

**The Serbian Orthodox Church
to her spiritual children at Christmas, 2009
+AMPHILOHIJE**

By the Grace of God

Orthodox Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands, Locum Tenens of the throne of the Serbian Patriarchs, with all the Hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, to all the clergy, monastics, and all the sons and daughters of our Holy Church: grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, with the joyous Christmas greeting:

Peace from God! Christ is Born!

Again this year, our dear spiritual children, here we are before the cradle of the Divine Child Jesus Christ. The immense mystery beyond comprehension of the birth of God the Logos took place in a lowly cave in Bethlehem, which from that moment, once and for all time, became the center of the world – the center of God’s glory and a source of comfort to all those who have sought after God throughout human history. The great father of the Church, St. John Chrysostom, when speaking of the Nativity Feast says: “Honor, brothers, the feast days, but most of all the day of Christ’s Nativity; for he who calls Christ’s birth the mother of all feast days makes no mistake...” From the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord all the feast days spring forth, as rivers spring forth from their sources. According to the holy Chrysostom, the birth of Christ is a new creation of the world, and the Incarnation of God the Logos is the cornerstone of everything. Another great father of the Church, St. Gregory the Theologian, begins his Nativity homily with the doxology – glorification of God:

Christ is born – let us glorify Him!

Christ comes from heaven – let us welcome Him!

Christ is on earth – let us be lifted up!

Sing to the Lord all the earth!

And he continues: “Let the people that sit in the darkness of ignorance see the great light of the knowledge of God. The old is gone – look, everything has become new! The letter of the Old Covenant withdraws – the Spirit takes over; shadows disappear – the Truth arrives.”

According to the narrative of the Holy Evangelists, the Lord Jesus Christ was born in the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus in Bethlehem of Judea, the city of prophets and of King David, from whose offspring, according to the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets, was to be born the Messiah promised by God – the Savior of the world.

Saint Gregory Palamas, the theologian of the light of Bethlehem and of Tabor, in his Nativity homily reveals the deep meaning of the Messiah’s coming: “With the incarnation and birth of Christ the Messiah into the world, universal joy and peace have been granted to the world. Listen to the end of the song of the Angel, the deliverer of the good news, and you will discover it – it says: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among*



men (Luke 2:14); for God came in the flesh in order to bring His peace to the world and to reconcile it with the Most-High Father.” Christ’s peace is not the same as the peace of this world. St. Gregory Palamas calls the peace of Christmas “the spirit of adoption, because those who are bearers of this peace with faith became *inheritors of God and coinheritors of Christ* (Romans 8:17). “That is why, according to this same saint, only those who live in love with one another, and who according to the words of the Holy Apostle Paul “*bear with one another, and forgive one another...even as Christ forgave you,*” live in the same Savior and in the spirit of Christmas. (cf. Colossians 3:13)

The far removed and exalted God, Who in the Old Testament conversed with Moses on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 3:5), with Christ’s birth bowed down the heavens and became “Emmanuel, which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23), without losing anything divine. St. John of Damascus confirms this when he talks about Christ’s Nativity by saying: “That is why we don’t say about Him that He is a man made God; rather He is God Who became man: because He being perfect God according to His nature, became perfect Man without changing His own nature nor the divine economy.”

The newly revealed Abba Justin of Celije said that “on Christmas God, according to His immeasurable love, entered history, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, incarnate from the Ever-Virgin Mary Theotokos, and became a real man.” In this way in the new born Child – the Divine Child Jesus Christ God – we have been given every abundant gift of the Heavenly Kingdom, bringing with Himself eternal Truth, eternal Justice and eternal Life which, according to Saint Maxim the Confessor, we taste in advance in the life and the liturgy of Christ’s Church. The Feast of Christmas has divided the entire history of mankind into two parts — into the time of anticipation and into the time of salvation. The biblical anticipation of the Messiah and Savior already began with the promise to the first-created people Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3:15), and more concretely to our forefather the patriarch Abraham, to whom God promised that in his descendants all peoples would be blessed (see Genesis 22:18), which was fulfilled precisely by the Birth of the God-Man Jesus Christ.

