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The message of the Archbishop of Albania Anastasiou for Christmas 2020



CHRISTMAS 2020

THE DECISIVE PRESENCE

“...and... His name shall be called... God with us” (Mat. 1:23).

This year we will celebrate Christmas without out-of-home festivities, without large gatherings of families and friends, and even more, without the general participation of the believers in the worship services. Simultaneously, however, these restrictions caused by the pandemic will bring about some positive reactions. First of all, it is a chance for the believers to evaluate how great is the significance in our spiritual and social life that which is taken for granted; the possibility to go to the holy churches whenever we decide, in order to pray, to participate in the services of worship and in the sacred mysteries of the Church. This time it is about another form of askesis and fasting which is imposed by external conditions.

This year, maybe the unsuited veneer will be diminished; the extraneous blaring noise and the irrelevant elements which have penetrated this great feast, having as their aim profit and vanity which distort the truest meaning of this of this singular feast, will be reduced. We will celebrate with simplicity and deprivation, with compassion for those who have departed far from their loved ones and with those who have survived in grief through varied trials.

Despite the alienation and the desertion with threaten us, the dominant feature of feast of Christmas is always the singular fact, the coming and the presence of the Son and Word of God. Christ is not coming as a visitor to greet us politely and then to leave quietly. He is coming to stay with us. This is the meaning of the name Emmanuel which means "God with us". He is not coming as a tyrannical ruler to deprive us of freedom, imposing His way. He is coming as an infant sharing in deprivation and abandonment; he is coming with an invisible smile of peace and hope to stay with us. He Himself will face trials, offences, hostilities, which will culminate in the passion, sharing the pain of humanity. He is coming to stay with us, disputed, persecuted, to support us, to console us with His resurrectional promise: "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mat 28:20). He is with us not only in the serene phases of our successes, of our good health, of our harmonious relationships with the others. He remains mystically with us also in the obscure periods when grief, failure, and illness exhaust our existence.

Above all, this decisive presence has to be perceived perpetually within our consciousness as well as in the formation and direction of our thoughts, ideas, decisions, and actions. We can not beg for Him to be present in the difficult times of our lives and ignore His will or neglect it in our mentality and behavior within our everyday lives. The continuous consciousness of His presence is exclusively capable to guide us correctly in the adventures of our life.

It is this multifaceted presence that we are called to live more intensively in this time, with less pride for human knowledge, abilities, and power. With a greater pursuit of the right priorities of humankind, with solidarity at the local and global level. With "a better hope" (Heb 7:19). It is symbolic that the vaccine, which is expected to offer recourse to this multidimensional captivity of the coronavirus, is coming into our lives as an unusual Christmas gift.

My brothers and sisters, in this atmosphere of strange isolation that is forced upon us by the pandemic, in the loneliness, in the agony, in the fear, let us resist, celebrating Christmas with devotion, especially towards the redeeming presence of the uncreated Son and Word of God, who is entering into created creation,

maintaining the last word in the course of our lives and in all the universe.

In this undetermined, unexpected loneliness which visits us, the mystical presence of Christ warms the thoughts and vivifies the lungs. This optimistic announcement of Christmas, like a pure diamond, without various adornments, glitters, and impressive wrappings, especially this year should be pointed out and experienced. Not as a simple remembrance of a loveable infant, but as a definite message of hope, of a unique expression of love, of the omnipotence of the Father, the Lord and Creator of the universe, as a guarantee of the fact that we are not alone, neither in our personal and universal adventure nor in this recent pandemic.

We ought not only reinforce this decisive experience in ourselves, but we should transmit it as spiritual antibodies to those around us. With affection, humility, by word, with silence, without provocative arrogance. It is not only the coronavirus which is transmitted quietly and drastically. Faith in this redemptive presence is transmitted quietly and effectively from a faithful person to another person and from group to group.

The most essential Christmas gift, my brothers and sisters, which we may offer to ourselves and to those around us, is the awareness and witness to the present Savior Christ in our everyday itinerary.

A blessed Christmas with resilient health! A peaceful and bright New Year of 2021.

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