

Prot. No. 751

PATRIARCHAL PROCLAMATION
FOR CHRISTMAS

✠ B A R T H O L O M E W
BY GOD’S MERCY ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE-NEW ROME
AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH
TO THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH
GRACE, MERCY AND PEACE
FROM THE SAVIOR CHRIST BORN IN BETHLEHEM
* * *

Most venerable brothers in Christ and beloved children,

As we journey with the All-Holy Virgin, who comes “to give birth ineffably” to the pre-eternal Word, and as we gaze upon Bethlehem, which prepares itself to receive the holy infant, behold we have once more reached Christmas filled with sentiments of gratitude to the God of love. The journey to this great feast of the nativity in the flesh of the world’s Savior was different this year with regard to the outward conditions, resulting from the current pandemic. Our church life and the participation of our faithful in the sacred services, as well as the church’s pastoral care and good witness in the world were all affected by the repercussions of the related health restrictions. However, all this does not affect the innermost relationship of the faithful with Christ or of our faith in His providence and our devotion to “the one thing that is necessary.”¹

In secularized societies, Christmas has lost its original identity and has been reduced to a celebration of ostentatious consumption and worldliness, without any suspicion that on this holy day we commemorate the “eternal mystery”² of the divine incarnation. Today, the proper Christian celebration of Christmas is an act of resistance to the secularization of life and to the dilution or demise of the sense of mystery.

The incarnation of the Word reveals the content, direction, and purpose of human existence. The all-perfect God subsists as perfect man, so that we may be able to exist “in the manner of God.” “For God became human in order that we might become deified.”³ In the profound formulation of St. Gregory the Theologian, man is “commanded to become God,”⁴ “a divinized being.”⁵ Such is

¹ Cf. Lk 10.42.

² Maximus the Confessor, *Varia on Virtue and Evil*, Century I, 12 PG 90.1184.

³ Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation* 54.

⁴ Gregory the Theologian, *Funeral Oration to Basil the Great*, PG 36.560.

⁵ Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 44 on Holy Pascha*, PG 36. 632.

the supreme dignity afforded to humankind, which renders our existence an insurmountable honor. In Christ, all people are called to salvation. Before God, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free man, neither male nor female; for everyone is one in Christ Jesus,” according to the divinely inspired theology of the Apostle Paul.⁶ This is a decisive reversal in the field of anthropology, the hierarchy of values, and the perception of ethos. Since that time, whosoever insults humankind also defies God. “For there is nothing as sacred as man, in whose nature God participated.”⁷

Christmas constitutes the entire divine-human life of the Church, where Christ is constantly experienced as the One who was, is and will come. The One “in His Mother’s embrace” is the One “in the bosom of the Father,” the child Jesus is the One who was crucified, resurrected and ascended in glory into the heaven, the righteous judge and the King of glory. It is this inexpressible mystery that we glorify with psalms and hymns, unto which we minister, while at the same time having been and being ministered by Him. This is what the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon was divinely inspired to define “following the Holy Fathers.” The “doctrine of Chalcedon,” which describes the way – beyond reason and comprehension – that the Word of God assumed the flesh of the world, is “chanted” by the all-sacred Church of Hagia Sophia in the City of Cities, the pride of Orthodoxy and the glory of the *oikoumene*, through the architectural expression, the organization of sacred space, the impressive dome, which reflects how the divine philanthropy unites all things, the heavenly with the earthly, but also through the icons and decorations, as well as through the unique theological language of splendid lighting.

In the midst of many circumstances and sorrows, we hear today the resounding voice of the “Lord’s angel,” who “brings the good news of a great joy . . . to all people, for to us is born this day a Savior, who is Christ Jesus.”⁸ We celebrate Christmas, praying for our brothers and sisters in danger and illness. We admire the self-sacrifice of the doctors and nurses and all those who contribute to confronting the pandemic. We rejoice as we discover that the patient is approached as sacred person and is not reduced to a number, a case, an object, or an impersonal biological unit. As it has been said so eloquently, “the white gown” of the physicians is “a white cassock” that expresses surrender from what is “mine” for the sake of my brother, “seeking the interests of the other”⁹ and the complete commitment to the suffering one. For this “white cassock” – just as for the clergyman’s cassock, since both are symbols of a spirit of sacrifice and service – the inspiration and driving force is love, which is always a gift of divine grace and never exclusively our own achievement.

⁶ Gal 3.28.

⁷ Nicholas Cabasilas, *On the Life in Christ* VI, PG 150.649.

⁸ Lk 2.9–11.

⁹ 1 Cor 10.24.

The perilous pandemic has shattered much of what we have taken for granted, revealing the limits of the “titanism” of the contemporary “man-god” and demonstrating the power of solidarity. Alongside the indisputable truth that our world comprises a whole, that our problems are common, and that their solution demands a joint action and agenda, what was supremely manifested was the value of the personal contribution, the love of the Good Samaritan, which surpasses every human standard. The Church actively supports – in deed and in word – our suffering brothers and sisters, while praying for them, their relatives and all those responsible for their care, and at the same time proclaiming that the healing of the sick – as a temporary victory over death – pertains to transcendence and to the ultimate abolition of death in Christ.

Unfortunately, the healthcare crisis has not allowed the development of activities foreseen for 2020, as “the year of pastoral renewal and due concern for the youth.” We hope that the coming year will render possible the realization of planned initiatives for the new generation. We know from experience that, when our young men and women are approached with understanding and love, they reveal their creative talents and enthusiastically contribute to such initiatives. In the end, youth is a particularly “religious” time in our life – filled with dreams, visions and deep existential pursuits, with a vibrant hope for a new world of fraternity. It is this “new creation”¹⁰ – the “new heavens and new earth . . . where righteousness dwells”¹¹ that the Church of Christ proclaims as good news and reflects in its journey to the Kingdom.

Beloved brothers and blessed children,

In the Church, man is completely renewed and not just “assisted.” There, man “lives in the truth” and experiences his divine destiny. As the Holy and Great Council of Orthodoxy declared, in the Church “every person constitutes a unique entity, destined for personal communion with God.”¹² We share the divinely-given conviction that our present life is not our entire life, that evil and negativity do not have the final word in history. Our Savior is not a *deus ex machina* that intervenes and annihilates troubles, while simultaneously abolishing our freedom, as if this was a “condemnation” from which we need to be delivered. For us Christians, the unparalleled Patristic words hold true: “The mystery of salvation pertains to those who are willing to be saved, not to those who are coerced.”¹³ The truth of the freedom in Christ is tested through the Cross, which is the way to the Resurrection.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 5.17.

¹¹ 2 Pet 3.13.

¹² *Encyclical*, § 12.

¹³ Maximus the Confessor, *On the Lord’s Prayer*, PG 90.880.

In this spirit, concelebrating Christmas and the other feasts of the sacred Twelvetide in a God-pleasing manner with all of you, we pray from our sacred Center of the Phanar that the Savior, who condescended to the human race, may grant you health, love for one another, progress in every good thing, and every blessing from above, on the occasion of the new year that dawns and in all the days of your life. Let it be so!

Christmas 2020
✠ Bartholomew of Constantinople
Fervent supplicant for all before God