Prot. No. 725

PATRIARCHAL ENCYCLICAL
FOR CHRISTMAS

+ B A R T H O L O M E W
BY GOD'S MERCY, ARCHBISHOP OF CONSTANTINOPLE-NEW ROME
AND ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH
TO ALL THE PLENITUDE OF THE CHURCH
GRACE, MERCY AND PEACE
FROM THE SAVIOR CHRIST BORN IN BETHLEHEM
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Most honorable brother hierarchs,
Beloved children in the Lord,

Today our Holy Church celebrates the Nativity in the flesh of the pre-eternal Son and Word of God, this "foreign and strange mystery" that "was concealed from ages and from generations" (Col. 1:26). In Christ, the truth about God and humankind is definitively revealed, as St. Cyril of Alexandria so theologically explains: "We are human by nature, but He condescended to what is contrary to divine nature for the sake of love and became man. We are servants of God by nature as His creation, but He became a servant once again, contrary to divine nature when He became man. But the reverse also holds true: He is God in essence, and we are, by grace, able to ascend to what is contrary to human nature. For we are human, and He is the Son by nature, yet we too become sons by status inasmuch as we are called to fellowship in Him."[1]

"Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (Jn. 8:32). Our Lord Jesus Christ is "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6), the liberator of man "from enslavement to the enemy." There is no life and liberty without the Truth or outside the Truth. Giving any meaning we desire to our life is not freedom, but the contemporary version of original sin, our self-enclosure within self-sufficient and self-serving independence, without a perception for truth as a relationship with God and our fellow human beings. Christmas is the time for self-knowledge, for understanding the difference between "God becoming

[1] Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus on the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity*, PG 75.561.

man" and "man acting as god." It is the time for awareness of the Christian teaching that "we do not speak of man becoming divine, but of God becoming human."[2]

The message of the good news about Christmas today echoes alongside the din of war and the clash of weapons in Ukraine, which is experiencing the horrible consequences of a provocative and unjust invasion. For us Christians, all wars are the murder of our brothers; they are all civil wars, which as the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church proclaimed, are "the result of the presence of evil and sin in the world."[3] In the case of Ukraine, the words of St. Gregory Palamas about his contemporaneous bloody conflicts among Orthodox believers in Thessaloniki are still more relevant: "For their common nurturing mother is the holy Church and devotion, whose chief and perfecter is Christ, the genuine Son, who is not only our God, but who also deigned it appropriate to be our brother and Father."[4]

In the person of Christ, the "recapitulation" of all has been achieved, the emergence of unity within the human race and the sanctity of the human person, the opening of the way toward the "likeness of God," and the revelation of the peace "that surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:10). Christ is "our peace" (Eph. 2:14), and it is to Christ that the historic and emblematic Sacred Church of "Holy Irene" is dedicated in the City of Constantine.

Our Savior blesses the "peacemakers," for "they shall be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9); He promotes the notion of righteousness and love, even toward our enemies. In the Divine Liturgy, the Orthodox Church prays "for the peace from above" and "for the peace of the whole world." And during the Liturgy of Basil the Great, we pray to and glorify the Giver of all good things: "Grant us your peace and your love, Lord our God; for you have granted us all things." As recipients and supreme beneficiaries of all things from God, we are obliged more than anyone else to strive for peace in accordance with the scriptural: "To the one that has received much, more will be demanded" (Lk. 12:48). In this sense, all that is enacted by Christians contrary to this principle does not primarily affect Christianity but rather those who live contrary to the divine commandments.

Never in the history of humankind has peace among peoples been a condition taken for granted. Instead, it was everywhere and always the result of inspired initiatives, of courage and self-sacrifice, of resistance to violence and rejection of war as a means of resolving differences, and a perpetual struggle for justice and protection of human dignity.

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[2] John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, PG 94.988.

[3] *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World*, IV, 1.

[4] Gregory Palamas, *On Peace with One Another*, PG 151.10.

Their contribution to peace and reconciliation constitutes the primary criterion for the credibility of religions. Within religious traditions, there are undoubtedly motivations not only for inner peace, but also for the advancement and establishment of societal peace and overcoming aggression in relations between people and nations. This is especially significant in our time when the position is maintained that peace will ensure due to economic development, a rise in living standards, and progress in science and technology through digital communication and the internet. We are convinced that there can be no peace among people and civilizations without peace among religions without dialogue and collaboration. Faith in God strengthens our effort for a world of peace and justice, even when that effort confronts humanly unsurpassable hurdles. At any rate, it is unacceptable for representatives of religions to preach fanaticism and fan the flames of hatred.

Most reverend brothers and beloved children,

Christ is born; glorify Him. Christ is descending from the heavens; come and meet Him. Christ is on earth; rise up to greet Him! Adhering to the exhortation of our holy predecessor on the Throne of the Church of Constantinople, let us celebrate the nativity of the world's Savior with spiritual joy, "not in an earthly, but in a heavenly manner," avoiding "everything superfluous and unnecessary; especially when others – made of the same clay and combination – are suffering hunger and poverty."[5] We pray that all of you may enjoy a prayerful and glorious Holy Twelve Days of Christmas, like a genuine fullness of time and radiance of the light of eternity. May the coming 2023 prove – by the goodness and grace of the Divine Word that became flesh for us and for our salvation – to be a period of peace, love, and solidarity, truly a year in the righteousness of our Lord!

We wish you many blessed years!

Christmas 2022

+ BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople

Fervent supplicant of all before God

To be read in churches during the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of Christmas after the reading of the Holy Gospel

[5] Gregory the Theologian, *On the Feast of Theophany, or the Nativity of Christ*, PG 36.316.