To understand Love is to attempt to get into the depth of God Himself, because in essence, God is love. In listing the three greatest virtues: faith, hope and love, St. Paul stresses the fact that of all the three, Love stands the greatest. This is because while faith and hope will one day cease to be, love never will; because God who is love is infinite, with no end.

What is faith?
In Hebrews 11: 1, St. Paul defines faith as “the evidence of things not seen.” So, when these things, get to be seen and fulfilled, faith ceases to exist. For example we believe in the existence of God, the saints, and eternal life, and when we see all these faith will become functionless. What is hope?
Hope by necessity deals with the future... For example our hope is to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Once we reach eternal life and inherit the kingdom of heaven, then the substance of our hope is fulfilled, and consequently there is no hope any more.

What is Love?
The Greek language, in which the New Testament was written, provides four terms that convey the meaning of the word ‘love’... These terms are:

1. Eros:
This term refers to carnal or sexual love. This kind of love is characterized by selfishness, as it is usually demanding without thinking of giving. It seeks gratification of one’s own pleasure; ignoring the benefit of the other. An example from the Old Testament of carnal love is Samson’s. When he wanted to marry, he said about the girl he wanted to marry, “get her a wife for me for she pleases me well” (Judges 4:3) thus exhibiting his desire for pleasure only. Another example is Ammon, David’s son who loved his sister with an Eros love... After he had committed sin with her, this love vanished. (2Sam 13:15). So is the nature of the love that younger youth experience in their early dating relationships. It is essentially feelings in the Eros sense; as she or he “pleases me well”.

2. Philia:
This term refers to love that binds close friends together. This kind of love is mutual, conditionally a patriarch nor a prophet, have you entrusted with our salvation, but You, without change, were incarnate and became man and resembled us in everything, except for sin alone and became for us a mediator with the Father”. What better reason do we have to rejoice than being reconciled with the Lord our God and being united with Him in His kingdom for eternity? How joyful should a servant be when his chastisement has turned into salvation! What a gift of love and sacrifice, indeed worthy of praise, thanksgiving and celebration!

How should we celebrate?
In a Christian’s life, Jesus Christ the Lord is the “all in all”. So it is fitting that we give honor and glory to our Lord and Savior on His feast days and all throughout the year, for He is our source of peace, goodness and every blessing. In all we do, His name should always be on our lips, to call upon, to thank, to supplicate Him and to perpetually praise His Holy Name.

As the season for the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord approaches, there are a multitude of things to do beginning with the fast up to the day of the Feast of the Nativity.

· Fast with the Church in preparation for the birth of the Lord.
· Attend Kiahk Praises and encourage all loved ones, family and friends alike, to attend with you. Meditate on the beautiful words in the Kiahk Psalmody in honor of the Theotokos. Enjoy the hymns and praises in the special Kiahk tunes that the Church established for this wondrous season. Every week during the month of Kiahk in the Divine Liturgy, the Church commemorates the events leading up to the Holy birth in its readings of the Katameros (the Coptic Lectionary). Meditate on those readings and enjoy the wonder of the Lord’s preparation for the Incarnation of His only-begotten Son.

+ Read and reflect on the fathers of the Church’s writings on the Nativity. Many of them have written beautiful and inspirational hymns and praises in honor of the Virgin Mary and the Incarnation of the Lord. For example, you can read the book by St. Athanasius the Apostolic On the Incarnation of the Word of God, from which his thoughts are quoted at the beginning of this article, or the beautiful hymns written by St. Ephraim the Syrian “The Nativity of Christ in the Flesh”. St. Ephraim wrote the following touching meditations in his second hymn (there are nineteen in all):

“Blessed is the Shepherd who became a Lamb for our reconciliation, Blessed is the branch who became the Cup of our Redemption! Blessed also is the Cluster Fount of medicine of life...Let us praise Him, who prevailed and quickened us by His stripes! Praise we Him who took away the curse by His Thorns! Praise we Him who put death to death by His dying!”

That was just a small taste of the sweet words of this great father of the Church about the newborn Savior.

+ When you attend the beautiful Divine Liturgy of the Glorious Feast of the Nativity, enjoy the celebratory festal tunes and joyful words full of honor for the newborn Christ the Savior as you listen to the fraction prayer proclaiming:

“O Master, Lord our God, co-creator, invisible, infinite, unchangeable, and immeasurable, who have sent His true Light, His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the co-eternal Logos. He who is in the Fatherly bosom at all times has come down and dwelt in the undefiled virginal womb.”
Mighty Arrows Magazine

What are you doing this Nativity?

Fr. Mikhail Aziz
St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church
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Three months ago, I was in the mall to buy a certain item and while walking into a department store I noticed that Nativity items were being set up in a display of lights and glitter to welcome the season. I couldn’t help but wonder, is it that time already? We’re still a good three months away! The retailers, who make a great portion of their financial gain during this part of the year, are always anxious to capitalize on the Nativity season and the shoppers are only too eager to help. Everyone is swept up into the commercial frenzy of the season… what to buy and for whom, what to cook, what to bake, what to decorate, what to wear, whom to invite or where to go. So much to do in so little time! Shopping and celebrating have become synonymous with the Nativity.

