

PASTORAL LETTER 2017

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!

“O Christ our God, You have become mediator between God and man; for through you, O Master, we have access from the darkness of ignorance to your Father, the Author of light.”

Irmos of Canticle 5, Matins of the Forefeast of the Nativity

Beloved Spiritual Children in Christ:

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

*“May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace,
and from us, hierarchal blessings!”*

Dearly Beloved,

Once again, our good God has bestowed on us this gift of celebrating the birth of His only-begotten Son, our Lord and God and Savior Jesus the Christ. We have completed the forty-day fast, having meditated on the meaning of the holiday through the Gospel readings of previous Sundays. Throughout our lives, we become familiar with certain songs and activities centered on this holiday. It may be a tradition to visit relatives and friends, our God-parents, to exchange gifts and special foods. Even so, it is of great spiritual benefit for us on this day to further reflect on the great importance this event has on our lives, on the life of the world, on human history. These few words are offered to you as a reflection on the true meaning of this unique event, that is: God Himself coming to dwell among us so as to prepare us to dwell with Him.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us that God is the Creator of all that is, and that He is the Father of all humanity which He created and made in His image and likeness (Gen.1-2); and *“God saw everything He had made, and indeed, it was very good”* (Gen. 1:31), *“...then God formed man out of the dust from the ground, and breathed in his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul”* (Gen. 2:7).

Saint Justin Martyr (100-165) reminds us that: *“[Men] were made like God, free from suffering and death, provided that they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His son...all men are deemed worthy of becoming ‘gods,’ and of having power to become sons of the Highest.”*

We are celebrating the coming in human history of the incarnation or taking on of our human flesh by Christ the Word of the Father, who *“for us men came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary for our salvation.”* (Creed)

We are celebrating the unique event that God Himself took on the very humanity He created.

The Word of God, Jesus, takes on our human nature, so that He will communicate with us, enlighten us with the divine light which lifts us from the darkness of ignorance about God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ becomes for all humanity for all ages, the one and only mediator between the Father and us.

Saint Athanasius in his great work, **The Incarnation**, reminds us: *“...the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things that are, owe their being to His will and power, and that it is through Him that the good Father gives order to creation, that by Him all things are moved, and through Him that they receive their being”* (Chapter 1). In reflecting on the Book of Genesis,

it is necessary to remind ourselves that Jesus existed from all eternity, and that creation came to be through Him.

But how did God, whom we cannot see or touch, come to take on our fallen human nature and be seen and heard? (I Peter 1:8). And why? Saint Luke, in his Gospel, tells us that an angel of God, Gabriel, was sent to a young woman, a virgin, by the name of Mary, who by her trust and willingness to serve God would bear His son; and, according to the directive of the angel, she would give him the name, Jesus. His Hebrew name is Yeshua, meaning Savior; this is the “Why” He took on our broken and fallen nature: to save humanity from death and extinction. The Holy Spirit, Creator with the Father and the Word, who brought about the creation of humanity, over-shadowed the willing Virgin Mary, and Jesus became incarnate, taking flesh of her, born in Bethlehem.

Saint John Chrysostom, in his Homily for Christmas morning, explains for us the virgin birth of Christ: *“It was fitting that the Giver of all holiness should enter this world by a pure and holy birth. For He it is that of old formed Adam from the virgin earth, and from Adam, without help of woman, formed woman. For as without woman, Adam produced woman, so did the Virgin without man, this day bring forth a man.”*

Let us listen to the reflections of Saint John of Kronstadt about this feast:

“He [Christ] has come upon earth, He Who in the beginning created us from earth and breathed His Divine breath into us;

He has come Who gives to all life, and breath, and all things’ (Acts 17:25);

He has come, He Who by a single word called all things visible and invisible from non-existence into existence, Who by a word called into being birds, fishes, quadrupeds, insects, and all creatures, existing under His almighty providence and care;

He has come, He Whom the innumerable hosts of Angels continually praise in joy. And in what humility has He come! He is born of a poor Virgin, in a cave, wrapped in poor swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger.” (My Life in Christ)

Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, came from the eternal kingdom to earth, to mankind, to us, in order to walk with us, to lead us, to bring us into the eternal kingdom, escorting us out of the darkness of ignorance about the very God who out of love created all that is, into the presence of the Father of all light. The Fathers of the Church speak about the great humility of God in taking on our limited and mortal nature so as to lift us to the divine. This is the meaning this holiday has in our lives, in the life of the world: we are called and invited to become in likeness as God is by nature.

Saint Athanasius says: *“For the Son of God became man, so that we might become God”*; and

“When God revealed himself, he united himself with our mortal nature in order to deify humanity through this close relation with deity” (On the Incarnation). Other Fathers state likewise. Saint Irenaeus (c. 130-200) says it this way: *“The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, becomes what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”* And Saint Clement of Alexandria (150-215) also says: *“The Word of God became man, that you may learn from man, how man may become God.”*

Thus, the celebration is for us a reminder that we are called to be sons of God through His son, Jesus. This is called *theosis*, as Saint Maximus the Confessor explains to us: *“In theosis, man (the image of God) becomes likened to God; he rejoices in all the plenitude that does not belong to him by nature, because the grace of the Spirit triumphs within him, and because God acts in him.”*

A further explanation from Saint Gregory of Nyssa is instructive: *“... God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He has come on earth, while being whole in heaven; and while complete in heaven, He is without diminution on earth. Though He was*

God, He became Man; not denying Himself to be God. Though being the impassable Word, He became flesh; that He might dwell among us, he became flesh. He did not become God; He was God. Wherefore, He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger so that He, by Whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from His Virgin Mother" [Catechetical Oration].

Saint Athanasius continues: *"In His humbleness, the Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach, the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it" [On the Incarnation].*

This "boundless humility" is praised by Saint John of Kronstadt:

"Riches, honors, glory of this world! Fall down, fall down in humility, tearful devotion, and deep gratitude before the Savior of men, and share your riches with the poor and needy.

'Do not pride yourselves on your visionary, fleeting distinctions, for true distinction can only be found in virtue.

Glory of this world! Learn here, before the manger, your vanity. Thus, let us all humble ourselves; let us all fall down in the dust before the boundless humility and exhaustion of the Sovereign of all, of God, Who has come to heal our infirmities, to save us from pride, vanity, corruption, and every sinful impurity" [My Life in Christ].

Thus, Jesus is also the Physician of our bodies and our souls, to heal but finally to restore us to peace with our Father in heaven. This is what salvation means: to be taken from darkness of the fleeting importance we give ourselves into the unending existence with the Creator of all that is.

Let us rejoice in this event, and embrace the invitation of Saint John of Kronstadt:

"What, then, O, brethren, is required of us in order that we might avail ourselves of all the grace brought unto us from on high by the coming to earth of the Son of God?

What is necessary, first of all, is faith in the Son of God, in the Gospel as salvation - bestowing heavenly teaching; a true repentance of sins and the correction of life and of heart; communion in prayer and in the mysteries; the knowledge and fulfillment of Christ's commandments.

Let us, then, O brothers and sisters, bring these virtues as a gift to the One Who was born for the sake of our salvation ...God, and Man, come to die for us.

This, from us, shall be the most-pleasing form of sacrifice to God and to the Infant Jesus Christ." [Sermon on the Nativity of Jesus Christ]

Dearly beloved, I pray that these few words about the true meaning of this profound, history-changing event, have enlightened us to give thanks to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

+ Nathaniel

+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