

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 7):
A CULTURE OF GIVING

by Father Frank Marangos

*“What shall we offer You, O Christ, Who for our sake has appeared on earth as a man?
Every creature which You have made offers You thanks. The angels offer you a song.
The heavens, their star. The wise men, their gifts. The shepherds, their wonder.
The earth, its cave. The wilderness, the manger. And we offer You a Virgin Mother.
O Pre-eternal God, have mercy on us!”*

Troparion of the Nativity

The celebration of Christmas, the Holy Nativity of Jesus Christ, best illustrates the 7th pillar of a vibrant Orthodox parish, namely, a culture of selfless giving. Exemplified by the hymn quoted above, mature Christian communities make every effort to appropriately respond to God’s Gift of His Son, by regularly emulating the respective “offerings” of the heavens, earth, angels, shepherds, and Magi.

For two consecutive years, the Florida city of Wellington had the ceramic figurine of the baby Jesus stolen from its community manger scene. In fact, the thief also stole the cumbersome concrete block to which the \$2,000 statute was attached with a heavy chain. Police finally solved the mystery by placing a GPS tracking device inside and tracing the thief to her home.

According to authorities, dozens of communities across America have suffered the loss of their Baby Jesus figurines, and, in some instances, entire nativity scenes. While such thefts are largely regarded as pranks, they are often set apart by anti-Christian sentiments. Referred to as the “Stolen Baby Jesus Syndrome,” some take the babies as a joke, others do so to protest. Surprisingly, there are also those who have a psychological compulsion to “own” Jesus as their own personal possession. Unlike these self-centered disorders, a healthy celebration of Christmas promotes a posture of gifting rather than taking.

Benevolence is one of the most important foundational pillars of the vibrant Orthodox parish. In addition to the pillars of (1) hospitality, (2) love of Holy Scripture, (3) catechesis, (4) liturgical participation, (5) vision, and (6) mutual encouragement, healthy communities strive to cultivate a culture of openhandedness. Rather than focusing on their own needs, preferences, and desires, such parishes are characterized by a spirit of selfless generosity and servanthood. Unlike individuals suffering from the “Stolen Baby Jesus Syndrome,” parishioners who belong to these parishes model the stewardship of the Magi by joyfully “gifting” their time, talent, and financial resources to in promotion of the Gospel.

On December 24, 1953, the television series *Dragnet* aired an episode called “The Big Little Jesus.” In the only story made twice, Sargents Friday and Smith investigate the theft of a Baby Jesus figurine from a church nativity display on Christmas Eve. Unable to solve the crime, the officers reluctantly tell the parish priest that his community’s evening Christmas service will have to be conducted without the statute. Fortunately, the figurine is restored when a little boy arrives with it in a wagon. “I promised Jesus,” the boy confesses to a group of stunned onlookers, “that if I got a wagon for Christmas, He would have the first ride!”

As the Greek Orthodox parish of the Annunciation prepares to liturgically “depart” from its celebration of Christ’s Holy Nativity, let our “leave-taking” resemble that of the Magi, who returned to Egypt “by another way” (Matthew 2:12). Let each of us vow to always give our Lord the “first ride” in our respective wagons of time, talent and resources. Forgetting what came before, let us agree to forge a new and exciting future of selfless generosity and servanthood. Only by honoring the Eternal Newborn Child in this fashion can we avoid being victimized by the “Stolen Baby Jesus Syndrome.”