

**CHRIST IS
BORN!**



**LET US
GLORIFY HIM!**

ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY 2020

Prot. No. 01-010/2020
Feast of the Nativity 2020

Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is Born! – Let us glorify Him!

*“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death
Light has dawned ...” (Isaiah 9:2, quoted in Matthew 4:16).*

Icons inspire us. Icons teach us. And, in showing us the Gospel in line and color, icons transform us. The Council of Constantinople, held in 870, tells us: “Just as through the written words which are contained in the Book, we shall obtain salvation, so through the influence that colors in painting exercise on the imagination, all – both wise and simple – obtain benefit from what is before them; for as speech teaches and portrays through syllables, so too does painting by means of colors.”

With this in mind, on this Feast of our Savior’s Birth, let us consider the Icon of the Nativity of Our Lord. The Nativity Icon powerfully reveals to us the teaching of the Incarnation of the Word of God! If we meditate upon it, the depth of its teaching will help us to prepare for a worthy celebration of this great holyday ... and its symphony of images will offer us an antidote to the sentimentality and secularism offered by other images that flood our senses in this sacred season.

The whole scene represented in the Icon rests on the narrative of the Gospels, with references to the Old Testament and to ancient writings. It reflects, too, the glorious

Kontakion of the Feast by Saint Romanos the Melodist, which uplifts singers and hearers alike when it is sung in our Christmas services: “Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One; and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One! Angels with shepherds glorify Him! The wise men journey with a star; since for our sake the Eternal God was born as a Little Child!”

I would like to focus our attention on an often-ignored aspect of this Icon – the cave. The cave is actually not mentioned in the Gospels, but is conveyed to us from that first Christmas night by Holy Tradition. It appears in the second-century writings of Saint Justin Martyr, and history records that the Bethlehem cave was already highly venerated by pilgrims, even before St. Constantine built upon it the Basilica that still stands today as the world’s oldest functioning church.

The ominous blackness of the cave, set so starkly in the center of the bright and radiant Icon, represents the pre-Christian world – a world yet without the Savior – and it represents all human disbelief and doubt, fear and helplessness, loneliness and hopelessness, sin and violence, meaninglessness and despair ... and death. In the icon we see – in the midst of a starless night, in the cave of our despair – Christ “the Sun of Righteousness” entering human history, having been clothed in flesh of the Virgin Mary.

Before this bleakest of backdrops, the Child is laid in the manger. But He is illuminated with heavenly Light against the darkness. The movement of God’s love and compassion for His creation is signified by the Light issuing from the top of the icon. It represents the Triune God answering the prayer of Isaiah, “O that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). God descends in one ray of heavenly Light, from the star of Bethlehem that shines forth upon the Incarnate Son Who has come to save the world.

As Saint John the Theologian reminds us, *“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not”* (John 1:4-5). And as the Word of God, the Son of the Father, it is He who brings into the world truth and justice, peace and promise, hope and consolation, forgiveness and healing, and life everlasting. It is this Infant Who is the Messiah, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Who will achieve for humanity the ultimate victory over darkness in all its forms – sin and the devil and death itself – by His Passion, Death and Burial.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons alerts us that the cave of Bethlehem is also a prefiguration of the Descent of Christ into Hades. We see the Child is wrapped in swaddling clothes, resembling a burial shroud. We notice the manger is rectangular, like a coffin or grave. It does indeed appear that the Infant Messiah is lying in a tomb, for He is born so that by His Death, death itself and sin, the devil and all the powers of darkness might be overcome. Consider the Icon of Pascha, where the darkness of Hades is trampled in triumph under the Savior’s feet ... and be overcome with gratitude to the Son of God, Who even from His Birth was sent into the world with one awesome mission: to die, so that He, and we, might rise unto eternal life!

My beloved in Christ: As Christ is born anew in our world on the Feast of His Nativity this year, we find ourselves – in America, 2020 – within a world that sits in darkness, not unlike the cave of Bethlehem two millennia ago. We are surrounded by the forces of fear and loneliness, the scourge of a pandemic and the horrors of violence. We too face the meaninglessness of life in a so-called “post-Christian age.”

But we know that this is impossible: how can there be a “post-Christian” time? Jesus Christ is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last”* (Revelation 22:13). And from that last book of the Bible, we know that, in the end, He is Victor over all the powers of darkness – yes, even the devil and sin and death itself.

There are two ways to look at the Icon of the Nativity. The first is to focus on the darkness, and accept a world without Christ. Those who do so will see death as the only end, and for them fear is natural ... because the darkness is what awaits those who cannot overcome the terror of sickness and suffering in all its forms, evil and violence in all its variations, and death as the result of it all.

But those who see, amidst the darkness of the cave, the Light and the Life of Christ ... they will come to experience the Son of God become Man as the Savior of the world ... piercing through the shroud of death. And they will come to know the unconquerable power and glory of the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves! *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

On this great Feast, my prayer for you is that you see, piercing through the darkness, the Light and Life of Christ ... and that you are blessed, this day and the coming year of 2021, with the joy and peace and love promised us by the One Who is more than a mere child, but Emmanuel Himself – “God with us!” May He bless you and your loved ones with the greatest of His gifts – good health in this world and life everlasting in His kingdom to come.

With my humble prayers, archpastoral blessings and sincere love in the Infant Messiah,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Archbishop Michael".

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