

"I behold a strange mystery: instead of the sun, the sun of righteousness contained ineffably in the Virgin. Seek not how this is so, for where God wills the order of nature is overcome. It was His will, He had the power to do so, and thus He came down and saved us."

-- Saint Athanasius the Great, *Homily on the Nativity of Christ*

Grace and Peace from our Savior Born in Bethlehem to the Honorable Clergy, Venerable Monastics, and Pious Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America.

My Beloved Brethren and Blessed Children in the Lord,

God's infinite love for us has once again accounted us worthy to bow down in worship before the great mystery of the incarnation of God the Word. We do so with deep reverence and spiritual gladness in the knowledge that if we worthily celebrate the feast of the Nativity, our souls and our countenances will be made radiant with the heavenly light of our Redeemer.

Worthily celebrating the feast means drawing near the divine Christ child with deep gratitude and humility even as the Magi approached the celestial revelation of divine love with their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, even as the Shepherds did so with their guileless faith, simple piety, and undivided heart. The spiritual joy that the faithful experience at this time of the year is so very different from the emotional, external, and temporary pleasures that the world offers. Christian joy wells forth from a deep spiritual awareness of God's unbounded love revealed so fully in the incarnation of God the Word. The Lord of glory who was born as a child in the days of Herod the King in the humble cave of Bethlehem is eternally born in the humble and repentant hearts of the faithful in a mysterious way that does not intimidate us with a display of divine power and dominion.

Through the feast of the Nativity, the Holy Church teaches us the mystery of God's freely offered love that neither coerces nor constrains. Referring to the divine incarnation, Saint John Chrysostom remarks, "Today, Bethlehem has become like the firmament above, for in that town angels hymning God take the place of the stars and the Sun of righteousness in a marvelous way takes the place of the physical sun. Where God so wills the laws of nature are overcome. And God so willed, it was in His power, and He did save man, for all things are obedient to God. Today, the eternal One becomes what He was not. While still being God, He also became human without ceasing to be divine. This wondrous and ineffable condescension was hymned with a loud voice by all His angels."

Beloved in the Lord, the Nativity of Christ is the unfailing surety that we are not lost in a dangerous, meaningless world in which we blindly wander into an unknown darkness. Christ Jesus, our Light, is in our midst! He shares in our life, our struggles, our worries, and even our death, "that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil... for in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to help them that are tempted" (Hebrews 2:14,18). Now that the Son of God has become the Son of man with His advent on earth, we know the true God, and we know the truth that sets us free. Even further, we are brought to life and given the strength to fight the good fight, for we know that we are no longer alone and unable to rise to life's challenges, but that with the Apostle Paul each of us can confess "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Let us prepare, my brothers and sisters, the manger of our hearts by keeping His divine commandments, so that the Savior and Redeemer of the world might be born and dwell in us. Then, we can truly experience within us the peace "which passeth all understanding." Then, the inner man of the heart will be radiant with the unsetting light of Christ who "illuminates every man that cometh into the world." From the depths of my soul I wish all of you a blessed and sacred feast of the Nativity of our Lord,

With heartfelt prayers and the ineffable love of the Holy Christ child,



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