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Patriarchal Nativity Encyclical 2018



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By the Grace of God

Orthodox Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade Karlovci and Serbian Patriarch, with all the Hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, to all the clergy, monastics, and all the sons and daughters of our Holy Church: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, with the joyous Christmas greeting:

Peace from God! Christ is Born!

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld
His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father,
full of grace and truth!”
(St. John 1:14)

John, the Holy Apostle, Evangelist, and the beloved disciple of Christ, expresses with his words The Word became flesh the great mystery of our Christian faith. He Who was “at the beginning”, that is from eternity, through Whom everything came to be, and without Whom nothing that exists came into existence, He Who is Life (cf. St. John 1:1-3), the Logos—the Word of God—became flesh when the fullness of time was fulfilled (Gal. 4:4), in order to bring to all people the gift of adoption to sonship, and to bring and to elevate them all to His and our Heavenly Father for their salvation and eternal life. (2 Cor. 6:18)

The Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ is an event which divides our human history into two parts: that which happened prior to His Birth, which we understand as the preparation of people for the arrival of the Messiah, and the period after His Birth, the period in which we now live. Even those who, for various reasons, do not wish to mention Christ’s name and who speak about the “old” and “new” eras, actually, in a very apt way, interpret that which the Church of Christ has preached for two thousand years, that is, everything before Christ is old and with Christ everything is new: mankind, life and all of history. (Rev. 21:5)

The Birth of the Son of God is for us Christians the central, key and most important event of the history of the world, and its meaning absolutely establishes the Christian way of life and the Christian perspective on the world. We wish to remind you, our dear spiritual children, about this foundation as you gather in our holy churches today. Emphasizing the Gospel foundations of the Orthodox Faith is never superfluous, since we are all inclined, almost unnoticeably, to inject into our faith our own views. This can happen particularly easily in these times in which we live, with worldly judgments and views, and oftentimes it is by these that we judge the Gospel and interpret the events from the history of salvation. But for Christians, the opposite undertaking is the only correct one. The Gospel, the meaning of the events from the history of salvation, and the Eucharistic experience of life in the Church, provide the foundation for our faith, and these judge the world and every historical and civilizational epoch. Let us begin first with giving thanks.

Whoever does not want to, or is not capable of, giving thanks, probably cannot comprehend anything of the Christian faith. (I Col. 5:8; Phil. 4:6) If we are ungrateful, we think that we owe nothing to anyone and that everything belongs to us because of our own efforts. In this case we owe nothing to our parents and ancestors, the society in which we live, the neighbors with whom we live, and the

least of all is what we owe to God. This is how the life ethos of extreme self-sufficiency which we see today is manifested. But we are rightly indebted to our ancestors, our parents and the society to which we belong, but we are especially indebted to God. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (St. John 3:16)

The Father gave us His Son, not as payment and reward for our efforts, but as an undeserved gift of his love, for He “so loved the world.” An unearned payment can be received only with tremendous thanksgiving because it is simply a gift. And it is given to those who with love approach the small and “helpless” newborn Christ Child, for it is impossible to approach a child in any other way than with love. A child understands only words of love, just as God speaks and understands only the language of love. And the gift is a confirmation and a sign of love. God the Father gives us today His Son as a gift and we, with love and thanksgiving receive that gift. And it is on the basis of this foundational principle of our Christian existence that we can now go on to speak further about some more aspects of today’s Great Holy Day.

The Son of God takes on human nature and is born in Bethlehem’s cave, and laid in a manger without ceasing to be God, but becoming fully human, the God-Man. This is the greatest mystery of our faith: that God can be present in a human person. (I Tim. 3:16) The God-Man Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Since that event in Bethlehem so long ago, everything in human life is new, just as this was a new and unique historical event. (II Cor. 5:17) God is inseparably united with man, and whoever through baptism and chrismation is born of the Holy Spirit is a child of the Father, though not according to nature as is Christ, but rather by grace and adoption. (Gal. 3:26) The new man is born of the Holy Spirit for salvation and eternal life. And so, God Himself through the Incarnation, and then our faith, elevates mankind, that is, every person, to the highest possible honor – to be a revelation of God’s presence in the world.

“Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God,” our forefather Jacob said to his brother Esau (Gen. 33:10). This testimony of brotherly love was fully made possible after the Incarnation of the Son of God, and it has the deepest consequences for our relationship with other people, known and unknown, friends and enemies, with all those that enter into our life, as well as towards those into whose life we enter—that the only way that leads to God passes through them and through the love we show them. Through the ascetic struggle we are to love our neighbor, and through it we reveal true and correct love towards God.

He who says that he loves God Whom he has not seen, and hates his brother whom he sees, lies to himself and to God. (I John 4:20) All of us born like the Divine Christ Child of the Holy Spirit, baptized and chrismated, all people to this very day who are taught by the Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of community, confess that we live as truly human persons only in the community of love. We are called to build this kind of relationship in marriage, family, wider society, and most certainly in the Church, which by her nature is the community of love. That is why the aforementioned living for self alone and self-sufficiency are sins against the Holy Spirit, the disease which needs to be treated immediately as soon as any sign of its appearance becomes noticeable.

With these thoughts of thanksgiving, community, and unity as a gift of the Holy Spirit, we announce to you our dear spiritual children the forthcoming 2019, the year in which we will celebrate a great jubilee of our Church – eight hundred years of receiving autocephaly. According to the testimonies of Domentian and Theodosius, who “in different words say the same thing,” the consecration of St. Sava as the first Serbian archbishop, and the obtaining the independence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, took place in Nicaea in 1219 thanks to the love and understanding of the Byzantine Emperor Theodore I Laskaris and the then Patriarch Manuel I Charitopoulos Sarantenos. It is clear that St. Sava accepted this spiritual struggle, the attaining of autocephaly, out of care of his people, overcoming selfishness, with the desire to bring together the disunited Christians of the Serbian state and to truly unite them in the Holy Liturgy.

In other words, he labored in order to give an opportunity to our ancestors and to all of us to truly be united in the Gospel of Christ, in His Church, in which all people and all nations as God’s children unite to partake in the life of the Holy Trinity in one common Liturgy as a foretaste of the Heavenly Kingdom. Having received the title “archbishop of Serbia and the coastlands”, St. Sava began his archpastoral ministry in the Church of our Savior, in the monastery of Zicha, striving to, as Domentian says: “feed the Christ-loving souls with spiritual food for their souls

through sermons and spiritual words." Having Christ within himself and all spiritual gifts, he "gave forth the spring of theology to all." During the time of Arsenije of Srem, the successor of St. Sava, the See of the Serbian Church was moved to Pec, located deeper in the country. Here, from the Patriarchate of Pec, for eight centuries, the Serbian Church has proclaimed the holy and good news of the Gospel about the new-born Divine Child, Who comes into the world to save the world and man with His redeeming work.

Our ancestors have attested to the truth of both heaven and earth that the Lord first loved the world, and that we are called to respond to that love with Christian living, by showing us that in this history, and this world, the battle for the Heavenly Kingdom is always being fought. They have confirmed us in the faith that through ascetic struggle we enter eternal life. Inasmuch as we approach life this way, there is no separation between the Heavenly kingdom and earthly kingdom, for there exists only one history, one creation of God, one Kingdom, one economy of God's Providence and of our salvation. In other words, we enlighten the history in which we live, the earthly kingdom with the Heavenly Kingdom so that we, at the same time, fight for God's justice and God's Kingdom, while everything else, according to Christ's words, will be added (St. Matthew 6:33; St. Luke 12:31) in this world and in this age.

Fighting for God's justice and for the Heavenly Kingdom, and enlightening the earthly kingdom with the Heavenly Kingdom, we are called to show special care toward our brothers and sisters in Kosovo and Metohija. We daily hear of "progress and development of human society" and about "special care for human rights." But while we and nations around us have rights concerning certain life choices, for our brothers in Kosovo and Metohija those basic rights of life worthy of human beings are being taken away. That is why we think that one of the vital preconditions for the solution of the Kosovo and Metohija problem is the building of a society founded on enforcement of rights where people of various backgrounds can live in peace with full protection and respect for everyone's religious, cultural and national identity. To speak about a lasting solution of the Kosovo and Metohija problem without consideration of these preconditions would mean to accept the war and post-war ethnic cleansing and theft as an accomplished fact and to throw away all the values upon which, at least in principle, Christian Europe as well as the entire world is founded.