All the Old Testament prophets pointed to the great mystery of the Messiah’s birth. Therefore, looking at the Old Testament with the eyes of the Holy Apostle Paul, we can repeat after him that the Old Testament in its entirety is “*our tutor to bring us to Christ*”, (Galatians 3:24), an instructor which before Christ pointed all God-loving souls to Bethlehem’s Cave. On the other hand, the three Magi from the East, whom the grace-filled Bethlehem star brought to the place where Christ was born, signify, according to the interpretation of the Holy Fathers, the entire polytheistic world, which through its *philosophy of men* (cf. Colossian 2:8) could not penetrate into the depths of the mystery of God’s Incarnation. To both the God-loving souls and the polytheistic world, the heavenly angel during the Birth of Christ revealed the great mystery of the world’s salvation, delivering the Good News to Bethlehem’s shepherds, and through them to all of us: “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11) From that proclamation of glad tidings to Bethlehem’s shepherds right up to today, the Birth of Christ is the Feast Day of heavenly and earthly joy in which angels and saints participate together, but also every God-loving soul enlightened by Bethlehem’s light. Like the three Wise Men from the East who came to worship the Divine Child Jesus Christ, all of us are called as well to worship Him, and to offer our gifts to the newborn King of heaven. (cf. Matthew 2:2) Is not all the good from God that we have done this year our biggest gift to the Divine Child? If we have fed the hungry, given a drink to the thirsty, and visited the sick, in doing so did we not offer our gifts to God? If we have glorified God with our life, living a holy and God-pleasing life, in doing so did we not offer the gold of the virtues to the Divine Child? If we have loved

God's Church and with our diligence have adorned the Lord's House, in doing so did we not offer a God-pleasing sacrifice? If we have acknowledged the suffering of our brothers, and have comforted them with our works, in doing so did we not do good to Christ Himself? (cf. Matthew 10:42) You see, in return for His limitless love the Divine Child Christ expects such gifts from us. That is why Christmas is also a feast day before which we re-examine our faith and everything which we, as God's creatures and sons and daughters of God, are called to do, as was so often repeated by our Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory.

This Nativity season we are especially filled with joyous sadness that our great Patriarch Pavle has left us and has gone on from earth to heaven. We deeply believe that he, in accordance with freedom given to him by God, "with all the saints of our nation" continues to offer his prayers for our Church and our crucified people, together with Saint Sava, Saint Simeon the Myrrh-gusher and all our holy ancestors who recognized and received Patriarch Pavle "as one of their own and as their equal." This Christmas we also remember all those who are afflicted, the suffering, those in exile, and all those who have had any injustice done them; we want to comfort them with the words: Christ is Born! Rejoice, for behold, the Lord comes to wipe away every human tear. (See Revelation 21:4)

With His birth on earth Christ has sanctified every aspect of human life – from conception to death and resurrection. That is why the Nativity reminds us not to raise our hand against the fruit of our womb, but rather to live according to God's commandment: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth." (Genesis 1:28) By respecting this blessing of God, Rachael's weeping over our people and for our children who are no more (see Matthew 2:18) would cease, and the inextinguishable life that has shown forth from Bethlehem's cave would blossom.

This Nativity season we are also with our brothers and sisters in Kosovo and Metohija — the cradle of our people. In Christ's love we ask them to return to their homesteads in Kosovo and to stay there to live with their holy shrines, safeguarding our Kosovo, that "wretched place of judgment." Let us never lose hope that God will enlighten the minds of those to whom He has given earthly power and control over other countries and peoples; that they, in the spirit of divine and human justice, will re-examine their unjust decisions regarding Kosovo and Metohija. Only in this way will peace and community in the Balkans and Europe be renewed, and the wounded dignity of the Serbian Orthodox people be returned. We also pray to the Newborn King of Peace that He eradicates war, violence and injustice everywhere in the world, so that finally peace and justice might reign among all peoples and nations.

