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Seasoning the Seasons™

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The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary: September 8

On September 8 each year we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There are only three births we celebrate in our Church Year: Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist. The liturgical calendar is fascinating...we celebrate Mary's birth on September 8, exactly nine months to the day after we celebrate her conception by Saint Anne (the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary) on December 8!

The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not a new feast on our calendar, but has been celebrated for centuries. It has its origins in the fifth century and commemorates the anniversary of the dedication of a basilica in Jerusalem which tradition says was built on the site of the home of Saint Anne.

The story of the conception and birth of Mary has been part of the tradition of our Church since the earliest years, and although it is not recounted in the Bible it has a long standing history in the liturgy, music, and art of both the Eastern and Western Church. In the Scriptures we first encounter Mary when the Archangel Gabriel visits her at the Annunciation (see Luke 1:26-28). Nowhere in the Bible do we hear about Mary's early life, nor are her parents, Saints Joachim and Anne, mentioned. Yet each year on July 26 our Church celebrates the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as an obligatory Memorial. If they aren't mentioned in the Bible, how do we even know their names?

Recall that there were numerous writings in the early Church, many, if not most, of which never made it into the official canon of Scripture. But these writings, and the stories they recounted, were well known amongst the early Christians. Most of these stories come to us from the early apocryphal sources, especially the *"Protoevangelium of James."* It is from this document that we learn, for example, the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna (Anne).

According to the *"Protoevangelium of James,"* Joachim was a wealthy man. But when Joachim went to the temple to offer his gifts, as was the custom of his people, he was refused entrance. He was



Nativity of Mary
18th Century Russian Icon

told that since he had no children, he was not worthy to offer his gifts to God. Joachim even researched the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and found out that he was the only one of the righteous men who did not have a child. This greatly disturbed him, and instead of going home to his wife, Anna, he went out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights and fasted, living only on prayer.



Tabernacle of the Visitation:
Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple
Benozzo Gozzoli, 1491
Biblioteca Comunale, Castelfiorentino, Italy

As the story goes, Anna then mourned for both the loss of her husband and for being childless. But because it was a time of celebration in the Jewish faith, Anna cleaned herself up and put on her wedding garments. She then went out into the garden, sat under a tree, and prayed to God to bless her with a child, just as God had blessed Sarah with a son, Isaac. As Anna was lamenting that all of creation except her – even the birds and beasts – were fruitful, an angel appeared to her and told her that God had heard her prayer and that she

would conceive and bear a child. Anna rejoiced and said she would bring her child as an offering to God to minister all the days of his/her life.

Then two angels came to Anna and told her that Joachim was returning. An angel had also appeared to Joachim and told him to go home because his prayer had been answered and his wife would conceive a child. As Joachim was returning with his flocks, Anna was at the gate and when she saw him she ran and threw her arms around his neck.

The story continues that on his first day back, Joachim rested. The next day, he returned to the temple with his offering of gifts, and this time his offering was accepted. He left the temple and went home rejoicing and giving glory to God. After nine months, Anna bore a daughter, whom she named Mary. And that is the story of Mary's conception and birth, as recorded in the "*Protoevangelium of James*."



Tabernacle of the Visitation: Meeting at the Golden Gate
Benozzo Gozzoli, 1491
Biblioteca Comunale, Castelfiorentino, Italy

We can rejoice in the fact that when we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we are uniting ourselves with Christians who have kept this feast for at least fifteen centuries! Like Saints Joachim and Anne, let us rejoice and give glory to God for the birth of Mary.