We seek the respect of one of the basic Christian principles: "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them." (St. Matthew 7:12) Everything that we demand for our brothers and sisters in Kosovo and Metohija, we are ready to offer and give

to all peoples living either in Kosovo and Metohija or in other parts of the Republic of Serbia. But this freedom for the Serbian people and all other peoples is not possible in the self-proclaimed illicit state of Kosovo! This is best attested by the events of our days: the barbarian deprivation of food, medicine and other items essential for life from the Serbian people by enforcement of notorious “taxes”, constant threats, arrests and much more. The most recent is the establishment of the so-called “Kosovo military” with the goal of continued terrorization and final expulsion of all Serbs, those south of the Ibar river as well as those north of that Serbian river. Once again, we emphasize that the question of Kosovo and Metohija, among other things, is a question of the survival of our people, clergy, monastics, and especially of our ancient holy places, without which we would not be who we are today.

Our holy churches are not only cultural-historical monuments, but their existence has deep meaning, foremost as places of liturgical gathering of our people, not only those from Kosovo and Metohija, but from all regions of Serbia and the world, wherever Serbs live. In the hope that the joy of our new-born Divine Child will help us to together find a way and come out of the helplessness caused by sin (Rom. 7:20), we greet our brothers and sisters in Kosovo and Metohija in their efforts to survive and remain on the Serbian promised land, with the words that Christ gives to his followers throughout the centuries: “Do not fear, little flock!” (St. Luke 12:32) “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.” (I John 5:4)

At the same time, we remain in the hope that those responsible for the difficult situation of our people will also be enlightened by the light of Christ’s Birth, so that they too may understand the depth of the sin they commit, not only towards us and our brothers and sisters, but towards themselves and their future generations. Perhaps they will remember the words of the wise Solomon: “When a righteous man dies, his hope does not perish, but the boast of the ungodly perishes.” (Proverbs 11:6)

With pastoral care and responsibility, we call on our brothers and sisters in Macedonia, who are in schism, to understand in the spirit of Christ’s love that autocephaly is exclusively a church institution, and that it needs to contribute to the advancement and confirmation of unity among the local Orthodox Churches. In that cause the Serbian Orthodox Church has striven and labored over these last eight centuries. If, in accordance with the logic of this world, autocephaly is understood in any other way, as an element of a state’s sovereignty, national individuality or separateness, then it does not contribute to the unity and building

up of the Church, but it rather invites self-sufficiency and living in isolation, and it becomes, paradoxically, a sin against the Holy Spirit.

We send the same message to those who speak of a so-called “Montenegrin Church”, who remain blind with their eyes for they do not see the ancient Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Coastlands. They are forgetting that salvation is not conditioned upon a claim of who is Serbian and who is Montenegrin. The temptation is the same in our very close and brotherly Ukraine, where the passion filled chauvinist-Russophobes, led by corrupt politicians with the assistance of Uniates and, unfortunately, with the uncanonical cooperation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, deepened and spread the existing schism and seriously jeopardized the unity of Orthodoxy in general. Christ did not come only to save the Hebrew people, even though they were chosen by God to prepare all peoples for the coming of the Messiah, He came as the Savior of all nations, regardless of their name (Rom. 10:12) and regardless of how what they call themselves in different eras.

We can only experience together the joy of the gift of salvation, for which we must give thanks, through mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. Having this in mind and with deep sorrow and sadness for the Serbian people and all other victims of the unfortunate wars on the territories of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, we pray to the new-born Divine Child, the Giver of every peace, that peace may finally enter into our hearts and that we may forgive each other as the Lord forgave us our sins. (II Cor. 5:18) The only way to free us from slavery to the past and daily political interests is forgiveness and reconciliation, to which we call all peoples with whom we once lived in a single state.

