



PASTORAL LETTER ON THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY 2007

† NICOLAE

by the grace of God
Archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the Americas

*To our Beloved Clergy and Orthodox Christians,
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,
and from us Hierarchical Blessings.*

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

**Most Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Christians,**

The Angel of the Lord's revelation to the Righteous Joseph brings us wonder and joy every year, for it proclaims our salvation, brought by the incarnate Son of God. St. Matthew the Evangelist then writes that this proclamation fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: *“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”* which means, *God with us* (Matthew 1:23). Our joy comes from this news that God is with us.

But in order to perceive the meaning of this proclamation, we must go back to the moment when the Virgin Mary receives the heavenly messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, who greets her in an unfathomable way: *“Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”* (Luke 1:28). Mary had been at prayer, as was her custom from the temple, but still she was amazed at this news. What was this favor that was spoken of? The Archangel explains to her God's plan for the pure Virgin: *“You have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son”*. Even for a human being totally dedicated to serving God, this news is hard to understand. And the angel completes the explanation: *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”* (Luke 1:35). Having been brought up on the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, the Virgin Mary knew the meaning of the descent of the Holy Spirit: that the grace of God came upon a person, transforming her into a chosen vessel, called to a special ministry. Mary also knew the meaning of the overshadowing of the Most High. During the time of Moses, a cloud used to hover over the Tabernacle and *cover it* (Number 9:16). The power of God protected the tent and the entire people of Israel, which by this means received direction for where they should set up camp. Later, on Mount Tabor, a bright cloud *overshadowed* the three Apostles and the voice of the Father from heaven revealed to them that *“this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him”* (Matthew 17:5). In the light of the Transfiguration, they too received the power to understand the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God. By the overshadowing of God, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, the salvation of mankind will be fulfilled through the grace of God and through the response of the Virgin, *“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”* (Luke 1:38).

The event of the Annunciation unveils the mystery of today's celebration of the Lord's Birth. For at the moment of that announcement the Virgin was made worthy of the grace of God—toward her, but toward all mankind as well. Mary was chosen, called, and then gifted by God. She was chosen before her birth through the providence of God which did not allow the Holy Ancestors Joachim and Anna to have children until the right moment. Then she was called by God through being dedicated to serve him in the temple, and later through the Annunciation itself. She received grace from God by virtue of her decision to accept the call. This succession, in the Holy Virgin's experience of choosing and then being given grace, points out for us also this path of first choosing, and then receiving grace.

God has first of all given us life. Then he has called us to become creators like himself, and to be life-givers by working together in synergy with God. When man turned away from his Creator and fell, God did not leave him in his wandering, but gave him prophets which, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the will of God to mankind, including salvation as the gift of God through the Incarnation of the Word. God gave mankind his very Son, *"that they may have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10). He who in the beginning *"formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being"* (Genesis 2:7) has given man a new birth into true life through the grace of his Son.

The Birth of Christ is the Feast of life as the gift of God. Christ is the Gift by which we see the Father-Giver through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. The Christmas gift we give to our loved ones can be nothing other than Christ. For without Christ, no other gift has any meaning. But how do we give Christ? According to the example of the Holy Virgin, by receiving the revelation of God for our own life, receiving Christ as the gift of grace in order that we then may offer him to others. In the Church Christ is offered as a gift through word and through mystery. The Word is that of the Gospel, in which Christ Himself proclaims himself and allows himself to be proclaimed by the evangelists. The Mystery is the offering of the Body and Blood of Christ which has been proclaimed already in the Gospel. Receiving Christ in the Eucharist, we receive also His life, which renews our life. And it is fitting that we should pass on the gift we have received—to those in our family: brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren; to those in our lives: relatives, neighbors, friends; to the strangers for whom we can become a neighbor, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Any other gift we give at Christmas receives its meaning and is accompanied by joy if it is connected to the Gift of God, Christ the Lord.

At this glorious holiday I call upon you to be aware of the significance of the gift of Christmas in our lives, for us, our families, and our parishes. Let us perceive the meaning of the gift of God to us, a gift which we ought to offer those around us. And together let us thank God for his gifts of health, peace, and growth in every Christian family.

With a brotherly embrace in Christ our Lord, my wish for you at these Holy Holidays of Christmas, New Year, and Theophany is that you enjoy them in the grace and peace of God.

Many Years!

Your Brother in Prayer to God,
† NICOLAE

Chicago,
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