.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:18; II Kings 23:6; St. Matthew 13:22; *Life of Moses*, Bk. II, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIV, col. 357A.

<sup>35</sup> St. Matthew 23:35; St. Luke 11:51.

<sup>36</sup> St. Luke 1:67-80.

to the salutation of her who was carrying the Lord, leaped in his mother's womb before he saw the light of day, as soon as the Forerunner of the Word was born, the silence of Zacharias was thereupon loosed by prophetic inspiration.<sup>37</sup> All that Zacharias recounted was a prophecy of the future. Therefore, guided to the knowledge of hidden things by the spirit of prophecy, and perceiving the mystery of virginity in the incorrupt birth, he did not exclude the unwedded Mother from that place in the Temple allotted by the Law to virgins, thereby teaching the Jews that the Creator of existing things and King of all creation has human nature subject to Himself, along with everything else, guiding it by His own Will as He sees fit, not being Himself mastered by it, so that it is in His power to create a new birth, which will not prevent her who has become a mother from remaining a virgin. For this reason, he did not exclude her, in the Temple, from the place of the virgins; this place was the space between the Temple and the altar. When the Jews heard that the King of creation, by Divine Economy, was about to undergo human birth, fearing lest they become subject to a king, they murdered the priest who bore witness to this birth as he was serving at the altar itself.

We have, however, wandered far from our subject, and must return to Bethlehem in the Gospel account. For if we are truly shepherds and keeping watch over our flocks, the voice of the Angels which proclaims these good tidings of great joy is assuredly directed to us.<sup>38</sup> Let us, therefore, look up to the heavenly host, behold the choir of Angels, and hear their Divine hymnody. What is the sound of these

<sup>37</sup> Cf. St. Luke 1:5-25.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. St. Luke 2:10.

who keep feast? “Glory to God in the highest,”<sup>39</sup> they cry. Why do the Angelic voices glorify the Divinity beheld in the highest? Because they say “and on earth peace.”<sup>40</sup> The Angels have become exceedingly joyful at the spectacle: “and on earth peace.” That which was previously accursed, which brought forth thorns and thistles,<sup>41</sup> the place of conflict,<sup>42</sup> the exile of the condemned,<sup>43</sup> has received peace. Oh, the wonder! “Truth is sprung out of the earth, and righteousness hath looked down from heaven.”<sup>44</sup> Such is the fruit that the earth of men yielded. And these things come to pass for the sake of God’s good will towards men. God is mingled with human nature,<sup>45</sup> in order that humanity might be raised up to the height of God. Having heard these tidings, let us go to Bethlehem and behold the new spectacle, how the Virgin exults in childbirth, how she who knew not wedlock suckles her infant. But let us first hear from the stories related about her who she was and whence she came.

I have heard a certain apocryphal account, which presents the following narratives concerning her.<sup>46</sup> Her father was

<sup>39</sup> St. Luke 2:14.

<sup>40</sup> St. Luke 2:14.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:18.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Genesis 4:9.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:23-24.

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 84:12.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 11, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 44A; *idem*, “Homily XV on the Song of Songs,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIV, col. 1097AB.

<sup>46</sup> The work to which St. Gregory alludes is not extant. Moreover, in none of the three apocryphal writings that recount the conception of the *Theotokos* is there any reference to St. Anna actually entering the Holy of Holies, into which “went the high priest alone once every year” (Hebrews 9:7), and into which the *Theotokos* alone among women entered in preparation for her vocation to give birth to God Incarnate. The Byzantine historian Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, who follows St. Gregory’s account quite closely, says merely that St. Anna supplicated God in the Temple that she not be excluded from the blessing of the Law (*History of the Church*, Bk. I, ch. 7, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXLV, col. 652B).

distinguished for his scrupulous observance of the Law and was well known for his virtues. However, he had reached old age without having sired any offspring, for his wife was unable to bear children. Now, there was a certain honor ascribed to mothers on the basis of the Law, an honor in which barren women had no share. His wife replicated the story of the mother of Samuel.<sup>47</sup> Having entered the Holy of Holies, she besought God that she not be deprived of the blessing that comes from the laws, since she not sinned against the Law in any way, but that she become a mother and dedicate to God the child that she would bear. Strengthened by Divine assent to the favor that she requested, she conceived. When she brought forth the child, she named her “Mary,” so that through the similarity of the name it might be indicated that the favor was granted by God. When the little girl was sufficiently mature, so that she no longer needed to cling to the breast, her mother made haste to give her back to God, in fulfillment of her promise, and conduct her to the Temple. The priests brought up the child in the Holy place for some time, just like Samuel, but when she was grown up, they took counsel as to what they could do about that holy body without sinning against God. To subjugate her to the law of nature and enslave her through marriage to one who would take her to wife was utterly unacceptable. Indeed, it was regarded as absolute sacrilege for a man to be master of something consecrated to God, for it was decreed by the law that a man should be master of his spouse.<sup>48</sup> However, it was not lawful for a woman to consort with priests in the Temple or to be seen in the Holy place, and besides, such a thing was improper.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. I Kings 11:1-20.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. I Corinthians 11:3; Colossians 3:18; St. Titus 2:5.

As they were deliberating on these matters, they received advice from God that they should betroth her nominally to such a man as would be apt to guard her virginity. Joseph, the kind of man they were looking for, since he was of the same tribe and family as the Virgin, was found, and on the advice of the priests he was betrothed to the girl. Their affinity extended only as far as betrothal. The Virgin was then initiated into the mystery of the Divine Will by Gabriel, the words of his mystagogy being themselves a blessing. "Rejoice, thou that art full of Grace," he said, "the Lord is with thee."<sup>49</sup> The words now addressed to the Virgin are the antithesis of those addressed to the first woman. The latter was condemned to the pangs of childbirth on account of sin;<sup>50</sup> in the case of the former, sorrow is expelled through joy. In the latter case, sorrows precede parturition; in the former case, joy is the midwife of parturition. "Fear not," says Gabriel.<sup>51</sup> Since the expectation of travail arouses fear in every woman, that fear is banished by the promise of an agreeable childbirth.<sup>52</sup> "Thou shalt conceive in thy womb," he says, "and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins."<sup>53</sup> What does Mary say? Hear the voice of a pure Virgin. The Angel proclaims the glad tidings of the birth; but she cleaves to virginity, judging incorruption to be preferable to the appearance of the Angel, and neither does she disbelieve the Angel nor will she relinquish her resolve. "I have refrained from knowing any man," she says: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"<sup>54</sup> This

<sup>49</sup> St. Luke 1:28.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:16.

<sup>51</sup> St. Luke 1:30.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. St. John 16:21.

<sup>53</sup> St. Luke 1:31; St. Matthew 1:21.

<sup>54</sup> St. Luke 1:34.

utterance of Mary is proof of the narrative that I have drawn from the aforementioned apocryphal work. For if she had been taken in marriage by Joseph, how would she have been surprised by him who announced that she was to bear a child, for in that case she would surely have expected to become a mother according to the law of nature? “Since it behooved me to preserve inviolate, as a holy offering, the flesh that I have consecrated to God, for this reason,” she says, “although thou art an Angel, although thou hast come from Heaven, and although this phenomenon surpasseth human nature, it is nonetheless impossible for me to know a man. How am I to be a mother without a man? For I know Joseph as my betrothed, but do not know him as a husband.” Now, what does the bridal escort Gabriel say to this? What manner of bridal chamber does he present for a pure and undefiled marriage? “The Holy Spirit,” he says, “shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.”<sup>55</sup> Oh, that blessed womb, which on account of its exceeding purity attracted to itself the good things of the soul! For in the case of all other human beings, a pure soul would with difficulty receive the presence of the Holy Spirit; but in this case, the flesh becomes a vessel of the Spirit. “And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” Now, what do these ineffable words mean? “Christ” is “the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, the Wisdom of the Most High God, which is Christ, takes form in her virginity through the coming of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> For, just as a shadow assumes the same shape as the body that precedes it, so also the character

<sup>55</sup> St. Luke 1:35.

<sup>56</sup> I Corinthians 1:24.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Refutation of Apollinaris*, ch. 6, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLV, col. 1136C.

and the traits of the Divinity of the Son will be manifested in the power of Him Who is to be born, the image,<sup>58</sup> seal, adumbration, and effulgence<sup>59</sup> of the Prototype being shown through His display of miracle-working.