It’s right to celebrate and we should celebrate! Keeping in mind two things: (1) why we celebrate and … (2) how we should celebrate.

Well, if we remember the “why”, then it should be natural to proceed to the “how”.

What are we celebrating?

If you simply said “the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ”, you would be right, but there are so many mysteries and gifts of the Incarnation within this simple statement. The Holy Bible tells us that “God was manifested in the flesh” in 1 Timothy 3:16. What a powerful and awesome fact this is! How often do we just stop for a moment and reflect on this statement? St. Athanasius meditated on it in this way: “He took our body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of a human father” 1 Why did our Lord do this? “He did this out of sheer love for us… that He might again return incorruption to men who had fallen into corruption and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His Body and by the grace of His Resurrection. Thus, He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.” Our Redeemer took on the form of a servant and resembled us in every way, except for sin. He was born as a lovely person, a pauper, He felt hunger, He felt thirst, He felt weary and He felt grief. He did that so we may be comforted by the verse “He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). Our God and Savior left His glory and became humble and lived among us, un worthy as we are, in our fallen world of sin and pride that He may teach us humility by which He may exalt us. He “Broke down the middle wall of separation” as St. Paul teaches us, so we may be reconciled with God and regain our original likeness. St. Gregory expressed the Incarnation in this way in the Divine Liturgy: “Neither an angel nor an archangel, tional, and ephemeral. It is always based on a condition: If you love me, I will love you. Many times the beloved has to earn the love of the lover. It is mutual, and reciprocally contrary to Eros, which is only receiving. When we were in school, we had friends whom we loved and who loved us. However, now we might not even remember their names, that love and friendship were temporary, hence it ended with time.

3. Storage:

This is the kind of love, the blood bond love, is essentially expressive of family relationship. God planted this love in us, and therefore we do not take any credit for it. The purpose of this love is to keep the family bond as a strong support system in the life of any individual.

4. Agape:

This is the highest form of love that seeks the transcendental good of others. When our Lord Jesus Christ commanded to “love God with all your might and your neighbor as yourself”, He used the term ‘Agape’. The same word He used when instructing to “love your enemies”. In Galatians 5:22:23 and 1Corinthians 13, St. Paul uses the same Greek term ‘Agape’ to de- scribe the fruit of the Spirit. Agape is then the kind of love I express towards God, others, and also my enemies. If this is the kind of love I have to express towards everybody. It follows that Storage and Philia must ultimately grow until they both reach the level of Agape.

What does Agape do?

1. Resides in the atmosphere…

Those who have attained Agape will watch it permeate their atmosphere, and through it they move and have their being… St. Paul says in Ephesians 5:1-2, “Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also has loved us, and given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma.” Who is responsible for creating this atmosphere of love? No one else but us. We are responsible for initiating love or other wise. As Christians, we are expected to always walk in the atmosphere of love that will ultimately become manifest in our actions, our work, and the way we serve each other.

2. Binds virtues together...

St. Paul likens virtues to the garments that we put on. Those garments need a tie to hold them together in place. If the garments of virtues fall down we will remain uncovered. What will then keep all these virtues bound together? It is the tie of love. In Colossians 3:12-14 St. Paul says: “Therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long suffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. If anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you so you also must do, but above all these things put on love which is the bond of perfection.”

3. Becomes the pivot of our actions...

In 1 Corinthians 16:14, St. Paul says, “Let all that you do, be done with love.” Also in 1 Corinthians 13:3 St. Paul says, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned but have not love, it profits me nothing.” No matter how
much, how long or how well you serve in or outside church, if you do it without love, you will not reap any fruit out of it.

4. Shields our actions...

Love protects our freedom in Christ against turning into destructive selfishness. The New Testament says that the Son sets us free. Therefore it may seem that we are not under any obligation to pray or fast or go to church. However, we could easily abuse our freedom in Christ and drift away. What then protects our freedom in Christ? St. Paul in Galatians 5:13 says, “For you brethren have been called to liberty, only do not use liberty as opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Yes, Christ has set us free, but through love we will deliberately offer ourselves to be servants of all, and slaves to all. Then what makes us pray or go to church though we are not obligated? It is the love that we have received from God. Once we get to understand this principal, we will be able to apply it to any area in our relationship with others. Take submission for an example. Submission of a wife to her husband is understood by many women as being slavery. However, the church does not teach it that way. On the contrary, it is sheer love and out of total free will that a godly woman submit to her husband.

5. Seasons our speech...

Many people think that there is a contradiction between truth and love. God is both love and truth. So if God is the truth and God is love, then there should not be any contradiction at all. In Ephesians 4:15 St. Paul says, “Speaking the truth in love.” If we keep a balance between truth and love, and the truth is said and communicated with love, truth will never be a fault in your life. When our Lord Jesus Christ wanted to confront the Samaritan woman (John 4) he did that in a loving unoffending way, thus ending up winning her. If love characterizes every word we say, we will not lose anyone.

What is the Nature of Agape?

