

**PASTORAL LETTER
AT THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY, 2019**

† IOAN CASIAN

*by the mercies of God,
Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada
To our beloved clergy and Orthodox Christians,
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,
and from us, hierarchical Blessings.*

*“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother,
and fell down and worshipped Him; and when they had opened their treasures,
they presented gifts to Him: gold and incense and myrrh.”
(Matthew 2, 11).*

***Most Reverend Fathers,
Beloved Faithful,***

The feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the opportunity for an encounter, but not any encounter. It is the encounter with the One who created everything, the One Whom the first people - Adam and Eve - saw and heard in Paradise, the Word of God. This event reveals to us Him who become one of us and from Whom man drifted away through sin.

Why was the incarnation of the Son of God necessary?

“The Word of God, our common Savior and lover of mankind - says St. Athanasius the Great - takes flesh and lives as a man among men and attracts the senses of all people, as those who thought that God was in the physical things, to know the truth from the deeds which the Lord works in the body, and through Him, to think of the Father.”¹

After failing to be obedient to God, man turns his powers, and especially those of knowledge, to the *saeculum*, to the outer and material things. Since that moment the whole life of man becomes a struggle to regain the authentic knowledge of God, of his own person and of the reality surrounding him, but which always escapes him. The whole tradition of the Old and New Testaments stands as a testimony. Prophet David says, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me ”* (Ps. 51:10), and St. Paul says: *“But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members”* (Romans 7:23). The nature of man and his capacities of knowledge and choice are weakened and darkened, this thing becoming evident in the choices he makes, and which result in suffering. The mind and the thinking are more inclined towards materiality and superficiality than to the true knowledge of the Creator and to the authentic reasons He has placed in each creature and which define a true and clear way of being. Man drifts away from a simple and sure dialogue with God, the source of authentic knowledge.

Why was it necessary for the Son of God, and not another Person of the Holy Trinity, to take flesh and carry out God's plan?

¹ St. Athanasius the Great. *Against Greeks. Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word. Three treatises against Arians*. Ed. EIBMO: Bucharest 2010 (translation, introduction and notes Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae) p 161

*“The reason for this - says St. Athanasius the Great - was that it was not possible for anyone else, but the Savior alone, to transform the corruptible into incorruptible, Who, in the beginning made all those that were not. Also, it was not possible for another person to restore in man the image of God, except the Image of the Father Himself. And it was not possible for another person to turn, through the Resurrection, the mortal into immortal, except the One who was the Life itself, that is, our Lord Jesus Christ. And nobody could teach about the Father and would be able to destroy the belief in idols, except the Lord who set up everything and is the only-begotten Son of the Father.”*²

God seeks to offer more gifts through the incarnation of His Son in order to remedy the corruption of man touched by sin: (1) the elimination of evil that had been established in human nature, and had become man’s *second nature* and from which he could not liberate himself by his own forces; (2) restoration in man the image of God that constitutes the backbone of his original identity as a creature of God; (3) He who, in the beginning (at the first creation), brought into the existence the world and man, was the only One who could restore the true life in this, the second creation. He who had risen from the dead on the third day was the only One who could do this from within the human nature; (4) He who had planted the reasons of all things, including man and, therefore, the premises of authentic knowledge of God, of the human self and of the world, He, the Son of God, was the only one who was able to reveal them to man in their authenticity and completeness.

The rediscovery of the gift of authentic generosity, the result of a restored inner health, could only be done through the work of the One who had created everything, bringing everything out of nothing, and who was the Word and Son of God and the Architect of everything.

As we see from the biblical text, the encounter of the three magi with God causes a pouring out of their heart manifested by the generosity of the gifts and by the pious respect shown when they met the child Jesus at the manger of Bethlehem. The gifts offered by the magi become the expression of their joy of meeting the Lord and the confirmation of the heavenly signs. The three gifts - *gold, incense and myrrh* - in addition to their material value, have also a spiritual significance, according to St. Gregory the Great:

*“There is something more that must be understood about gold, incense and myrrh. Solomon testifies that gold symbolizes wisdom when he says, ‘a pleasing treasure lies in the mouth of the wise’ (Prov. 21:20). The psalmist bears witness to that incense which prayer offers to God when he says, ‘Let my prayer ascend as incense in your sight’ (Ps. 140:2). The myrrh indicates the mortification of our bodies, of which the holy Church speaks through its workers who strive even unto death on behalf of God, ‘My hands dripped with myrrh’ (Song 5:5). And so, do we offer gold to the newborn king if we shine in his sight with the brightness of the wisdom from high. We too offer Him incense if we enkindle on the altar of our hearts the thoughts of our human minds by our holy pursuit of prayer, so as to spread a sweet fragrance to God by our heavenly desire. We also offer Him myrrh if we mortify the vices of our bodies by our self-denial.”*³

St. Gregory tells us that the three gifts - *gold, incense and myrrh* – are the expressions of generosity but, at the same time, they mean much more; they represent the new reality of a profound transformation that’s taking place in the restored and renewed man after the experience of meeting the Lord and after experiencing His providence and guidance toward this encounter with Him.

