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+ BARTHOLOMEW

By the Mercy of God

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church

Grace, Peace and Mercy from our Savior Christ Born in Bethlehem

“Christ is born again and the Angels sing once more:

‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among all.’” (Luke 2.14-15)

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

The angels chant these three majestic proclamations and yet the great majority of human beings, although celebrating the feast of Christmas, cannot perceive the significance of the angelic song, instead asking themselves whether God is truly glorified today or why God should even be glorified; where can one discern on earth the peace that is announced, and why should contemporary humanity live with good will?

It is because, in reality, most people do not glorify God – either in their deeds or through their words. Many of them doubt the very existence of God and God’s presence in their lives. There are also many people that attribute responsibility to God for the unfortunate occurrences in their lives. However, those who grumble against God err profoundly, since evil does not derive from Him. On the contrary, the loving incarnation of the divine Son and Word, together with the consequent events of His Crucifixion and Resurrection, reshape the human person to its former beauty, granting eternal life and the peace that surpasses all understanding, while rendering human beings co-heirs of the heavenly kingdom. This act of divine condescension, though embracing the ultimate humiliation, is in itself capable of glorifying humanity. Thus, even if many people fail to glorify God in their hearts, nevertheless glory is rendered – by all creation and all things that take place among humans – unto Him who dwells in the highest. We too, then, gratefully cry out with the Angels, “Glory to God in the highest,” for the immensity of His works and the incomprehensibility of His love for us.

Yet people also query the second angelic proclamation: “And on earth peace.” How can we speak of peace on earth when almost half of the planet finds itself either in the act of or in preparation for war? The sweet tone of the angelic proclamation regarding “peace on earth” is of course primarily a divine pledge that, if people adhere to the way indicated by the new-born Child, they will acquire internal peace and peaceful coexistence. But, alas, most people are moved and drawn by the cymbals of war, ignoring the sound of the pledge for peace on earth. We are not referring here to those who passionately support the use of

weapons, but especially to those who transform gentle competition to unequal conflict, seeking the annihilation of any opposition. In this respect, war is experienced as reality among members of rival social groups and parties of all kinds – whether racial, political, partisan, financial, ideological, religious, athletic or any other kind, where the intense mindset of members is converted into militant rather than peaceful. However, this does not refute the truth proclaimed by the Angels, that – through the Nativity of Christ and the acceptance of His teachings – peace will indeed prevail on earth. Christ came bearing peace; and if His peace does not prevail in the world, then responsibility lies with those who fail to accept and embrace this peace, not with the God who grants it.

Since this is the stance of contemporary humanity in light of the peace offered by God, it is hardly surprising that good will is rare among people. The good intention of God toward humanity is assured, just as the favorable consequences of divine love are in principle apparent for all human beings and particularly tangible for all those who accept the angelic proclamations in practice. By contrast, for those who reject these proclamations and are given to exploiting and abusing others, the consequences are experienced as a crisis of stress and anxiety, as a crisis of economy and meaning, and finally as existential uncertainty.

Beloved brothers and sisters, children in the Lord,

All the proclamations of the Angels during the birth of the Lord are realities that exist and are experienced today in fullness by those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Divine-Human Savior of the world. Let us begin from this year to live Christmas in a way that pleases God, the giver of all good things, so that we might experience in our hearts the transcendent peace and the loving good will of God toward us. Let us render ourselves as loving human beings in our relationship to God and other people, becoming sharing persons rather than selfish individuals. Let us remove the masks that estrange and divide us from God and His human image, our fellow human being. And let us fulfill our destiny in the likeness of God by practicing our faith in Him. Let us, too, proclaim the angelic song to humankind, which is suffering terribly and cannot discover Peace and Good Will through its conventional ways. The only way of overcoming war and all forms of crisis, such as the financial one that plagues our world, is our Lord Jesus Christ, who assured us that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Therefore, we glorify God in the highest and Jesus Christ who condescended to dwell among us. And we proclaim with the Angels that Peace is accessible and truly exists on earth and within our hearts because we have been reconciled to God through His good will to assume flesh by His birth in the manger.

So let us experience the joy of the Nativity of Jesus Christ and the foretaste of all the benefits announced by the threefold proclamation of the Angels. Amen.

At the Phanar, Christmas 2011
+ Bartholomew of Constantinople
Fervent supplicant for all before God