

PASTORAL LETTER 2021

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!

*"The whole creation is made rich; let it rejoice and be of good cheer.
The Master of all has come to live with his servants, and from the bondage of
the enemy he delivers us who were made subject to corruption."*

Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ: Canticle 6, Ikos, Slavic
[Festal Menaion, M. Mary/T. Ware]

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, hierachal and fatherly blessings!"*

Dearly Beloved,

Once again, God has blessed us to celebrate the birth in the flesh of his son and our Lord Jesus Christ. This birth was foretold in the beginning of human history. The birth in human flesh of the Son of God the Father came to be through the Virgin Mary of Nazareth in real-time, in the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Christians confess Christ's birth each time we recite the Creed. *"I believe... and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages: Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate [took on flesh] of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man."*

This event is the “beginning of salvation.” The coming of the Lord Jesus is to work, to deliver. He came to undo the disobedience of Adam and Eve, to restore what they had lost. The image of Christ as the good shepherd is one with which we all are familiar. As we hear from the words quoted, he has come to deliver us from the bondage of death. Thus, this is not simply an annual celebration on our Christian calendar, but it is a universal, timeless action of God for all humanity. The Good Shepherd came to redeem all humanity of all generations until the Second Coming of Jesus and the universal restoration.

The beautiful words of this hymn of the Forefeast lift our hearts to hope and spiritual peace. Hope, because God himself has come to earth and knocks on the door of our hearts, or rather he taps gently, tenderly, as a father awakening his child from sleep to announce a gift of love. In his coming, we have the assurance that all is well. Spiritual peace, because all of our anxieties, our frustrations, our concerns are dismissed through his lifting us onto his shoulders into his

embrace, because “...he has come to live with his servants.” He is, indeed, the loving Good Shepherd.

Saint Cyril exhorts us: “*This peace was made through Christ. For by himself, he has reconciled us to the Father and to God, taking from our midst the inimical guilt, reconciling two peoples through one man, and joining together into one flock both those in heaven and those on earth.*” (“Christmas Day”)

A major concern of modern man is his loneliness. Although surrounded by numerous images and persons, this loneliness, “alone-ness,” is not a result of being physically alone but of being spiritually uncertain of being acceptable to his creator. He longs for God his Father. Adam and Eve rejected the Creator, and he left them to themselves. But as a loving father, he planted the seed of the hope of reconciliation through the promise of the advent of his son to “live with his servants.”

Saint Matthew shares with us the words of the Archangel: “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife...she will give birth to a son, and you must name him Jesus, [which means savior] because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins*” (Mt. 1:20-21). There is stated the promise, the seed of reconciliation.

Jesus comes to dwell among us and to save us from our sins. Even more, he restores us to a new and unending life, to freedom from “corruption,” meaning from annihilation. As Jesus is eternal, so he bestows on us the gift of eternal life. His birth, indeed, brings joy and good cheer.

Reflecting on the hymn, we are “*of good cheer...the Master of all has come.*” Saint Ephraim of Syria lifts our hearts and exhorts us to change our lives with his reflections on the feast: “*This is the day that opened for us a gate on high to our prayers. Today, the Lord of nature was against his nature changed; let it not be troublesome for us to change our evil wills... Today, Godhead sealed itself upon Manhood, so that with the Godhead’s stamp, Manhood might be adorned.*” (“Hymn 1 on the Nativity”)

This exhortation to us is that as God the Almighty took on our lowly state, so we ought to desire to lift ourselves from aloneness and self-centeredness to the state of being his authentic sons and daughters. “*Let us be careful, dearest brethren, ...who...in the divine foreknowledge are destined to be the subjects of God’s heavenly kingdom, and equals of his angels...*” St. Gregory of Rome (PL 76, col. 1103)

Saint John Chrysostom likewise invites us to “...rejoice and be of good cheer...” “*Come, then, let us observe the Feast. For this day, the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error is driven out, truth has been brought back... heavenly way of life has been planted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.*”

He further explains: “*Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. 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. To him, then, who out of confusion has wrought a clear path...*” (“Homily on Christmas Morning,” PG 56, col. 385)

Finally, Saint Leo, Pope of Rome, encourages us with his words: “*Acknowledge, O Christian, the dignity that is yours. Being made a partaker of the divine nature, do not bring any unworthy manner of living fall back into your former abjectness of life. Be mindful of whose head and whose body you are a member. By the sacrament of baptism, you have become the temple of the Holy Spirit.*” (“Homily on Christmas Day,” PL 4, col.190)

Dearly beloved, let us thank God for this celebration, and let us take courage in this feast of redemption. Let us, this year, rejoice as never before. Let us run to the Good Shepherd and fall into his arms and be lifted up to hope and peace. Let us gather our loved ones around us and tell and retell the wonderful good news, the Gospel, that God has come among us to live with us and to deliver us, so as to be made whole in his presence forever.

Christ is born! Let us glorify him!

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop