

PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY 2022

† NICOLAE

by the grace of God

*Archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the United States of America and
Metropolitan of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas*

*To our Beloved Clergy and Orthodox Christians,
Grace, peace, and joy from Christ the Lord, and from us hierarchical blessing.*

*“Today heaven and earth are united, for Christ is born.
Today God has come to earth, and man ascends to heaven.”
(Sticheron from the Litia of the Feast)*

Very Reverend Fathers, Beloved Faithful,

With holy joy we bring glory to God, for He has allowed us again to celebrate together *The Lord's Nativity*, the feast of hope and of joy, the feast of the descent of God to mankind, the feast of the communion of heaven and earth. The joy of the proclamation of this mystery is, in the sense of the words of the sticheron from the Litia, expressed by St. Gregory Palamas: *„today I see equality of honor between heaven and earth, and a way up for all those below to things above, matching the condescension of those on high.... For nothing done by God from the beginning of time was more beneficial to all or more divine than Christ's nativity.”*¹

The reason for this joy is the wonderful way in which God has chosen to turn mankind back to communion with Himself, to give mankind the chance to regain the *likeness* of God which Adam lost in Eden: *“since it was God's good pleasure to annul the pretext for that pride which brought down His rational creatures, He makes everything like Himself; and because by nature He is equal to Himself and equal in honor, He makes the creation equal to itself by grace and equal in honor. And how was this done? The very Word of God from God emptied Himself in an indescribable way, came down from on high to the lowest state of man's nature, and indissolubly linked it with Himself, and in humbling Himself and becoming poor like us, He raised on high the things below.”*² In these words of St. Gregory Palamas we find a deep explanation of St. Paul the Apostle's hymn in his Epistle to the Philippians: *“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:6-8). God the Creator, God Almighty did not remain in His majesty, did not look down indifferently on His creation, nor did He wait for the creature to humble itself and return, but He came Himself, emptying Himself of glory, clothing Himself in humility, so that He might save lost mankind.

St. Gregory goes on to say that through this condescension God **“mingled” humanity with divinity and thus showed to all that humility is a path that leads to the things above, offering Himself as an example to mankind and to the holy angels.** We understand that God's descent to

¹ St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki: *Homily 58, on the Holy Nativity of the Lord*. From Saint Gregory Palamas: *The Homilies* (Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009).

² Ibidem, p. 184.

earth produced a profound change in human nature. Under the burden of pride, mankind had become bent down, gazing on material things, and was found empty of the grace of God. The humble God freed mankind, pointed him again heavenward, clothed him again in the garments of grace, and offered him the chance of eternity. The services of the Feast of the Nativity express this miracle of the **humility that heals and raises up**, that brings us back to the likeness of God: “*Hearken, O heaven! Give ear, O earth! Let the foundations of the earth be shaken! Let trembling seize the regions beneath the earth, for our God and Creator has clothed Himself in created flesh; He fashioned all creation, yet reveals Himself in the womb of her that He formed!*”³

As we know, this wondrous news of the descent of God to earth was proclaimed to the shepherds in Bethlehem, who in turn became messengers of the miracle. The star guided the magi to the Nativity manger, offering them the chance to behold with their own eyes the Savior of the world, to worship Him, and to bring Him prophetic gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the news also awakened the apprehension of King Herod, fearful for the undeserved throne on which he sat. **The world was receiving its Savior, the world was rejoicing in the proclamation of eternity, but he was in fear because of passing earthly and useless glories.** The Holy Family fled from him into Egypt at the angel’s command, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy: “*See, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before Him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt with fear*” (Isaiah 19:1).

This “swift cloud” on which the Lord “rides” is the Theotokos, unburdened by sin and the curse, swift through the beauty of purity and the multitude of blessings. Earlier God had gone before the Israelites in the form of a pillar of cloud (Exodus 13:22), bringing them out of Egypt. Now God travels on a “swift cloud,” that He Himself might escape the sword of that people brought out of Egypt. St. Nikolai Velimirovich asks why the Giver of Life flees before mortals. Could not God have sent an angel of death to take the soul of Herod and prevent the threat to the life of the child Jesus? St. Nikolai’s response is the following: “*Undoubtedly the Almighty could have done this... But how would the Gospel have shown **the horrific degradation of human nature through sin** and how would it have been seen that **God Himself had to become involved**, if through death Herod’s evil intention had been thwarted? And if God had not fled from mankind, **how would the spiritually blind see the abyss into which humanity had fallen through its alienation from the true God Who had guided it?**”⁴*

Beloved Faithful,

In these few words of the great Serbian hierarch we find answers to many of our questions. First, the way God has chosen to accomplish the salvation of humanity, in deep humility, *unto death*, not through a majestic revelation of His glory. Then the question of why Almighty God allows these trials in our lives: in order to heal us of spiritual blindness that we might know our own alienation from God. And, more importantly for our times, **why is mankind so divided and agitated?** The two thousand year history of Christianity teaches us that the world, from the Lord’s Nativity until now, is divided between those who recognize Him as Savior and those who deny Him, between those who desire salvation and those who live according to *the world and its lusts* (cf. 1 John 2:17). To this division is added the **fear of disease and of economic crisis** that are cultivated in our world.

³ Sticheron from the Royal Hours on the eve of the feast.

⁴ Sf. Nicolae Velimirovici, *Predici*, Editura Ileana, București, p. 54-55.

In a world of division, even among Orthodox brethren, in a world of fear, the proclamation of the Lord's Nativity ought to be an occasion for hope and joy, **an opportunity for each of us to identify with those who seek Christ and desire salvation**, with those who receive the news of the angels and shepherds and become in turn advocates of peace and joy, for a Savior has been born.

I pray that the Christ Who was born in a manger may grant you the courage and joy of proclamation, health, growth in faith, and unconquerable hope in Him Who descended to earth!

With a brotherly embrace in Christ the Lord I wish you *Joyful Feasts* and *Many Years!*

Your brother in prayer to God,
† **Metropolitan NICOLAE**

Chicago, The Feast of the Lord's Nativity, 2022