² Idem p 169 – 170

³ St. Gregory the Great. *Forty Gospel Homilies* (PL 76: 1113; CS 123:58-59 - *Homily 8*) in Manlio Simonetti (ed). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (I a / Matthew 1 - 13). Ed. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois (USA) p 28 Coll. 2.

According to St. Gregory, Man is restored to the fullness of his powers in this encounter with God. The first restored power, signified by gold, is the *wisdom* that begins to perceive God and His work in everything as He is. Man regains the natural rationality which the Creator had placed in him and in everything at the time of creation. The second restored power, signified by the incense, is that of *prayer* that gives man his wings. Man knows God through prayer. Prayer lifts the man up and sets him on the path of ascent to the source of life. And finally, the third restored power, signified by the myrrh, is represented by *the deed*, the ascetic effort of purification, of cleansing or subduing the passions that break the unitary harmony of the whole human being. This way, the human person offers itself to God in the fullness of its inner and outer powers. First, the human wisdom begins to be flooded by the uncreated light and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. On the altar of our hearts, through prayer, we offer to God our thoughts as an offering of sacrifice and purification so that we can receive the fullness of the divine life. And in the end, we advance towards acting, that is, the ascetic effort of fighting against one's selfishness through virtues, making through them room for God.

Understood in this perspective, the sentiment of generosity that we see in the three magi is nothing but the spontaneous movement that God has placed in the very nature of man and which is the immanent reflection of the movement of generosity and dedication of the Persons of Holy Trinity, which means love.

*"By offering the sacrifice of virtues, or of our openness in the Church to the infinite God - says Father Dumitru Staniloae, - we achieve the extended unity of Christ's body in which the infinite love of the Persons of the Holy Trinity moves, unity whose beginning was set by the Word through the incarnation. The virtues are the forms and degrees of our unending openness to the Father and to our fellow human beings through love in Christ, for in Christ this opening has been made and remains forever."*⁴

By the work of the virtues, the person open to the Creator, becomes a temple or a church in which God and His saving grace dwell. Through virtues, humanity becomes an extended body of Christ in communion with the Holy Trinity. Man offers to God all his outer and inner gifts as a total offering. The greatest virtue, however, is the self-giving by which man embodies and expresses his most authentic and intimate vocation, that is, the human love, the expression of the trinitarian love. This means to be a church of the true God. This means to be in the image and likeness of God. This brings everything into unity, both from a personal and community point of view. It best expresses the mystery of divine unity and love in the churched humanity, directed toward the new leaven, characterised by the communion with God.

*"God is now with all of us - says the Archimandrite Vasile Vasilachi - sharing with everybody His life, His truth and His grace for our eternal happiness! Are you with God? Are you, during this Christmas season, a new Bethlehem to receive Jesus Christ in your heart? With Him is possible to create a new man, a new family, a new society and a new era! This will be the best gift, the First One, for each of us, having Jesus Christ in our hearts for eternity. Merry Christmas!"*⁵

Beloved Christians,

The year 2019, dedicated to the Patriarchs Nicodim Munteanu and Justin Moisescu, to the distinguished representatives of the Romanian village - priests, teachers and diligent mayors - as

⁴ *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. (vol 2) Ed. EIBMBOR, Bucharest 2003, p 231

⁵ *The Nativity of Jesus Christ*, p 63 – 64 in *The Supremacy of God*. Theological Collection 'Word of Life': New York, 1991

well as to the Church book translators, reminds us of the example of the magi. All of the aforementioned and many others have put their personal gifts in the service of God and of their fellow men, contributing through them, according to the measure of grace of God bestowed upon them, to the work of the Church and the communities which they have served. In better or more difficult times, they knew how to share the gift of gratitude toward God and the neighbor.

We also contemplated this year the beauty, the clarity and the generous richness of the simple but noble culture of the Romanian peasant who knew how to transfigure his daily life within the Romanian village, into a paradisiac garden, having Christ, the tree of life, through the Church, present in the middle of it. Through his participation in the Sunday holy services, the Romanian peasant guided his senses through the Church towards God, knowing that this is the most natural and normal way to return to the spirit of paradise, that is to understand the divine reasons that underlie every creature or thing created by God and through this to come to live the presence of God in a clear, simple and wise way.

Let us also follow the example of our predecessors – magi, priests, teachers, diligent mayors, Church book translators and so on - and let us put our gifts in the service of God, of the Church and of our neighbors, in order to rebuild a world according to the beauty, the kindness and the truth thought from eternity by God.

On the occasion of the feasts of the Lord's Nativity, the New Year and the Epiphany, I extend to you my most sincere blessing and wishes for good health and spiritual achievements in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Your brother in prayer to Christ the Lord, the One born in the cave of Bethlehem,

† IOAN CASIAN

Saint-Hubert/Montreal, Feast of the Lord's Nativity, 2019