



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
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**Archpastoral Letter
for the Feast of the Nativity 2016**

Protocol Number 01-008/2016
The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord

Dearly Beloved of Our Diocesan Family:
Christ is Born! – Let us glorify Him!

***“For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word;
taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit;
and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life.”***
-- St. John Chrysostom, *Sermon on the Nativity*

As we celebrate again the glorious Feast of Our Lord’s Nativity, and gaze upon the Icon of the Birth in the flesh of the Son of God, lying in the manger of a cave, let us remember what the Saints of our Church, like St. Irenaeus of Lyons and Athanasius of Alexandria, have taught us: “God became Man so that we might become like God.”

This is the purpose, the meaning, and the destiny of our lives: to become like God. It is what we were created for, made “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26-27). The Infant Messiah, named by the angel “Jesus Christ,” born on Christmas night, is “the express image (*‘ikon’* in Greek) of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). He has come to earth to show us how to achieve “*theosis*” or “divinization” – how to become “merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36), “perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48). He has come to show us how to be “sons and daughters of the Most High God.”

The key is for us to follow Jesus’ example. He shows us how to “be” by the way He lives: humble and meek, honest and chaste, obedient and pious, kind and considerate, not judgmental but forgiving. Above all else, He is loving – to all who come to Him and to all those in need. Our Christian life must be an imitation of His Love.

As we greet each other with the shout that “Christ is Born!” ... our celebration is somewhat clouded by the knowledge that for too many in our country, Christmas is only about family and friends, food and drink, football and, of course, presents from Santa. For so many – our neighbors next door, our co-workers at the office, even members of our family – today is Christmas **without Christ**. And a growing number of these good people have self-identified their faith as “**none**.” They have no church affiliation; they may say they are spiritual but not religious; they may believe in God, but they do not express that belief in any ceremonial way.

How can we translate our age-old faith for today’s “nones”?

We achieve this by living the Christ-like example, ourselves. If people see us truly in love with Our Lord and Savior, then we offer them witness to the gracious Son of Man Who incarnates what He proclaims: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Far too often, we Christians have accepted and presented our faith as a system of rules and regulations – a system “nones” have no desire to follow. While the Old Testament gives us the “do’s and don’ts” of the Ten Commandments, Our Lord offers us something greater – the how “to be” of the Beatitudes. To be Christ-like in our thoughts, words and deeds, is to gain His blessing: “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... the meek ... the merciful”. If we keep the Commandments, we are not following rules, so much as following Jesus’ example – faithful to His Father, obedient to His mother, honest and chaste, kind and considerate, forgiving and accepting, and loving.

For too long, we have presented the Church to others as a business or corporation, a club or organization that compels members to pay mandatory “dues” and “assessments”, and fulfill other requirements. This sends a bad

message to those outside the flock. We must show that the Church is a Family that offers us a Father and a mother; makes us brothers and sisters in Christ; and commands us to care for the needs of each other and those outside the family as well. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

Critics of the Church say that we are judgmental, condemning and excluding of others. This is not what the Lord taught! He preached "returning to God" in repentance, and being welcomed and forgiven and loved. We must restore that approach, if it is not ours already. Christ warns us, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt 7:1) – and He forgave and welcomed the cheating tax collector, the sinful woman, and the life-long thief. He gives us the Holy Mysteries, the Sacraments, as sources of His grace for our forgiveness, healing, and eternal life. It is the Eucharist – Holy Communion – that makes us one with Him, members of His Body the Church: "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54).

Too often, we ourselves complain about so many divine services, their length and seeming repetitiveness ... and we attend with a sense of obligation. This sends a wrong message. We love God, and we come to Church because we want to be with Him often. We honor the Lord's Day – Sunday – because He rose from the dead that day to offer us eternal life. We celebrate the great events in His and His people's lives on feast days: "[T]his day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations" (Ex 12:14).

Those outside the Church fail to see the value of prayer and fasting and almsgiving, because we do not present it properly. Too often we ourselves complain about the Lenten seasons and disciplines. We must pray, as Our Lord showed us – when He would set Himself apart from the disciples and commune with His Father; and as He taught us, in the beautiful Lord's Prayer. We fast, because He fasted – abstaining from meat in honor of His flesh betrayed on a Wednesday and sacrificed on a Holy Friday. We give alms, because He gave to all who came to Him in need – miraculous healing, soul-saving forgiveness, limitless love and acceptance. His "final test" for us is "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matt 25:40), expecting us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned in His Name.

My beloved, we need to celebrate this Nativity today as our reception of the Gift of Love from the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). And then we need to spend the rest of the year, the remainder of our lives, reflecting that Love in our practice of our faith, sharing that Love by reaching out to others and inviting them to "come and see" in our Church how great the Lord is, and by giving that Love tangibly to those who are in need – in our homes, in our parishes, on our streets. This may be the best chance we have to show the "Nones" the true meaning of our Faith.

Ours is not some stone cold god of the pagan past, nor a God of judgement, vengeance and retribution, nor a God Who is dead ... but the Living God of Love Who has become one of us, and is involved in our everyday joys and sorrows; Who wills our salvation, and answers our prayers in fatherly love ... and the Church that Christ founded is a community of love for God and fellowman, in imitation of the love shared among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Perhaps in living the same "way of life" that the Apostles and the early Church lived, and that the Saints of every age have lived, we can attract the unchurched, the "spiritual but not religious," and the non-believers ... even as the first Christians did, when they turned the world upside down, and brought the pagan Roman empire to its knees in the worship and faith of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Remember, our first lesson is at the Manger – where we learn to be humble, meek and self-sacrificing. The last lesson is at the Cross – where we learn to be forgiving and loving and self-sacrificing. Come, let us adore Him ... by the way we live the example of Christ-like love. And let us pray that our humble efforts will inspire others "not yet of this fold" to join us in the blessed Family of the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

With love in our Infant Messiah,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey