



NATIVITY EPISTLE FROM THE FIRST HIERARCH OF THE RUSSIAN TRUE ORTHODOX CHURCH

We congratulate our fellow Most Reverend Archpastors, all-honorable pastors, monastics and monks, and all the God-loving flock of the Russian True Orthodox Church on the great and joyful feast of the Nativity of Christ!

Christ is born – Glorify Him!

Long ago, in a small cave in Bethlehem, an event occurred that could only be compared in importance to the creation of the world. There, the King of kings and the Lord of lords was born, the descendant of the kings of Judea; the Son of David and Solomon was born. The Son of the *More Honorable than the Cherubim and the More Glorious of the Seraphim* was born; by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the God-Man Himself was born. The world had long awaited His birth, as if sensing it. Prophecies of Christ's coming were read not only by Jewish scribes but were also known to pagan sages, and they anxiously awaited the dawn of a new era, which they dimly sensed with their whole souls. The birth of Christ was one of the most joyous events in the earthly world – it marked the beginning of a new era, a new understanding of the Covenant of God – the **Covenant of love**. It became the starting point for drawing all the peoples of the earth to the true faith; it completely changed the course of earthly events. People, as is known, live in hope, and the Nativity of Christ gave people the brightest and most true hope - *the hope of eternal life and eternal love in God*.

How rarely in our lives does something happen that opens up new hopes and new horizons for us? Yet the Nativity of Christ gave the whole world hope in the all-encompassing mercy and love of God. Never before has the earthly world known such joy. Never has such a bright holiday happened in it. That is why it is so bright and good for us on this night: we feel faith in eternal life, we lift the curtain over it and experience almost heavenly joy. It was this that the God-child brought to earth, with the goal of resurrecting the righteous.

Unfortunately, however, this joy that is now overflowing us can quickly end – we only have to remember some of our everyday hardships and sorrows; we only have to leave the church and go outside, listen to the noise of this world, think about how much sorrow, atrocities, depravity there is around... How can we rejoice in this fallen world? How can we combine our stillness of soul with the whirlpool of life? How can we preserve this childish, pure prayer that may have just been barely kindled in our hearts?

But let us not think that we live in a world in which true joy is impossible. The world has not changed much, and on that night when the Lord came to earth, there were as many sorrows and horrors on earth as there are now. In a strange way, the great joy of the Nativity of Christ was intertwined with sorrow already when the miraculous Child had barely opened His eyes.

The cave was small and unwelcoming, far from the kind of place befitting the arrival of the Lord. One must suppose that this greatly struck the eastern kings – magi – who came to look for the

King, who visited Herod and the Jewish scribes, only to find the Child in a manger for cattle. Instead of luxury – poverty, instead of the capital – a province of Judea, instead of courtiers – cattle in a barn and a poor family, exhausted by wanderings, unknown to anyone...

This is how the earth met its Creator; this is how Judea met its God.

With what eyes did Christ look at His children then? What did He feel, having protected His people for many years, being forced to hide in a foreign country on the second day after His birth? The only people who came to pay Him honor turned out to be pagans, who only guessed His coming by a vague prediction, by the stars. And He, who rejoiced inexpressibly about the love that He brought to people, how He must have grieved in those moments about the deafness and blindness of people! And His joy was intertwined with sorrow.

And thus Mary's joy about the Newborn was darkened: she had to flee even from the wretched cave, which for her, who knew how to look not with her physical eyes but with her spiritual ones, was a "delightful palace," as is sung in the troparion for the eve of the feast. The flight to Egypt was only the beginning of a long chain of sorrows that Christ and Mary had to endure during His earthly life. Ahead were still numerous insults from the scribes, accusations of blasphemy, incessant wanderings, deprivations; ahead was the betrayal of one of the closest disciples and death on the Cross... As God already then, the God-child knew all this, but he smiled and loved this cruel world into which he had come. He knew that after His flight thousands of infants would be slaughtered, but he knew that the souls of infants would never be forgotten by people and would be at rest with His Father. He knew that amidst His wanderings and hardships, He would find the people closest to Him – the disciples. They who would continue His preaching, which would never die on earth. He knew that on the night of Judas' betrayal His disciples would partake of His Body and Blood for the first time, and for the first time on earth a man would partake of his Creator. He knew that repentance would follow Peter's denial. He knew that the scourging and torments on the Cross would end with the Resurrection. This knowledge of the highest Providence and the joy that transcends sorrow is not easy to come by. That is why the Lord on the Cross would sigh: *My God, why hast thou forsaken me* (Matt. 27:46)? He would sigh but would drink the cup of suffering to the end.

This is the immutable law of earthly existence: joy always goes hand in hand with sorrow. This is how the Lord created it; our world is based on this. It must be different in the Kingdom of Heaven, but here, while we are alive, we submit to this immutable law, for even the Lord Himself, having come into this world, submitted to it. Therefore, let no joy make us complacent, for sorrow is nearby, and let no sorrow lead us to despair, for the Lord always intertwines sorrow with joy.

Let us remember this unity of sorrow and joy in those days when we experience sorrows, when we are overcome by despondency, when we stand on the brink of despair. Let us then think of the Infant God, smiling like a child in His manger while, as God, knowing about the road ahead; let us think of Mary, who was able to discern the delightful palace in the stable. Let us, in bitter moments, remember the Christmas joy we experienced in the Church. A joy which transcends all earthly sorrows, all losses, all betrayals, all adversities, because today a new law has come into the world – the law of love, the good news has come – the news of the Kingdom of Heaven, firm hope has come – **the hope of eternal life and eternal love.**

The Church calls all of us, her children, to meet the newborn Savior, to prepare for a worthy meeting with Him - "Christ is born – glorify Him! Christ comes from heaven – meet Him!" But does modern humanity hear this joyful call? From the Gospel we know that on the holy Christmas night, when an event unparalleled in the history of the world took place, when God appeared on

earth, humanity, living its ordinary life, was unaware of what happened in Bethlehem, that God appeared in the flesh. Only the Virgin Mother herself, righteous Joseph, and the humble shepherds of Bethlehem, who heard from the heavenly messengers, angels, about the birth of the Savior of the world, were witnesses of this extraordinary event – and the human race did not even suspect it. So it was then when the work of our salvation had not yet been accomplished and the message about the coming Christ had not yet been heard. In our time, when the Gospel has already been preached everywhere, and continues being preached by the Church even now, what do we see in life if not criminal indifference and disregard for the great work of our salvation, accomplished for us by God Himself, who became incarnate “for us men and for our salvation”?

After all, the time in which we live is a terrible time. Never before in the history of mankind has evil appeared so openly, so brazenly and shamelessly! How drastically life has changed, changed for the worse! It is not for nothing that the Word of God warns us that the world will inevitably enter the realm of apostasy – apostasy from both the truths of faith and normal moral principles and concepts.

And now it is impossible not to see how people are becoming more and more immersed in the vain affairs of the world, are carried away by various, previously unseen passions generated by modern civilization. How much unbridled sinfulness has suddenly appeared in the world around us, how the boundaries between moral norms and repugnant sin are being dissolved. Is this not unfolding before our very eyes? Tragically, in many countries there is a rapid dismantling of everything that has always been unshakable. Traditional human values are being declared illegal. Filth and vile vices are considered normal, legally established, are widely propagated in life, and are approved in some formerly Christian countries.

A believer and a normally thinking person has nothing to breathe in the atmosphere of general retreat. And over all this hangs the terrible threat of war, the consequence of which may be the destruction of all that exists.

But it is not for nothing that we read in the Holy Gospel the words of the Savior: *Fear not, little flock* (Luke 12:32). In our time – a dreadful time, a time of retreat from all the foundations of faith and morality which we see now – the number of true believers is truly a “little flock” compared to the majority of humanity, which has actually lost the true faith and trampled on all the foundations of Christian morality.

It becomes obvious to us that the farther humanity moves away from Christ, the more brazenly death triumphs, the more sorrows fill the world, the greater the despondency of the peoples from the disasters coming upon the universe.

