



IRINEJ

BY THE GRACE OF GOD
BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA

GOD'S PEACE — CHRIST IS BORN!

Most beloved clergy and monastics, sons and daughters,
Faithful children of the Eastern American Diocese of our Most Holy Church,

*In the secrecy of a cave, You were born,
But Heaven spoke openly through a star,
Revealing You to all, Savior.
The Star led Wise Men to worship You;
As on them, Lord, have mercy on us!*

(Vesperal Troparion of the Prophecies)

The Star, which long ago appeared over a cave outside of Bethlehem, continuously reveals for us the mystery of the birth of the Divine Christ Child. Christ is born – rejoice, beloved! Rejoice for the light of the Nativity also reveals the intended purpose of humanity and, therefore, our own being. The Word of God – *Light of Light, True God of True God* – as we faithfully proclaim in the Creed, became man, so that the same Star, which shone upon Him, may continue to shine upon us, illumining our hearts and minds with the Gospel of Truth and Righteousness and, thereby, the promise of salvation for all.

The light of the cruciform Star of Bethlehem, as it reveals the Sun of Righteousness to the world, will also reveal in us the mystery of our humanity and, with it, the salvific nature of incarnate love and community. Through the Gospel encounters of the Nativity, we are summoned to illumination by the light-bearing precepts of family, friendship, fellowship and faith. Through the birth of Christ in the flesh, the fullness of His humanity is realized ultimately in His sacrifice on the Cross, as foreshadowed in the gifts of the Magi, and fulfilled in the light of the Resurrection.

Consequently, the light of the Nativity reveals family. For Christ was begotten before all time of a Father without a mother, and in time of a Mother without a father. Through the incarnation of the Word, His words come to pass: *Whoever sees me sees the Father* (John 14:9). As a result, the fear of God, a fear which insinuates itself ever so easily, no longer has grounds for existing. St. Peter Chrysologus, known as the Doctor of Homilies, writes that *God became a child, so that we might cease to be afraid of Him*. Thereby, tender love, affection (στοργή), abides in the family, the foundational community of humankind, which is threatened on nearly all levels in contemporary society.

The light of the Nativity reveals friendship. Writing on ideal friendship in a letter to St. John Chrysostom, his mother, St. Anthusa, notes that a genuine friend *is more desirable than light itself. . . for it would be better for us if the sun were to be extinguished, than to be deprived of friends. It would be better to live in darkness, than to be without friends. And how can I say this? Because many who see the sun are in darkness. But those who are rich in friends could never be in tribulation. . . Friends surpass fathers and sons, that is, friends according to Christ.* For in the Nativity, God became human, one of us, so that we might reciprocate His divine love (αγάπη) through our filial love (φιλία) for each other.

The light of the Nativity reveals fellowship. For us, as Orthodox Christians, our salvation lies in community. Even at birth, Christ is surrounded by heaven and earth in its fullness: angels herald His birth and shepherds respond to the strains of *Glory to God in the highest*; as the appearance of the Star inspires the Wise Men to follow its brilliance. Together, the shepherds and the Wise Men, behold an infant in the manger of a cave, surrounded by the animals, and embraced tenderly by His Mother; as the faith of Joseph the Betrothed, is tested, as is ours, in believing that the Savior is truly born for us and for our salvation.

The light of the Nativity, as such, reveals faith. Through the Incarnation of the Christ Child, we come to understand that there are no strangers in the Lord. The Birth of the Savior seals human dignity and confirms the worth of every person through family, friendship, fellowship and faith. In turn, we must all ask ourselves, how can we, without exception, who are endowed with His image and likeness, manifest this likeness of the Newborn Savior, save by recognizing Him in everyone alike?!

We pray the Newborn Divine Infant that He finds His abode in the manger of your hearts and minds; that He blesses and enlightens each of you with the radiance of the Star of Bethlehem; that He grants you a blessed New Year of salvation, illumined by the light of the knowledge of God. May this forthcoming Year 2019 be filled with mutual love, peace and harmony.

With paternal love, we invoke upon all of you, the blessing and grace of that Holy Christmas Night, joyfully exclaiming from all our heart:

**GOD'S PEACE – CHRIST IS BORN!
INDEED, HE IS BORN!**

Given in New York, at Christmas in the year 2018.

Your fervent intercessor before the cradle of the Divine Infant Christ,

+IRINEJ

**BISHOP OF EASTERN AMERICA
THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**