



† THEOPHAN

**By the Mercy of God
Bishop of Philomelion
and the Albanian Orthodox Diocese of the Americas**

PASTORAL LETTER NATIVITY OF CHRIST 2023

To the honorable clergy, and the Orthodox Christians faithful, sons and daughters, members, supporters, benefactors and friends of Albanian Orthodox Diocese of the Americas

Grace, Mercy, Peace and Joy from our Lord Jesus Christ, and from us, paternal blessings!

*"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be for all the people;
that in the city of David a Savior was born to you today, who is Christ the Lord."
(Luke 2:10-11)*

The feast that lies before us represents the fulfillment of the covenant between God and people. The baby Jesus, born in the manger of Bethlehem, illuminates the life time of each of us and the whole world, because even the years are sanctified by counting them from the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The whole creature marvels at the mystery of God's descent to us and trembles under the humility shown by the Son of God, He who is born in the flesh from the Mother of God and the Ever-Virgin Mary.

The birth of Christ the Redeemer, which the whole creation enjoys, makes us reflect more deeply on the mystery of the Incarnation, because the way of the union of the two natures, Divine and Human, in the one Person of the Son of God, is the model of the unity of the Church. Being a theandric communion, the Church is the mystical Body of Christ, in which the unity of believers imitates the unity of the Holy Trinity. *"The gathering in the Church is, above all, the Mystery of love. We go to church for love, for the new love of Christ Himself, which is given to us in our unity."* (Fr. Alexander Schmemmann).

Through His Incarnation, Christ the Lord took "the yoke of humanity", assuming in Himself the universal body of the Church: "He did not take the body of heaven, but the body of the Church. Heaven is for the Church, not the Church for heaven." The Head of the Church, Christ the Lord, Who





became Man, stands in eternal connection with humanity, dwelling through the Spirit in our hearts, "so that, having Him in us, we may cry aloud: "Abba! (Father!)," we may advance easily to all virtue and, besides this, to stand strong and unconquered in the face of the wiles of the devil and oppositions." (St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, X, II, p. 983).

Dearly beloved in Christ Jesus,

The spiritual unity of the Church, given by Christ the Lord in the Holy Spirit, assumes a great responsibility from us. The well-known statement of Saint Cyprian of Carthage who said: "**Extra Ecclesiam nulla Salus!**" (**Outside the Church there is no Salvation!**), truly expresses the teaching of the Savior Jesus Christ; that outside the communion of love, based on the right faith, there is no Salvation. Each person, as a member of the Church, not only has to take care of himself, guarding against sin as a weakening of Ecclesial Unity, but he has to take care of his neighbor with responsibility and sacrificial love, as the Holy Apostle Paul teaches us: "Walk worthily, according to the calling with which you were called, with all humility and meekness, with long-suffering, forgiving one another in love, forcing yourselves to guard the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace. It is one Body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling; is a Lord, a faith, a baptism, a God and Father of all, Who is above all and through all and in all. And to each of us Grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ." (Ephesians 4:2-7).

Church Unity must be a model for social unity. Just as the divine love shown in the person of the Savior Jesus Christ is at the foundation of the Church, so the love towards our neighbor is at the foundation of the unity of the Nation, a fact for which we intercede in the Divine Liturgy: "Asking for the unity of faith and the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us offer ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God." (Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)

May the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord, of the New Year and of the Baptism of the Lord (*Theophany*), bring you much peace, health, abundant joy and strength in your souls!

Christ is Born, Glorify Him! Christ is on earth, exalt Him!

Prayerfully yours in the Newborn Lord and God Jesus Christ our Savior,


+ THEOPHAN

of Philomelion and Albanian Orthodox Diocese of the Americas

