

## The Nativity Encyclical of the Serbian Orthodox Church 2020



The Serbian Orthodox Church to her spiritual children at Christmas, 2020

### **The Holy Hierarchical Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church**

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!*

*Christ is born, glorify Him!*

*Christ is come from Heaven, welcome Him!*

*Christ is on earth, be lifted up!*

*Sing unto the Lord all the earth!*

With these words Saint Gregory the Theologian begins his Nativity sermon, and these same words we, sixteen centuries later, sing in our services. Sing to the Lord, all the earth, for the joy prophesied by the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 2:2-3; 9, 6; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23; Micah 5:2) and the righteous (Genesis 12:3; 18:15) has been fulfilled. The most difficult task of man's life is to comprehend how

that announced and then fulfilled joy is not like any earthly joy; rather it represents the very essence of life and our faith. Every earthly joy and celebration is limited by time and space, but the joy of Christmas is an event which lasts, giving meaning to all of our relationships and our whole life here and now. This joy has manifested itself, it has begun, it is already given to us according to Christ's words: "Your joy no one will take from you." (St. John 16:22)

The birth of Christ reveals to us the Mystery of God's unlimited love. Only God, Who is Love, (St. John 4:8) was able to humble himself and be born as a true Man, as the God-Man, without ceasing to be truly God and our Savior from sin as the source of evil, decay and death. In the Creed of our faith, we confess that the Incarnation has taken place for us and for our salvation, that "the Son of God has become the Son of Man so that in the end men could become sons of God," as Saint Irenaeus of Lyons has said. Christmas is foremost a time when the Church powerfully and mightily glorifies that Good News with the words: "Today, God has come to earth, and man has ascended to heaven. Glory and thanks be to the One Who is newly born on earth, Who has made us earthly beings divine." By His birth Christ brings the richness of divinity for us; He brings the indescribable joy to which the Church calls all peoples and all things: Sing to the Lord, all the earth!

Being children of God is the greatest Christian ideal, the ideal that needs to be constantly achieved and proven (I John 3:1-3). The entire Gospel points to this, beginning with the genealogy of Christ which witnesses to us that the Son of God, while remaining that which He is, becomes that which He was not (St. Matthew 1:1-23). While remaining true God, He becomes true Man. By this He has made all people who believe in Him and are baptized children of God. For if it is possible that the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, then it likewise is possible that sons of men become sons of God according to the gift of adoption to sonship. Our sonship to God is a direct consequence of the Incarnation of the Son of God and is shown as the highest manifestation of the love of God the Father towards mankind.

The angels greeted Christ's birth with a song: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men!" (St. Luke 2:14) This angelic hymn becomes life's motto of faith and it moves us to action and creativity, to the movement out of passivity, for the glorification of God and the spreading of peace on earth are deeply and essentially creative human activities. Peace is one of the most often encountered terms in the Holy Scriptures (St. Matthew 5:9, St. Mark 5:34; St. John 16:33; Romans 15:13). Everything begins and ends with peace. The Lord has greeted all with peace, and with peace he has responded to the greetings. With the blessing of peace He departed from His disciples by saying: "Peace I leave with

you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (St. John 14:27-28) The Holy Apostle Paul begins and ends his every epistle lesson with the greeting of peace to the respective local churches. With the calling to peace, we begin serving the Divine Liturgy. And peace, our dear brothers and sisters, is a state of heart and soul. This Gospel and Christ’s peace, as many have attested, we have recognized in the life and deeds of the newly reposed Archpastor of our Church, Patriarch Irinej of blessed memory, as well as in the life of the two virtuous hierarchs of our Church, Metropolitan Amphilohije and Bishop Milutin, who also this year were translated into the Heavenly Kingdom. In the consciousness of the people and in the Church’s memory they will remain people of peace and good will, more precisely, as those through whom, in our days, Christ’s peace was manifested, the peace of the first and only *King of peace* (Revelation 1:5).

The message of today’s feast day of the birth in the flesh of the Son of God obliges us also to build peace all around us. We all know what it means when restlessness enters into our heart, when the lack of peace paralyzes the mind, when a person begins to run away from others and when he closes himself within his fragile fortress, being lost and weak for any good deed and for meeting with others. Today, certainly not by accident, we greet each other with the words: Peace from God, Christ is born! We are not seeking some uncertain, calculated, oftentimes ambiguous human peace, but rather, the peace of Christ which reconciles us with God the Father and with each other, a peace of conscience, that true feeling of the fulness of fulfilling the will of God. The opposite of that, the lack of peace which inflicts today’s people, is a consequence of spiritual emptiness and a life void of God’s joy and communion.