1. It is a willful love.

Agape is an emotion that rises in the mind and not in the heart. That is because it is a principle, a decision, and a freely made choice. Agape is the type of love with which you love your enemy. Therefore it cannot start in the heart. God would otherwise be unfair in asking us to love our enemies while knowing that our hearts cannot generate such demanding emotions. While Philia is a heart generated uncontrolled emotion towards the beloved, Agape is a concentrated exercise of the will. That is why training has to be established before we can exercise our will to love others. After Agape starts in the mind, it will be processed in the heart, and then emotions and feelings will develop. Who should be trusted more, the will or the emotions? In reality, it is the will that should be trusted more than the emotions because the latter could become influenced by some factors, but a decision made Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Exposition of Verse 1:
The conception of the Lord Jesus fulfills Isaiah 7:14 in the Septuagint, where we are told that a virgin (Gr: parthenos) will conceive and bear a Son. He who is conceived in her is not a new Person coming into existence but the eternal Son of God, using her womb as His throne. The virginal conception through the Holy Spirit and the name of the Incarnate Son, Immanuel, God with us, are clear declarations of the Lord Jesus’ divinity.

Exposition of verse 2:
The Holy Spirit and power of the highest are synonymous; this is a case of repetition for emphasis. Holy One is a messianic title. That He is to be born of St. Mary demonstrates the Lord Christ’s human nature. But that the Virgin will conceive and bear the Son of God reveals the divine nature of the Lord Christ. We note especially the reference to the Holy Trinity—God the Father (the Highest), the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Old Testament: “For unto us a Child is born. Unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

New Testament: “And the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) emphasized by St. Paul in his epistle: “and without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16).

Exposition:
The Word became man without ceasing to be fully God: the mystery of God incarnate. He assumed complete human nature, both a physical body and a rational soul—everything we are, except for sin. As God and man in one Person, the Lord Christ accomplishes a redemption that fully heals and saves fallen humanity.
2. It is a sacrificial love.

While Eros is a selfish love that receives only and Philia is a mutual love that receives and gives, Agape is always giving and caring without expecting or receiving anything in return. It is giving to the extent of laying down one's life for others (John 15:13). It is a readiness to go the extra mile and perhaps even shed blood for the beloved.

3. It is an unconditional love.

With Agape, the beloved does not have to earn their lover's adoration, but receives it as a free gift from the lover. This may sound far-fetched, and rather unrealistic, but it is precisely what happened with the Lord Jesus Christ. For while we were sinners and enemies to the Father, He loved us offering Himself on the cross for us.

4. It is a limitless love.

Agape is inclusive, not exclusive, in the sense that it does not differentiate among people based on sex, age, social status or ethnic background. It is expressed to everybody, and embraces all people.

This explicit definition of the nature of Agape may sound too difficult to attain, thus causing some to perhaps become discouraged in their pursuit of such a kind of love. There is a lot of truth in this negative response; because God who is Love, and who is infinite at the same time, renders this kind of love seemingly infinite; unreachable, and unattainable by anyone... It follows therefore that infinite time is required to achieve this infinite love. The good news is that love has a lot in common with fire (Song 8:6, 7), when we approach love, we grow in it, and although we will never achieve all of the infinite love, we will be ignited by its fuel and warmed by its warmth. On the other hand, those who do not practice love, will live in coldness and gradually experience emotional frost. The point here is that we all have to grow day after day in our love. Nobody can say I am done or that I have reached the infinite love with no more room for further growth. Even in eternal life we will grow in our love day after day. Growth in love becomes a target; and, whoever grows, and gets closer, will receive blessings in their life, and the coldness will melt gradually as they approach the source of the infinite love. The more you approach this love and grow in it; the more will your heart be warmed by it.

The nature and reality of Agape should not dishearten us nor make us hopeless of attaining it. On the contrary it should help us make it our goal to attain Agape...and I already perfected, but I press on that I may lay hold on that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.”

May the Lord of love fill all our hearts with His divine love and glory be to God for ever Amen.

Prophecies in the Old Testament Fulfilled in the New Testament

Regarding the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

By: Fr. Moussa Saleh
St. George Church, Tampa, Fl.

The Genealogy of Our Lord Jesus Christ:
Old Testament:

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of His roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him” (Isaiah 11:1-2).

New Testament:

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King…” (Matthew 2:1).

The Annunciation Of the Birth Of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Old Testament:

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel”’ (Isaiah 7:14).

New Testament:

“He will pass through Judah, He will overflow and pass over, He will reach up to the neck; And the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel….speak the word, but it will not stand, For God is with us” (Isaiah 8:8-10).

Explanation:

The selective list of the Lord Christ’s ancestors is arranged in three groups of fourteen generations each. Fourteen is the numerical value of the consonants of the name David, underlining the Lord Jesus’ Davideic descent.

The Place of the Lord Jesus’ Birth:

Old Testament:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

New Testament:

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, in the days of Herod the king” (Matthew 2:1).

The Place of the Lord Jesus’ Birth:

Old Testament:

“Bear, child and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” which is translated “God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

New Testament:

“Behold the virgin shall be with Child and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23).

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