

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

St. Raphael School Newsletter

Christmas 2025



Kontakion of St. Raphael
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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Hello, dear readers! As we enter the joyful Christmas season, filled with warm lights, cherished traditions, and hearts full of gratitude, we're delighted to bring you the December edition of the Newsletter. This time of year invites us to slow down, reflect on our blessings, and embrace the hope and wonder that our Lord and Savior's birth brings.

We're also happy to announce that the results of our Story contest are included in this edition! Be sure to check inside to see the winner.

As we celebrate Christmas and look toward a new year, may this season fill your home with peace, joy, and love. Whether you're enjoying time with family, participating in holiday activities, or simply cozying up with a warm drink, we hope this December is meaningful and bright for everyone. Blessed Nativity, everyone!

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St. Raphael School Newsletter

Prayer List

Living

Fr. Peter
Eleousa
Phyllis
Lynn
Joseph
Linda
Andrew

Departed

Barbara
Joy
Suzan
Elliot
Timothy
Fr. Porphyrios
Fr. Abraham
Anna
Zane

"Today He who is, is born; and He who is becomes what He was not."
-St. John Chrysostom

The Nativity of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ



Troparion – Tone 4

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, / has shone to the world the Light of knowledge; / for by it, those who worshipped the stars / were taught by a star to adore You, / the Sun of Righteousness,¹ / and to know You, the Dayspring,² from on High. / O Lord, glory to You!

Feasts of the Month

December 4

Barbara the Great
Martyr

December 9

The Conception by
St. Anna of the Most
Holy Theotokos

December 12

Spyridon the
Wonderworker of
Trymithous

December 25

The Nativity of Our
Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ

December 26

Synaxis of the Holy
Theotokos

December 29

14,000 infants (Holy
Innocents) slain by
Herod in Bethlehem

Note from the Editor

Dear St. Raphael Journal readers, thank you for taking the time to read our newsletter! This wouldn't be possible without the incredible support of the SRS teachers and staff. To see more student submissions, be sure to visit the St. Raphael School Journal Website. To submit names for the prayer list or a student submission, email the Newsletter team at raphaelschooljournal@gmail.com

Check out our
website [here](#)

Theodora Ciuca
Managing Editor & Website Coordinator

Contest Announcement

1st Place Story Contest Submission

Winner: Elizaveta Durka

That week back in July at Camp St. Mary of Egypt felt different. I had been Orthodox since infancy, yet something new stirred inside me. During the Fire On Father sessions, the priests spoke sternly, yet with loving voices, about being in the world, not of the world—how we must cling to holy things to stay anchored. They said it was like holding onto a lifeline: the sign of the cross, the prayer rope slipping through your fingers, Confession, the lives of the saints whispering their strength into your heart. The priests urged us to embrace these practices daily, reminding us that they root our souls firmly amid life's storms and distractions. I made the sign of the cross, feeling new-found joy and love in my heart. With each prayer upon my prayer rope, I gained new understanding – it was more than a tool – it was a shield, a way to guard the soul and focus the mind. The priests spoke about Confession. It struck me how Confession, too, was a shield – not just protection but a healing embrace. The priests' words which echoed the Holy Elders sat deep in my heart: Sin is loneliness and a disease. Yet, we are never truly alone when we open our souls to God and others. Listening to the teachings of the saints, the elders, and the wonderful priests, I realized faith isn't just inherited; it is lived, breathed, and renewed every day. I see how attaching ourselves to holy practices of Orthodoxy keeps us safe from the world's noise and temptations. That summer, my Orthodox faith wasn't just a name or tradition – it became my refuge, my guide, my strength. How fitting, for the theme for the camp this year was that Christ is our Shield, our Strength, and our Refuge.

Featured Essay

My Christmas

By Sevastiane Archer

Christmas is truly (one of) the most wonderful times of the year. There are so many presents being given and secular advertisements out there, and sometimes it is hard to still hold on to the true meaning of Christmas. Christ's birth is full of joy and many beautiful Christmas hymns. On Christmas (or on Christmas Eve) we have a church service full of the beautiful Nativity hymns and we get to see what Christmas is truly about. One of my favorite things to do is to go to a monastery for Christmas. There is such joy there and it is very peaceful.