The celebration of the birth of the Son of God is a feast day that has a plethora of traditions that attest to the richness of the historical existence of our people. We especially emphasize this in the year when we commemorate a century since the reestablishment and renewal of the Serbian Patriarchate at the Patriarchal Palace in Sremski Karlovci by the Hierarchical Assembly of the united Serbian Church. Still, it is necessary to point out that the meaning of Christmas is not simply as a historical remembrance, but rather it is an Event we celebrate as important for the life of every generation and every person. Our beautiful traditions are an integral part of every feast day, its colorful representation, but it is necessary that we reach the center around which the traditions are formed, so that they do not become some empty mechanical completion of certain works void of understanding. It sometimes happens that in focusing on the traditions the life-giving meaning of this Feast Day is overlooked and forgotten. The birth of the Son of God needs to

awaken in every person a desire for repentance, and through repentance to clearly direct him toward the practical Christian life (St. Mark 1:15). This concretely means our orientation toward a virtuous life and our progress in virtues, so that our faith does not stay as a dead letter on paper, having become just one of many ideologies, void of life's strength and power. The Orthodox Faith is life lived according to the Gospel, by which people should recognize us (St. Matthew 5:16). Living a virtuous and sacramental life, a person becomes Christ-like, so that his words and deeds find their fulfillment in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, it is necessary that the message about a virtuous life begins exactly on the day when the Son of God becomes Man and when our salvation begins (St. John 1:14). Christmas is the beginning of our edification in virtues. There are many of them, and they depend on each concrete person and historical moment. Still, they all rest on the triad of eternal and essentially important virtues, and these are: faith, hope and love (I Corinthians 13:13). they need to be a foundation upon which to build our growth into the stature of the fulness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

On this foundation of Christ's love which has enlightened us today, we are called to have this love towards all, and not only love as a good attitude towards someone or something. That kind of love has little meaning. We are talking about love as a way of life. Furthermore, we are talking about love which is a way of God's existence (I John 4:16), and we, being godlike (Genesis 1:27), are called to have this kind of love for each other. To have this kind of love means that if we want life, if we want existence, then we can have it only in the community of freedom and love with others. To see God in others is Christ's calling. His words are that he who says he loves God, but hates another person lies. For "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for how can you love God, Whom you do not see, if you do not love the person you do see?" (I John 4:20)

Illuminated by that love, we are, this Christmas, together again with our brothers and sisters in Kosovo and Metohija – the cradle of our people. Their destroyed homes are also our homes, their burned homesteads are also our homesteads, the centuries-old churches and monasteries that have been destroyed are also our churches and monasteries. That is why we pray to our Lord that He grants strength to them and to us, sending them the words of encouragement that Christ gave to His disciples: "Do not fear, little flock!" (St. Luke 12:32)

We send Bethlehem's greeting to all the fulness of our God-loving people throughout the world with a message to safeguard the Orthodox Faith, the language and alphabet, regardless which continent and in which country they might live. Be proud and dignified people! We are an ancient Christian nation,

which through baptism, the inheritance of Saints Cyril and Methodious and of Saint Sava, enlightenment became a part of the culture of the entire Christian world.

Filled with that love, this Christmas we remember all those in distress and suffering, all people who have suffered injustice, and especially those who in these difficult days, in the midst of this terrible illness, have lost their most dear and loved ones. To them we send the words of consolation that we find in our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Birth we celebrate, in the Lord Who became a man for us and our salvation. The Lord Himself has gone through the path of death, asking the Father to glorify Him, which the Father does by resurrecting Him from the dead by the Holy Spirit (St. John 12:28). That is why the Lord tells all of us not to fear, because those who are united with Christ, even though they die, yet they will live (St. John 11:25).

The love of the newly-born God-Child reminds and invites us to give thanks in these days of great temptation to the doctors and all the medical staff who selflessly endeavor to help everyone, oftentimes even at the expense of their own lives. In this way, through their unselfish sacrifice, they show that indeed they are God's children, ready to hear and fulfill the words of Christ that greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for his friends (St. John 15:13).

This love and sacrifice oblige us to call upon you and to appeal to you, our dear spiritual children, that in these challenging days for the entire human race you safeguard your health and your life, and that you protect others in the way recommended by the health services of our homeland and the countries where our people live throughout the world. Doing this, you do not show a lack of faith or little faith; instead, you demonstrate that you respect the holiness of life, that you love your neighbor and that you love the Lord Who is Life Himself.

Celebrating in this kind of love of our Lord, let us rejoice in God and Christmas and let us glorify Christ the Divine Child as *the only thing new under the sun* (II Corinthians 5:17). If sadness has pressed upon our hearts this entire year, may joy be born in them today for we celebrate the Birth of the greatest Joy, the Birth of the Son of God Jesus Christ! If during this year hatred, pride and malice have poisoned our hearts, let us expel this poison from them today, for we celebrate the Birth of the heavenly Love, His incarnation in human nature!

May this Christmas, our dear spiritual children, bring to your homes peace, love, unity, joy and blessing in all the days of your life! May the newborn God-Child Christ grant repentance and readiness to forgive! If there be among you even today those who are quarreling, we call upon them in the joy of Christmas to ask

for forgiveness of each other, husband from his wife, wife from her husband, children from their parents, parents from their children, neighbor from his neighbor. We must ask for forgiveness of each other if we wish to belong to God and to have Christmas as joy, happiness and blessing, and for us to be all these in Him.

With these wishes and prayers to the Divine Child Christ, we wish you every true good in the New Year 2021, greeting you with the joyous Christmas greeting which carries in itself the glorification of God in heaven, and on earth peace and good will among men.

PEACE FROM GOD – CHRIST IS BORN!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade at Christmas, 2020.

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

Metropolitan of Dabro-Bosna CHRYSOSTOM, president of the Holy Hierarchical Synod and Locum-tenens of the throne of the Serbian Patriarchs

Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana PORFIRIJE

Bishop of Sabac LAVRENTIJE

Bishop of Srem VASILIJ

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 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 Buenos Aires and South Central America KIRILO  
Bishop of Australia and New Zealand Metropolitanate SILUAN  
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 ISIHJE  
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

*[Path of Orthodoxy Translation]*