

THE CHRISTMAS FEAST AT THE PATRIARCHATE

The Feast of Christ's Nativity was celebrated by the Patriarchate according to the tradition and order at the Basilica of the Nativity and the God-receiving Cave in the town of Bethlehem, on Sunday December 25, 2017/ January 7, 2018.

The Feast began with the Service of Matins at 10.30 p.m. on the night of Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017/ January 6, 2018 with the entrance through the Baptism Gate and the welcome of the officiating Patriarchal Commissioner Most Reverend Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias.

The formal descend to the Holy Cave began with the Matins Hymn "Come, ye faithful, let us see where Christ the Saviour hath been born". The Archbishops and the Priests dressed in their liturgical vestments preceded the procession which was officiated by His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, having the President of the Palestinian State Mr. Mahmoud Abbas Abu-Mazen on His right hand side, the representative of His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan, Interior Minister Mr. Ghaleb Zu'bi on His left hand side, and the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr. Christos Sophianopoulos, the President of the Church Affairs Committee of the Palestinian State Mr. Hanah Amire, the Palestinian Presidential Adviser Mr. Ziad Al-Bandak, and other Officials of the Palestinian State and on either side other Governmental and Police Force Officials of the town of Bethlehem and diplomatic representatives of countries.

Once in the Cave, the Hymns of Ascent were chanted, the Gospel narrative of the Nativity was read in Greek and Arabic, and the Patriarchal Christmas Message was read by Geronda Secretary-General Most Reverent Archbishop Aristarchos of

Constantina as follows:

*“He that was begotten of the Father before the
morning star without a mother, is today on
earth become incarnate of thee without a father;
wherefore, a star announceth the good tidings to the
Magi; and the Angels with shepherds hymn thy seedless
childbirth, O Full of Grace.”*

(Kontakion: Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos)

During the joyous and glorious period of the Holy Twelve-days the Church as much as the whole of humanity celebrate a divine and heavenly event, an event that is at the same time splendid and marvelous, strange and paradox. We celebrate the event of God’s peaceful visit and healing intervention in man’s life. The Church proclaims the event of the incarnate Epiphany of God in the world. It confesses that God, who has created man according to His image and likeness, remodeled him by the Son’s resemblance to man according to the divine beauty given to him before the fall. In the presence of His Only-Begotten Son and Word, God became incarnate, He was made flesh, He became human. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1.14) Through the Incarnation and nativity in the flesh of His Son by the Ever-Virgin, during the reign of Caesar Octavius Augustus in Bethlehem, God revived and pulled man out of the depths of his fall and corruption and lifted him in the heights of heaven, making him “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1.4). For this offering, grace and unspeakable joy given to humanity, the Church chants with the hymn writer today: “the Lord hath sent forth redemption to his people”; with the Evangelist: “a Saviour has been born to us today, who is Christ”; and with the hymn writer: “Our Saviour

from on high hath visited us” and “Christ is born, give ye glory, Christ is on earth, be ye exalted”.

Eye-witnesses to this unheard of mystery, namely God’s incarnate presence in the world, are; the Ever-Virgin, who contributed to this reality, and conceived by the Holy Spirit, became pregnant and gave birth in the flesh and swaddled Christ; Joseph the elder, her companion from Nazareth to Bethlehem for Caesar’s census, from Bethlehem to Egypt on their escape, and to their return in Nazareth, from which the Lord was called a Nazarene. Eye-witnesses are also simple farmers, shepherds watching over their flocks, who drew nigh in order to see and experience the mystery, after the invitation and the vision of angels, who were chanting in heaven the angelic hymn: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2.14). Moreover, eye-witnesses were men of science, Magi Kings from Persia, researchers of the universe. They were called from afar by a star in heaven, to herald the beginning of the Church of nations, so that from the idolatry of the stars they would come to the worship of the Sun of Righteousness. And indeed, in this simple and humble Cave they beheld in ecstasy “the babe lying in a manger” (Luke 2.16), and recognizing Him they bowed and worshiped the Incarnate God made man in the flesh by the Virgin, and offered Him their gifts of reverence “gold, and frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2.11).

