

NATIVITY MESSAGE for 2016

“He was made man, that we might be made God”

Beloved Fathers and Brethren; beloved children in the Lord:

The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the world, in Bethlehem of Judæa, twenty centuries ago, signaled the Incarnation of God the Word and the manifestation of God upon earth: “God was manifested in the flesh” (I St. Timothy 3:16). The Son of God was revealed in the flesh as the Theanthropos (God-Man), in order to restore us to the Divine life from which we had fallen.

Christ was incarnate, in the unfathomable greatness of His love, in order that man might be deified: “The Son of God became the Son of Man,” St. Athanasios the Great emphasizes, “in order that the sons of man, that is, of Adam, might become sons of God.”

To all those who received the Divine Epiphany with faith, our Lord “gave power to become the sons of God” (St. John 1:12). Divine adoption into sonship constitutes the greatest dignity and the greatest value for the faithful man, who is henceforth a child by Grace of the Most High, Almighty, and Immortal God.

As is well known, man was fashioned from the beginning “in the image of God,” but became corrupted and forfeited his regal Grace, distorting his filial relationship with God the Father. Nonetheless, by the Nativity of Christ he was deified, for he was united with the flesh of Jesus and incorporated into His Church, whereof Christ is the Head.

On the Theanthropic Body of the Church was bestowed all the Grace of the Triune Godhead, which saves man from sin and regenerates, sanctifies, and deifies him.

To each one of us, however, Grace is given “according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Ephesians 4:7). Christ bestows His Grace, “according to our own labor” (I Corinthians 3:8), in the virtues and the Mysteries.

Through Holy Baptism we are incorporated into the Orthodox Church, and through partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ we are united with Him and with each other. Our own contribution is assuredly needed for the realization of this charismatic gift, as well as for its preservation and increase. Man must freely yearn for his deification. He may have received the Grace of Divine sonship and may have been

registered in the Church as a child of God, but what matters is the extent to which he has actualized this Grace in his daily life.

This means that we must wage a continuous struggle against the world, the flesh, and the Devil, which militate against our Divine calling and strive to make us captive. Let us not forget that the Church consists of strugglers and penitents, who desire not only their moral improvement, but also holiness, union with God by Grace, and deification!

Our faith and our unstable will, therefore, need to be strengthened, so that they might reject the fulfillment of the deceptive and sinful delights that estrange us from the Divine Infant. Adoption into Divine sonship and the satisfaction of sinful desires are incompatible.

How, though, will we abide in the blessed state of Divine sonship and avoid the oppression of the evil thoughts that are constantly abuzz within us, for the purpose of diverting us from the path of salvation?

A decisive factor is the preservation of inward nearness to Christ our Savior. Living faith, un- ceasing prayer, works of love and mercy, and patience amid tribulations and temptations maintain our fellowship with Him and reinforce it. Repentance, forgiveness, and Communion of the Im-maculate Mysteries, following the spiritual preparation of fasting and abstinence, vivify and renew our union with Christ.

Evil thoughts are put to flight by intense and assiduous supplication to God, our only Liberator. The most sweet Lord Jesus Christ, when man calls upon Him for help, then “goes into the hid- den places of the soul” and expels the heavy yoke and the bitter bondage of wicked thoughts (St. Macarios of Egypt).

Beloved children in the Lord:

Let us reflect that, at a far remove from God and His Holy Church, which preserves Divine teaching and the method of purification and sanctification, there exist only error, sin, and perdition. Our Orthodox Church, with Her spiritual Tradition, leads us, by way of Her Saints, Hierarchs, and spiritual Fathers, to the correct understanding and experience of the Faith, and also to incorporation into the Incarnate Word. All who rebel against their lawful and canonical Orthodox Shepherds disturb Divine order and confine themselves within the destructive deceptiveness of their own wills.

May we live in genuine renewal of our Divine sonship, inspired by hope for Divine ascents and for struggles for the sake of virtue and holiness.

May He Who is born, the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior, uphold us in the Confession of the right Faith, far removed from errors and heresies, and especially from the pan-heresy of ecumenism, and far away from demonic assaults and snares and from the manifold apostasy of these apocalyptic times in which we live.

May He also banish evil thoughts of complacency and cupidity, of lasciviousness and misanthropy, and may He grant us eternal life and salvation. Amen!

Nativity of Christ, 2016

THE HOLY SYNOD