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His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago issues Christmas Encyclical 2019



His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago has released this year's Christmas Encyclical. Read the full text below:

NATHANAEL

By the grace of God, Metropolitan of the Holy Metropolis of Chicago
Christmas 2019

To the Reverend Clergy, Monastic Communities, and blessed people of the Holy Metropolis of Chicago.

Beloved fathers and brethren,

Beloved children in the Lord of the Metropolis of Chicago,

The Christmas season is a time of *journeys*.

In their Christmas pageants around our Holy Metropolis, our Sunday School children re-enact for us the stories of these long journeys. First, they tell of the Holy Theotokos and her trek to Bethlehem, the ancient city of David and the ancestral home of St. Joseph. They also tell of the Wise Men and their long expedition from the East, guided by a star to the place where the Christ-child would be found, so that they might offer the homage of the nations to the King of Kings.

But there is an even greater journey in the Gospel story. It is the journey of the Son and Word of God, coming down from heaven to enter fully into our human condition in body, soul, and mind. Of all these journeys of Christmas, this one was the most profound. While those journeys of the Virgin Mother and of the Magi can be measured in miles and days, this journey—from the divine state of absolute Being into our creaturely condition of weakness, pain, and mortality—was measureless, infinite, and beyond comprehension. It was, as we chant in another season of the year: Συγκατάβασις γὰρ Θεϊκή, οὐ μετάβασις δὲ τοπικὴ γέγονε, *“a divine descent and not a mere change of place”* (Akathist Hymn, Third Stasis).

The Son of God, being from all eternity Light of Light and God of true God, pure spirit, unchangeable, incorporeal, transcendent, and holy, took on our own human form. In so doing, *“He emptied Himself,”* as Saint Paul says (Philippians 2:7), giving up that unending bliss of the Divine nature, casting aside His radiant glory and perfect honor. In place of heavenly riches, He became poor. In place of almighty strength, He became weak. In place of the Father’s heavenly throne, He took His repose in the manger of a cattle-shed. For our sake He became subject to passions and change, weakness and weariness, hunger and thirst, suffering and death.

One naturally wonders why? What was purpose for this divine descent, this self-abasement and humiliation? One answer is found in the baptismal prayers: *“He could not bear to see the human race under the tyranny of the Devil.”* In a word, the Lord Jesus Christ made this great journey from heaven to earth for the sake of mercy. As Saint Athanasius explains (*On the Incarnation*, 1.8): *“He took pity on our race, and had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption, and, unable to bear that death should have the mastery—lest the creature perish, and*

His Father's handiwork in humankind be spent for naught—He takes unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours."

He entered our world in a place and time where there was little mercy to be found. He came to a land of darkness and sorrow, poverty and oppression. He came to a realm of brutal soldiers, corrupt rulers, and divided allegiances. He came to a nation under Roman subjugation, where scholars often cared more about semantic niceties than human necessities. He came to a people sick in body and spirit. And in this place, the Lord Jesus Christ administered the medicine of mercy.

He healed them; He fed them; He taught them and encouraged them. He delivered them from spiritual oppression, and He blessed them. He offered this mercy freely, to righteous and to sinners alike, to rich and poor, to young and old, and to every ethnicity without discrimination. He did not inquire as to their worthiness of His mercy. He only saw the unfathomable worth of each and every person as a child of God and an icon of the divine image.

Already in His birth, He imparted healing to His Virgin Mother. At His birth, He drew Jews and Gentiles together in worship. At His birth, He frustrated the designs of an evil ruler. At His birth, He accepted for Himself the common lot of those who were poor, homeless, vulnerable, and subject to fear and death. Christ did not stand apart from those He came to save. From the moment He entered our world, He dwelt among the lowliest of our race. His was a mercy of truest *sympathy*. His was a mercy pure and unselfish, limitless and unconditional. For this reason, He undertook that journey of divine descent—for the sake of His marvelous and measureless mercy.

Christmas is a time for other journeys as well. These are the travels that many of us will make in this holy season to be with family or friends. Our journeys cannot compare in distance or significance to the divine descent of Jesus Christ. But like His, they can still be journeys of mercy. As we shop for our Christmas presents, we can also set aside money to give generously to those in need. As we feast on Christmas Day, we can find ways to also feed and satisfy the hungry. As we gather with family and friends, we can find a place for those who are alone, home-bound,

or in mourning. Throughout the Christmas season, we can extend in meekness and gentleness of heart our kindness and forgiveness to those who love us and to those who hate us. At all times we can all speak blessings to those around us and hold them up before God in prayer.

We honor Christmas best by imitating Him who sojourned so far from heaven above to extend His great and abundant mercy on us and on all the world. Keeping in mind the mercy of Christ to us in His Nativity, we can show Christmas mercy to everyone we meet.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

With paternal love in Newborn Christ,

† NATHANAEL

Metropolitan of Chicago
