

Serbian Orthodox Church to her spiritual children on Christmas of 2021

PORFIRIJE

by the Grace of God

Orthodox Archbishop of Pech, Metropolitan of Beograd – Karlovci, and Serbian Patriarch, with all the hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church – to the clergy, monastics and all the sons and daughters of our Holy Church: grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, sends the joyous nativity greeting:

PEACE FROM GOD – CHRIST IS BORN!

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace,
good will among men” (Luke 2: 14)

Our dear spiritual children,

We know that the birth of the God-child in Bethlehem is the focal point of the world history, and that the realm of Christian values is based on the salvation of mankind in the Lord Jesus Christ. Birth of the God-man surpasses even the very creation of the world because it was the coming of the Divine Light into the cave by the town of Bethlehem that shined the light of possibility of eternal life upon man. In the Light which shone in the darkness and which was not overcome by night (John 1: 5) the Christian culture and civilization blossomed forth. The new Adam replaced the old so that the Holy Spirit could renew the entire creation through Him. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new,” says Apostle Paul (2 Cor. 5: 17). In that same spirit Evangelist John tells us the good news, that everything has come into being through the Logos of God (John 1: 3) Who took upon Himself the human nature and thus renewed the union of God and man, making the covenant at the core of that relationship eternal.

Love, brothers and sisters, is the original driving force of all events in the history of the salvation, and especially in the coming of Christmas – of God's entering the world as a child. This is why we can experience the beauty and power of today's Feast only in pure love. Driven by Love, God created the world and man. Led by it, He came down among us causing the human to receive the Divine into its bosom, as well as the uncreated to embrace the corruptible. Within the all-encompassing wisdom of the Holy Fathers of our Church we follow one central thread which states that the Son of God became one of us so that we may, through Grace, become what He is. Love of God made it so that the created world not be overwhelmed or destroyed by God's force, but that it may be healed and saved by walking the narrow path of the Lord's humility. Hence we ought to understand, amid the joy of today's Feast, that the birth of the God-man in the modest cave in Bethlehem invites us to real love, permeated with the sincere feeling of brotherhood among men. Hence, also, the joy of this Feast ought to be fueled by the dignity of our Christian witness, by love that is conducted through the care of others, and not by selfish illusions of unity which the globalistic culture, especially during this holy season, uses for commercial purposes, not delivering thus any peace or joy to anyone. Let us therefore approach each other, passing through the humility of the cave of Bethlehem, and let us remember that the Son of God was incarnate in order to prove to us that we need each other – man needs God and God needs man, a friend needs a friend, a relative needs a relative – because we can't make it without each other! Let us not burden ourselves with the superfluous question of “who is my neighbor” but rather, instead of assessing that which others do to us, let us ask ourselves what we do for others and to whom are we a neighbor. Let us therefore be a neighbor to all those whom we happen to encounter according to the measure of the love of Christ.

If this principle of love takes root within us, we will have planted a stem of salvation in the world

which desperately yearns for love. There is no true and eternal love without Christ the Savior in Whom God's love for man and man's love for God have met and been eternally united. The thought of Saint Justin of Chelie that “only love exudes the fragrance of immortality because it bears the fragrance of God” echoes with evangelical might. It teaches us the possibility of knowing God and obtaining eternal life in the love of Christ. If we neglect within us the love of Christ, we fall into a tragic dead-end. But if we renew it through struggle and grace, we ascend to the fullness of life. Within it is the source of the spiritual joy and a spring of unwavering moral fortitude in face of difficult trials of life.

This has been known since the ancient times to our people who during these joyous days once again turn to the custom of yule-tiding. Within families, in the neighborhoods, in the workplaces, everywhere we encounter the mutual pacifying followed by the festive greeting – Peace from God, Christ is born! Thus in a most beautiful way the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah comes true in our midst, “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given... And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9: 6). So let us pray during this blessed season to the Lord and King of peace (Heb. 7: 2) to extinguish animosities among the peoples, to save the people around the world, and that He be merciful and loving toward all of us, that we may be worthy heirs to our ancestors according to flesh and spirit, worthy of the blessing promised by the ancient prophets and delivered through the God-man Christ.

While our glances meet during this festive season, within our hearts simmers the feeling that our joy is not full. We celebrate the Nativity of Christ in the world which is filled with fear and restlessness, with a lack of understanding, which is filled with mistrust and intolerance which lead into a certain exclusivity that arises from the advanced culture of selfishness and individualism – core values of the globalistic, consumerist mentality. We live in a world in which the only thing a man will never renounce is the fear of the loss of physical safety. It seems that the people living in that world are not at all helped by the advancements in medicine, industry of technology. It seems that mankind is fundamentally not the same anymore, because the scientific and technological developments exhibited through the influence of information technology, strive to change the manner of human interaction, only increasing their alienation and loneliness. Suffice it to feel uncertainty at the curing of a most basic disease and one experiences a fear of an ultimate and existential kind.

