

Saturday, January 20, 2007
St. John the Baptist, Ottawa 4:30 P.M.

The feasts of the Church - part II

In part I of the feasts of the Church, we mainly considered the feasts of Christ - the Resurrection, Christ's Birth, the Theophany and Encounter as well as the feasts which are dependant upon the Resurrection - the Ascension and Pentecost.

For part II we will consider the remaining feasts - largely those of Mary, the Mother of God, who is by far the most perfect creature which God has made.

As the year begins on Sept. 1, we will begin with the first major feast of the year which is the

Birth of the Most Holy Mother of God and
ever-Virgin Mary on Sept. 8.

As is the case for some Church
tradition, a good deal of the material
for this particular feast is taken
from the New Testament Apocrypha.
In this case it is the Proterangelium
of James.

Protestants are shocked that
Catholics and Orthodox take some
tradition from apocryphal books,
but we must try to appreciate the
fact that the word apocrypha
means hidden. While some of the
content of some apocryphal
writings certainly seems to be quite
outlandish; such is not necessarily
the case for all apocryphal
writings. Indeed, certain apocryphal
books contain much authentic
oral tradition. We must always
follow the guidance of the Church

when it comes to accepting aspects of the apocrypha.

The New Testament says nothing about the early life of the Mother of Jesus. In tradition, however, Mary, like other significant people in the history of Israel, was born by direct divine intervention. We see this pattern with, for example, Isaac and John the Baptist.

The Protevangelium of James, dates from the second century and according to it Joachim and Anna, the parents of Mary and grandparents of Jesus were righteous, but childless. Because of their childlessness, Joachim, a rich man, was not allowed to offer his gifts in the temple because he had not raised up offspring in Israel.

Saddened by this rejection, Joachim

researched to see whether all the righteous in Israel had had children and found that, indeed, they all had. With Abraham, who had a son in his old age, in mind, Joachim went into the wilderness, saying nothing to his wife, and fasted with prayer for 40 days.

Anna, his wife, also mourned her childlessness and her presumed widowhood. At the prompting of her maid Judith, she exchanged her mourning for bridal clothes, and sat down under a laurel tree in her garden. Remembering Sarah, she lamented her barrenness and prayed to God for a child. An angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her that her prayer had been heard. She would give birth to a child who would become famous. Anna promised that any

child she might have would be given to the Lord for a lifetime of service.

Two angels then told Anna that ~~she~~ her husband was returning home.

Joachim had, in turn, been told that his wife would conceive. Joachim then offered lambs, calves, and goats from his flocks in Jerusalem.

Anna went to greet her husband at the gate and said: "Now I know that the Lord God has greatly blessed me; for behold the widow is no longer a widow, and I, who was childless, shall conceive."

When Joachim offered his gifts at the altar, he knew, from the appearance of the priest's frontlet (plate) that he had been forgiven and justified. In due time Anna gave birth to Mary.

The themes of the forefeast on Sept 7.

the feast on Sept 8 and the commemoration of Joachim and Anna on Sept. 9 are largely derived from the Protevangelium of James. The language in which these themes are ~~developed~~ ^{presented} are that of a fully-developed doctrine of the incarnation, formulated by the third and fourth ecumenical councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451.

The icon is reminiscent of that of the Birth of Christ, Anna is seen lying on a couch with attendants nearby, while the new-born is washed. The infant is also shown, wrapped in swaddling bands and lying on a small couch next to Anna's bed. Sometimes she is depicted in a cradle, rocked by another maid. From a window Joachim looks down on the scene.

Another feast based on the Protewangelium of James is the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the temple on the 21st of November. Joachim wanted to do this when she was 2, but Anna thought it better to wait until she was 3 as she would miss her parents less. The undefiled daughters of the Hebrews took a burning torch each to capture Mary's imagination ~~and~~ to prevent her being tempted to turn back from the temple. The high priest Zechariah welcomed her and blessed her and told her that the Lord had magnified her name among all generations, and that because of her the Lord at the end of days would reveal His redemption to the children of Israel. He placed her on the third step of the altar. God gave her grace, she danced, and was beloved of all Israel. She showed no sign of wanting to go home with

her parents when they left. Fed miraculously by an angel, she stayed in the temple until she was twelve. Then an angel of the Lord told Zechariah to betroth Mary to one of the widowers of Israel, whom the Lord would indicate.

