

Prot. No. 1237

BARTHOLOMEW

By God's Grace

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch
To the Plenitude of the Church
Grace, peace and mercy from the Savior Christ
Born in Bethlehem

Beloved concelebrants and blessed children in the Lord,

*Heaven and earth have united
Through the birth of Christ.
Today, God has appeared on earth,
And man has ascended to heaven.
(Christmas Hymn)*

The distance and separation between God and humanity resulting from sin has been abolished with the assumption of the entire human nature by the Only-Begotten Son and Pre-eternal Word of God. It was God's good will – that is to say, His initiative and will – that the incarnation of His Son should abolish all such distance uniting heaven and earth, as well as creation with its Creator.

During the Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos, the Church chanted: "Today is the beginning of God's good will and the proclamation of human salvation." During that feast, through the dedication of the blessed Mary to the temple and her preparation there to become the bearer of the boundless God, the road was paved for the incarnate dispensation of God, which foretold our salvation.

During the feast of the Annunciation, when the divine conception of the Inconceivable occurred through the Holy Spirit within the womb of the Theotokos and divine nature began to coexist with human nature in order that – as St. Athanasius the Great articulated it – "we might become deified," the Church again chanted: "Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the pre-eternal mystery; the Son of God becomes the son of the Virgin." Thus, the "divine good will" welcomed at the Entrance, as well as

the salvation commenced and revealed at the Annunciation, are today rendered a tangible reality, as we celebrate the great and holy day of Christmas. Today, “the Word assumes flesh and dwells among us” (John 1.14), while the Angels celebrate the event, chanting: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among humankind.” (Luke 2.14)

With the Incarnation of the Divine Word, the salvation of the human race has already potentially occurred. For those who believe in Jesus, live in accordance with this faith, fulfilling His commandments and practicing His teaching, are thereby elevated to become the friends and participants of God! They become “partakers of divine nature” (2 Peter 1.14), gods by grace! This takes place exclusively within the Church, where we are reborn in Christ and adopted by the Father through Holy Baptism and through the holy Sacraments, as well as by cultivation of virtue in order to be filled with divine grace and the Holy Spirit, growing “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4.13) until we reach the level of saying, like St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal. 2.20) Those who acquire such perfection are not regarded by Christ simply as His friends or brothers, but are recognized by Him as members of His Body. This is why, from the height of the Cross, he would say to His Most Holy Mother about the Evangelist John: “Woman, here is your son,” and to John: “Here is your mother.” (John 19.26-27) Christmas, therefore, opens wide the door of human “christification” and deification by grace; and for this reason, “the entire creation rejoices in celebration and the heavens delight with us” on this day of significance and salvation.” (Hymn of December 28)

With these joyful and hopeful realities before us, from the sacred See of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Phanar, we extend to you our fervent festive congratulations and wholehearted Patriarch wishes on this central feast of the Christian calendar. We greet all of our beloved faithful throughout the world, the beloved children of the holy Mother Church – clergy of all levels, monastics and laity, pastors and parishioners, and especially those suffering, experiencing sorrow, need or trial. May the pre-eternal Son of God – who was born in a cave and lay in a manger – who for our sake became Son of Man, render all of us worthy of his self-emptying love and of His sacred, venerable incarnate dispensation.

At the Phanar, Christmas 2009

Bartholomew of Constantinople

Fervent supplicant for all before God