This all speaks of an atmosphere which was precisely described by our Nobel-prize winning author Ivo Andric when he said, “the real and greatest danger is not in the dangers which are a threat indeed, but in the fear which is within us”. The God-child Christ expels that fear out of us, of which His beloved disciple John also testifies, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4: 18).

Before the Apostle of love spoke, there was a message recorded in the Old Testament, which unifies many others, “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41: 10). Hence the answer to the situation which oppresses us today ought to be sought in the words which the Lord Christ uttered to His disciples before His Passion, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16: 33). So let us rejoice, brothers and sisters, because through this Nativity we receive the Victor! Let us remove the shadow of fear in face of troubles, and with a firm faith in God let us celebrate the birth of the God-man, Whose New Testament name Emmanuel encourages us by its meaning – God is with us (Isaiah 7: 14).

In the festive joy of the Christmas day, with a special pastoral care and responsibility we send our fatherly greetings and prayers to all our brothers and sisters in the homeland and in diaspora, wherever Orthodox Serbs may live, and especially to those in Kosovo and Metohija, our spiritual and national cradle. We want them to know that we know of their trials which are ongoing, and that their Mother Church who has been with them until now, will always be with them. Today, in spirit and in prayer we

are together with all of you wherever your dwelling place might be. Every Orthodox home becomes a little Bethlehem where the meaning of the Badnjak and the warmth of the manger permeate us, where we all together sing the lofty hymn, “Thy Nativity O Christ our God, has enlightened the world with the light of reason...”

Today, with a special respect and gratitude we congratulate the Feast of the Nativity to all the physicians and medical staff, for whom we offer prayers to the God-child Christ! We pray also for the sick, that they recover speedily and that the contagion which has befallen the world pass quickly! We pray also that we, Orthodox Christians, not fear for our lives and not shrink back before the dangers brought about by the sickness caused by the spread of the virus, but that we have firm faith in God, true Healer of our souls and bodies, and that a sense of fear, fueled by the recommended “social distancing” not hinder us in doing that which is for the benefit of our neighbors and the community we belong to, in every respect: spiritual, familial, business... There is a saying that is perpetually relevant for us Orthodox Christians, “You have seen the face of your brother – you have seen the face of your God”. This saying was coined over the centuries of observation of our God-like nature always being turned toward communing with God, with our brothers and sisters and with nature as a whole. The Church therefore invites all during this pandemic to abide by the reasonable measures and recommendations of governments and other relevant institutions in the countries and regions where our people live, but she also reminds all and every one to avoid exclusivity and to respect human freedom as the highest and most precious gift of God given to man. Having in mind the call of the Apostle Paul, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5: 1) let us remain free, and no less responsible at the same time, guarding ourselves and others.

Facing thus the global threat of the corona virus, let us first understand that man was created to act as the only true factor of stability and survival in this world. Depending on the use of his free will, he can be the only disruptive factor, the only true virus. By his intervention into the human nature, and through violence against the creation as a whole, man disrupts the grandiose harmony of everything created by God. In that case, the corona virus, like any other virus, is just a reflection of an incomprehensibly deeper problem. Therefore, it is, among other things, a pedagogical warning to man to return to God's commandments, because when one steals from nature and does not live in harmony with the order that God established, the nature stops being our peaceful habitat. It remembers and suffers injustices, but sooner or later it strikes back. We must, therefore, respect nature, cherish it and care for it as the most valuable gift from God.

The meaning of Christmas is exactly in the God-child Christ offering us permanently, through His incarnation, a possibility to be healed of our own virus-like acting and to be reconciled with God, people and whole creation. Let us then be sober-minded regarding these things, hearkening the words of our great Saint and hymnographer John Damascene, “Let heaven and earth rejoice today, as was prophesied! Let angels and people spiritually celebrate! For God is manifested in the flesh to those who sat in the darkness and shadow of death, by being born of a woman. The cave and the manger receive Him, shepherds declare the wonder, wise men from the East bring gifts to Bethlehem, and we, with unworthy lips, imitating Angels, let us praise Him: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace!”

Happy and blessed feast of the Nativity of our Savior and Deliverer Jesus Christ!

With these wishes and prayers to the God-child Christ we wish all of you, both as one common body of the Church and individually, every good thing in the New Year 2022. Therefore we greet you with the joyous Christmas greeting:

Peace from God – Christ is born!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Beograd, on Christmas of 2021.