

Patriarchal Nativity Encyclical 2017

The Serbian Orthodox Church to her spiritual children at Christmas, 2017

+IRINEJ



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!

*“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;
old things have passed away;
behold, all things have become new!”
(II Corinthians 5:17)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The foundation of God's New and Eternal Covenant was laid on this very day, the first Christmas in history. Because today, our beloved spiritual children, the preeternal God accomplished a work greater than the creation of the universe and fulfilled the promise given to our first parents, the promise that the prophets had foretold from time immemorial, and which the Most Pure, the Most Blessed and Ever-Virgin Mary accepted in peace. God the Logos became man and dwelt among men. (cf. St. John 1:14) The Son of the Heavenly Father became a contemporary of mankind so that man could become co-eternal with God. The Lord Almighty “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7) and became one in body with our lowliness, so that he could make us equal to the image of His glory. That is why the Godly-wise Apostle Paul elatedly said: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past understanding!” (Romans 11:33)

At that time, the most beautiful and inspired hymn: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men!” the multitude of angelic hosts sang, while the heavens with the star pointed to Bethlehem, the birth city of the Holy Prophet and King David, the Home of bread, where truly the Living Bread Who came down from heaven has appeared. In the quiet spiritual light of Christmas night the human face of the pre-eternal and Only-Begotten Son joyfully welcomed the sight of shepherds (cf. St. Luke 2:4-15). Being that this magnificent mystery of piety – the appearing of the Son of God in the flesh – is inconceivable to angels and men, the primordial plan of God's all-encompassing love began to be revealed in the sacred silence of a Bethlehem cave filled with meekness and inexpressible goodness. And truly, piously approaching the city of David together with heavenly and earthly choirs of saints, we see with spiritual eyes how in Him through Whom everything was created that is in heaven and on earth “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” (Colossians 2:9) This divinely revealed truth is proclaimed in our Holy Church countless times with the words that the Son of God “for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.”

The salvation that the Creed speaks about, dear brothers and sisters, surpasses every human expectation. God did not become man in order to show His glory and majesty, nor to appear in this world accompanied by heavenly hosts as its Master. The Savior was willing to be born from the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary so that man, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, in baptism and through participation in the Holy Liturgy and the life in Christ, could be reborn and could become god by grace, a brother and co-dweller of the God-Man. He made this possible for us thanks to the true birth for eternal life granted to us by holy baptism, by holy chrismation and by the entire sacramental life culminating in the Divine Liturgy, accompanied by our efforts to obtain the Gospel's holy virtues. Beginning by truly belonging to the Community of God's children, the Church, we participate by grace in the divine life of Christ and are being saved and are saved in the Church.

In the brightest light and miraculous joy of Christmas, ancient folk wisdom has composed a toast: “Give, O Lord, health and happiness to this house, may healthy children be born, may wheat and vineyard be fruitful, may the goods in the field, stable and barnyard multiply!” Truly, deep is the meaning and far-reaching is life's message of this old wisdom. Dear spiritual children, neither our country, nor beautified cities and villages, nor the economic growth to which we so aspire,

nor all the goods of this world, will be worth anything if as a people we are gradually, but surely, disappearing, that is, if we have more deaths than births. It was not difficult for our Christian ancestors during our tumultuous history, from its beginning, after the most difficult temptations and troubles, and sometimes literally from the ashes, to reestablish the state, economy, culture and all that which has always made them members of true European civilization. That was always accomplished by them because their homes were filled with faith, virtue and strength, while their children multiplied with great number. Let us bear in mind the law of God and let us be mindful of God's commandments given to our forebearers Adam and Eve which says: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it!" (Genesis 1:28) Therefore, beloved in Christ Jesus, let us not forsake the fulfillment of this commandment! The Lord of love Himself willingly accepted to be born in the flesh and dwell among us, and with His birth from the Virgin Mary, He sanctified and gave meaning to motherhood and childbirth forever.

In these holy days of Christmas we fervently pray for our brothers and sisters in Faith in our Homeland and abroad, with the hope that the Divine-Child Jesus Christ may kindle in their hearts and homes the humble joy of Bethlehem's light, with which heaven and earth are enlightened and shine brightly. We especially call upon all the faithful, in this silent night, to be of one heart and one soul with the much-suffering Serbian Orthodox people who are faithfully safeguarding and defending every step of the holy land in Kosovo and Metohija, which has been, may we never forget, given to us by God as an eternal pledge. Tumultuous times have come and gone. During all that time our ancestors indelibly bore in their hearts the Patriarchate of Pech, Gracanica, the Church of the Theotokos of Levis, Banjska, Dechani, the Holy Archangels and thousands of other altars throughout Kosovo and Metohija. They knew and remembered who had set foot on that holy land back in the seventh century and even earlier as it is recorded by the Byzantine chronicles. They knew who left written records on pieces of pottery from the ninth century and who opened the first schools at monasteries, wrote books, painted frescoes and icons, built temples, opened the first hospitals, wrote slavonic books. They knew that the Grand Zupan of Ras Vukan defended the city Zvečan in the eleventh century. They knew which rulers from the Nemanjic, Lazarevic, Brankovic, Petrovic, Obrenovic and Karadjordjevic dynasties built holy shrines throughout the Serbian lands. Our ancestors knew all that, dear brothers and sisters. And we, their descendants, know that as well. We know something else. We know that our suffering people in Kosovo and Metohija have stayed to confess their holy Orthodox Faith as martyrs and to courageously testify to their Serbian name. We know as well as they do, and we forget nothing of it, for Kosovo and Metohija is our Jerusalem, our holy land. And that is why we can, together with King David who wrote psalms, prayerfully promise: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem", if I forget you Kosovo and Metohija, "may my right hand be forgotten." (Psalm 136 [137]:5)

Our brothers according to the Faith, not only in Kosovo and Metohija, but elsewhere as well, face tribulations. Especially today, the Divine Christ-Child inspires us that we, Orthodox Christians and children of the Church, empowered by His grace and in response to His commandment, may return good to all, as brothers and friends, regardless of how others treat us anywhere, whether in our homeland, in the surrounding areas, or in the entire world, regardless of their faith and nationality, knowing that the God of love asks us what we are doing to others, not what they are doing to us.

Today, when the Most Holy Virgin Mary gives birth to the Pre-eternal God, we pray for all people, but especially the young, suffering the vices of narcotics, alcohol, perversity, laziness, anger, love for money, jealousy, arrogance, intemperance, lack of compassion and all other vices which promise visible happiness, while destroying the God-given honor of man and making him a slave. We pray that the Lord of Hosts will strengthen them so that they may recognize the truth and the image of God in themselves and so rise and rid themselves of the yoke of the wrong choice. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: "...You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free...Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." (St. John 8:32, 34) We are free in the true sense of the word only when we live a virtuous life, which stems from a creative communion of love with God. Opposite to that, the misuse of God's gifts and the potential we have, as well as the choice of the wrong lifestyle, weakens and destroys our freedom, undervalues our being, produces a feeling of emptiness and lack of meaning, and in the end, leads to spiritual slavery. True freedom is, our dear spiritual children, freedom for Christ, for others, for life and health; freedom for eternity. Such freedom can be given to us only by God, because He truly is Freedom, courage and strength. Only by this freedom, which implies adherence to God's will and self-restraint towards our neighbors and created nature, can we in our nation overcome the previously unheard of conflicts which we, unfortunately, so often hear and read about, between spouses, parents and children, relatives and kumovi.

The Good News of Christ's Nativity today is also proclaimed to a world where weapons resound; a world where violence is taking place between individuals and nations, where inequality and social injustice occur, a world where innocent children are victims of war, abuse and hunger and above which the threat of nuclear catastrophe hovers daily. Nevertheless, though concerned, without losing hope we pray to the Divine-Child of Bethlehem to enlighten the darkness and to turn to goodness those who hold the levers of power in their hands.

Let us not fear! Instead of earthly worries and fear, we pray that peace from God fills our hearts! Such peace is not passive and indifferent, rather it is a dynamic, creative, and above all an unceasingly active power, with power to transform and bring salvation not only to us but to all those around us. The grace-filled experience of Saint Seraphim attests: "Obtain the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved."

God Who is with us, Emmanuel, is that Peace through Whom the peace of the Heavenly Kingdom comes. Such peace certainly cannot be identified with previous, contemporary or future attempts to bring peace on earth without taking into account the relationship at whose center is the Triune God. Christ's peace is unique because it is founded on the inexpressible and incomprehensible love of the Heavenly Father, "Who 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 God-Man Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary in order to die on the Cross and resurrect from the dead, giving peace and the blessing of eternal life to all creation. This reality of gaining peace which conquers sin and death, dear spiritual children, we experience not only today on this feast day of the Nativity of Christ, but also each time we gather in our holy churches for the Divine Liturgy and when we partake of the Living Christ.

Celebrating today's Feast Day, let us pray that our hearts may become Bethlehem's cave in which Christ the Son of God is born, so that we are enlightened by the light of Bethlehem's star and illumined with the wisdom of wise men from the east, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Who overshadowed the Mother above all mothers and calmed the anxieties of the righteous Joseph, confidently exclaiming on all four sides of the world and announcing the coming of Him Who saves us:

PEACE FROM GOD - CHRIST IS BORN!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade at Christmas, 2017. 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 **CHRYSOSTOM**
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 Zahumlje and Hercegovina **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 and Petrovac **SERGIJE**
Bishop of Timok **ILARION**
Bishop of Nis **ARSENIJE**
Bishop of Australia and New Zealand Metropolitanate **SILUAN**
Bishop of Dalmatia **NIKODIM**
Vicar Bishop of Moravica **ANTONIJE**
Vicar Bishop of Dioclia **KIRILO**
THE ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF OCHRID:
Archbishop of Ochrid and Metropolitan of Skoplje **JOVAN**
Bishop of Polos and Kumanovo **JOAKIM**
Bishop of Bregal **MARKO**
Vicar Bishop of Stobija **DAVID**