But the glad tidings of the Angels exhort us to bring our discourse back to Bethlehem and to behold the mysteries in the cave. What is this? A Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger; and she who remains a Virgin after giving birth, the incorrupt Mother, cares for her offspring. Let us, the shepherds, utter the cry of the Prophet: "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God."<sup>60</sup> Surely these things that are related about Christ did not happen fortuitously or accidentally, and surely there is some reason behind this story. What does it mean for the Master that He dwells in a cave and lies in a manger?<sup>61</sup> That He became involved with our life at the time of the whole world was being registered for taxation?<sup>62</sup> Is it not clear that, just as He delivers us from the curse of the Law, becoming a curse for our sake,<sup>63</sup> and transfers our stripes to Himself, so that by His stripes we might be healed,<sup>64</sup> so also He submits to taxation in order to free us from the evil fetters of the tax which death has been exacting from humanity? When you see the cave in which the Master is born, understand the lightless and subterraneous life of mankind, into which He enters, appearing to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.<sup>65</sup> He is bound in

<sup>58</sup> Cf. II Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>60</sup> Psalm 47:9.

<sup>61</sup> St. Luke 2:7.

<sup>62</sup> St. Luke 2:1-3.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Galatians 3:13.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Isaiah 53:5; I St. Peter 2:24.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Isaiah 9:2.

swaddling clothes Who wraps Himself in the bands of our sins. The manger is the abode of irrational animals, in which the Word is born, that the ox may know his Owner and the ass his Master's crib;<sup>66</sup> the ox stands for him who is subject to the Law, while the ass, that beast of burden, stands for him who is weighed down with the sin of idolatry. But whereas the food and sustenance suitable for irrational animals is grass—"He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle," as the Prophet says<sup>67</sup>—the rational animal is nourished with bread. For this reason, therefore, the Bread of Life, which descended from Heaven,<sup>68</sup> is set forth in the manger, which is the dwelling-place of irrational animals, so that those irrational animals might partake of rational food and become rational. Thus, the Lord of both mediates, in the manger, between the ox and the ass, in order that, having "broken down the middle wall of partition," He might "make in Himself of twain one new man,"<sup>69</sup> both removing the heavy yoke of the Law from the former and relieving the latter of the burden of idolatry.

But let us now gaze upon the celestial wonders. For behold, not only do Prophets and Angels announce the glad tidings of this joy to us; the heavens, too, proclaim the glory of the Gospel through their own marvels. Christ "sprang out of Juda" for us, as the Apostle says,<sup>70</sup> but the Jews are not illumined by Him Who thus sprang forth. The Magi were strangers to the promise of the Covenants and without a share in the blessing of the Fathers; yet they surpass the people of Israel in knowledge, for they recognized the heavenly luminary and were not ignorant of the King in the

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Isaiah 1:3.

<sup>67</sup> Psalm 103:14.

<sup>68</sup> St. John 6:48, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Ephesians 2:14-15.

<sup>70</sup> Hebrews 7:14.

cave. The Magi bring Him gifts, but the Jews plot against Him. The former worship Him, but the latter persecute Him. The former rejoice at finding Him Whom they were seeking. The latter are perturbed at the birth of Him Who was announced.<sup>71</sup> For, when the Magi “saw the star” over the place where the Child was,” “they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.<sup>72</sup> “When Herod...had heard” the report, “he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”<sup>73</sup> The Magi offer frankincense to Him as God, honor His regal dignity with gold, and through myrrh, by prophetic Grace, allude to the Economy of His suffering. The Jews, however, condemn the entire infant population to slaughter, which, it seems to me, convicts them not only of cruelty, but also of the utmost folly. For what did they intend by this act of infanticide? And to what end did the murderers dare to perpetrate such a heinous crime? A certain new and marvellous celestial sign, it says, indicated to the Magi the appearance of the King.<sup>74</sup>

What, then? Do you believe in the truth of the sign that announces Him, or do you suspect that what is rumored about Him is groundless? For if He is such a nature as to have the heavens under His control, is He not obviously above your control? But if He makes His living or dying dependent on you, in vain do you fear such a one. For what purpose do you plot against one who acts in such a way as to be under your control? Why do you issue that dire mandate, your wicked decree against the infants, that hapless babes be slaughtered? What wrong did they do? What cause of punishment and death did they bring upon themselves? Their sole crime is

<sup>71</sup> Cf. St. Matthew 2:3.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. St. Matthew 2:9-10.

