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Archpastoral Letter for the Feast of the Nativity

Prot. No. 01-005/2024
Feast of the Nativity 2024

Beloved in the Lord:
Christ is born! – Glorify Him!

“God became man, so that we might become like God.”

“Joy to the World! The Lord has come! Let Earth receive her King!” So begins one of the most beloved of Christmas carols. The song has become a holiday standard that continues to put listeners in a festive mood.

And the proof of this joy: What do we each do every December? We send each other greetings, and we exchange presents! What happiness this brings to people in the bleak cold of winter.

In fact: The truth is that “exchange” is exactly the meaning of the Nativity: the revelation to the world of the Lord’s Incarnation, the unprecedented event that we celebrate at Christmas. When Christ was born in Bethlehem, there occurred the most wonderful of all exchanges. The Son of God took on our humanity – our gift to Him, offered through the Blessed Virgin Mary – and in exchange, He enables us to share in His divine grace and glory.

As Saint Paul tells us, speaking metaphorically in terms of riches and poverty: *“Though He (the Son of God) was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that through His poverty you might become rich”* (II Corinthians 8:9). The riches of Christ are His heavenly glory; our human poverty means our fallen condition, our alienation and brokenness. Our Lord shares in our brokenness – in our anguish, in our loneliness, in our loss of hope – and so we are enabled by way of exchange to share in His eternal life, becoming *“partakers of the divine nature”* in the words of Saint Peter (II Peter 1:4).

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons expresses the same point in more direct terms: *“In His unbounded love, He became what we are so as to make us what He is.”* Saint Athanasius of Alexandria is more succinct: *“God became man, so that we might become like God.”*

When we understand that our salvation is part of the process of theosis or deification, we can realize that salvation is not just some change in our legal status before God. It is not just an imitation of Jesus through moral efforts, but it signifies an organic, all-embracing transformation of our created personhood – through a generous participation in divine life.

Saint Gregory the Theologian spells this out clearly in terms of our *healing*: “*That which is not assumed cannot be healed.*” That is to say that Christ has shared totally in our humanness – He has taken upon Himself our human nature in its entirety (except for sin) – and in this way He heals us and transfigures us.

As we celebrate this year the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, let us joyfully proclaim to God our Father, in the words of the Apostle Paul: “*Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift*” (II Corinthians 9:15), which is His Only-Begotten Son, Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. And in gratitude and in exchange, let us offer ourselves to the holy work of our destiny – living a Christlike life and, in so doing, becoming like God, as the Saints have so beautifully taught us in their writings and by their examples.

To echo the treasured song again: This is indeed a most *joyful* season of the year ... but let us not lose the real meaning and blessing of this sacred season: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

May you have the most joyous of Christmases this holy season – a glorious Nativity Feast and a peace-filled coming new year – blessed personally by the One Who truly loves us more than we love ourselves.

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing, and my sincere love,

+ Archbishop Michael

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