Christmas Message of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus Kirill

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to the Archpastors, Pastors, Monastics and All the Faithful Children

of the Russian Orthodox Church

Your Graces the archpastors, venerable fathers, all-honourable monks and nuns, dear brothers and sisters!

On this holy night I address all of you living in different countries, cities and villages, yet making up the One Russian Orthodox Church, and from the bottom of my heart I congratulate you on the world-saving feast of the Nativity of Christ. I send you my heartfelt greetings, my dear ones, and prayerfully wish that we all be filled with spiritual joy in participating in this great festivity and enjoy the banquet of faith as sons and daughters of God and friends of Christ (Jn 15:15).

Today, as we contemplate the mystery of the incarnation of God, we strive to understand what the meaning of this event is that happened two thousand years ago in Bethlehem and what relationship it has to us and our contemporaries.

St. Paul writes: ' But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons' (Gal 4:4-5). But what preceded this fullness of time? The entire history of the human race before the Nativity of Christ in essence is the history of the search for God when the best minds tried to understand who is the source of the supernatural power which affects every human person in one way or another in life.

On their path for searching for God, people, in endeavouring to find the truth, have stumbled into all sorts of errors. Yet, neither man's primitive fear before terrifying natural phenomena, nor the deification

of the natural elements, idols and at times himself, nor even those rare insights which illumined the pagan philosophers, have brought people to God. And when 'the world by wisdom knew not God' (1 Cor 1:21), he deigned to come down to people. With our spiritual eyes we contemplate the 'great mystery of godliness': the Creator is likened to creation, he assumes human nature, endures humiliation, dies on the cross and rises again. All of this transcends human understanding and is a miracle which reveals the fullness of the Revelation of God of himself to people.

Christ is born and the world has found hope, Christ is born and love reigns forever, Christ is born and the heavens have bowed down to the earth, Christ is born and the star of Bethlehem shows the true way to God, Christ is born and let no one believe in the triumph of evil, for we are 'saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God' (Eph 2:8).

The prophet Isaiah awaited and foresaw the coming of the Messiah, and exclaimed: 'God is with us' (Is 8:10). His divinely inspired words are even today a source of ineffable joy for millions of Christians. Once born in Bethlehem, the Lord is born in our hearts and abides with us if we remain faithful to him and the Church that he has founded. He is with us when we accomplish good deeds. He is with us when we help our neighbours. He is with us when we are compassionate and sympathetic. He is with us when we reconcile enemies. He is with us when we forgive and remember not evil. He is with us when we pray and participate in the Church's sacraments, more so in the sacrament of Thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

The feast of the Nativity of Christ speaks to us of that which is most important; we are called to learn how to love God and serve him, our Saviour, the one who has granted this salvation to all nations and for all times, who extends his embrace to each one of us. In acquiring the skill of worshipping God and reverentially standing in his presence, we at the same time learn how to serve our neighbour as well by manifesting 'faith which worketh by love' (Gal 5:6).

We have only to add a little – to respond to the action of the saving grace of God through our obedience, through our trust in the words of the Lord, through our desire to fulfill his commandments. If we master this great truth, then much will be transformed not only within ourselves but around us. We will be able to set priorities on our values, we can peacefully, calmly and assuredly go along the path of life mapped out for us, rendering praise and thanksgiving to God.

In order to attain this spiritual state, we must be Orthodox people not only by opinion polls but according to our deepest convictions and way of life, as our pious ancestors were ardent believers and people who loved God. Among these a special place is occupied by the baptizer of Rus, the Holy and Equal-to-the-Apostles Grand Prince Vladimir, the thousandth anniversary of whose demise we shall commemorate this year. It is thanks to him that we are the bearers of the lofty estate of Christian and in total comprise the single family of Orthodox brotherly peoples of historical Rus. Thus it was, is and shall be. And no

temporary troubles and trials, no external forces can tear asunder these centuries-old spiritual and cultural ties of the inheritors of the baptismal font of Kiev.

In these holy days of the Nativity the prayers of the fullness of the Church and my own fervent prayer are for peace in the country of Ukraine. Irrespective of where her children live and of their political views and preferences, the Russian Orthodox Church fulfills her responsible mission which was placed upon her by Christ (Mt 5:9). She has done and continues to do all that is possible to reconcile people and help them overcome the consequences of enmity.

At the bottom of all conflict, hatred and division is sin. According to St. Justin Popović, sin 'exploits all its power to accomplish one thing: to render the human person godless and inhuman' (St. Justin Popović, *Philosophical Abysses*). And we see in what infernal state the human person at times abides when he has lost the dignity granted to him by the Creator.

Yet the Church in the name of God, tirelessly proclaiming to people the 'great joy' (Lk 2:10) of the birth of the Saviour, calls upon each dweller on earth to believe and transform himself for the better. She offers to us the way of ascent: from seeking out God to the knowledge of God, from the knowledge of God to communion with God, and from communion with God to becoming like God. St. Athanasius the Great, who lived in Alexandria in the fourth century, expressed the purpose of the coming into the world of the Saviour in these amazing words: 'God became man so that man may become god,' yet not according to his nature but according to divine grace. The centuries-old experience of the Church testifies that genuine transfiguration, *theosis*, is accomplished through the action of grace by means of the voluntary co-operation between God and the human person. And it is attained through labour, in obedience to the Creator, and not through accepting the diabolic temptation of the serpent who intimated to our ancestors that they should taste of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and immediately become 'as gods' (Gen. 3:5). Every person who lives according to faith knows that it is fidelity to God that deters him from evil deeds and thoughts, that it is faith which inspires him to spiritual feats and labours to the glory of God and for the good of our neighbours.

In congratulating you all on the great feast of the Nativity of Christ and the New Year I would like to wish you from the bottom of my heart good health, peace, prosperity and abundant succour from on high in following our Lord and Saviour without stumbling.

'But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.' (1 Pet 5:10-11)

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PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA

Moscow

The Nativity of Christ

2014/2015

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