On Christmas Eve we go into the church, which is only lit up with candles. The smell of incense is strong and everyone is waiting in anticipation for the service to start. Once the service starts the chanting is majestic and we are in the church for four hours until the feast. Once the service is done we all go into the trapeza to feast together, breaking the fast. Another one of my favorite things at Christmas time is the movies and songs. I get to decorate my room while listening to Christmas music, and afterward I watch the first Christmas movie of the year. I decorate my room with lights, Christmas candles, and a Christmas blanket. Of course, we also have Christmas parties that I love.

Christmas day is one of my favorite days of the year. We wake up early on Christmas, and, if we had church the night before instead of in the morning, my brother and my dad will go surfing. I usually read, and when they get back we open presents. Then my mom and I make a wonderful Christmas breakfast; we have cinnamon rolls, eggs, sausage, and bacon. We wait for a little bit and go over to my grandmother's house. There we also help her cook our Christmas dinner, I get to see my cousins who I only see twice a year, and I play the grand piano in the sitting room. Then we give our grandmother and cousins our gifts and have our dinner. Our dinner usually consists of ham and mashed potatoes.

I love Christmas and love how it's a day my family and I can all see each other. Where I live there is no snow, but it's a great Christmas with palm trees and the beach.

Once Upon A Time

Why Watching Shallow, Hallmark-Adjacent Christmas Movie Has Become a Favorite Christmas Tradition

By Natasha Richart

Christmas movies are a central part of many households in the holiday season. Classics such as the 2000 *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Santa Claus*, *Home Alone*, and maybe even *Die Hard* play on screens as families sip hot cocoa and crunch on buttered popcorn.

However, when my sister, cousin and I get together for our hangouts and sleepovers over Christmas break, we automatically mix up some sape (seltzer+grape juice) and turn on *Christmas Prince*. It is a series of three movies on Netflix that follow a journalist in NYC as she is sent to the fictional country of Aldovia to write a story on the supposed flighty, play-boy prince, and surprise surprise, they fall in love. We have watched it every year since 2022 and it has become a Christmas tradition of its own. Yes, it is a rom-com and yes, there is kissing. Yes, it is a cheesy Christmas movie that would be a Hallmark flick if Netflix hadn't gotten the idea first. However, it is now a tradition for me and my little close friend group and we watch it every year without fail, laughing at the funny parts, covering our eyes during the kissing scenes and wishing we could marry a European prince (well, most of us, my sister isn't quite as romantically minded as my cousin and I).

In short, *Christmas Prince* has become a tradition for me not because I particularly think it is an ingenious concept or Oscar-worthy. It is because it is something that my tiny friend group likes to do and the story of a nobody in NYC finds the opportunity of a lifetime and has a happy-ever after. It's light hearted, it's fun, it's Christmasy, it carries no emotional baggage and is something that we can watch when we're ready to enjoy the holidays and put stress on the back burner.

Advertisement

Publish your work!

Send us your
poetry, artwork,
photography,
creative writing,
and essays to be
published in
upcoming issues
of our newsletter!

Email us at:
raphaelschooljournal@gmail.com

*Merry
Christmas*



Stump the Priest

Do you have a
question for a priest,
but you're not sure
who to ask? Email us
your question, and it
will be answered by a
priest; the question
and answer will be
published in the next
newsletter.

Church on Christmas

By Mary Kjendal

It's late at night, I'm shivering, but I get out of bed;
I rush to brush my hair and put a headscarf on my head.

I can hardly wait until the ringing of the bells,
The sound of chanting from the choir as the music swells.

The church is full of joyful faces, lit with festal light,
Nobody is sorrowing on this most blessed night.
"Christ is born!" the people shout, and everyone draws near;
We share the kiss of peace and love with all the people here.

The entire church is chanting, "Thy Nativity, O Christ;"
Born a man, God came down, so He'd be sacrificed.
We sing the Christmas canon, "Give ye glory, all the earth!"
And every one rejoices at the humble Child's birth.

Liturgy is finishing, and now we all process –
The Christmas feast is set, waiting for the priest to bless.
The children are all laughing, not a one of them is spent;
They feast, now at the end of the six-week Christmas Lent.

In rejoicing and with singing, the early hours pass;
The eyes of sleepy children slowly drop at last.
Families leave, and all are snug, back in their own warm beds
Remembr'nces of God's glory are now dancing in their heads.

Short Story Corner

The Three Kings

By Seraphim Weaver

.....

“We three kings of orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star...”

