

**CHRISTMAS PASTORAL LETTER OF THE HIERARCHY
OF THE UKRAINIAN GREEK-CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN WESTERN EUROPE**

Very Reverend Clergy,
Venerable Monastic Brothers and Sisters,
dear Faithful in Christ!

Christ is born!

Usually, the Christmas holidays are associated with joy, safety and happiness. People welcome the newborn Saviour on our earth, in a human body, and they also greet each other in love, peace and goodwill. Rituals, traditions, and customs are associated with the holiday, which we continue to keep and never tire of repeating: carols, nativity plays, festive greeting...

But the first Christmas was not filled with joy. On the contrary, it began with the anxiety of Joseph himself, who did not know what to think when his betrothed's pregnancy was revealed. With a heavy heart, he considered letting her go (Mt. 1:18-19). When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and the wise men from the East came to greet the "king of the Jews", the ruling king Herod "was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (2:2-3). When the wise men did not return to him, but "went another way", the king "was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under" (2:13, 16). No, Christmas was not greeted with joy then!

However, there were those who rejoiced at the birth of the Child-God. John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb when Mary, who was carrying Jesus, visited Elizabeth (see Luke 1:41). On the same occasion, the Mother of God expressed her joy, saying: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour" (1:46-47). Joseph's doubts were dispelled when an angel revealed to him in a dream that the child was from the Holy Spirit (see Mt. 1:20). At the birth of the Saviour, the angels sang: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, among men good will" (Lk. 2:14). They announced to the shepherds "a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (2:10-11). Also, the righteous Simeon and the prophetess Anna glorified God on account of the birth of the Messiah (see 2:28, 38).

It is impossible not to add, dear ones in Christ, parallels with the current situation of the Ukrainian people, when we begin to celebrate the Nativity of Christ. Many of our sisters and brothers in Ukraine will begin the holidays without light, without heat, without water. The Herods of today want to erase the Ukrainian people from the face of the earth, like Herod – the "king of the Jews". Instead of joy – anxiety; instead of cheerful singing – we mourn our losses; instead of celebrating – people are trying to survive. This is the external – physical, material and mental – aspect of this year's holidays.

But there is another side. John the Baptist was comforted by the coming of the Messiah, without even seeing Him. The Theotokos rejoiced at the birth of the Son of God, even in the unpleasant conditions of cold, lack of a comfortable place, and restlessness. The shepherds probably did not fully understand who they were meeting, but "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Lk. 2:20). Simeon, who "came in the Spirit to the temple" (2:27), from among the numerous children who were brought, recognised in the newborn Child "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel" (2:32).

Why joy in the midst of sorrow, sadness, anxiety? Because “a little Child, the pre-eternal God” (*kontakion of the Nativity*). He is “Emmanuel, which means, ‘God with us’” (Mt. 1:23). As He was with Joseph in his doubts, as He was with Mary in her trust in God’s plans, with the shepherds in their simplicity, with Simeon and Anna in their obedience to the Holy Spirit – so He is with us, dear ones in Christ! God is with our defenders in their trenches; with our families in their dark and cold homes; with our people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity; with our refugees and internally displaced persons who sit down to the Holy Supper far from their relatives; with our families, who at Christmas dinner this year will be missing a relative who is at the front, in captivity, or whose fate is still unknown. *God is with us always and everywhere!*

Dear Sisters and Brothers, may the Herods of today not dim the heavenly light brought in our houses by the Son of God! Let them not steal the warmth our families who wish – despite the war – to welcome the newborn Saviour again as our only hope! May the Nativity of Christ banish sadness, grief, and sadness from our hearts – and let peace, harmony and joy in the Holy Spirit dwell! Let it be so, let it be so!

Happy holidays and a blessed new year 2023!

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

Given in London, Munich, Rome, Paris, and Kyiv
24 December 2022, the Eve of the Nativity of Christ

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