We especially address our children in diaspora, from America to Asia, from Europe to Australia, calling upon them to always show love in action in every place and towards everyone. Be merciful, do not judge, forgive, help each other (St. Luke 6:37-38) and always have in mind the words of Christ: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (St. Matthew 7:21) Be conscious and responsible citizens of countries that afforded you homes, pray for cities where you live, for in their good it will be good to you as well (Heb. 29:7), but do not forget your faith, language and fatherland, the country of your ancestors, soaked with the blood of martyrs.

We call on you all, our dear spiritual children, for mutual understanding, love and forgiveness. Let us guard ourselves from heavy and carelessly spoken words, keeping in mind that we create with our words the social surroundings in which we live. Mild words heal, rude words hurt, and wounds caused by words are often

greater than physical wounds. That is why the wise Solomon teaches us that death and life are in the power of language. (Proverbs 18:21) If we see that our neighbor inflicts injustice upon us, let us act according to the Gospel's principles, let us talk to him doing everything within our power to gain our brother. (St. Matthew 18:15) Let us forgive each other seventy times seven (St. Matthew 18:22), and in the judgments which we bring towards others, let us be guided with the truth, which we must explain mildly with respect and good conscience. (II Cor. 4:2)

Giving thanks to the Lord for this day in which, according to the words of Romanos the Melodist, "The Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One, and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable one! Angels with shepherds glorify Him! The wise men journey with a star! Since for our sake the Eternal God was born as a little Child", we herald to the world this great joy and greet all of you with the all-joyous Nativity greeting:

PEACE FROM GOD – CHRIST IS BORN!
A HAPPY AND BLESSED NEW YEAR OF OUR LORD, 2019!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade at Christmas, 2018.

Your intercessors before the cradle of the divine Christ-Child:

Archbishop of Pec,
Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and
Serbian Patriarch IRINEJ

Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands AMPHILOHIJE
Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana PORFIRIJE
Metropolitan of Dabro-Bosna CHRIYSOSTOM
Bishop of Sabac LAVRENTIJE
Bishop of Srem VASILIJE
Bishop of Banja Luka JEFREM
Bishop of Budim LUKIJAN
Bishop of Banat NIKANOR
Bishop of New Gracanica-Midwestern America LONGIN
Bishop of Canada MITROPHAN
Bishop of Backa IRINEJ
Bishop of Great Britain and Scandinavia DOSITEJ
Bishop of Western Europe LUKA
Bishop of Zicha JUSTIN
Bishop of Vranje PAHOMIJE

Bishop of Sumadija JOVAN
Bishop of Branicevo IGNATIJE
Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla FOTIJE
Bishop of Mileseva ATANASIJE
Bishop of Budimlje and Niksic JOANIKIJE
Bishop of Düsseldorf and Germany GRIGORIJE
Bishop of Valjevo MILUTIN
Bishop of Ras and Prizren TEODOSIJE
Bishop of Western America MAXIM
Bishop of Gornji Karlovac GERASIM
Bishop of Eastern America IRINEJ
Bishop of Krusevac DAVID
Bishop of Slavonia JOVAN
Bishop of Austria and Switzerland ANDREJ
Bishop of Bihac-Petrovac SERGIJE
Bishop of Timok ILARION
Bishop of Nis ARSENIJE
Bishop of Australia and New Zealand Metropolitanate SILUAN
Bishop of Buenos Aires and South Central America KIRIL
Bishop of Dalmatia NIKODIM
Bishop of Osek-Polje and Baranja HERUVIM
Bishop of Zahumlje and Hercegovina DIMITRIJE

Vicar Bishop of Moravica ANTONIJE
Vicar Bishop of Remezijan STEFAN
Vicar Bishop of Mohac ISIHIJE
Vicar Bishop of Diokleia METODIJE

THE ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF OCHRID:
Archbishop of Ochrid and Metropolitan of Skoplje JOVAN
Bishop of Polog and Kumanovo JOAKIM
Bishop of Bregalnica MARKO

Vicar Bishop of Stobi DAVID