<sup>73</sup> St. Matthew 2:3.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. St. Matthew 2:2.

that they were born and saw the light of day. Because of this it was necessary that the city be filled with executioners and that a throng of mothers and infants be assembled, with people accompanying them and parents and all their kinsfolk gathering together, as one might expect, to witness their plight. Who could describe this calamity in words? Who could bring before our eyes through narratives their torments? their mingled lamentation? the mournful dirge of children, mothers, relatives, and fathers crying out piteously at the threats of the executioners? How could one portray the executioner standing beside the infant with bared sword, with a grim and murderous look on his face, uttering words to match his expression, dragging the infant towards him with one hand, and stretching out his sword with the other, and the mother on the other side pulling the child towards herself and holding out her own neck under the edge of the sword, so as not to see with her own eyes the hapless child being destroyed by the hands of the executioner? How could one recount the reactions of the fathers? their exclamations, their lamentations, their final embraces of their sons, and many other such things that occurred at the same time as these? Who could set forth the various kinds of torment, the twofold pangs of the mothers who have recently given birth? the bitter searing of their feminine nature? how the hapless babe clave to its mother's breast and at the same time received the mortal blow through its vitals? how the unfortunate mother held out her breast to the mouth of the infant and received the blood of her child on her bosom? At times, with the swing of his hand, by a single stroke of his sword, the executioner would thrust through both mother and child, and a single stream of blood would flow, mingled

together from the wound of the mother and the mortal blow dealt to the child. And since, by Herod's abominable decree, not only was the death sentence was to be meted out to newborn infants, but also any child who had reached his second year was to be carried off and slain (as Scripture says, "from two years old and under"<sup>75</sup>), the account quite naturally foresees yet another predicament: that the intervening time had made the same woman mother of two children. What a spectacle it was in such situations, with two executioners busying themselves with one mother! The one would be dragging towards him the child that was running back to his mother, while the other would be tearing the suckling away from his mother's bosom. What suffering the poor mother must have undergone in these cases! Her instincts are split between two children, each of whom kindles the flames of maternal affection in equal measure, for she does not know which of the wicked executioners to follow: the one dragging her infant off to slaughter from one side, or the other doing the same thing from the other side. Is she to run to her newborn, who is emitting what are as yet indistinct and inarticulate laments? But she hears the other, who is already able to speak, tearfully calling out to his mother in a faltering voice. What is she to do? Who is it to be? To whose cry will she respond? In response to whose lamentation will she lament in turn? Which death will she mourn, being stung by the goads of her maternal nature equally for each?

But let us avert our hearing from threnodies for the children and direct our minds to themes more cheerful and more suitable for the Feast, even though Rachel, in accordance with the prophecy, bewails the slaughter of the

<sup>75</sup> St. Matthew 2:16.

children with loud cries.<sup>76</sup> For on a day of celebration, as the wise Solomon says, it is fitting to forget evils.<sup>77</sup> What could be more auspicious for us than this Feast, whereon the Sun of Righteousness, having scattered the evil darkness of the Devil, shines upon creation through this our nature, whereon that which was fallen is raised up, that which had become hostile is brought to reconciliation, that which had been outlawed is recalled, that which had fallen away from life returns to life, that which had become enslaved to captivity is restored to the dignity of the Kingdom, and that which had been bound by the fetters of death and runs back, liberated, to the land of the living? Now, according to the prophecy, the brazen gates of death are crushed and the iron bars are shattered, whereby the human race was formerly confined in the dungeon of death.<sup>78</sup> Now, as David says, the gate of righteousness is opened.<sup>79</sup> Now the sound of those who keep festival<sup>80</sup> is heard in unanimity throughout the inhabited earth. Through man came death, and through man salvation.<sup>81</sup> The first man fell into sin, but the second raised up him who was fallen. A woman came to the defense of a woman: the former afforded an entrance to sin; the latter ministered to the entrance of righteousness. The former accepted the counsel of the serpent; the latter brought forth the Destroyer of the serpent and gave birth to the Author of light. The former introduced sin through a tree; through a tree the latter introduced good in its place. By “tree” I mean

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 31:15; St. Matthew 2:17-18.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Ecclesiasticus 11:25.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Psalm 106:16; St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 23, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLV, cols. 61D.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Psalm 117:19.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Psalm 41:4.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Romans 5:12-21.

the Cross; the fruit of this tree is evergreen and amaranthine life for those who taste thereof. And let no one suppose that such thanksgiving belongs only to the mystery of Pascha. Let him reflect that Pascha is the end of the Divine Œconomy. How could the end come about if the beginning had not preceded it? Which is prior to the other? The Nativity of Christ, of course, is prior to the Œconomy of His Passion.

