

PASTORAL LETTER 2009



NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!

“O Lord my God, I will sing a birthday hymn, a song on the Forefeast to you who by your birth gives me a divine rebirth and leads me up to my first excellence.”

Compline: Canon, Ode I, b.

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!*

It is Orthodox tradition to celebrate the Feastday of one’s patron saint which is the day on which the saint fell asleep in the Lord. Sometimes death came from the natural weakness of the body and sometimes by martyrdom. In any case, we celebrate the entrance of the saint into the realms of the heavenly and unending kingdom on the day of falling asleep.

Orthodox Christians also have a special “birth day,” the day of their baptism into Christ. This is a very important day in the life of the Christian, for on this day we begin a new existence, a new birth into a spiritual and authentic life in God. It would be good for each of us to know and give special recognition to our “baptism birth day.”

In some parts of the world, in particular North America, it is the custom to celebrate the physical birth of an individual, the day in which we “enter” the world. In this case, the celebration is centered on an individual and not on someone else, as is the case in celebrating one’s patron saint. Congratulations are offered for a long life and happiness and prosperity in this world. Part of that celebration is in joining together to sing the song, “Happy Birthday to You.”

Paul, Bishop of Emesia, calls us together to celebrate the Birthday of Christ in a special way: “It is fitting that on this day we should exhort your pious devotion, that you form together with us a holy choir...”¹ to sing together in honor of the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We bring to your attention this reminder of a “birth-day,” because of the hymn quoted above in which it is stated that, “I will sing a birthday hymn” to you O Lord my God! Strange as this may seem to say that we sing a birthday hymn to God, we do sing this to our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ who was born in the flesh. In the Creed, we confess: *“I believe ...in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God,...who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man.”* By incarnate, we mean that Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, taking on our human nature, living on earth, dying on the cross and being buried, arising on the third day and ascending into heaven.

Jesus, eternal Son of God, was born in the village of Bethlehem, a village which still exists. His mother, the Holy Virgin Mary, gave birth to him in a stable for want of a room in the village inn. At his birth, shepherds left their flocks to come to see him as they had been informed by a host of angels. Wisemen from the east left their cities to come to see the Christ child, for they had been lead to him by an unusually long-visible star. The unusual visit of these Wisemen to worship the “new-born King of the Jews” caused much wonder in the capital city of Jerusalem. This wonder turned the ruler, Herod, into a furious tyrant who issued a command to murder all male children born in Bethlehem and in the surrounding area. Herod would have no future child-king live to take away his throne! All of this is told to us in the Gospel of Saint Luke who, no doubt, heard it from Saint Peter who learned these things from the Virgin Mary herself.²

A Christian, in addition to reading the New Testament, must also read the Old Testament, because, in addition to proclaiming the history of the presence and actions of God in human history, the Old Testament includes the prophecies and psalms proclaimed centuries before the birth of Christ referring to his coming on earth as Messiah, or “Chosen one of God.” It is in these prophecies and psalms that the unique events, such as the virgin birth, the appearance of the star, and the worship of the Wisemen are foretold. In other words, these references which long before preceded the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, were fulfilled in his birth inasmuch as such was the divine plan of God.

Saint John the Beloved states: *“No one has ever seen God: it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father’s heart who has made him known.”*³ Jesus, Only-Son of God, the Messiah, came to reveal to us the

promise of the Father, that is, the gift of reconciliation and salvation into eternal existence. Certainly, it is only by the coming of our Lord Jesus and through his Gospel that the Old Testament comes to be fulfilled. It was the Christ himself who opened the minds and hearts of his disciples to the fulfillment of the prophets and psalms after his resurrection during his forty days with them before his ascension into the heavens.

The second part of the hymn states, *“your birth gives me a divine rebirth.”* What does this mean, “your birth gives me a divine rebirth?” Aren’t we already born? What rebirth do we need? We are born of our parents, mother and father, but are re-born in baptism which is a “divine” rebirth. We even have “Godparents!” We are baptized into Christ and are clothed with Christ. We are “re-newed”; we have a divine new beginning through the birth of Jesus. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus clarifies for us: *“There are many celebrations corresponding to each of the mysteries of Christ! Yet they all have one completion, my perfection and refashioning and restoration to the state of the first Adam”* .⁴

The rest of the hymn states that we are *“...lead to our first excellence,”* which is to the state of being before the fall of Adam and Eve. This then, is the calling of all humanity by God’s grace to struggle, to work, to become what Adam and Eve were before their sin and the resulting unhappy rejection from the Paradise into which they had sojourned. Saint Irenaeus of Lyon reminds us that: *“...Christ Jesus our Lord and God, Savior and King...would bestow on (the righteous) as a grace the gift of incorruption and clothe them with everlasting glory.”*⁵

Dearly beloved, Christ took on our human nature so that he would be like us in everything except in sin. In taking on our human nature, he lifted it up. *“You have taken our fallen human nature on your shoulders, O Christ, and in ascending, you took it to God the Father.”*⁶ Saint Leo, Pope of Rome, exhorts us: *“...the Birth Day of Life Itself...fills us with gladness. No one is excluded from sharing in this cheerfulness, for the reason our joy is common to all men. Our Lord, the Conqueror of sin and death, since there was no one free from servitude, came that He might bring deliverance to all.”*⁷

This “birthday hymn” we propose to offer to God is not the common song we join in singing to one another; rather, it is the song of all humanity to its Creator, Savior and Sanctifier. It is a song of unspeakable joy and thanksgiving that God has not abandoned fallen humanity, but rather has come among us, as St. John states in his Gospel: *“Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life - this is our subject. That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony.”*⁸

In a hymn of Vespers of the Nativity, we sing: *“Come, let us greatly rejoice in the Lord as we tell of this present mystery. The middle wall of partition has been destroyed; the flaming sword turns back, the cherubim withdraw from the tree of life, and I partake of the delight of Paradise from which I was cast out through disobedience.”*⁹ Of course, this hymn was chanted last evening at the vespers during which you would have heard this and other explanations of our holy faith. How good our Holy Church is to proclaim to her faithful the wonders of God in holy hymns and services.

Thus, we come together as a “holy choir” to sing this “birthday hymn” to Christ our Lord, while at the same time, in a mystical way, we are singing it to ourselves. We are singing that it is also our birth, a new birth made possible through Jesus’ coming on earth to prepare us to return to our true home, the heavenly kingdom. It is there where we shall meet our patron saints, and it is there where we shall become what we had been, true children of God, true sons and daughters, true in his image and likeness.

Dearly beloved, on this celebration of the Birth of Christ Jesus, let us be courageous in our lives; let us put first things first; let us rejoice in God’s love for us and greet him on this day of his incarnation with songs of joy and with resolutions to seek with our whole life the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!
The Messiah is among us! Let us go forth and receive Him!
+ NATHANIEL, Archbishop of Detroit
Romanian Episcopate

¹ Homily 5, par. 1

² Luke 2:1-20

³ John 1:18

⁴ *On the Nativity of Christ*, 16-125

⁵ *Against the Heresies*, 1-9-4

⁶ Vesting of the hierarch

⁷ Homily Three, par. 1, 11-2

⁸ 1 John 1-2

⁹ “Lord I have Called,” 1