



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
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Archpastoral Letter for the Feast of the Nativity 2018

Protocol Number 01-003/2018
Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord

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

“God became man, so that man could become like God.”

The Incarnation – the Son of God taking on human flesh, which we celebrate on this Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord – is an act of God’s loving-kindness towards mankind. Looking at the Incarnation from this point of view, several Orthodox Saints – like St. Maximos the Confessor and St. Isaac the Syrian – have taught that even if man had never sinned, God still would have become human in His love for mankind. They tell us that the Incarnation was part of the eternal purpose of God – and not simply an answer to Adam’s Fall.

But the fact is that mankind did sin – and because this is so, the Incarnation is not just an act of divine love, but an act of salvation. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ united mankind and God in His own Person, and re-opened for us the path to union with God. In His own Person, Christ showed what the true “likeness of God” is ... and through His redeeming passion and death and glorious resurrection, He set that likeness once again within our reach. Christ, the Second Adam, came to earth to reverse the effects of the first Adam’s sin of disobedience.

Without the Incarnation, there would be no salvation as we know it; no Cross, no Resurrection, no partaking of the divine energies of God, no deification. Without the Incarnation, Paradise and eternal life (which were given to man before the Fall) would still have resulted in humanity being eternally joined to God – but only as servants. When the Father gives His Son to redeem mankind – you and me – from the curse of the Fall wherein God had forewarned Adam and Eve that “you shall surely die,” His Son deifies human flesh and makes it possible for every man, woman, and child to be a communicant with the Holy Trinity through Himself. By this, we humans are no longer called to be servants of the Kingdom, but rather we are invited to become adopted daughters and sons of God the Father.

This profound message of the Feast of the Nativity can easily be overlooked in our celebration: we forget these words of St. Athanasius the Great, *“God became man, so that man could become like God.”* Yes, we celebrate the Birth of the Son of God ... but are we also celebrating the possibility of our own deification? Do we realize what Christ is offering to us on this day?

Beloved fathers and brothers and sisters: We are being called by Our Lord Himself to partake of His very life. **To be united to Him.** He is inviting us to enter into union with Him, asking us if we will allow Him to enter into us, to take His abode in us. God has taken on our material body, so that He might give us the greatest gift – His eternal, heavenly, immaterial life. In so doing, we are given the opportunity to become saints – if not canonized Saints, with a capital "S" ... then at least everyday saints, with a small "s".

Instead of being moved by His gift with a response of gratitude and love, too often we respond by engrossing ourselves in the desire for material things – wealth and power, earthly comforts and personal prestige – instead of heavenly gifts such as peace and joy, communion and life eternal with God. No wonder Christmas itself has become a celebration of materialism, commercialism and hedonism in too many cultures ... in too many homes ... in too many hearts.

So what is to be our response to the message of this great Feast? Shall we just celebrate the Birth of Christ ... or shall we actually try to respond to His Incarnation? Shall we really try to be united to Him, as we once were at our Baptism? The easy reply to this invitation is to think that “I must strive to be better, more virtuous; more kind and loving; more patient and forgiving; more honest and trustworthy and chaste.” But this is not true Christianity – simple behavior modification. These virtues are not the *goal* of our spiritual life; they are simply the natural expression, the flowering, of the pursuit of our real goal – which is to be united with Christ.

We might try with all our might to live these virtues, and perhaps we could sustain this for a while ... but eventually we burn out. The strength to possess these virtues comes only from our union with Christ. So, then, how can I unite with and become like God? Our Lord’s own teaching, the Church’s own tradition across the centuries, provides us with the tried and true methodology that has produced both canonized Saints and everyday saints in every generation of history: pray to God and read His Holy Scriptures daily; participate in the divine services and receive the Holy Mysteries as often as they are offered; follow the commandments and help those in need in His Name. If we truly try to seek Christ above all else, if we pray to Him from our heart daily, and show sincere repentance for our sins – from time to time with tears, but always with a desire to return to the Father’s saving love – then we are indeed on the narrow road to union with Christ, which is salvation and theosis.

The Feast of the Nativity invites us, beckons us, to seek Christ above all else. It calls us to unite ourselves to Him ... but it offers us only the invitation to this union. It does not ever force us. That would not be the way of love, because love can only be given where there is freedom – to accept or reject the beloved. What is our response to this gift of Christ – to be united with Him, to save our souls, to live with Him forever, to become more and more like Him unto eternity?

Too many voices today are advocating change in our society through the political arena. What we need, what our society and our world need, more than anything else, is for us Orthodox Christians to really live our faith ... for us to focus our energy on seeking our Savior above all else ... to have Christ living within us, so that we can help others find Him. So that we can be witnesses, to the saving truth that God has become man, so that man can become like God.

On the glorious Feast of the Lord’s Nativity, I wish you every blessing that comes from His hands – a prosperous and peaceful life, good health and spiritual joy, His visitation and assistance in all good things, and most importantly: salvation, deification and union with Him in His Kingdom.

With love in the Newborn Savior,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Michael". The plus sign is a simple cross, and the name "Michael" is written in a cursive, flowing script.

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