And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another (Matt. 24:10), the Lord predicts in the Gospel. Is this not the reality of our days? What do we not see now? But the saddest thing is that people cannot understand the reasons for all these disasters. They cannot understand that salvation is not in politicking, not in external reforms of life and not in its material "progress" - but in returning to the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love, in returning to the Gospel ideals and in the churching of life, in complete, humble and loving obedience to the Mother Church and Her saving leadership.

To this day the incarnate God-Child Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church, and from Him, from the Immortal Head of the Church, flow the life-giving grace-filled forces throughout Her entire body, reviving us with immortality and eternity. In Her are all the holy sacraments and holy virtues by which we are cleansed and renewed, reborn, sanctified and saved.

And when we imagine the immeasurable greatness of the Church of Christ, before the name of Whose Head *every knee has bowed, in heaven and on earth and under the earth* (Phil. 2:10), what bewilderment, although holy and touching, can be caused in us by the words of the Apostle Paul about Priscilla and Aquila and their domestic Church: *Greet Priscilla and Aquila [...] and the church that is in their house* (Rom. 16:1-6).

On the one hand, such immeasurable greatness of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and on the other, its confinement, as it were, to the small dimensions of the private home of Priscilla and Aquila... This remark of the holy apostle about Priscilla and Aquila and their domestic Church has for us enormous, divinely revealed importance, for it indicates that the essence of the Church of Christ is not in its external size or earthly greatness, but in what the domestic church of Priscilla and Aquila undoubtedly contained, despite its small size. In it were visible the true faith of Christ, and the grace of the holy sacraments, and agreement with the universal Church, and the apostolic ministry. Thus, water is always water, whether it be in the boundless ocean or in a river, in the heavenly clouds or in a drop of rain. The essence of the water element is everywhere one and the same.

This thought, which the Apostle Paul gives in his Epistle to the Romans, must be especially kept in mind when someone begins to measure the greatness of his local or national church, his diocese or his parish by the size of the land, or the number of people, or the wealth and external splendor of his own. In these manifestations of his pride, it is good to remember Priscilla and Aquila and their domestic church.

In the holy book of Revelation, there are wonderful words that the Lord says to those who remained faithful to Him: *Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name [...] And Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth* (Rev. 3:8,10). Wonderful, comforting words! The Lord promises special mercy and protection to His faithful. And isn't this what this solemn Feast tells us?

Today we solemnly celebrate the incarnation of the Eternal God, Who becomes the God-man for the sake of all mankind, in order to redeem it from original sin, wash it with the waters of baptism, sanctify it with Holy Communion and other Sacraments, and grant those who believe in Him the opportunity to enter the Kingdom of God. God, what great opportunities a believing Christian has!

Today, when the sea of life seems especially dangerous and impassable, ready to swallow all of humanity in its whirlpool, when the forces of hell are becoming more and more hardened in their ferocity and cunning in their deceit, it is especially important to always remember this truth. We must firmly know that everything that we encounter on our life's path, the Lord will certainly turn into salvation for those who love Him – just come, fall down before this wondrous manger of the God-child, bow down and sing of His ineffable goodwill towards us, sinners. Neither a teardrop, nor a part of a drop will be hidden from the Savior born today, always standing at the door of our hearts, always ready to transform our sorrow into joy. All Scripture, all the prophets, apostles, holy fathers and all the saints of the Orthodox Church bear witness to this truth. Whatever waves rise up against us, let us not be afraid, let us not be carried away by those who sow fear and panic in the present world. But more than ever, let us study the lives of the saints who, for the sake of Christ and the future blessed life, have passed their sorrowful earthly path as victors. Let us firmly remember from now on the forces of evil are powerless; from now on they are doomed – Christ is born, God is with us!

The joy we experienced in these wonderful days of the Nativity within the Church surpasses all earthly sorrows, losses, betrayals and tribulations! Therefore, let us rejoice now, O Christians, in the great mystery of God's incarnation; let us share this joy and love with our neighbors, singing a song of praise with the Angels: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*

I congratulate all of you, faithful children of the True Church of Christ, with all my heart on the Nativity of the God-child Jesus Christ!

CHRIST IS BORN – GLORIFY HIM!

The Nativity of Christ.

December 25/January 7, 2024/2025

*+Archbishop Tikhon, of Omsk and Siberia,
First Hierarchy of the Russian True Orthodox Church*