In this manner did the wealth of Christ’s Divinity shine upon men, in the humility of the Cave and the poverty of the swaddling clothes. Christ took upon Himself the form of a man, humbling Himself, so that in this form He would sanctify and glorify man. “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8.9). Being true God, strong and mighty, He took on the feebleness of the human flesh and became God-human, one person in two natures, “who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him” (Acts 10.38).

This philanthropy of God is preached in the Holy Spirit by the Church, the Body of the Incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ who was Crucified in the flesh and Resurrected from the dead for the salvation of the world. Christ has bequeathed the Church with the perpetuation of His peace-making, reconciling, sanctifying and salvific mission in the world. The Church manifests and preaches His mission to its members, but also to all those who by their free will do not accept the message of the Lord of peace, but act remorselessly and inhumanly instead, just like Herod did to the new-born King and the infants. They neither sharpen their plows for plowing, nor their sickles for reaping; on the contrary, they sharpen their swords in order to rend each other to pieces. They spend the wealth of God's creation to compatible and incompatible weapons and wars, they sacrifice hundreds of thousands of innocent people through atrocious terrorist acts and they dare say this is done in the name of God. The Church speaks to them in love. It teaches peace, to those near and afar. It sanctifies the people, tames their morals and remains an oasis, a paradise and the visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. It shares its spiritual and material goods with the people philanthropically. It tolerates persecution; being slandered, it forgives and prays. It calls everybody, saying: "come and see" (John 1.46).

This is done also by the Church of Jerusalem in the Holy Land, which defends and preserves the Holy Shrines and of course the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built by Constantine and Justine the Emperors. The Church of Jerusalem prays from the God-receiving Cave for the peace of the whole world, peace in the Middle East and the Holy Land; it prays especially for its Greek Orthodox congregation which lives in the Palestinian State, but also for all Palestinian people and supports with all its strength and by all peaceful means His Excellency the President Mahmoud Abbas Abu-Mazen, who honours with His presence our Feast; so that He may successfully complete His mission of sustaining the political and religious Status Quo

in Jerusalem, as it is recognized by the International Community, and that He may accomplish the full recognition of the Palestinian State by all nations worldwide.

*In the Holy Town of Bethlehem, **CHRISTMAS 2017***

Fervent supplicant for all before God,

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

The Message was also read by the Press Representative of the Patriarchate for the Arabic M.M. Dean Priest Issa Mousleh in Arabic.

Afterward, there was the veneration of the Nativity place and the Holy Manger, followed by the ascent through the North Gate of the Cave and the litany three times around the Basilica was concluded at the centre of the Basilica with a special prayer.

After the prayer, His Beatitude started the Katavasie "Christ is born" and coming down from the throne, the Service of Matins was continued at the singing of the choir leader of the All-holy Church of the Resurrection Archimandrite Aristovoulos on the right in Greek and the Bethlehem choir on the left in Arabic. At the same time, the Divine Liturgy was being celebrated in the Holy Cave, led by the Most Reverend Metropolitan Joachim of Helenoupolis.

Having finished the prayer, the Divine Liturgy started at the Catholicon, officiated by His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, with co-celebrants the Most Reverend Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias and the Archbishop Demetrios of Lydda, Hagiotaphite Hieromonks, Priests of the Patriarchate and other churches, Archdeacon Mark and Hierodeacon Anastasios. The choir leader of the All-holy Church of the Resurrection Archimandrite Aristovoulos sang on

the right in Greek and the Bethlehem choir on the left in Arabic under Mr. Lawrence Samour. The Service was attended in contrition by many pilgrims from Russia, Greece, Romania, Ukraine and other countries as well as local pilgrims. The Divine Liturgy was also attended by the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr. Christos Sophianopoulos and the Consul Mrs. Katherine Tzima.

After the Divine Liturgy, a meal was offered to the Patriarchal Entourage, the Archbishops, Priests and the people by the renovator of the Monastery Most Reverend Archbishop Theophylactos of Jordan, for the glory of God Who permitted and accepted this Feast.

From Secretariat-General

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