The celebration of this feast is closer to Christmas than that of the Birth of Mary; and this is reflected in the use of some of the hymns for Dec. 25 in the canon at Matins on November 21.

The icon of the feast depicts the story told in the Protevangelium of James. At the door of the temple, at the top of some steps, stands the prophet Zechariah in priest's robes. He holds out his hands, like Simeon in the icon of the Presentation of Christ, to receive the three year old child. She goes up the steps towards him, carrying a

lamp in one hand, and holding out the other. Her parents are behind her, looking at each other and pointing to Mary. A group of virgins carrying lamps is nearby. The icon combines this image of the entry itself with another of Mary seated high up above the temple beneath a canopy. She takes the bread brought by the archangel Gabriel, who blesses her.

One of the really Major feasts is that of the Annunciation, celebrated on March 25, exactly nine months before the Birth of Christ. This feast is technically the feast of the Incarnation of Christ as Mary conceived ^{at} ^{the} moment she said "let it be done to me according to your Word."

The announcement of the Birth of Jesus follows a pattern of the miraculous conceptions found in the history of Israel — the

conception of Samson (Judges 13) and
Samuel (1 Samuel 1) and, of course,
those of Isaac and John the
Baptist.

The account of the Annunciation
comes from the gospel of Luke.

Later faith in Jesus Christ as the Son
of God was expressed in the fourth
century by the phrase in the
Nicene Creed "conceived by the Holy
Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."

Luke's account is evidence for the
early belief in the virginal conception
of Jesus, and affirms His birth
to be due entirely to the action of
God.

The texts for the feast come from
Luke's account and draw from
the early comparison between
Mary and Eve — Mary being
the new Eve — just as Christ is
the new Adam. Eve disobeys God
and brings about the Fall and the

expulsion from paradise. Mary obeys God's will and thereby reverses the negative effects of the first Eve's disobedience. Mary is the mother of the new Creation.

The liturgical texts reflect the dogmatic definitions of the first four ecumenical councils regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ and His relation to the Father: it is the divine Word, the Second Person of the Trinity who enters Mary's womb and there takes His human nature upon Himself. The purity of Mary is also emphasized. There has always been the belief that Mary's virginity was preserved not only before, but also after, the Birth of Jesus.

The icon of the feast signifies the silent dialogue of eyes and hands

between Mary and Gabriel. Mary is sometimes depicted seated and sometimes standing. If her hand is open toward the archangel, as if signalling him to stop, it indicates reserve and detachment. If it is folded back onto her breast, it expresses consent and submission.

Mary is also depicted spinning the purple thread for the veil in the temple. This veil represents the Body of Jesus which ~~she~~ is ~~the~~ being woven inside of her. Hence it represents the human flesh of Jesus.

