

Philip's Fast: a time to form ourselves in Christ
By Bishop Milan Lach, SJ

The Byzantine Church's liturgical life exists for one reason alone: to restore the divine image of Christ in us. The liturgical year of the church invites us to celebrate the entirety of Christ's life, from his nativity to his resurrection.

When we celebrate in the Byzantine Church, we are not left as distant spectators at past events. We actually participate in the reality of the celebration.

St. Leo the Great reminds us of this fact: "That which was visible in our Redeemer's life is passed on to the sacraments" (Sermon 74).

This is reiterated by the constant refrain of the word "today" in our hymnography: "Today the Virgin gives birth to the transcendent one; and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable. The angels give glory with the Shepherds; the wise men journey with the star. The eternal God is born for us as an infant child" (Kontakion tone 3, Nativity of Christ).

Our response to this gift is to enter into this mystery. Father Lev Gillet, writing under the pseudonym of "A monk of the Eastern Church," explains this well: "In the liturgical year, we are called to relive the whole life of Christ: from Christmas to Easter, from Easter to Pentecost, we are exhorted to unite ourselves to Christ in his birth and in his growth, to Christ suffering, to Christ dying, to Christ in triumph and to Christ inspiring his Church. The liturgical year forms Christ in us, from his birth to the full stature of the perfect man" ("A Year of Grace of Our Lord," 2).

Seen in this light, the Philip's Fast, which begins Nov. 15, is an invitation to participate more fully in Christ's Nativity. This 40-day period of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving before Christmas is given to us in order to nurture and grow the presence of God in our lives, in the same way that the Mother of God nurtured the Son of God in her womb for nine months.

In this way, the Philip's Fast doesn't just bring Christ more into our life, but also makes Christ more clearly present in the world.

St. Maximus the Confessor tells us that through the practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we witness another type of Incarnation: "The Word, through praxis, becomes flesh" (In "200 Chapters on Theology").

So, I encourage you to embrace this time of preparation as God's gift to you to enter more fully into his divine life. Try to pray more at home, maybe go to church during the week if you only go on Sundays. Go to confession; don't be afraid to ask your priest for the sacrament. Abstain from foods according to the traditional fast. Show kindness to a neighbor, love an enemy.

These acts do more than just trim our waistline and keep us out of trouble. They form Christ in us and bring Christ to the world, a world that desperately needs him.

Then, when the time comes to celebrate the Nativity, we will sing "Christ is Born" and celebrate the Christ Child borne anew in the manger of our hearts — through our sacrifices of the Philip's Fast — and not just in a manger 2,000 years ago.

*As published in Horizons, Nov. 12, 2017
Sign up for the e-newsletter.*