

*Pastoral Reflection, December 2022, Entering the Heart*

“Let us lift up our hearts!” But how do we enter the heart? In one sense, we are always in our heart; but it is often disordered and stormy. Why? All too often within our heart, we only find ourselves. I become the center of myself and not God. Everything revolves around me: my hurts, my angers, my pains, my pleasures, my desires, my passions, my thoughts and plans, my distractions, my plans, my ego. None of us, as Adam and Eve sadly discovered, can free us from this self-centered disorder by ourselves.

To enter into our true heart, our true self, we must struggle to become pure of heart, to become, as the Theotokos said, “the servant of the Lord.” We must “commend ourselves and one another to Christ our God.” This requires prayer, worship, and genuine service to God and, thus, to others. But it also requires humility and what our holy fathers and mothers call *dispassion*—freeing ourselves from all of the passions, thoughts, and concerns that lead us to focus just on ourselves which allows us to discover God and our true self. Each of us is created by God to be a living icon of Christ. We are intrinsically worthy we are but also to be in communion or fellowship with God and one another.

Here is an “exercise” as we approach Christmas to help with this struggle. Here are two hymns for the Nativity of Christ:

“Ye mountains and ye hills, ye plains and valleys, ye peoples, tribes, and nations, and all things that have breath, shout with jubilation, be filled with divine gladness; for the Redemption of all is come, the timeless Word of God became subject to time because of His compassion.”

The Troparion for the Nativity: “Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the Light of wisdom! For by it, those who worshipped the stars, were taught by a Star to adore You, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know You, the Orient from on High. O Lord, glory to You!

Don’t just read them. Approach them as icons in word and sound that invite you to be drawn into a presence and experience of Him in and through the Holy Spirit. Center yourself and read or chant them so that they come from within you as though they were something you yourself sincerely composed in your heart to express your love of Christ and to be filled with “divine gladness.” Hopefully, you will encounter someone far more marvelous than you who so loves you that He entered your life to sacrifice Himself for you and all of creation. In Christ, Fr John

(Fr John D. Jones, Priest-in-Charge, Holy Theophany Church—A Mission of the OCA)