



Orthodox Church in America DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST

2020 NATIVITY MESSAGE OF HIS EMINENCE, ARCHBISHOP PAUL

Since March of this year, our faith has been tested by the pandemic. Some have left parishes that wear masks or use other methods of giving communion to attend other parishes that don't follow these practices. Some are afraid to go to church for fear of getting the virus. In the case of people 65 and older this is understandable, because many of them may be at high risk due to other healthcare issues. Attendance at church has been limited because of the continued huge increase of people coming down with COVID-19 (recently, over 245,000 cases in one day were reported in our country); deaths have increased as well. Hospital beds are filling up again with people who have come down with the virus. Everyone has their own opinions about how this virus is being dealt with in our churches. This has intensified the discord among some people over this.

We have seen black men and women killed by the police leading to peaceful protests and demonstrations. Unfortunately, others have used this terrible tragedy to justify the intentional, violent looting and destruction of property. This has only intensified peoples' fears and done more harm to local businesses.

People are suffering from depression, and despair; some have lost their jobs and some businesses have closed due to the virus and the restrictions placed on them by state and local authorities.

As we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord this year, what do our worship and the wisdom of our Holy Fathers offer to help us make sense of this? I put before you this day the examples of two men, King Herod of Judea, and Joseph, the Betrothed to the Virgin Mary and foster-father of our Lord. Both dealt with this Good News in entirely different manners. One of the verses from the 9th Royal Hour describes Herod's response:

Herod was filled with alarm when he saw the righteous wise men. Overcome by fury, he determined precisely when the child was born. Mothers were robbed of their infants: Their tender lives were reaped as a bitter harvest. Milk stopped flowing and breasts dried up. Great was the suffering! Therefore assemble in holy fear, O faithful, to worship the birth of Christ! (Verse from the 9th Hour of the Nativity Royal Hours)

King Herod initially deceived the wise men to find out how he could see the Infant in Bethlehem in order to "worship Him." But this was not the case. The gospel states Herod "in a furious rage" slew all the infants under two when the wise men left him (Matthew 2:16). St Gregory Palamas gives us an insight into the nature of this rage in his homily on the Nativity:

The author of evil (Lucifer) did not want to be lower than any of the angels, but to be equal in excellence to the Creator Himself; he was the first to suffer the terrible fall before anyone else. Smitten by envy, he deceitfully attacked Adam and dragged him down to the abyss of Hades by means of the same desire. By so doing, he made Adam's fall difficult to reverse, and it required God's extraordinary presence, which has now been accomplished, to restore him. His own fall (Lucifer's), however, he rendered incurable once and for all, because he did not acquire his arrogance from anyone else, but became himself the principle of evil and fullness of evil, and made himself available to anyone wishing to participate in evil. (St. Gregory Palamas, On the Nativity)

Herod's arrogance and pride blinded him from the experience and joy of this blessed event. The birth of the Divine Infant in the Cave posed a threat to him, which he could not tolerate. He wanted to be treated as an equal to God and not as an earthly king. He became a participant in evil and killed 14,000 innocent infants thinking he would kill the Divine Infant born in the Cave. We now turn to Joseph the Betrothed where we see something different.

When Joseph went up to Bethlehem, his heart was filled with sadness. But you cried out to him, O Virgin: Why are you so troubled? Why are you in misery seeing me with a child? Do you not understand at all? I bear a fearful mystery! Cast your fears away, and learn a strange wonder: God in His mercy descends from heaven to earth. Within my womb He has taken flesh! When He is pleased to be born you will see Him. You will rejoice, and worship Him, your Creator. The angels ceaselessly praise Him in song, glorifying Him with the Father and the Holy Spirit. (Verse from the 9th Hour of the Royal Nativity Hours)

Nativity Letter of His Eminence, Archbishop Paul

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Joseph was beset with doubt and was initially bothered by this news. He may have been scandalized and because of this news, sought to divorce Mary quietly so as to not shame her (Matthew 1:19). The words from the above verse of the 9th Hour of the Nativity show that something different was going on with Joseph. Mary issues a poetic plea to him to “cast your fears away, and learn a strange wonder.” By so doing He will come to “rejoice, and worship Him, your Creator.” What was in Joseph’s heart that allowed him to conquer his initial doubt and sadness? Once again we turn to St. Gregory of Palamas:

Now 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...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, or rather, He gathered both things into one, mingling humanity with divinity, and by so doing, He taught everyone that humility is the road which leads upwards, setting forth today Himself as an example before men and holy angels alike. (St. Gregory Palamas, On the Nativity)

Joseph may have been sad and troubled, but not angry or bitter. His heart was open to being taught. More importantly, he was open to embracing this road to humility that led to the Divine Infant in the Cave. Here he would learn the Good News concerning our Incarnate Lord:

Today heaven and earth are united, for Christ is born. Today God has come to earth, and man ascends to heaven. Today God, who by nature cannot be seen, is seen in the flesh for our sake. Let us glorify Him, crying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace! Your coming has brought peace to us: Glory to You, our Savior! (Litya verse of the Nativity)

We have a choice that is set before us this day. Let us renounce the pride and arrogance of King Herod who rejected the Divine Infant in the Cave. This hardness can find its way into us if we do not guard our heart. This way only leads to death where there is no hope. Do not let the events of this past year lead us to the point that we become resentful, bitter and arrogant. This is nothing more than the vice of pride.

The other choice before us is the example of Joseph; he was tested as he had doubts. He wondered if this really was “Good News” that Mary was to give birth to our Lord. But he heard the voice of the angel who visited him; he heard the voice of the Virgin Mother who encouraged him. He was led to the Divine Infant in the Cave, and embraced Him with joy. It was the virtue of humility that led him there. Let this be the choice we make leading to life. This will not only enable us to cope with the temptations the events the last 9 months have brought us, **but to conquer them in Christ!**

CHRIST IS BORN! GLORIFY HIM!

With love in Christ,



+PAUL

Archbishop of Chicago and the Midwest

To be circulated or read in Diocesan parishes.