

CHRISTMAS ENCYCLICAL

✠ **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 New-born Saviour Christ in Bethlehem

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord,

The sweetness of the holy night of Christmas once again embraces the world. In the midst of human toil and suffering, crisis and challenge, greed and hatred, anxiety and despair, the mystery of the divine incarnation presents the same charm as a truly tangible and ever contemporary reality, urging “the inhabitants of the world to learn righteousness” (cf. Is. 26:9), for “today our Saviour is born” (Lk 2:11).

Unfortunately, however, in our age, many people think like Herod, that illicit and utter slayer of children, annihilating their fellow human beings in manifold ways. When Herod's self-centeredness distorted his mind as an earthly leader, he was paradoxically threatened by the birth of an innocent Child. Therefore, Herod chose the annihilation of the Child as the most appropriate way of protecting his earthly power.

To escape his murderous intentions, the Infant Jesus, about whom the angels spoke, was forced to flee to Egypt, becoming (as we might say in today's terminology) a “political refugee,” together with Mary, his most-holy mother and Theotokos, as well as the righteous Joseph.

In our time, which is considered a time of progress, many children are forced to flee as refugees with their parents in order to save their lives, which are undermined by diverse enemies. This is truly a disgrace for the entire human race.

For this reason, on the occasion of the Nativity of the Child Jesus, our genuine Redeemer and Saviour, we proclaim from the most-holy Apostolic, Patriarchal and Ecumenical Throne that every society must guarantee the safe development of children and respect their right to life, education and normal upbringing, which may be secured by their nurture and formation within the context of the traditional family, based on the principles of love, compassion, peace and solidarity, which are gifts offered to us today by the incarnate Lord.

The New-born Saviour invites everyone to receive this message of salvation for all people. It is true that, in the long course of human history, people experienced many migrations and settlements. Yet we would have hoped that, after two world wars as well as numerous proclamations for peace by Church and political leaders and institutions, modern societies would be able to secure the peaceful co-existence of people in their own lands. Unfortunately, events have shown otherwise and shattered our hopes, because huge masses are today obliged to set out on a bitter road as refugees in the face of annihilation.

This ever-escalating situation, with the constantly swelling wave of refugees, increases the responsibility of those of us who are still blessed to live in peace and some comfort, in order not

to remain insensitive to the daily drama of thousands of our fellow human beings. Instead, we are called to express our practical solidarity and love, knowing that every gesture of love toward them is ultimately attributed to the New-born and incarnate Son of God, who came to the world neither as king and ruler, nor as tyrant or aristocrat, but rather as a naked and defenseless Infant in a tiny manger, homeless like many thousands of people at this very moment, and forced from his earliest years to migrate to a distant land in order to survive the hatred of Herod. The innocent blood of today's refugee infants spills onto the earth and into the sea, while Herod's insecure soul "bears the guilt."

This divine Infant, born in Bethlehem and headed to Egypt, is the authentic guardian of today's refugees, who are persecuted by modern-day Herods. This Child Jesus, our God, "became weak to the weak" (cf. 1 Cor 9:22), in every way becoming like us who are weak, wearied, at risk, as refugees. Our support and assistance to the persecuted and displaced, irrespective of race, ethnicity and religion, resembles the most precious gifts of the wise men to the New-born Lord, like the invaluable treasures of "gold and frankincense and myrrh" (cf. Mt 2:11), an inviolable and permanent spiritual wealth that remains incorrupt to the ages and awaits us in the heavenly kingdom.

Let each of us offer whatever we can to our refugee brothers and sisters, in whom we see the person of Jesus Christ. Let us offer the precious gifts of love, sacrifice and compassion to the small Child Christ born in Bethlehem, imitating his tender mercy. And let us worship him with the angels, the wise men and the simple shepherds, as we cry out "glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to all people" (Lk 2:14), together with all the saints.

May the grace and abundant mercy of the refugee Infant Jesus be with you all!

Christmas 2015

Your Fervent Supplicant before God
✠ **BARTHOLOMEW**