

PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY 2016

† NICOLAE

by the mercies of God

***Archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the United States of America and
Metropolitan of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas***

*To our beloved clergy and Orthodox Christians,
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,
and from us Archpastoral Blessings.*

*"For in Bethlehem Mary, completing her journey,
In a little dwelling in that town gives birth to the Messiah."*

**Most Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Faithful,**

The words of the *holy and good* carol „O, What Wonderful News” (O, ce veste minunată) speak to us all of the joy of the fulfillment of the holy family’s journey to Bethlehem in obedience to the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. Their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not fulfilled, however, through their presenting themselves to the authorities, but through the wondrous event of the birth of the baby Jesus in the Bethlehem manger. And the angels’ announcement of the fulfillment of this pilgrimage was the occasion for a song of praise brought by the shepherds to God. The holy family’s pilgrimage becoming the occasion of joy can offer us too a way to understand our pilgrimage on this earth toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

Adam, the first created and fallen into sin, began this pilgrimage of regaining the lost paradise. Adam and Eve, disobedient to God, first hid themselves from His face (Genesis 3:8-9), and then heard the punishment of their banishment from paradise (Genesis 3:24-24), but not before they were promised the sending of the Savior who would destroy the power of the evil one, the one who brought division between man and God: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15). Man, fallen away from the face of God, begins a *pilgrimage of repentance* with the desire to again find God the Creator and Ruler, to again find meaning to his existence on earth.

The history of mankind up until the Incarnation of the Son of God is a long pilgrimage of man through the ages, like the journey of a ship on the storm-tossed seas of the world. The tempests of the ages nearly swallowed up disobedient and stubborn mankind, if we think of Noah’s flood or the tower of Babel, but God’s care for His creation can be seen in them. For He chose for Himself a people that He blessed that from it would be born the Savior of the world: “*Blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants... In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice*” (Genesis 22:17-18). The history of the Jewish people is the continuation of this pilgrimage marked by wanderings away from the worship of the true God and returning through the voice of the prophets. St. Basil the Great speaks of this pilgrimage that has taken place under the watchful care of God: “*For You did not forever reject Your creature whom You made, O Good One, nor did You forget the work of Your hands, but because of Your tender compassion, You visited him in various ways: You sent forth prophets; You performed mighty works by Your saints who in every generation have pleased You. You spoke to us by the mouth of Your servants the prophets, announcing to us the salvation which was to come*” (St. Basil’s Liturgy).

Mankind’s pilgrimage through history is fulfilled through the descent of the Son of God in time and history to give them the meaning of eternity. It is not a coincidence that the wondrous event of the Nativity

of Christ is also described as a pilgrimage. The Virgin Mary and the Righteous Joseph set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem “to be registered,” for they were “of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4-5). They set out on pilgrimage just in the days when the Virgin was due to give birth. But the true pilgrimage was fulfilled by the baby in the womb. He, the unseen God, set out toward Bethlehem in order to be seen in the form of the innocent baby in the lowly manger. Bethlehem became the place of the meeting of God with man, the little village on the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem became the center of the Universe, for there God was revealed to man—the pilgrim desirous of repentance and of encountering God. God and man hasten toward one another, toward a saving rediscovery for man. Man’s alienation from God through Adam’s sin is healed at the fulfillment of the pilgrimage through history toward the Bethlehem manger.

The mystery of the humility of the Son of God revealed through His manifestation as a baby is expressed by St. Paul the Apostle in his Epistle to the Philippians, taken up by St. Basil the Great in the Liturgy that bears his name: *“And when the fullness of time had come, You spoke to us through Your Son Himself, through whom You created the ages. He, being the splendor of Your glory and the image of Your being, upholding all things by the word of His power, thought it not robbery to be equal with You, God and Father. But, being God before all ages, He appeared on earth and lived with humankind. Becoming incarnate from a holy Virgin, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming to the body of our lowliness, that He might change us into the likeness of the image of His glory.”* St. Gregory Palamas interprets this unimaginable way of humility: “God, as nature beyond nature, cannot ascend higher, to the heights or to a greater glory. He ascends from the things below, from having descended and humbled himself in His creatures. The glory of the Most High is His condescension down to the things that are humble.” The Son of God became man in order to make man god, the Holy Fathers say.

The marvel of God’s humility in Bethlehem was revealed also to other pilgrims: first to the shepherds by the angels, later to the magi as pilgrims following a star to the place of the Savior’s birth. They “were instructed by a star to worship the Sun of Righteousness,” as the Troparion of the Feast tells us. This means that their pilgrimage was undertaken under the sign of a perceptive humility. They went off to worship the King of the World without knowing where they were going, but guided by faith in God’s protection and illumination. And they fulfilled their pilgrimage by bringing gifts to Christ the Savior, revealed by a star in the Bethlehem manger.

Most Reverend Fathers, Beloved Faithful,

The discovery of these meanings of the pilgrimage to Bethlehem is profoundly meaningful for our own pilgrimage through this life. From baptism we are in the ark of the Church, under the command of Christ, journeying toward the meeting with God in eternity. But we already fulfill this journey, this pilgrimage, when we journey together with Christ. In our pilgrimage we need to have the faith and humility of the magi, that God protects us and that we will make it through the waves of life’s temptations. When those waves rise up threateningly, let us not take our eyes off Christ, that we may not sink as did St. Peter the Apostle. Let us remain as pilgrims in the ark of Christ, having Christ as our captain, for outside it we will lose the way toward eternity. Let us lift up our hands in prayer and include also those who are separated from Christ and His ark, let us stick together with our brethren, children, youth, or adults, and together let us travel with the hope that we too will “complete our journey” toward the Bethlehem of our salvation. In these few words are comprehended all the hope of the fulfillment of the mission to which God has called us on this earth.

I pray that God will illumine every priest and believer, that He will protect every parish and monastery of our new Metropolia. May the new year be blessed, and may we multiply our hope, and grow in our faith in God.

With a brotherly embrace in Christ the Lord, my wish for you is to celebrate the holy Feasts of the Nativity, the New Year, and Theophany in health, peace, and spiritual joys!

Merry Christmas! Many Years!

Your brother in prayer to God,
desirous of every heavenly good,
† **Metropolitan NICOLAE**

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