The glories of Pascha, therefore, belong to the laudations of His Nativity. If one enumerates the benefactions recorded in the Gospels and reviews the miraculous healings, the provision of food amid scarcity, the return of the dead from the tombs, the extemporaneous production of wine, the expulsion of demons, the transmutation of various illnesses into health, the saltations of the lame, the fashioning of eyes from clay, the Divine teachings, the ordinances of the new Law, the mystagogy, through parables, towards higher things—all of these are a gift of the present day. Therefore, “let us rejoice and be glad in it,”<sup>82</sup> not fearing the reproach of men, as the prophet exhorts, nor being overcome by the contempt<sup>83</sup> of those who deride the rationale of the Œconomy, saying that it is not seemly that the Lord should assume bodily nature and mingle with human life through birth,<sup>84</sup> ignorant, it seems, of the mystery involved in this matter, how the Wisdom of God wrought our salvation. We had voluntarily sold ourselves to our sins and were in bondage to the enemy of our life like bought slaves. What, indeed, would you like the Master to have done? Is it not to have delivered you from calamity? Why do you quibble about the manner

<sup>82</sup> Psalm 117:24.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Isaiah 51:7.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 14, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, cols. 45D-48A.

of your deliverance? Why do you lay down the law for your Benefactor, as if you receive no benefit from Him? It is as if one were to spurn his doctor and reprove him for doing good, because he effected the cure not in this way, but in another way.<sup>85</sup> If you inquire, out of curiosity, into the magnitude of the Divine Economy, it is sufficient for you to realize that the Divinity is not just one good thing among others, but is whatever good we can conceive: powerful, just, good, and wise, whatever names and concepts possess a meaning that befits God.<sup>86</sup> Consider, therefore, whether all the attributes that I have mentioned—goodness, wisdom, power, and justice—coincide in the benefaction wrought for us. As good, He loved the apostate; as wise, He devised a means for the return of those in bondage. As just, He did not coerce him who had enslaved mankind,<sup>87</sup> who had justly acquired him by purchase; rather, He gave Himself in exchange for those held fast,<sup>88</sup> in order that, transferring the debt to Himself like a guarantor, He might set the detainee free from those detaining him.<sup>89</sup> As powerful, He was not held fast by Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.<sup>90</sup> For it was not possible that the Author of life should be held fast by corruption.<sup>91</sup> But was it not disgraceful for Him to undergo human birth and undergo the experience of sufferings in the flesh? You

<sup>85</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 17, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 53AB.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, ch. 20, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 56D.

<sup>87</sup> That is, the Devil.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Galatians 1:4; I St. Timothy 2:6; St. Titus 2:14; St. Gregory, “Homily XV on the Song of Songs,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIV, col. 1097B; *idem*, *Against Eunomios*, Bk. XI, §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 860B.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. St. Gregory, *Great Catechetical Discourse*, ch. 23, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, cols. 61A–64B.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Psalm 15:10; Acts 2:27, 31.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Acts 2:24; Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, in *Ἱερατικόν* (Athens: Ekdotis tes Apostolikes Diakonias tes Ekklesias tes Hellados, 1995), p. 178.

are speaking of His exceeding beneficence. For since it was not possible for humanity to be delivered from so many evils in any other way, the King of all dispassion suffered to exchange His own glory for our life. His purity descended to our filth; but our filth had no effect on His purity, as the Gospel says: “And the light shone in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”<sup>92</sup> Darkness is disappeared by the presence of light; the sun is not dimmed by darkness. Mortality is swallowed up by life, as the Apostle says;<sup>93</sup> life is not consumed by death. That which is corrupted is saved along with what is incorrupt. Corruption does not affect incorruption. For this reason, there is a common symphony of all creation, all things sending up unanimous doxology to the Master of creation, every tongue of those in Heaven, on earth, and under the earth crying that the Lord Jesus Christ, in the glory of God the Father, is blessed unto the ages of ages.<sup>94</sup> Amen.



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<sup>92</sup> Cf. St. John 1:5; St. Gregory, *Refutation of Apollinaris*, ch. 26, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLV, col. 1180C.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. II Corinthians 5:4.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:10-11.