

*"I can do all things through Christ  
who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13*

# St. Raphael School Journal

Christmas 2024  
Newsletter

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## Kontakion of St. Raphael the Bishop of Brooklyn

You were a guardian and a defender of the Church's teaching: you protected your flock from false doctrines and confirmed them in the true faith. O holy father Raphael, son of Syria and glory of North America, always intercede before the Lord that our souls may be saved.

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Welcome to the Christmas Edition of the SRS Journal! Although this special edition is an annual tradition, this year will be a bit different. Each column member has chosen their own question, unique to them and will share their own beautiful insight on it. On behalf of the SRS Journal, we present to you the 2024 Christmas Edition Newsletter and all of us would like to wish all of you a blessed and joyous Christmas. Merry Christmas! Christ is Born!

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*Kontakion*  
(Tone 3)

Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One, / and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One! / Angels with shepherds glorify Him! / The wise men journey with a star! / Since for our sake the Eternal God was born as a Little Child!

## *The Feast of The Nativity of Our Lord*



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 9:6-15

*Troparion*  
(Tone 4)

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, / has shone to the world the Light of wisdom! / For by it, those who worshiped 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!

### **Note from the Editor**

Dear St. Raphael Journal readers, thank you for checking out our newsletter! It wouldn't be possible without all the amazing support from SRS teachers and staff. If you would like to see more student submissions, please explore the St. Raphael School Journal Website. **To submit names for the prayer list or a student submission, email the Newsletter team here.**

Theodora Ciuca  
Managing Editor & Website Coordinator

*Theodora Ciuca*

Managing Editor Of The Newsletter

## If You Could Visit Anywhere For Christmas, Where Would You Go?

If I could spend Christmas anywhere in the world, I would choose Greece without a doubt. There's something about the country's deeply rooted Orthodox faith that makes Christmas feel extra special. Having the whole country celebrate together in unity makes Christmas absolutely spectacular. In Greece, Christmas is celebrated twice—on December 25th according to the Gregorian calendar and again on January 7th, following the Julian calendar. This means double the festivities and double the joy!

One of the reasons I'd love to be in Greece for Christmas is how deeply Christmas is connected to our faith. Christmas is a celebration of Christ's birth and often times, many people, including myself get lost in the chaos of the holidays and forget the true meaning of Christmas. In between midterms, buying the gifts, preparing for guests, and everything else, it gets really hectic. But to celebrate Christmas with your family, friends, neighbors and everyone around you would be such an experience. Imagine, everyone in your home is gathered at the door on Christmas Eve and you open the door to see everyone walking down the street, lit by Christmas lights, heading to church for the midnight service. It would truly be an the experience of a lifetime.

Food is another huge part of Christmas in Greece, and after hearing all about the delights from my Greek friends who visit yearly for Christmas, it sounds amazing. Greek families come together to share traditional meals that are passed down through generations. One of the most iconic dishes is Christopsomo, a sweet bread decorated with the cross, which is blessed at church before being enjoyed at home. Enjoying this bread alongside other treats like melomakarona, honey-soaked cookies spiced with cinnamon and cloves sounds absolutely delicious and sharing it with family would be even better. These small, delicious moments of food and togetherness would make Christmas feel so cozy and intimate, surrounded by loved ones.

Spending Christmas in Greece would be a dream for me. The combination of church services, festive food, and the warmth of family and community would make the Christmas so special. It's a place where the true spirit of Christmas is celebrated, and where I can see how a culture's traditions can make Christmas feel both timeless and full of heart and unity.

Thank you reading everyone! Merry Christmas! Christ is born!

*Mary Kjendal*

Co-Editor Of The Newsletter, PR Manager

## What Is Something That Makes Christmas Feel Like Christmas?

For every holiday, there are traditions that make it feel like a holiday. Maybe it's the smell of stuffing on Thanksgiving, the blessing of the river on Theophany, the fish meal on the Annunciation, the smash burgers on the Fourth of July – it's the feeling of the holiday! The family or friend traditions make the holiday the special day that it is.

Christmastime is full of these warm and cozy feelings, all these little things that remind me of Christmas all year round. It's full of traditions, scents, and tastes – and some of them are so significant that it doesn't feel like Christmas without them!

My favorite tradition is going to the midnight service, with Festal Orthros and Liturgy for the Nativity, late at night. It feels like a little Pascha – which it should! The Nativity is also known as the Winter Pascha, and the services are modeled after the services of Great and Holy Pascha. The hymns for the Nativity mirror those of Pascha. We fast for 40 days before the Nativity, as we do before Pascha. He was born, in the flesh as a man, in order that He could die and rise from the dead. There is so much beautiful mirror imagery in the services (and order of services), hymns, and iconography.

Another Christmas something (a Christmas taste) is a Swedish tea roll – which might not sound like Christmas to you, but – that's the whole point of your Christmas traditions! They can be anything – but if it's yours, if you see it or smell it or hear it in May or August or anytime, it'll remind you of Christmas. Every Christmas, we have a Swedish tea roll and our chocolate from our stockings for breakfast. Oh, and chocolate covered bacon. No questions asked.