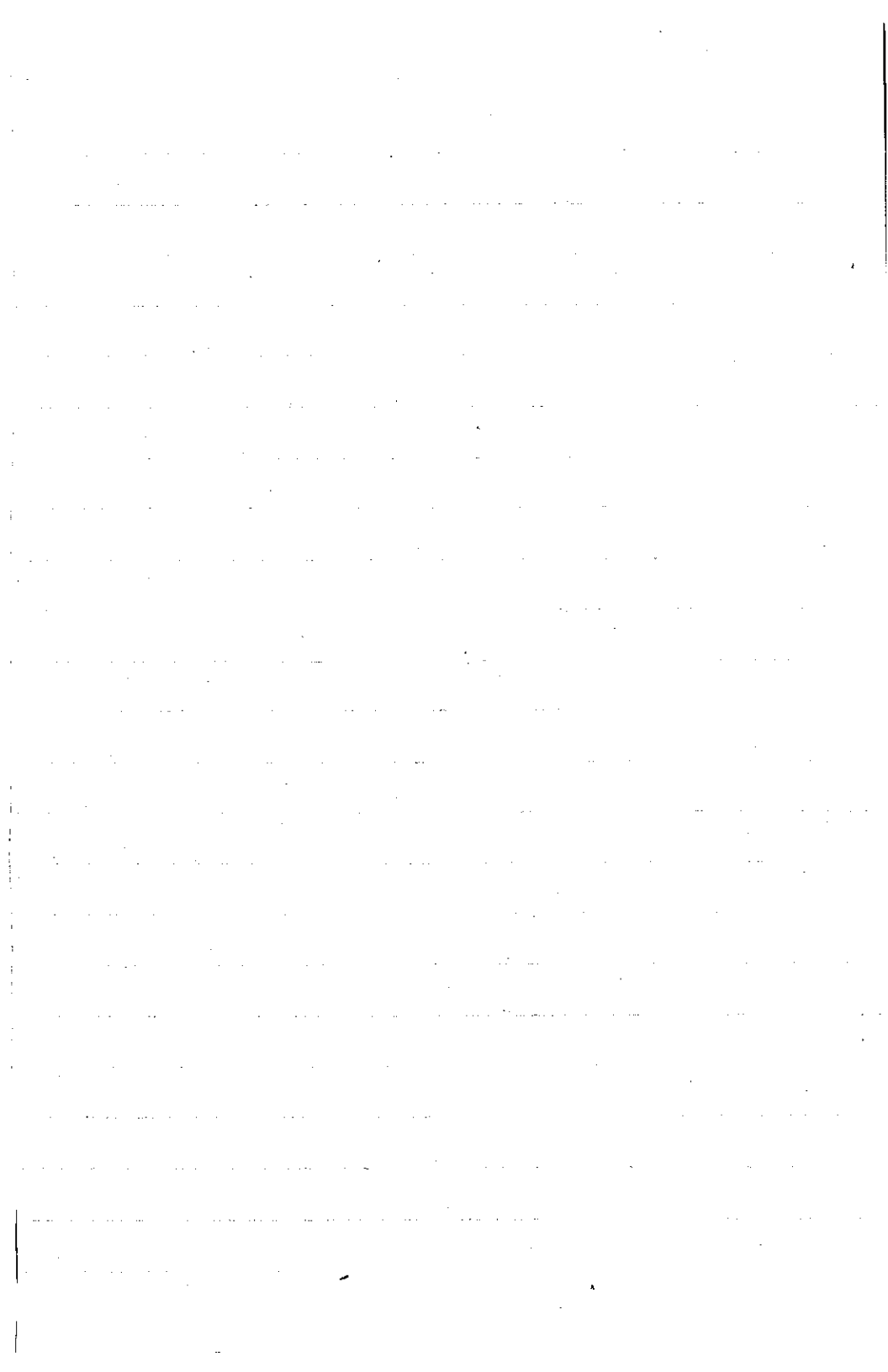
The last feast we will consider today is that of the Dormition or Assumption of Mary. It is a major feast and is preceded by a two week fast. The feast is celebrated on August 15 and is a major holiday in some countries.

Like the beginning of Mary's life, the end of her life is only spoken about in apocryphal writings.

There are many accounts of the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary.

There is one in Greek called:

The Discourse of St. John the Divine Concerning the Falling Asleep of the Mother of God. It tells how Mary used to go to the holy sepulchre to burn incense and ask Him to come and live with her. Gabriel appeared one day and said that rather, she would go and live with Jesus in heaven. The apostles were miraculously brought to Mary's house on clouds. Those who had already died were raised for the occasion.



Saturday March 24, 2007
St. John the Baptist, Ottawa -
The Invisible Creation: Angels and
Demons.

Each time we recite the Creed we say:
"I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth and of
all things visible and invisible."

There are, first, of all, many things in
the physical creation which are
detectable, but invisible, for example,
gravity, magnetism, radio waves,
various types of radiation. We can
detect these things, for example, heat
but can't see them. Some things
need specialized equipment to sense -
nuclear radiation and other
invisible things can now be seen
because of microscopes e.g. bacteria,
viruses, germs, amoebae, paramecia etc.

Another aspect of invisibility is in the realm of ideas. We can't know an idea until it is expressed verbally or in writing. We can see the brain, but we can't see the ~~idea~~. Once expressed we become ^{aware} of an idea, but if not expressed the idea still exists.

According to Christian doctrine, there also exist, as attested to by numerous appearances in the Bible, personal, intelligent, powerful beings, distinct from God and man. These creatures are usually called angels from the Greek word $\alphaγγελος$ which means messenger. They are also called the $\alphaβωτοι$ or the bodiless powers of heaven. Sometimes they seem to be confused with God.