We greet our entire God-loving people with the greeting of Bethlehem, asking that we safeguard our Orthodox Faith, our language and our alphabet, on whatever continent we might live. We Serbs are an ancient Christian nation, because through baptism by Cyril and Methodius and enlightenment by St. Sava we became part of the culture of the entire Christian world. We in this way have left an indelible stamp on the history and civilization of modern Europe and the world, embedding ourselves, once and for all, in their future. The Nativity of Christ always calls all of us to live in brotherly love, in love for God and in evangelical humility, living from the work of our hands and holding fast to the New Testament teachings: that we not do to others anything that we would not wish them to do to us. (cf. Acts 15:29)

In summarizing this great and inconceivable mystery of the Nativity, Saint Gregory the Theologian said: "This is our holy day. This is what we celebrate today: God's coming to mankind — so that we might come to God; or to put it more suitably: so that we might return to God; so that we might put off the old man and put on the new, and so that just as we have all died in Adam, we may come to new life in Christ, that we may be born again with Christ, and be crucified along with him, and be buried with Him, and resurrect along with Him."

Concluding our Nativity encyclical with the words of this Godly-wise Church father, we

greet you all, dear spiritual children, and we greet all peoples and all nations with the all-joyous greeting of Bethlehem and of peace:

PEACE FROM GOD - CHRIST IS BORN!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade at Christmas, 2009.
Your intercessors before the cradle of the Divine Infant Christ:

The locum tenens of the throne of the Serbian Patriarchs,
Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands AMPHILOHIJE
Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana JOVAN
Metropolitan of Libertyville-Chicago CHRISTOPHER
Metropolitan of Dabro-Bosna NIKOLAJ

Bishop of Sabac-Valjevo LAVRENTIJE
Bishop of Nis IRINEJ
Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla VASILIJE
Bishop of Srem VASILIJE
Bishop of Banja Luka JEFREM
Bishop of Budim LUKIJAN
Bishop of Canada GEORGIJE
Bishop of Banat NIKANOR
Bishop of New Gracanica-Midwestern America LONGIN
Bishop of Eastern America MITROPHAN
Bishop of Zica CHRYSOSTOM
Bishop of Backa IRINEJ
Bishop of Great Britain and Scandinavia DOSITEJ
Bishop of Ras and Prizren ARTEMIJE
Bishop of Bihac and Petrovac CHRYSOSTOM
Bishop of Osijek and Baranja LUKIJAN
Bishop of Central Europe CONSTANTINE
Bishop of Western Europe LUKA
Bishop of Timok JUSTIN
Bishop of Vranje PAHOMIJE
Bishop of Sumadija JOVAN
Bishop of Slavonia SAVA
Bishop of Branicevo IGNATIJE
Bishop of Milesevo FILARET
Bishop of Dalmatia FOTIJE
Bishop of Budimlje and Niksic JOANIKIJE
Bishop of Zahumlje and Hercegovina GRIGORIJE
Bishop of Valjevo MILUTIN
Bishop of Western America MAXIM
Bishop of Gornji Karlovci GERASIM
Bishop of Australia and New Zealand IRINEJ
Retired Bishop of Zahumlje and Hercegovina ATANASIJE
Vicar Bishop of Hvosno ATANASIJE
Vicar Bishop of Jegar PORFIRIJE
Vicar Bishop of Lipljan TEODOSIJE
Vicar Bishop of Dioclea JOVAN
Vicar Bishop of Moravica ANTONIJE
THE ARCHDIOCESE OF OCHRID
Archbishop of Ochrid and Metropolitan of Skoplje JOVAN
Bishop of Polos and Kumanovo JOAKIM
Bishop of Bregal and locum tenens of the Diocese of Bitolj MARKO
Vicar Bishop of Stobija David

[Path of Orthodoxy translation]