“Balthazar! Melchior! It’s here, It’s here!” Caspar yelled, as he ran across the temple in search of the two other astrologers. When he finally found them, he was panting and bending over, trying to catch his breath. “Caspar, whatever is the matter?” Melchior asked. Several times, Caspar tried to tell them but couldn’t for lack of breath. “Speak, boy! What is it?” inquired Balthazar. When Caspar finally regained his breath, he blurted out, “The star, the star, it’s finally here!” “THE star? You mean the one we’ve been waiting for?” Melchior said. Caspar nodded enthusiastically. Then Balthazar said, “We have much to prepare if we are to follow that star to the king the prophecy speaks of; we must make arrangements.” The next few days flew by as the magi made all the preparations. They bought frankincense, myrrh, and gold. Finally, when it was time to set off, Melchior and Balthazar mounted their camels. “I’m coming too, right?” asked Caspar, who looked concerned. “Of course not!” said Balthazar.

“You’re far too young to make the journey,” added Melchior. “Please?” asked Caspar. “Oh alright, but you must be quiet while we ride,” said Melchior. “I won’t speak a word!” he said excitedly. They rode for a long time, over field and fountain, moor and mountain; and it was about a year and a half of traveling later that they arrived at the palace of king Herod, to congratulate him on the birth of a son. King Herod looked puzzled at this, and when they asked to see the baby, he looked all the more puzzled. When he had told them a son had not been born to him, they set out again and followed the star once more. Another half of a year went by, when they came to a small house. They went up to the door and knocked. The door was answered by a man with grey hair, and he told them to come in. When they went in, they saw a mother holding a child, and said amongst themselves, “Surely, he must be more than a king! For, look, his face shines as the sun! He must be the Christ the Israelites prophesied would come!” And they knelt and presented their gifts to him: frankincense, myrrh, and gold, and said, “Christ is born, glorify him!”

“Thy nativity O Christ our God, hath shown forth the light of reason upon the world,
For therein those who worshipped the stars, have been taught by a star to worship Thee, the Sun of
righteousness, and to know Thee the dayspring from on high, O Lord glory to Thee!”

- Troparia of the Nativity of Christ.

Theosis Through The Arts

A New Way of Celebrating Christmas

By Iván Stepanowich

Christ is in our midst! As we enter this season of fasting, I wanted to reflect on how Nativity has changed for my family and I. When we lived in Canada, Christmas was a very important season. At that time, we did not understand its spiritual significance. Instead, we took it as an opportunity to exchange gifts with one another and spend time with family and friends. After filling our bellies with a feast we went to bed knowing that Santa was on his way that very night. When we awoke, we rushed to see what gifts and candies he had given us.

But then something unexpected happened, something that changed everything: we moved to South America, specifically Ecuador! When we arrived it was already late November, Christmas was right around the corner. For the first time in my life, I had a Christmas without snow.

Our tree was a little mango sapling, with a few styrofoam ornaments we bought at a local store. Little did I know, this was only the beginning of everything that would change in the following years. I already knew the truth about Santa Claus before moving to Ecuador but it was a year later until my siblings found out. While my brother was just as upset as I was, my sister, well, she couldn't have cared less. With Santa out of the picture, I thought, surely nothing else could change.

When we moved, our lives were completely uprooted. We sold many of our possessions and we had to adapt to a completely new culture. Oh, and we had to learn Spanish—still working on that. All of this change led to my parents seeking truth, finding Christ, and eventually us becoming Orthodox Christians. From there, the transformation only continued, not only reshaping Nativity, but also our lives. We began to rethink how we would celebrate Christmas. Eventually we stopped buying ornaments, instead making them ourselves. Then we started fasting in December; no more chocolate advent calendars. I thought, now, surely nothing else could change.

Then we moved Christmas to January.

It has been a slow and hard journey. Nativity is only one of the many things that have changed in our lives since we moved to Ecuador and found Christ. And each and everyone of them has taken a lot of effort and time to get used to. It was not easy having to tell our friends that we are vegan on Christmas day, or having warm weather in December. Wait, no, that I am totally ok with.

Praise God, because Nativity was never meant to be as it is in secular society, self-centred and worldly. Going through this journey, together as a family, has taught me that it is about being humble and kind. It is a chance to increase our prayer, and remember what wonders God works in His love for us.

“Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, / has shone to the world the Light of knowledge; / for by it, those who worshipped the stars / were taught by a star to adore Thee, / the Sun of Righteousness, / and to know Thee, the Dayspring from on High. / O Lord, glory to Thee!”

Troparion for the Nativity of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Blessed Nativity to you all!

