

Archpastoral Letter for the Feast of the Nativity 2015

The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord
Friday, December 25th, 2015

Dearly Beloved of Our Diocesan Family:

Christ is Born! – Let us glorify Him!

One of the most beautiful prayers ever composed for the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord was written by Saint Ephraim the Syrian. Ephraim was a Syriac and a prolific Syriac-language hymnographer and theologian of the 4th century. He wrote a wide variety of hymns, poems and sermons in verse, as well as Biblical exegesis in prose. His works are hailed by Christians throughout the world, and he is venerated by various traditions as a saint. He is especially beloved in the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

From across more than sixteen centuries here are the words of his Prayer for the Nativity Feast:

*Child of Bethlehem, what contrasts Your embrace!
No one has ever been so humble;
no one has ever wielded such power.
We stand in awe of Your holiness,
and yet we are bathed in Your love.*

*And where shall we look for You?
You are in high heaven, in the glory of the Godhead.
Yet those who searched for You on earth
found You in a tiny baby at Mary's breast.
We come in hushed reverence to find You as God,
and You welcome us as man.
We come unthinkingly to find You as man,
and are blinded by the light of Your Godhead.*

*You are the heir to King David's throne,
but You renounced all of his royal splendor.
Of all his luxurious bedrooms,
You chose a stable.
Of all his magnificent beds,
You chose a feeding trough.
Of all his golden chariots,
You chose a donkey.*

*Never was there a King like You!
Instead of royal isolation,
You made Yourself available
to everyone who needed You.
Instead of high security,
You made Yourself vulnerable
to those who hated You.*

*It is we who need You, above anything in the world.
You give Yourself to us with such total generosity,
that it might almost seem that You need us.
There never was a king like this before!*

On this year's Feast of Christmas, it is my hope that all of us realize personally the truth of St. Ephraim's words: *"It is we who need You, above anything in the world."* It is the Lord God Who has given us the gift of life; every breath we draw is from His Holy Spirit. He has blessed us with our health, our strengths, our talents ... our family, our life situation, our destiny. He alone forgives our sins, heals our infirmities, grants us communion with His Divinity ... it is in Him that all love has its origin, and it is He Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

The miracle of the Incarnation is that *"You give Yourself to us with such total generosity, that it might almost seem that You need us."* It is unimaginable that the All-Powerful God would come to earth as a helpless infant in the cold and darkness and poverty of a cave in Bethlehem. It is unthinkable that the Lord of Life would choose to experience death in the flesh for His creatures. And it is unfathomable that the All-Good God would endure suffering and death for us even while we were sinners. No wonder St. Paul wrote of Christ's coming in the flesh: *"Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift"* (II Corinthians 9:15).

It is my fervent prayer that this year, we will choose the real meaning of the Nativity over the commercialism of a cultural holiday. May we celebrate this Christmas in the spirit of the Scripture and tell our children and grandchildren *"why this night is different from all other nights."* May we set aside time from opening presents, to participate in the divine services in our parish churches -- and share with the angels their hymns of praise to the Infant Savior: *"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men."* May we join the shepherds in *"glorifying and praising God for all things that they had heard and seen"* and then, as they did, make known to others what has been revealed to us -- by witnessing to and sharing our faith in the Christ Child with those persons we know who have no church. And, after the example of the Wise Men who followed the star and *"presented their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh"* to the new-born King, let us offer Him the gifts of our time, our talent and our treasure in His service and to His glory.

May your Christmas and coming new year be filled with all the joy and blessings of the First Nativity ... and because of the Gift that we receive, may we commend our whole lives to Christ our God ... knowing that *"There never was a king like this before!"*

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing and my sincere love, I remain

Devotedly yours in the Infant Messiah,

+ MICHAEL

Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey