

Patriarchal Encyclical for Christmas (2024)

+ B A R T H O L O M E W

BY GOD'S MERCY ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE-NEW ROME
AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH
TO ALL THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH

GRACE, MERCY AND PEACE
FROM THE SAVIOR CHRIST BORN IN BETHLEHEM

Most honorable brother hierarchs and blessed children in the Lord,

With the grace from above, we have once again this year arrived at the festal day of the Nativity in the flesh of God the Word, who came into the world and dwelt among us “out of his ineffable loving for humankind.” We honor with psalms and hymns as well as with inexpressible joy the great mystery of the Incarnation, which is “newer than everything new, the only new thing under the sun,”^[1] through which the way is opened for us to deification by grace and the entire creation is renewed. Christmas is not the experience of emotions that “come rapidly and depart even more rapidly.” It is the existential participation in the whole event of Divine Economy. As testified by the Evangelist Matthew (ch. 1. 18–2.1-23), the leaders of the world sought to obliterate the divine infant from the outset. For us faithful, along with the cry that “Christ is born” in the feast of the incarnation of the Son and Word of God the Father, as well as the mournful bells of His passion, we also hear the cry that “Christ is risen,” the good news of the victory over death and expectation of the common resurrection.

The words “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace” are heard once more in a world filled with violence, social injustice and dissolution of human dignity. The stunning progress of science and technology does not reach the depth of the human soul, because human beings are always more than what science can comprehend or to which the advancement of technology aspires. The gap between heaven and earth in our human existence cannot be scientifically bridged.

Today there is much talk about “the metahuman” and praise of artificial intelligence. The dream of “the superhuman” is of course hardly new. The concept of “the metahuman” is based on technological progress and his equipment with means previously unimaginable to human experience and history, through which humankind will be able to transcend currently valid human measures. The Church is not technophobic. It approaches scientific knowledge as “a divinely granted gift to human beings,” without however overlooking or suppressing the dangers of scientism. The Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016) also emphasizes the contribution of Christianity “to

the healthy development of secular civilization,” since God “established human beings as stewards of sacred creation and His coworkers in the world.” Moreover, it also highlights: “The Orthodox Church sets against the ‘man-god’ of the contemporary world the ‘God-man’ as the ultimate measure of all things. “We do not speak of a man who has been deified, but of God who has become man (John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* iii, 2 PG 94.988).”[2]

The answer to the crucial question—namely, how can we preserve the “culture of personhood,” the respect for its sacredness and emphasis on its beauty, until the final “eighth day” in the face of the titanism and prometheanism of the technological culture, its evolution and transmutation, in the midst of anthropotheistic changes and exaggerations of humankind—has been given once for all in the mystery of Divine Humanity. God the Word became flesh, the “truth has come” and “the shadow has passed.” For human beings, speaking the truth will forevermore be associated with their relationship to God as the response to God’s descent toward them and as the expectation and encounter of the coming Lord of glory. This living faith supports the human struggle to respond to the contradictions and challenges of earthly life, to life “by bread” (Mt 4.4), to survival as well as social and cultural development. Nevertheless, nothing in our life can thrive without reference to God, without the horizon of “the fullness of life, the fullness of joy and the fullness of knowledge” of His Kingdom.[3]

Christmas is an opportunity for us to become conscious of the mystery of divine freedom and the great miracle of human freedom. Christ knocks on the door of the human heart, yet only human beings honored with such freedom are able to open that door. “Clearly, without Him, without Christ,” as the late Fr. Georges Florovsky writes, “man cannot do anything. But there is something that only man can do—namely, respond to God’s call and welcome Christ.”[4]

By saying “Yes” to this calling from above, Christ is revealed as “the true light” (Jn 1.9), “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14.6), the answer to the ultimate questions and pursuits of the intellect, to the desires of the heart and the hopes of humankind, but also to the “whence” and “whereto” of creation. We belong to Christ, in Whom all things are united. Christ is “the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22.13). In His voluntary incarnation “for us men and for our salvation,” the Word of God “did not dwell in a single human being, but embraced human nature in its entirety with His hypostasis,”[5] thereby establishing the common eternal destiny and unity of humanity. He does not liberate one people, but the entire race of humankind; He does not savingly divide only history, but renews the whole creation. Just as for history, so too for the universe, “before Christ” and “after Christ” holds definitively and determinately valid. Throughout its journey in the world, in history and through it to the Eschata, to the day without setting in the heavenly Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Church that is “not in the world” witnesses to the truth and performs its sanctifying and spiritual work “for the life of the world.”

Brethren and children in the Lord,

With a spirit of devotion, we kneel before the Mother of God who holds the infant and humbly worship “the Word from the beginning” who assumed our form, and we wish to all of you a blessed and holy Twelvetide and a favorable, healthy, peaceful and fruitful in good deeds new year of the Lord’s favor, filled with spiritual joy and divine gifts, in which the entire Christian world concelebrates and honors the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea.

Christmas 2024

+Bartholomew of Constantinople
Fervent supplicant of you all before God

1. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, PG 94.984.
2. *Encyclical*, § 10.
3. Alexander Schmemmann, *I believe* (Athens: Akritas Editions, 1991), 129 [from the Greek].
4. Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras Editions, 1983) [from the Greek].
5. Nicholas Cabasilas, *Nine Unpublished Homilies* (Thessaloniki, 1976), 108.