

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS – CHRISTMAS DAY

The Christmas Feast of Sunday, December 25, 2023/January 7, 2024, began with the Descent in the evening from the entrance to the Baptistry and the entrance to the Basilica, presided over by the Most Reverend Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias.

Then the sequence of Matins began, as written in the Minaion, in the Catholicon of the Basilica. During this time, His Beatitude, the High Priests and the Priests proceeded to the Grotto, with, the President of the Supreme Ecclesiastical Committee, representative of the President of the Palestinian State Mr Mahmoud Abbas-Abu Mazen, Mr Ramzi Khouri and associates of his office on the right and the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr Dimitrios Angelosopoulos on the left and the representative of the King of Jordan.

In the Grotto, a prayer was offered and the Gospel according to Luke was read “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed” (2,1). Afterwards, the Patriarchal Christmas Message was read by the Elder Secretary-General His Eminence Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina in Greek and by the Protopresbyter Fr Issa Mousleh in Arabic:

“A strange and marvellous mystery do I behold;

the cave is a heaven; the Virgin a cherubic throne;

the manger a space wherein Christ God the

Uncontainable One hath reclined.

Him do we praise and magnify”

(Christmas Canon, Heirmos of Ode 9)

Mankind beheld "a strange and marvellous mystery" indeed, as the hymnographer of the Church writes, at the end of times, during the reign of Caesar Octavianus Augustus. We saw God's condescension manifested in Bethlehem of Judea. Fulfilling His promises to the prophets, God "sent redemption to His people". This redemption is the Only Begotten Son and His Word, "of the same essence" as the Father. Through God the Father, He was blessed to be incarnated, to take on human soul, flesh and body from the Holy Spirit and the Ever-Virgin Mary. "As He willed and as He pleased" and as the Evangelist John says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". (John 1, 14). For our sake, He "emptied himself" (Phil. 2, 7), and was "secretly born in a cave". He accepted the ultimate poverty; He was born in a cave and wrapped in swaddling clothes; He lay in a manger. In this poverty "the wealth of His Divinity shone". Because of this, "the heaven through the star brought over to Him the Magi as the beginning of the nations" and "precursors of the Church" according to Saint Chrysostom. An angel revealed Him to the shepherds who kept the night watch and a multitude of angels proclaimed Him from heaven through the hymn, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men", announcing that God's goodwill for men is peace. This all-pervading Divine peace is brought to the world by God's Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; He is "the Angel of great counsel, the Prince of peace and the Sun of righteousness".

Based on this Divine revelation, as it was witnessed by eye and ear witnesses in the Holy Scriptures, the Church believes and preaches to its members and the whole world, that Christ is the Saviour and Redeemer of the human race, not as deified man but as God Incarnate, for the salvation, that is, the deification of man. God came down to earth, to raise man to heaven, because "our conversation remains" (Phil, 3, 20) according to Saint Paul. The Fathers of the Church say

incessantly, "God became man and man became divine". And Saint Gregory Palamas proclaims that "the flesh is glorified along with the reception and the glory of the body, which becomes the glory of the Godhead". Through the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection from the dead and His Ascension, Christ as God and man, God-man, sat down at the right hand of the Father after assuming His human nature and paved the deification for those believing in him.

Having ascended into heaven, the Incarnate One, the crucified in the flesh and risen from the dead, our Lord Jesus Christ, left the Church on earth, that is, the holy disciples and apostles, their successors, the hierarchs, priests and the Christ-named congregation, so that it may fulfil His mission unto the ages; the mission of the teaching, the conciliation and the sanctification of people, so that what was heard on the first night of His Nativity, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace goodwill among men" prevails on earth.

The Church worldwide, especially the blessed Church of Jerusalem, proclaims this word and performs this work, obedient to its founder, as it ministers in the places of His manifestation in the flesh, the first of which was the city of Bethlehem. In the magnificent Constantinian Basilica of the Nativity and the humble Grotto, the Mother of the Churches will celebrate again this year, starting from Jerusalem, keeping its ancient tradition since the days of the pilgrim Aetheria and our late predecessor Patriarch Sophronios.

Filled with the joy of the Nativity of Christ, we address Our Patriarchal and Fatherly wishes and blessings to "every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh" (Jn.1, 4, 2), to the pious pilgrims, especially to Our reverend flock in Gaza, along with Our prayers, that Saint Porphyrios remains its protector and of all those suffering there under the raging war.

In particular, we express our gratitude to the President of

the Palestinian state, Mahmoud Abbas-Abu Mazen, through his representative, Mr Ramzi Hourri, and we wish him God's strength in the success of his efforts and struggles, including the protection of the tested Palestinian people, to live in peace, justice and prosperity in the context of an absolutely free Palestinian state worthy of international recognition.

In the Holy City of Bethlehem CHRISTMAS 2023

THEOPHILOS III

PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM

This was followed by the veneration of the star and the Manger. Then the exit took place from the north gate of the Grotto and the top of the steps of the chapel of the Armenians, to hold the procession three times around the Catholicon and the sides of the Basilica of the Nativity and there was a supplication at the central part of the Church.

When the Entourage reached the iconostasis, His Beatitude started chanting the 9th Ode, the service of Matins continued and then the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great. The services were presided over by His Beatitude, with the co-celebration of their Eminences, Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias, the Archbishops, Aristarchos of Constantina, Theophanes of Gerassa, Dimitrios of Lydda and Philoumenos of Pella, the Elder Kamarasis Archimandrite Nectarios, other Holy Sepulchre Priests, Archdeacon Mark and Hierodeacon Eulogios. Despite the ongoing hostilities in the area, a large congregation of Palestinian Orthodox Christians attended the Vigil.

The Divine Liturgy was also celebrated in the Grotto of the Nativity by His Eminence Archbishop Nectarios of Anthedona, the representative of the Patriarchate in Constantinople.

The Patriarchal Liturgy finished at 3.30 a.m., as per the Status Quo.

After the Vigil the Patriarchal Representative in Bethlehem hosted a meal, sharing the plight of the Palestinian people who are being tested by the ongoing war.

In the morning the Elder Dragoman Archimandrite Mattheos went down to the Grotto for veneration and left the Basilica, indicating with this act the end of the first day of the Great Feast of Christmas at the Basilica of the Nativity and the Grotto, where Christ our God was born in the flesh.

From Secretariat-General