Greek uses the word $\alphaγγελος$ for both celestial and human messengers

while Latin tends to use angelus for the celestial and legatus and nuntius for the human.

Both the Old and New Testaments have angels everywhere. The Bible does not deal with the nature of angels, but is mainly concerned with their bringing messages to humans or otherwise intervening and assisting us. They also praise God.

Angels are personal. They have consciousness and are intelligent, but they are neither God nor human. They do not have matter, hence they have no form, but while the expression is used, they would not appear to be pure spirits as this would seem to be reserved for God. Angels are circumscribed, that is, unlike God, they are not everywhere.

An angel must leave heaven to come to earth. A particular angel may be in a specific place, but not all places at once.

Angels are creatures; so they had a beginning. As they do not have material bodies, they do not have senses; so unlike us, they do not receive knowledge through the senses. Their knowledge comes through intuition. Unlike God they are not omniscient and do not know all things.

Angels may be something like photons. They have no matter or mass, but they have energy.

They may well be spheres of conscious, intelligent energy. It might help to think of them as a field, such as an electromagnetic field.

As they have no bodies, their presence is to be found in their actions.

Since they have no mass, they are not restrained by physical laws. The question is asked whether they travel at the speed of light. It would appear not, because they apparently do not age, therefore there can be ~~a~~ no lapse of time when they travel. Rather than travelling at the speed of light, it would appear that they travel at the speed of thought.

In other words they do not have to cover a physical distance.

At the speed of light, it would take about eight ^{earth} minutes to travel from the sun to earth, but for an angel the trip from the sun to earth takes no time.

As angels have our well being in

mind, they are constantly seen in the Bible announcing important divine messages or otherwise helping and protecting us.

Two angels save Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom.

An angel intervenes to save Isaac from Abraham's knife.

Jacob dreams about angels of God going up and down a ladder to heaven.

An angel speaks to Jacob in a dream.

Raphael protects Tobias on his journey.

An angel saves the three youths from the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar.

The list is endless.

We often encounter the angel of the Lord. This is often interpreted to be the Lord Himself; there is a

tendency in the east to see these as appearances of the Word of God before His incarnation.

The New Testament too is full of angels.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take Mary as his wife.

An angel also appears to Joseph in a dream and tells ~~Joseph~~ him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt & then tells Joseph in a dream when it is safe to return.

After His temptation on the desert, angels appeared and ministered to Jesus.

Jesus says that the angels of the little ones are constantly before His Father in heaven.

Jesus says that the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven

and will send his angels with a loud trumpet.

The book of Revelation is filled with angels who play a prominent part in that book.

From a Biblical perspective, there can be no doubt that these creatures do exist and it would appear that it is not just a matter of talking about psychological realities.

As mentioned in the sacred scriptures and as elaborated by Dionysius the Areopagite, there would appear to be nine choirs of angels grouped into three hierarchies descending from those closest to God to the lowest ranks which deal with us.

In the first or highest hierarchy,

we find the seraphim, cherubim
and thrones.

Seraphim means fire makers, that is, carriers of warmth. The name seraphim means a perennial circling around divine things, penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails, a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, a like warmth. Seraphim are filled with love; so there is a speculation that because of this, none of them rebelled against God.

Cherubim means fullness of knowledge or outflowing of wisdom. This rank of angelic beings is immediately present before God, His revelation is received by them first.

Cherubim signify the power to know and see God, to receive the greatest gifts of His light, to contemplate the divine splendour in primordial power, to be filled with the gifts that bring wisdom and to share these generously with subordinates as a part of the ~~benefit~~ beneficent outpouring of wisdom

Thrones suggest a transcendence over every earthly defect, as shown by their upward-bearing toward the ultimate heights, that they are forever separated from what is inferior.... and are utterly available to receive the divine visitation. that they bear God and are ever open, like servants, to welcome God.

It is especially the Cherubim and Seraphim $\frac{1}{2}$ who sing, as

reported by Isaiah: "Holy, Holy, Holy,
is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth
is full of his glory."

