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**Patriarchal Encyclical for Christmas
†BARTHOLOMEW**

**By God's Mercy
Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch
To the Plenitude of the Church:
Grace, mercy, and peace from the Savior Christ, born in Bethlehem**

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”
(Isaiah 9:5)*

Many centuries ago, the Prophet foresaw and announced with enthusiasm and joy the birth of the child Jesus from the ever-Virgin Mary. Naturally, even then, there was no period of census by Augustus Caesar, no place to stay for the safety of the Holy Virgin who was carrying a child by the Holy Spirit. So the holy Joseph as her betrothed and protector was obliged to lead her to a cave, a manger with animals, “in order to give birth to a child.”

Heaven and earth received them, offering thanks to their Creator: “The angels offered the hymn; the heavens a star; the wise men gifts; the shepherds a miracle; the earth a cave; the desert a manger; and we the Mother Virgin.” The shepherds were keeping watch over their flock, protecting them throughout the night, while the angels were witnessing the Mystery in ecstasy, singing hymns to God. (From Vespers of the Nativity)

The sweetness of the Holy Night of Christmas once again embraces the world. And in the midst of human trial and pain, of unending crises, of passion and enmity, of concern and despair, it presents the mystery of the Incarnation of the Divine Word as a genuine and timely solution. For He descended as dew in a field of cotton inside the womb of the ever-Virgin Mary in order to give rise to righteousness and much peace. (See Ps. 71.7)

In the silence and peace of that sacred night of Christmas, Jesus Christ – being without beginning, invisible, incomprehensible, immaterial, ever existing and the same – enters the drama of history bearing flesh, being insignificant, simple, poor and unknown. At the same time, he comes as a “wonderful, counselor, almighty, prince of peace, everlasting father.” (Is. 9.6) Indeed, he comes as a human being, born of a Virgin Mother, to solve the complexity of sin and grant resolution to the impasse of life's anxiety through His grace and mercy, while providing destiny, value, content, as well as an exemplary ethos and model for the human adventure.

The Lord assumed and sanctified all of human nature. The pre-eternal God condescended to become for us an embryo and be borne inside the womb of the Theotokos. In so doing, He both honored human life from its earliest stage and taught us respect toward humankind from its earliest conception. The Creator of all accepted to be born as an infant and be nurtured by a Virgin. In so doing, He honored both virginity and motherhood, spiritual and natural. This is why

St. Gregory the Theologian exhorts: “O women, be as virgins, so that you may become mothers of Christ.” (Homily XXXVIII on Epiphany, PG36.313A)

So the Lord appointed the marriage of male and female in the blessed family. The institution of Christian family constitutes the cell of life and an incubator for the spiritual and physical health and development of children. Therefore, the manifold support of the institution of the family comprises the obligation of the Church and responsibility of leadership in every country.

In order for a child to be raised in a healthy and natural way, there needs to be a family where man and woman live in harmony as one body, one flesh, and one soul, submitting to one another.

We are certain that all spiritual and ecclesiastical, much like the vigilant shepherds of old, but also the leaders of our world, know and accept this divine truth and reality, which we once again proclaim from the Ecumenical Patriarchate during this Christmas period. We must all encourage the creation and function of natural families, which can produce citizens that are spiritually healthy and joyful, filled with sentiments of security, based on the feeling of safety provided by a strong and protective father as well as a nurturing and loving mother. We need families where God might find rest. We invite and urge the entire plenitude of our holy Orthodox Church to live in a manner that is worthy of their calling and do everything that is possible to support the institution of marriage.

Brothers and sisters, “the night is far gone; the day is at hand.” (Rom. 6.12) The shepherds are already headed toward Bethlehem in order to proclaim the miracle. They are inviting us to follow them “like other star-gazing wise men filled with joy” (From the Christmas Troparion of the 4th Ode), bringing “worthy gifts” “such as fine gold to the King of ages, incense to the God of all, and myrrh to the immortal that lay dead for three days.” (Anatolios, Vespers Hymn at Christmas) That is to say, the gifts of love and our faith, which test us as Christians, especially as Orthodox Christians, in the ethos and tradition of the family, the Fathers, and the Church, which has always practiced the Orthodox way through the centuries and to this day holds together our blessed society, whose cell for sacred life and growth is the family.

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in Christ,

2013 years have passed since the birth of Christ in the flesh

2013 years have passed and, like then, Christ continues to be persecuted in the person of the weak by Herod and all kinds of contemporary Herods

2013 years have passed and Jesus is persecuted in the person of Christians in Syria and elsewhere

2013 years have passed and Christ still flees like a refugee not only in Egypt, but also in the Lebanon, Europe, America and elsewhere, seeking security in an insecure world

2013 years have passed and the child Jesus remains imprisoned with the two hierarchs in Syria, Paul (Yazigi) and Youhanna (Ibrahim), as well as the Orthodox nuns and many other known and unknown Christians

2013 years have passed and Christ is crucified with those who are tortured and killed in order not to betray their faith in Him

2013 years have passed and Jesus is daily put to death in the person of thousands of embryos, whose parents prevent from being born

2013 years have passed and Christ is mocked and ridiculed in the person of unfortunate children, who experience the crisis of the family, destitution and poverty.

It is this human pain, sorrow and affliction that our Lord came and once more comes to assume during this Christmas season. After all, He said: “As you have done to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters,” you have done to me.” (Matt. 25.40-41) It is for these that He was born of a Virgin, for these that He became human, for these that He suffered, was crucified and arose from the dead. That is to say: for all of us. Thus, let each of us lift up our personal cross in order to find grace and mercy when we seek His assistance. Then, the born Emmanuel, our Savior and Lord, will “be with us.” Amen.

Christmas 2013

*† Bartholomew of Constantinople
Your fervent supplicant before God*