



IRINEJ

By God's grace Orthodox Archbishop of Pech, Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and Patriarch of Serbia, with all the Hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church – to the priests, monastics and all sons and daughters of our Holy Church: grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We greet you with the joyful greeting of Nativity:

PEACE FROM GOD – CHRIST IS BORN!

This year also, as we celebrate the glorious Incarnation of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the only New Thing under the Sun, we all haste to the house of God to gather around the God-child, Most pure Mother of God and Ever-virgin Mary, and righteous Joseph.

We do this in order to warm our souls with the words of the Gospel pertaining to the Incarnation and birth of our Savior, God-man Jesus Christ, when Heavens and Earth both exclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men!"

A holy hymnographer of the Church says about this unique and most glorious event in history and in all the worlds, "Adam of dust was at first a partaker of the graceful inspiration but through the viles of the serpent became subject of perdition, but we know

that the Word became man for his sake. O Virgin, You crossed the boundaries of mortal creatures by giving birth to the pre-eternal Word Who was pleased to pass through You, a sealed treasure-chest, O unburnt Bush. You, the God of peace have sent us the Great Angel of Thy Holy Council to consecrate us and to bring us to the light of the knowledge of God. Where sin abound You gave an indescribable grace and thus we all became heirs of the light from on High.”

For our spiritual children, our still much-suffering Serbian people both in homeland and in diaspora, we, your spiritual shepherds, wish that righteous thoughts and feelings permanently dwell within you, and that our lives take their course within God and with the Saints. Thus we ought to walk also before the face of Saint Sava and all the Serbian Saints and Enlighteners of our holy autocephalous Serbian Church. We have to always ponder how do we live now in order to have our glorious ancestors at our side when we stand at the judgment at Christ’s righteous tribunal – that they would recognize us as their followers. Behold the holy duty of our earthly existence!

Our dear spiritual children, let us do everything we can to make sure that any abundance we might be enjoying be unto the soothing of needs of our near and dear ones, especially regarding brotherly love. Divine Maximos the Confessor teaches us thus, “Let us strive to equate natural imbalances through our soberminded pondering, fulfilling the needs to those who lack something with that which we have an abundance of.” This is pleasing to the Incarnate Son of God Who made Himself equal with the lowest and the poorest. Therefore, whoever does something for them, he has done it for Him. Did the God-child not come to first of all feed all the mouths and give peace to all our hearts?

If Christ was incarnate and became God-child, died and resurrected for our sake, should not all our deeds in this world reflect our gratitude to Him and thus adorn us make us pleasing to God? For this we all need humility and awareness that we are coworkers of God and adorners of the Church.

If the world lies in evil of passions and sins, and it does indeed, then let no man take part in it, or rather in the works of darkness! We Christians vowed to maintain the heavenly order of things, not an order which ignores heavens or works against them. In

accord with one introspective saying, regarding the issue of freedom, let us say that we are free only inasmuch as we are free from sin. Only if we are free from sin are we free for Communion with God. Starting from that point, establishing ourselves with repentance and humility, we will be able to grow in Divine virtues. We will be able to assume the features of the Image of Christ only by the Grace of the Holy Spirit and through doing deeds that are pleasing to God. Thus we shall be able to pluck the fruit of virtues from the Tree of Life – our Lord Jesus Christ, placed in the midst of the Church as Paradise of Sweetness, being fed by Him both within time and in eternity.

The main message of this Nativity ought again to be that we must preserve the Orthodox Faith at any price. Our Orthodox Revelation and Holy Tradition both tell us that it is pleasing to God to confess the belief in the Incarnate Son and Word of God, God-man Christ, as well as the belief in the Holy Trinity. This gives us light as we walk through the darkness of this world wallowing in sin. On this belief depends our understanding and adopting of the Lord's bright Image, the perfect measure for every thing – our Savior Jesus Christ in Whom we grow and for Whose glorious second coming we hope. Ultimately, it is the survival of the entire creation that depends on the completeness of the faith. It then follows that it is that orthodox faith that makes it possible for us to make the communion with God the center of our existence, in Divine Liturgy. Our holy Orthodox Church lives through Liturgy and bears witness to our communion with the God-child Christ.

Our holy duty is to carry the cross of historic events and trials in all the local Churches, as one. But it is also a holy duty of all the local Churches to respect and honor each other. So, workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, regardless of their merit, should be reminded that nothing can be done without agreement and unity among all; nothing by force, in order not to tear up Christ's robe not made by hands, or rather, not to defile the Image of the God-child Christ. Let the rule of healing ourselves and others in a kind, honest and patristic manner be applied everywhere.

In this year's encyclical to our faithful children of Saint Sava we again wish to state that we cannot forget Old Serbia – Kosovo and Metohija. We as a people should see Kosovo and Metohija as a testament, word and heritage, inseparable from our being.

Choirs of Serbian martyrs and new martyrs testified exactly to this. Today, on Christmas day, let us most solemnly remember the martyrs of Kosovo, Jasenovac, Gradina, and all other places of suffering. We pray to them to help us to also confess our Orthodox Faith in the God-child Christ to the end, not fearing anything.

Problems of a modern man pertaining to the present and, it seems, the future as well, often discourage us and surprise us. It seems like the modern Serbian man has decided to split mankind into those who had the chance to live and those who were not given that chance but were aborted instead as unborn infants, and make the number of the latter greater than the former. How do we approach Christ-child and His Holy Mother, and all the Saints, with this on our national being – that is the most painful question of here and now!

Obviously, rulers of this world are ready to not only rip the sacramental life out of our hands, but to challenge even the concept of genders and marriage, and to take us to a place where human thought, word, deed and step had never been before. Still, Christ the God-child offers a word of consolation, “What profit does a man have if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?” One repentant soul is more important than the whole world.

Establishing an organic link between Christmas and Theophany, as our iconographers rightly do, we shall say the following in concluding this encyclical:

Our Savior Jesus Christ stepped into this world as He stepped into the Jordan river in the days of old. Then, as John put his hand over Him, all the sin fled from Him, as did the waters of the Jordan river. The same has happened throughout the ages as Apostles, bishops and priests put their hands on the heads of us who set out on the path of deification. Fire of God’s grace from which the Cherubim tremble we have also received at the Sacrament of baptism, in the font of rebirth in Christ by water and Spirit. Thus we became light-bearers of faith in the Son of God, God-child Christ, receiving also as a gift the ability to reign with Him in eternity.

This is why it is so important how we shall live, we and all our offspring, and to determine what they can build their house of their Christian life. Will it be on water,

sand, straw, or will be it be on the rock of Christ, the Cornerstone of the Church which is the home of our Father Who is in heaven? All our deeds will be tested by the fire of God's grace!

Only the deeds tested by the fire of Divine Grace will show us to be justified or condemned. They will show all of us people to be either true or renegade children of God the Father, brothers to the Only-begotten Son and God-child, and vessels of the Holy Spirit. Will it show us to be the faithful worshippers of the Trinity, Coessential, Equally omnipotent, Worshipped and Glorified?

Gathered around the God-child in the cave of Bethlehem, we also yearn to be in our Father's embrace!

Therefore, let our homes be warmed and gladdened in the Holy Spirit by the heavenly-earthly hymn of the God-child, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men!"

Peace from God, Christ is born!

Delivered at the Serbian Patriarchate in Beograd, Christmas of 2019.

Your intercessors before the God-child Christ:

Archbishop of Pech, Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and Patriarch of Serbia IRINEJ

[with all the members of the Holy Assembly of Bishops]