

PASTORAL LETTER 2012

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!

Today, Christ is born of the Virgin in Bethlehem.

*Today, he who is without beginning begins to be, and the Word is made flesh.
The Powers of heaven rejoice, and earth with mankind is glad. The Magi offer gifts;
the Shepherds proclaim the marvel, while we cry aloud without ceasing:
Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth; good will among men.*

[Nativity of Christ, Praises, Tone 2 - Monk John]

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 in Christ,

Today the world celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ! I clarify this statement by saying “the birth is of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ!” I say “the world” because even if not everyone knows the true meaning of this holy day, the world in general is made known that this is a special day for those who do know its significance. For those who only know that “Christmas Day” is widely publicized on civil calendars, they know that it is a time of great economic benefit to merchants and to the general economy. We know the event to be from the plan of God, and that it is of universal benefit to the human race.

There are those who know only of the economic aspects of the celebration, and there are others who realize the significance of this celebration for Christians but who reject what it represents to them; that is, the coming into human history of the Son of God in our flesh. “Today, he who is without beginning begins to be, and the Word is made flesh.”

The person of Jesus Christ and his unique life has been and will remain controversial until his Second Coming. It is the central theme of Christianity: God became man so that man may become as God, as Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt states. Let us who are believers in Christ, however, put aside debates about the truth of this event which we accept and confess; and concentrate, as is proper for us, on the significance of the day and the joy it brings into our hearts and homes!

In the Creed, we confess: “I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of light, true God of true God, Begotten not made, of one essence with the Father through whom all things were made; 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.” In the early days of the Church, what the Christian people believed had to be re-affirmed, because there were some who denied that Jesus was the Son of God in a unique way. Others denied that the Holy Virgin is the Mother of Christ God. This statement about Jesus Christ was hammered out by the early Fathers of the Church who met in Councils.

“*The angel Gabriel was sent by God...and the virgin’s name was Mary, and the angel said to her... ‘Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God’s favor. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High’; and “...the child will be holy and will be called Son of God”* (Lk.1:26-35). We say that Jesus was incarnate of the Holy Spirit who over-shadowed Mary after she had agreed to bear the Lord. She accepted to bear the Messiah in her womb, and thus “he became man,” that is, Christ was born of her, flesh of her flesh, incarnate.

Thus, the fact of God descending from on high to become like us in every way, except for sinning, means that the Creator took on created human nature, our nature, our fallen nature. Another way of expressing the word “incarnate” is to say “taking on our flesh,” or taking on our humanity. This came about because he was conceived in the virginal womb of the Blessed Theotokos, Mary, of her own free will. Why God himself came to live among us is made clear: to restore our fallen nature to where it had been at the time of its creation.

This favor, that the angel Gabriel says Mary won, is that through all the ages before her there was no woman as pure and dedicated to adoration of God as was she. After having given birth, she remained as before; and there is no one after her sojourn on earth as pure and dedicated to adoration of God as she is. This is what is meant by the expression “the fullness of time” - when the Virgin Mary was born of her parents, Joachim and Anna.

By her free will, she remained pure and dedicated to adoration of God. *“My soul exults in God my savior; for the Almighty has done great things for me”* (Lk 1:47). She says that God has done great things “for” her, not “to” her; meaning that the Almighty found favor with her, because she would cooperate with Him. That is why she was chosen to conceive the “Son of the Most High, the Son of God” in her virginal womb. This was her free choice: “Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38) Mary says to the angel Gabriel.

Saint Romanos, the Hymnographer, writing about the year 518 A.D., composed what we entitle, Kontakia, a form of religious poetry sung on certain feasts. In the following words of Nativity Kontakia, he sets a scene of a conversation of the Holy Virgin Mary with Christ, Eve and Adam, explaining why Jesus came to dwell among us.

The eyes of Mary as she beheld Eve and as she looked on Adam, quickly filled with tears...Hence she said to them: ‘Cease your lamentations, I shall become a mediator for you in the presence of my son. I have a son who is merciful, even too compassionate, as I know from what I have experienced; I observe how he spares: Although he is fire, he inhabited my womb and did not consume me, humble as I am’ (Strophe 10). And Christ answers his mother: ‘O mother, I save them because of you and through you. Had I not willed to save them, I should not have dwelt in you, I should not have allowed my light to shine from you, and you would not have heard yourself called my mother. It is for your race that I lie in the crib. At my will I now give milk to your breasts. For their sake you carried me in your arms. The Cherubim did not see me, but you beheld me, and carried me and cherish me as son’ (Strophe 14).

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt says: *“For it is the Father’s glory that man, made and then lost, should be found again; and when dead, that he should be made alive, and should become God’s temple...and the heavenly powers will not be astonished at seeing all of us, who are of one body with him, introduced into their realms”* (4 Discourses Against the Arians 1:42).

It is God’s love for us, his creation, to save us from sin and death. It is God’s humility to take on our human nature which he himself created and to lift it higher than it was before; and thus, his Only-Begotten Son was born in our human nature, born of the pure and Ever-Virgin Mary to bring us back to the Father Almighty. The role of the Holy Virgin in salvation history was debated from the earliest days of the Church and is found in the discussions at the Councils about who is Jesus Christ! This is why the icon of the Nativity of Christ shows centrally both the infant Son of God and the Holy Virgin. He is born of her free will and she is exulted through him, because she willingly gave herself to be the bearer of God, the Theotokos.

Saint John of Damascus reminds us: *“For the purpose of God the Word (Jesus the Holy One of God, the Son of God) becoming man was that the very same nature, which had sinned and fallen and become corrupted, should triumph over the deceiving tyrant (Satan) and so be freed from corruption”* (Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Bk. 3. Ch. 12). The Holy Virgin Mary, flesh of our flesh, and joy of all humanity, bore the Messiah, the Savior of his own Creation whom the angel had proclaimed when he came to her in the town of Nazareth.

Finally, let us reflect on the words of St. Clement of Alexandria: *“The Word, who in the beginning bestowed life on us as the Creator when he formed us, taught us to live well when he appeared as our teacher; that as God he might afterwards conduct us to the life which never ends”* (Exhortation to the Heathens. Ch. 1, 7:1).

So, we see that, to celebrate this feast of the Incarnation of Jesus, the Holy One of God, the Son of God, we must also reflect on our own fallen human nature and acknowledge that because we do sin, we need God’s forgiveness. We reflect on the reality that all men die and because we do die, we have faith that the incarnation, the taking on of our fallen human nature by Jesus, the unique Son of God, Savior of mankind came to destroy Death by his death and bestow on us in the future, eternal life.

Let us today say, as we do on the Great Day of Pascha, “This, too, is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,” for Christ is born and he has glorified his creation and is lifting us to the heavens!

Christ is born! Glory Him!

The Messiah is among us! Let us go forth and receive Him!

+ NATHANIEL

Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Episcopate