



Orthodox Church in America
DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST

2016 NATIVITY MESSAGE OF HIS GRACE, BISHOP PAUL

In this night of reconciliation let no man be wroth or gloomy; in this night that stills all, none that threatens or disturbs! This night belongs to the sweet One; bitter or harsh be in it none! In this night that is the meek One's, high or haughty be in it none! In this day of pardoning let us not exact trespasses! In this day of gladnesses let us not spread sadnesses! In this day so sweet, let us not be harsh! In this day of peaceful rest, let us not be wrathful in it! In this day when God came to sinners, let not the righteous be in his mind uplifted over sinner! In this day in which there came the Lord of all unto the servants, let masters too condescend to their servants lovingly! In this day in which the Rich became poor for our sakes, let the rich man make the poor man share with him at his table. On this day to us came forth the Gift, although we asked it not! Let us therefore bestow alms on them that cry and beg of us. This is the day that opened for us a gate on high to our prayers. Let us open also gates to supplicants that have transgressed, and of us have asked forgiveness. Today the Lord of nature was against His nature changed; let it not to us be irksome to turn our evil wills. This is the day that gladdened them, the Prophets, Kings, and Priests, for in it were their words fulfilled, and thus were the whole of them indeed performed! Today Godhead sealed itself upon Manhood, that so with the Godhead's stamp, Manhood might be adorned. The voice that of old Isaiah spoke, today became reality. For the Virgin this day brought forth Immanuel in Bethlehem. (Excerpt from 100 Stanzas on the Nativity by St. Ephrem the Syrian; quoted from preachersinstitute.com)

Beloved Clergy, Monastics and Laity of the Diocese of the Midwest,

Christ is Born — Glorify Him!

As I ponder the above words from Saint Ephrem, it causes me to think that for many people the holiday season is not a happy time. Some people get depressed at this time of the year, and may even resent the “happy façade” in their mind that is presented by others. For some, there may be strife and conflict in family life, abuses of various kinds, marital divorce, or loss of loved ones around this time.

What I love in these words from Saint Ephrem is that he is saying much more than “gray skies are going to clear up, put on a happy face!” The Nativity of our Lord offers us the opportunity not of just being happy, but more so to be transformed. We can come to Our Lord Jesus Christ whether happy, sad, angry, depressed, full of strife of various types, or powerless over some addiction that plagues us and begin this process of transformation one day at a time. Saint Ephrem says, “Today the Lord of nature was against His nature changed, let it not to us be irksome to turn our evil wills.” So this feast day offers us the opportunity to not just hide from what is wrong in our lives and act as if we are happy, but to face what is not right in our lives, with the hope that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Saint Ephrem's words also show that when our Lord meets us where we are, it will change the way we interact with those around us. Many of us might be unhappy about our circumstances, wishing that someone else or something else (apart from us) needs to change. The words above tell us we have a greater chance of changing others or our circumstances by first changing ourselves.

*Bethlehem has opened Eden: come let us see! We have found joy in a secret place:
come let us seize Paradise hidden in the cave! (Ikos from Nativity Canon)*

Let us embark on this journey of seizing Paradise in this cave of joy where we find God become man. How can we ever become truly human in our life without knowing the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us?

So if anyone is depressed or in turmoil of some kind, enter into the cave where the Word has become flesh and surrender your will to His will; embrace Him as Lord and Savior; allow Him to lead you to His Holy Church where the process of healing can begin and continue. Through the prayers of our Holy Father Ephrem the Syrian, O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us!

With love in Christ, the unworthy

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Paul
Bishop of Chicago and the Midwest

To be read during Nativity services and/or circulated among the faithful of the Diocese.