

Pastoral Letter on the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord 2008

† NICOLAE

by the mercy of God

Archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the Americas

*To the beloved clergy and right worshipping Christians,
Peace and joy from the Lord Christ,
and from us hierarchical blessing.*

*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.
This mystery is great, and I speak of Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5, 31-32)*

**Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Faithful,**

In the tradition of many peoples, and particularly in the Western Christian tradition, the feast of the Lord's Nativity is especially a family holiday. At Christmas, the family gathers in the parental home to rejoice with dear ones, parents, siblings, and other relatives. Presents are exchanged in memory of the presents brought by the magi to the newborn child Jesus. Christmas carols are sung proclaiming the joy of the Incarnation of the Son of God for the salvation of man. And this proclamation closes the caroling period prior to Christmas when we spread the news of the birth of the Savior to one another. The last to be caroled are the parents and siblings in the parental home. My word of proclamation at the feast of the Nativity of the Lord refers precisely to the importance of the family in the Church and society.

The family is the oldest and holiest institution known to humanity. In the Book of Genesis we discover the personal manner of creating man, personal meaning in the personal image of God, according to the image of the eternal communion between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over it.'" (Genesis 1:26-28) It is mentioned and emphasized through repetition that "God made humankind in his image; in the image of God he made male and female." We can say that this mode of creation of humankind in the image of God is made evident in this creation toward communion between man and woman. From the beginning man and woman were created for communion of life and love.

But man and woman have fallen turning their face away from the Creator and refusing to recognize their sin: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'" (Genesis 3:12-13) As consequence to their sin, they lost communion with God and each other. They lost eternity and bowed toward earth: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)

But God the Creator promised the first people redemption through the seed of the woman, through the offspring of the woman: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15) The offspring of the woman, according to the teaching of the Church Fathers, is the Savior

Jesus Christ. He struck the head of the tempter from Eden, Satan. Through the woman came the temptation and the fall, through offspring of the woman, salvation will come.

Christ came to reconcile humankind with God, to restore the fallen image of humankind, to give him once more the beauty of creation. As the image of God in humans refers to the communion with God and the neighbor, the Incarnation of the Word brought the restoration of the communion between man and woman to the image created in the Garden of Eden. By His presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and through His first miracle, Christ revealed the transformation of the earthly bond of matrimony into a bond of the Kingdom of heaven, for the union between man and woman at the wedding is accomplished “in Christ and in the Church”. The grace of Christ reestablishes man in his position as child of God. The grace of Christ also shows the two, man and woman, “united in body and spirit”, as a family in the Church. The personal path of salvation that each person begins at baptism continues following the wedding, together, as husband and wife, as a Christian family.

The Holy Apostle Paul presents this mystery of the union of man and woman according to the model of the union between Christ and the Church: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior....Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy...” (Ephesians 5:22-26). The relationship between Christ and the Church is sacrifice. The relationship between man and woman is also sacrifice. It is that sacrifice of Christ which regained for us the grace and gift, the personal offering of love toward one another. In the Church we bring the bloodless sacrifice as a result of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. In the family we bring the sacrifice of love, the offering of man for the woman and the reciprocated through the grace of Christ received at the wedding in order to live a life of family communion. This is the significance of St. Paul’s words: “this mystery is great, and I speak of Christ and the Church.”

Beloved faithful,

Revealing this understanding of Christian marriage, we can see the dangers to which the family becomes exposed in modern society. The Book of Genesis says explicitly and strengthens that God created man and woman, not two men or two women. And the fulfillment of the creation of man and woman was a blessing to grow and multiply. The child is the fruit of the love between man and woman and only this love brings life. Any other understanding of love can only be contrary to the creation of God and cannot give life. At this time, when we bring to one another tidings of the coming of the Son of God upon the earth it is appropriate to receive this Christian understanding of family. Let us add to our Christmas carols the confession of the truth about the redemption brought by Christ and the about the restoration of the family according to the grace of God.

May the Child Jesus, born in the cave of Bethlehem, be spiritually born today in the soul of each faithful person and the bosom of each family! For He is our peace and comfort and through Him we receive from God the Father “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift” (James 1:17).

I embrace you in the Lord Christ and wish you health, peace, and spiritual joy for the great feasts of the Nativity, New Year, and Theophany.

Happy New Year!

**Your brother in prayer toward God,
† NICOLAE**

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