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Keeping the spirit of Christmas is a lifetime commitment

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"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace"

Isaiah 9: 6

How easily these words might come to mind, especially between Thanksgiving and Christmas! Then on Dec. 26 they fade away for another year, tucked away as an old but favorite pair of shoes that we bring out for a special occasion, remembering a time long past. The meaning of Christmas for us in America may involve gifts and family gatherings, music and trees. Christmas might also mean crowded shopping malls, short tempers, so little time and money, no "peace and quiet," and sometimes thankfulness when it's over.

The true meaning of Christmas is expressed in this quotation by St. Nikolai Velimirovic of Serbia: "Our salvation had its origin not from men, nor from earth, but from the greatest heights of the invisible, divine world. Such is God's mercy and such is man's greatness, that God himself came down from eternity into time, from heaven to earth, from the throne of glory to the shepherd's cave, solely to save man, to cleanse him from sin and to lead him back to Paradise." Christmas is Christ coming to earth to lead man back to Paradise.

The Prince of Peace came that we might have salvation. The Spirit of Christmas is his heavenly peace, which passes all understanding. As Christians, we are instructed by the prophet David, St. Mark and the Apostle Paul: "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14); "Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another" (Mark 9:50); "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). We are commanded to seek the peace of God and to have peace with all people at all times.

How then does a Christian keep and live the "Spirit of Christmas," "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men," if we are to call ourselves followers of the Prince of Peace? Do our lives reflect his peace, his mercy and his good will after the celebration of his Nativity has passed? Are we as merciful, peaceful, loving and giving today, Saturday, Jan. 3, 2004, as we perhaps were on Dec. 25? Will we be able to hold onto and give this peace by St. Patrick's Day, Pascha (Easter), the Fourth of July, Labor Day 2004? If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit: It's hard to make it through even one day at peace within ourselves and at peace with others -- let alone to hold the Spirit of the Lord's Nativity all year round!

To hold onto the peace of Jesus Christ means we must put forth effort "to keep" the peace of Christ and not lose it. Christ calls us to become his people by following his commandments. "Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass. For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (James 1:22-24). "That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His

commandments" (Psalm 78:7). "To keep" the spirit of Nativity means to put forth effort to remember God and to keep his Peace, and in doing this we remember who we are and who our neighbor is. We do this by engaging in a daily practice of remembering.

St. Seraphim of Sarov said in the early 19th century in Russia, "Acquire the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved." In the Orthodox Christian tradition, there are tried and true ways to acquire the spirit of peace, the presence of Jesus Christ, and to bring peace to others. "Deny yourself, take up the Cross and follow me" is the foundational commandment from the Lord which we practice. Daily private morning and evening prayers, daily church services, feasts, daily reading of the Holy Scriptures and lives of the saints, fasting, daily striving to repent from our sins and live the commandments of Christ, almsgiving, Holy Confession and frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist ... without these spiritual labors, we notice that we are not at peace within and not at peace with others.

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord (Jan. 7 on the traditional Church calendar) is preceded by a 40-day fast from certain foods. The fasts of the Church always precede the feasts, to help us deny ourselves, to increase our prayer and to turn our gaze toward heaven: "I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom" (Psalm 35:13). This living practice of fasting before feasting helps us to remember how much we need a savior and his healing.

God's plan for mankind is to lead us back to Paradise. However, his plan includes his gift to us: free will, to choose or not to choose him. To keep the Spirit of Peace means to engage our free will, and to put forth spiritual effort to remember and to keep this Peace. It means to live our lives as determined acts of faith and hope for this Peace, we are commanded to thank God and repent daily, to confess our sins, to forgive, and to partake of the healing medicines that the Church has to offer for the healing of soul and body. With this healing we are led back to Paradise, to Jesus Christ himself. What a glorious and fulfilling life! With Christ's love in us, we open the doors of our hearts, our lives, our homes and our churches to welcome and share with everyone the "Spirit of Christmas," which is Heaven Itself, all year round.

May our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ help us to fulfill such a blessed calling.

"Christ is Born! Glorify him!"

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