The middle hierarchy consists of
the dominions, powers and
authorities. There is sometimes a
bit of confusion regarding the
order of these three choirs, who
are sometimes referred to as
Dominations, Virtues and Powers.
The Dominations are the fourth
order of angels and dwell in the
second heaven. They are responsible
for governing angelic duties in all
angelic orders lower than themselves.
They are also in charge of merging
the spiritual and physical worlds.
They receive their assignments
directly from God and rarely
communicate with humans
personally.

The Virtues are the fifth order and are responsible for workings, miracles in God's name on earth. They look after those who champion good. They give strength to individuals when needed. It is a belief that two angels of the Virtue class escorted Christ to heaven at His Ascension. Michael and Raphael may be ruling princes of this order.

The Powers ~~make~~ or Authorities make up the sixth order. They may be the first angels created by God. They reside between the first and second heavens. They are guardians of the passageway leading to heaven. They are also guides to lost souls. The powers bring balance to the earth. They are said to prevent the efforts

of demons to take control of the world.
Gabriel may belong to this order
and Satan may have been this
type of angel before he fell from
God's favour.

The final hierarchy consists of
principalities, archangels, and
angels. This is the angelic
hierarchy that directly presides
over human hierarchies and the
different nations are allotted to
different angels, Israel's angelic
ruler being Michael (whom Dionysius
does not seem to regard as an
arch angel). The idea of guardian
angels for nations is found in the
Bible (e.g. book of Daniel)

The term Archangel can be confusing
as it can be used for all the
choirs above that of angel. The three

archangels whose names are given in the Bible are Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.

Michael (who is like God) is seen as the leader of the heavenly armies who cast Lucifer out of heaven and is prominent in the Apocalypse.

Gabriel (God is my strength) is best known for bringing important announcements. He explains a vision to Daniel and then tells him about the coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament he announces the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and that of Jesus to Mary.

Angels have the most contact with us and serve as our guardians and protectors. It is believed that each human is assigned at least one angel as a personal guardian and protector.

It is a common belief that the angels keep the entire creation functioning according to God's will and design and that they are responsible for all sorts of human artistic and other creative inspiration.

On the belief in demons or devils, it is Christian belief that all things created by God were good, but angels and human beings were given the ability to make choices. A major difference between angels + men besides the fact that angels appear to have energy, but no matter is that ~~be~~ angels get only one choice. As they have no physical bodies or senses, they see or intuit everything with perfect clarity; so there is no place for the benefit of the doubt or changing

your mind. An angelic choice is total, conscious, deliberate, and irreversible.

The tradition that comes to us is that a particularly intelligent angel named Lucifer, developed an arrogant pride which caused him to seek being ~~interdependent~~ independent from God. This conscious act cut him off from the divine source of life. As a result, He and those who followed him ceased praising God. Because of their arrogant pride they became envious of God and began hating Him. They continue permanently with their arrogance and envy and as a result of their vicious egos seek to prevent human beings from praising God and attempt to get us to give them

praise instead of ^{to} God. This whole dynamic was recognized by the fathers who are constantly on warning about the error of idolatry. The demons are vicious in their egoism and envy and many peoples have chosen to appease them with praise and worship rather than risk demonic retaliation. The Bible recognizes that the gods of the nations are demons.

The fall of Satan from heaven is attested to by Jesus who said:
"I saw Satan fall from heaven."

If you read through the New Testament carefully you will see an almost constant presence of angels and demons to the extent that the picture arise that Christ's major task here was to battle

with demons. His ultimate victory over them was when He descended into their realm and destroyed their power base in Hades.

Jesus is emphatic about the existence and character of Satan, or Beelzebub - he is a liar and a murderer from the beginning and the Father of Lies.

Today, due to a prevailing materialistic and mechanistic culture, there is a marked tendency to deny the existence of angels & demons or to be naive in our treatment of them. While we don't really know as much as we would like to, the entire tradition we follow clearly speaks of their actual existence and that they are not just products of human fantasy and imagination. Denial

of the reality and work of the demons is spiritually very damaging in the world today.

Demons are delighted when we deny their very existence.

The Church has been consistent in its belief about the invisible, intelligent creation. The prayers are replete with references to them. They enter with us at the liturgy and assist at the altar. We also expel the destructive spirits through exorcisms at baptism and at the great blessing of water.