

PASTORAL LETTER 2016

The Birth of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ

"And I will make my home among them; and live with them; 'I will be their God and they shall be my people'."

(2 Cor. 6:16; Lev. 26:11-19)

Beloved Spiritual Children in Christ:

Reverend Clergy, Venerable Monastics and Devout Faithful of our God-protected Episcopate:

Dearly Beloved,

Once again, after a long year, we are today celebrating the birth of the Sun of Righteousness, Jesus Christ, the Light of the world! The burden of the weeks and months, the cares and decisions made, are laid aside on this great day of joy and feasting for the gladness in our hearts on the celebration of the birth of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. In reflecting on his holy feast day, our spirits are renewed with the strength and courage which comes from eternal hope.

Today, if we listen with our hearts, we can hear the beat of the angels' wings as they hover over the manger of the newborn Christ child and the mighty rush of their flight as they descend to the shepherds to announce the great tidings: The Christ is born! What joy was in the heart of the ever-virgin Mary, of Joseph the Protector, of the shepherds, magi. Even the beasts of the field and the cave and mountains rejoiced!

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, all of creation, nature and man, has striven to find its true and proper relationship with its creator. Man, in his search but in his pride fell farther and farther from heaven, growing more and more distant from the Almighty; and God saw that his image and likeness was darkened by sin and had become overwrought with despair.

"What was God to do in the face of this dehumanized mankind, this universal hiding of the knowledge of himself by the wiles of the evil spirits?" asks St. Athanasius the Great. "What else could he possibly do, being God, but renew his image in mankind so that through it man might once more come to know him?"

God had sent prophets and even angels to call man back to him, but it was necessary for the Creator himself to stoop to earth to lift man to heaven. *"What wonderful progress..."* exclaims St. John Chrysostom. *"He first sends angels to men, then leads the men to heavenly things. A heaven is made on earth, since heaven must take to itself the things of the earth."* Jacob the Patriarch cried out: *"He is coming, and the people will gather around him."*

The coming of the Savior was to wipe off the dust from the image of God in man and to restore him to his rightful place as heir of his Father's kingdom. St. Athanasius also tells us that, *"The Word of God comes in his own person, because it was he alone, the image of the Father, who could recreate man after the Image,"* quoting the words of our Lord: *"I came to seek and save that which was lost."* It was therefore necessary for God himself to come to us, announces St. Leo the Great, *"For unless he were true God, he could bring us no aid; and were he not true man, he could offer us no example."*

The reason, therefore, for which Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, explains St. John Chrysostom is: *"...that coming among us, he may teach us; and teaching us, lead us by the hand to the things that men cannot see. For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so he has deigned to show himself in bodily presence that he may remove all doubt."*

In teaching us, Christ has opened our minds to the Scriptures and to the prophets, indeed, as David said: *"He shall come down welcome as a rain on thirsty soil!"* His birth is of cosmic importance. It has value not only for me personally, not merely for my family and nation but for the universe of which he is the Creator. Indeed he is welcome!

Coming to know him, we are called to worship him. *"For if Christ is God, as indeed he is, but took not human nature upon him, we are strangers to salvation. Let us then worship him as God,"* says St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *"but believe that he also was made man."*

Jesus the Savior, Christ the Anointed One, came as *"bread down from heaven that he might feed the hungry,"* invites St. Cyril; and men of every age have hungered and thirsted for the truth of his place in creation; and today's celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace reminds the world that, indeed, man is the son of the King who calls all to eternal inheritance.

Do we rejoice today in his birth? Yes! We do! *"Acknowledge, O Christian, that dignity which is yours!"* exhorts St. Leo. Dignity, yes! For we are also the *"temples of the Holy Spirit"* (1 Cor. 6:19) in whom God dwells and with Whom he walks, calling each of us by name. Thus, we are never alone, not even in the darkest hour; not when satanic hands pull down our holiest shrines and churches. *"God is with us! Understand o nation, and submit yourself, for God is with us!"* (Isaiah).

Wherever there is a true believer, there is the Church, and there is the temple of God. The steadfast worshipper holds fast to the cradle of the Christ Child and sings out with St. John Chrysostom: *"I rejoice bearing in my arms the cradle of Christ. For this is all my hope, and this is my life, this is my salvation, this is my instrument of song, the harp of my soul!"*

At the birth of Christ, the angels cried out: *"Glory to God in the highest heavens and on earth peace to men who enjoy his favor!"* (Lk. 2:14). *"This peace was made through Christ Himself for He reconciled us with the Father and to God,"* St. Cyril exclaims. *"In persecution and in sorrow, in good times and in rejoicing, the peace of God knows no bounds"* (Is. 9:7). Thus, today, our own joy knows no bounds; and we rush forward to welcome the new babe Christ into our world, for he brings reconciliation and peace to all. He is welcome! Let us welcome him, for He is our God, and we His people.

For today, *"to us a child is born, unto us a son is given..."* (Is. 9:5); the rain has come onto our thirsty land, the sweet-smelling fragrance covered the earth, the gentle and protecting cloud come into our midst, the pillar of fire to lead us out of darkness into brilliant light, and extends his infant hand to us preparing us for what is yet to come, for the promise yet to be fulfilled. *"For when Christ shall appear, who is your life, then you also shall appear with him in glory!"* (Col. 3:3-4).

Christ is born! Glorify him!



+NATHANIEL

By the grace of God and the will of the people, Archbishop of Detroit
and The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America
of the Orthodox Church in America