

Ecumenical Patriarch's 2017 Nativity Message

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PATRIARCHAL PROCLAMATION

FOR CHRISTMAS 2017

Bartholomew

By God's Mercy Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and
Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church

Grace, Mercy and Peace from the Savior Christ Born in Bethlehem

* * *

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, dear children,

By the grace of God, we are once again deemed worthy to reach the great feast
of the birth of the divine Word in the flesh, who came into the world to grant us

“well-being,”¹ remission of sin, of captivity to the works of the law and death, in order to grant us true life and great joy, which “no one can take from us.”²

We welcome the “all-perfect God,”³ who “brought love into the world,”⁴ who becomes “closer to us than we to ourselves.”⁵ Through kenosis, the divine Word condescends to the created beings in “a condescension inexplicable and incomprehensible.”⁶ He “whom nothing can contain” is contained in the womb of the Virgin; the greatest exists in the least. This great chapter of our faith, of how the transcendent God “became human for humankind,”⁷ while remaining an “inexpressible” mystery. “The great mystery of divine Incarnation ever remains a mystery.”⁸

This strange and paradoxical event, “which was hidden for ages and generations,”⁹ is the foundation of the gift of human deification. “There is no salvation in anyone else; for there is no other human name beneath heaven through which we must be saved.”¹⁰

This is the supreme truth about salvation. That we belong to Christ. That everything is united in Christ. That our corruptible nature is refashioned in Christ, the image is restored and the road toward likeness is opened for all people. By assuming human nature, the divine Word establishes the unity of humanity through a common divine predestination and salvation. And it is not only humanity that is saved, but all of creation. Just as the fall of Adam and Eve impacts all of creation, so too the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God affects all of creation. “Creation is recognized as free when those who were once

¹ Gregory the Theologian, Oration XXXVIII, on Theophany, namely the Nativity of the Savior, iii, PG 36, 313.

² John 10:18.

³ Doxastikon of the Aposticha from the Great Vespers of Christmas.

⁴ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, vi, PG 150, 657.

⁵ *Ibid.* vi PG 150, 660.

⁶ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, iii, 1, PG 94, 984.

⁷ Maximus the Confessor, *Various chapters on Theology and Economy concerning virtue and vice*, First Century, 12, PG 90, 1184.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Col. 1:26.

¹⁰ Acts 4:12.

in darkness become children of light.”¹¹ Basil the Great calls us to celebrate the holy Nativity of Christ as the “common feast of all creation,” as “the salvation of the world—humanity’s day of birth.”¹²

Once again, the words that “Christ is born” are unfortunately heard in a world filled with violence, perilous conflict, social inequality and contempt of foundational human rights. 2018 marks the completion of seventy years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, after the terrible experience and destruction of World War II, manifested the common and noble ideals that all peoples and countries must unwaveringly respect. However, the disregard of this Declaration continues, while various abuses and intentional misinterpretations of human rights undermine their respect and realization. We continue either not to learn from history or not to want to learn. Neither the tragic experience of violence and reduction of the human person, nor the proclamation of noble ideals have prevented the continuation of aggression and war, the exaltation of power and the exploitation of one another. Nor again have the domination of technology, the extraordinary achievements of science, and economic progress brought social justice and the peace that we so desire. Instead, in our time, the indulgence of the affluent has increased and globalization is destroying the conditions of social cohesion and harmony.

The Church cannot ignore these threats against the human person. “There is nothing as sacred as a human being, whose nature God Himself has shared.”¹³ We struggle for human dignity, for the protection of human freedom and justice, knowing full well that “true peace comes from God,”¹⁴ that the transcendent mystery of the Incarnation of divine Word and the gift of human deification reveals the truth about freedom and humanity’s divine destiny.

In the Church, we experience freedom through Christ, in Christ and with Christ. And the very summit of this freedom is the place of love, which “does not seek

¹¹ Iambic Katavasia on the Feast of Theophany, Ode VIII.

¹² Basil the Great, Homily on the Nativity of Christ, PG 31, 1472-73.

¹³ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, vi, PG 150, 649.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *On Corinthians 1*, Homily I, 1, PG 61, 14.

its own”¹⁵ but “derives from a pure heart.”¹⁶ Whoever depends on himself, seeks his own will, and is self-sufficient—whoever pursues deification by himself and congratulates himself—only revolves around himself and his individual self-love and self-gratification; such a person only sees others as a suppression of individual freedom. Whereas freedom in Christ is always oriented to one’s neighbor, always directed toward the other, always speaks the truth in love. The aim of the believer is not to assert his or her rights, but rather “to follow and fulfill the rights of Christ”¹⁷ in a spirit of humility and thanksgiving.

This truth about the life in Christ, about freedom as love and love as freedom, is the cornerstone and assurance for the future of humankind. When we build on this inspired ethos, we are able to confront the great challenges of our world, which threaten not only our well-being but our very survival.

The truth about the “God-man” is the response to the contemporary “man-god” and proof of our eternal destination proclaimed by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016): “The Orthodox Church sets against the ‘man-god’ of the contemporary world the ‘God-man’ as the ultimate measure of all things. “We do not speak of a man who has been deified, but of God who has become man.” The Church reveals the saving truth of the God-man and His body, the Church, as the locus and mode of life in freedom, “speaking the truth in love,” and as participation even now on earth in the life of the resurrected Christ.”

The Incarnation of the divine Word is the affirmation and conviction that Christ personally guides history as a journey toward the heavenly kingdom. Of course, the journey of the Church toward the kingdom, which is not realized remotely or independently of historical reality—or its contradictions and adventures—has never been without difficulties. Nevertheless, it is in the midst of these difficulties that the Church witnesses to the truth and performs its sanctifying, pastoral and transfiguring mission. “Truth is the pillar and ground of the

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 13:5.

¹⁶ 1 Tim. 1:5.

¹⁷ Theotokion, Aposticha of the Ainoi, October 12.

Church ... The pillar of the universe is the Church ... and this is a great mystery, a mystery of godliness.”¹⁸

Brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

Let us celebrate together—with the grace of the divine Word, who dwelt in us, as well as with delight and fullness of joy—the feasts of the Twelve Days of Christmas. From the Phanar we pray that our Lord and Savior—who was incarnate out of condescension for all people—may in this coming new year grant everyone physical and spiritual health, along with peace and love for one another. May He protect His holy Church and bless the works of its ministry for the glory of His most-holy and most-praised Name.

Christmas 2017

+ Bartholomew of Constantinople

Your fervent supplicant before God

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, On Timothy I, Homily XI, PG 62, 554.