The smell of a pine tree, the Orthros canon of the Nativity, the prefestal kontakion in Liturgy every morning, the Julenissen around the house, the popovers baking in the oven... Christmas!

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

*Natasha Richart*

Column Writer (Once Upon A Time)

## When Is The Right Time To Set Up For Christmas

As the holidays close in with a blur of cold weather, hot cocoa, and evening fires, the inevitable question arises. When is the right time to set up your Christmas decorations? Of course, the answer differs on whether you are on New or Old Calendar (I am on Old Calendar). Some people start hanging up wreaths on October 1, others on December 20. It depends on your family, but here, I will be talking about when is the proper time to start hanging up your wreaths and ornaments.

First, there is a difference between putting a wreath up, and setting up your Christmas tree. One can go before the other, and often does. I think that minor external decorations, such as a wreath that hangs on the outside of your door should go up sometime in late November, whether or not you are New or Old Calendar, after Thanksgiving. Next comes lights on your house, which should go up in early December if you are New Calendar, and mid-December if you are Old Calendar. Essentially, about a month in advance. This brings in the Christmas spirit, the general joy and bustle of festivities.

Next comes the internal decorations. This means stockings, lights, and your Christmas tree if you have it. These should come in early to mid-December for New Calendar, and mid-December for Old Calendar. The last thing should be your tree, as this is the last big touch that truly lets Christmas sink in.

Your decorations should be up when Advent starts. By then, you're counting down, and your decorations should show it.

Of course, I started listening to Christmas music in November, and started singing Jingle Bells in October. I got in the Christmas spirit a bit early. However, there is so much joy that comes with Christmas, I just couldn't wait.

*Mary Reese*

Column Writer (Poetry Corner)

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## What Is Your Favorite Christmas Song?

My favorite Christmas song is definitely "O Holy Night." I've loved this song ever since I was a little kid. I think it's because it's such a powerful and beautiful piece, with captivating lyrics. Whenever I hear the climax, it sends a thrill through me and makes me feel all the *Christmassy* vibes. The lyrics carry so much meaning, and the words are so impactful that you can truly feel the grace radiating from the music. I believe music is incredibly powerful, and when used the right way, it can have an amazing effect on people. I really appreciate this song because it's full of beauty, love, power, and grace, and it genuinely makes you feel the spirit of Christmas.

*Sophia Iheorge*

Column Writer (Theosis Through The Arts)

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What special traditions does the Romanian Orthodox church have for Christmas?

Romania's culture is rich with Christmas traditions, and it is probably the most anticipated holiday of the year for us Romanians. With its many and beautiful carols that tell us of Christ's birth, the delicious traditional foods that make one's mouth water, the messiness of pigs being butchered, friends and family getting together, and the three days of Christmas services, I can confirm that it is the most wonderful thing.

Starting with the forty day fasting period, everyone that is able to keeps a strict fast. It may be hard, but with all the "fish days" (as we lovingly call them) during the weekends and more important feast days, it helps one pull through quite easily. Then, usually in the weekend or a few weeks before Christmas, Romanian families butcher a pig (I still don't really know why then). With the fresh meat, we prepare sausages, the Romanian bacon called slanina, pork steak, and soups. In the house, the women make sarmale, a traditional cabbage roll with rice and meat, and cozonac, the traditional sweet walnut bread that some people like with Turkish delight (I personally don't).

Christmas eve is probably my favorite part. Some people put up their tree then, and some on St Nicholas day depending when they have time. In Romania everyone goes caroling, and many choirs have concerts at their churches. The Romanians here in America also carol their friends and family, and the church choirs are always heard practicing carols weeks before Christmas. Romanian Christmas carols are very beautiful, because they all tell us of Christ's birth. There are two main genres, Byzantine chant style and traditional carols. I prefer the Byzantine style as they sound more "churchy"; the traditional carols are sometimes accompanied by instruments. I highly recommend to you all to look up some Romanian carols on youtube, and if it's possible see if they have cc in english. (The lyrics are literally so beautiful trust me!)

Christmas morning brings presents from Mos Craciun (literal translation: Grandfather Christmas). After hurriedly opening the presents, everyone goes to liturgy for the service (we don't have a midnight service on Christmas Eve). The church is full with families dressed in traditional clothing, and after liturgy, where everyone partakes of Holy Communion, there is an agape meal that all the families contribute to. The atmosphere is really happy and cozy, with children excitedly telling each other what they got for Christmas, mothers complimenting each other on their food, and everyone caroling together.

I hope you all have a very blessed Christmas, with much happiness and love!  
Christ is born!

*Sevastiane Archer*

Column Writer (Featured Essay)

## What Are Some Of Your Favorite Christmas Traditions?

One of my favorite things after celebrating the new calendar Christmas is to go to one of my favorite monasteries for the old calendar Christmas. On Christmas Eve, we have a vigil, then we process to trapeza, where we have the most delicious food. (It tastes especially good after fasting for so long.) After we eat, we have some time to rest, but then all the families around the monastery come back and we sing Christmas carols and munch on treats. It is so nice to have community with one another, especially on Christmas. We also love to exchange cards.

Another one of my favorite Christmas traditions is making gingerbread with my Godmother and her children. Every year before Christmas, I go over to my godmother's house and make gingerbread houses with her five, three, and one-year-old. We buy a kit from the store, but it is so fun to decorate with them and be a part of it. It is a memory I will treasure forever; I love helping them be a part of a fun Christmas tradition. I love to decorate with an sophisticated theme, but with them being so young, it can be fun to let loose and do whatever I want, knowing they won't care.

I look forward to This simple but fun tradition with my Godfamily every year, and I am so grateful to do this with them. This year, we have a new baby too!

These are some of my favorite things to look forward to during Christmas!



*Elizaveta Durka*

Column Writer (Reflection Of The Month)

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## What Is Your Favorite Christmas Movie And Why?

*My favorite Christmas movie is Roy Del Ruth's 1947 film, It Happened on 5th Avenue, starring Victor Moore, Anne Harding, Don DeFore, Charles Ruggles, and Gale Storm. This Christmas classic tells the story of Aloysius T. McKeever, a resourceful homeless man who takes up residence in a wealthy man's mansion while the owner winters in the South.*

*McKeever's generosity knows no bounds as he invites other homeless individuals, including war veteran Jim Bullock and runaway heiress Trudy O'Connor, to join him in this luxurious and bougie hideaway. The film is a delightful mix of comedy and romance, with McKeever's comical antics, the budding romance between Trudy and Jim, and the humorous Tchaikovsky scene towards the end which I never fail to laugh at!*

# Student Submission

## On The Incarnation Of Christ

Elizabetha Durka

First of all, what do we mean when we say Christ is incarnate? Well, incarnation is the act of clothing with flesh, or the state of being so clothed; the act of taking, or being manifested in, a human body and nature. Christ was incarnate by becoming fully God and fully Man through his birth by the most Holy Theotokos. The central affirmation of the Orthodox Christian Faith and the very essence of its gospel and life is that the Word of God became man as Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel and the Lord and Savior of the world. Jesus of Nazareth is the divine Word of God in human form. He is the personal Word of God Who was “in the beginning with God,” the Word “by whom all things were made” (Jn 1.2).

He is the uncreated Word of God according to Whose image all men are created. He is the Word of God Who came to the patriarchs and prophets and Who is incarnate in the Bible in scriptural form. He is the Word of God Who died on the cross and is risen from the dead. He is the Head of the Church which is His Body, and the King of the Kingdom of God. He is the Word of God with Whom and through Whom the Holy Spirit comes to the world. This is how Christ was incarnate. At the feast of Holy Nativity, we sing in the Orthros service

*“Let us go before O nations, and celebrate the Nativity of Christ. And lifting our minds to Bethlehem, let us ascend with our consciences. And behold the great mystery that is in the cave, for Eden hath verily been opened by the coming forth of God from the Spotless Virgin—perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity. Wherefore let us shout forth: Holy God Eternal father, Holy Mighty the incarnate Son, Holy Immortal One, the Comforting Spirit, Holy Trinity glory to thee.”*

This hymn draws attention to the great mystery of God becoming human through the Holy Virgin. It highlights the dual nature of Christ—fully God and fully man—born from the most Holy Virgin who is perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity.

# Meet the Newsletter Team!

Theodora Ciuca



Managing Editor

*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."  
- Philippians 4:13*

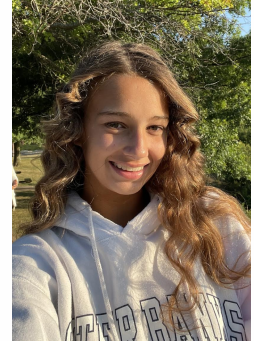
Mary Kjendal



Co- Managing Editor

*"A rose does not speak, but its fragrance spreads far in silence."  
- St. Theophan the Recluse*

Natasha Richart



Column Writer

*"All grown-ups were once children...but only few of them remember it."  
- The Little Prince*

Mary Reese



Column Writer

*Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.  
~Dr Seuss*

Sevastiane Archer



Column Writer

*"Prayer is the place of refuge for every worry, a foundation of cheerfulness, a source of constant happiness, a protection against sadness."  
-St. John Chrysostom*

Sophia Gheorghe



Column Writer

*"It isn't what we say or think that defines us, but what we do."  
- Jane Austen*

Elizaveta Durka



Column Writer

*"Let us not then be anxious about the praise of men, nor seek to display our good deeds before others, but let us bury them in the secret place of our hearts, and let God alone see them."*