Reflection of the Month

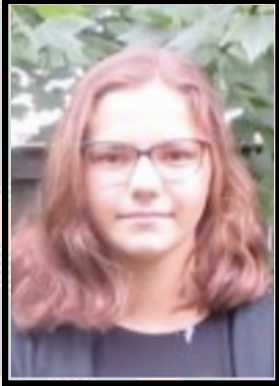
My Favorite Christmas Things

By Elizaveta Durka

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Christ is Born! Glorify Him! There are many wonderful and beautiful traditions that I cherish about Christmas: chanting and singing during the festal services of the Feast of the Nativity; our parish's Holy Supper and caroling; and sending Christmas cards to friends and family near and far, filled with greetings, well wishes, and the triumphant proclamation—CHRIST IS BORN! GLORIFY HIM! The services of the Nativity are radiant with joy, echoing the glory of the Feast of Feasts — Pascha. Indeed, the Nativity is often called the Winter Pascha, for its services mirror those of Great and Holy Pascha. Just as we fast for forty days before Pascha, so too we prepare with forty days of fasting before the Nativity. Christ was born in the flesh so that He might die and rise again, granting us eternal life. The services, hymns, and iconography of the Nativity are rich with theology and dogma, teaching us the mysteries of our faith. One of the blessings of chanting is that through the hymns, I learn so much about the depth of the Orthodox Faith. Aside from the troparion of the Nativity, one of my favorite hymns proclaims: "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." Another tradition I treasure is our parish's Holy Supper and caroling. On the Eve of the Nativity, after the Vespereal Divine Liturgy, we gather for a special fasting meal called the Holy Supper. It begins in darkness, with a candle placed in bread to symbolize Christ as the Light of the world. The Nativity Troparion is sung, and the Christ Child is placed in the manger. The meal has twelve Lenten dishes, representing the Twelve Apostles. Garlic and honey are tasted to remind us of life's bitterness and Christ's sweetness. The table is set with hay, bread, and an extra place for Christ or a guest, recalling the manger and the openness of the Holy Family. A white cloth covers the table, symbolizing the swaddling clothes of the infant Christ, and an icon of the Nativity is placed at the center. A large loaf of bread rests in the middle, with a candle lit inside it, showing Christ as the Bread of Life and the Light of the world. The room itself becomes a symbol of the Cave and Manger of Bethlehem. Lights are dimmed, and the parish prepares to welcome Christ into their hearts and homes. The meal begins with the singing of the Nativity Troparion and the lighting of the candle. The bread is broken by Father Andrew and shared with everyone, recalling Christ at the Last Supper. The foods range from bitter to sweet, reminding us of life before Christ and the joy of life in Him. During the twelve days of Christmas, the children's choir visits nursing homes, singing carols and Nativity hymns, bringing the joy and love of Christ's birth to those in need. Finally, one of my favorite traditions is sending Christmas cards to family and friends across the country. Each card radiates with the proclamation: Christ is Born! Glorify Him! It fills me with joy to share even a small part of the deep, burning love for Christ I feel that is truly a blessing to – expressed in words and greetings.

Meet the Newsletter Team!

Theodora Ciuca



Managing Editor

*"I can do all things through
Christ Who strengthens me."*

-Philippians 4:13

Mary Kjendal

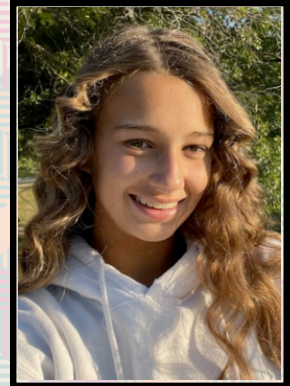


Co-Managing Editor

*"A rose does not speak, but its
fragrance travels 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

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

Elizaveta Durka



Column Writer

*"Write me of hope and love,
and hearts that endure."*

-Emily Dickinson

Iván Stepanowich

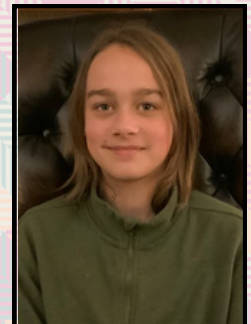


Column Writer

*"All that is gold does not
glitter, Not all those who
wander are lost;"*

-J.R.R. Tolkien

Seraphim Weaver



Column Writer

*"Some believe that it is only
great power that can hold
evil in check. But that is not
what I have found. I've found
it is the small things,
everyday deeds of ordinary
folk that keeps the darkness
at bay. Small acts of kindness
and love."*

-Gandalf the Grey