

Вих. ВА 14/522

CHRISTMAS PASTORAL LETTER OF HIS BEATITUDE SVIATOSLAV

**Most Reverend Metropolitans, Archbishops and Bishops,
Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Venerable Religious and Monastics,
Beloved Brothers and Sisters, in Ukraine and throughout the world**

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

(Luke 2:10-11)

Christ is Born!

With these angelic words from heaven, Christ's Church announces news of salvation. Today for us a Saviour has been born: the Lord descended to earth, appearing in a human body in the city of Bethlehem. This day heaven and earth rejoices, the entire human race rejoices in the knowledge that our Creator has not abandoned His creation, but He came to accept its fate as His own. He became man in order to share our human life: our pains and joys, our fears and insecurities. The Lord became one of us, reveals Himself as our Saviour and Redeemer.

On the feast of Christ's Nativity, we rejoice in knowing that never again will we feel alone or abandoned. We celebrate that God is with us, that He loves us, and we see God's love incarnate in the newborn Christ Child, who gently rests in a hay-filled manger. The Mystery of the Birth of our Saviour reveals to us how God's greatness opens up to us through human frailty, how the humanly small and insignificant can become great in God!

The Holy Gospel tells us that the Lord of the Universe was born in a family of refugees. At first, by Caesar's decree, and then because of the blood-thirst of King Herod, the Most Holy Family was forced to abandon their home and seek refuge among strangers. Yes, our God chose to be born as a refugee without home! In these strange circumstances of our Saviour's birth, in addition to the wise men from the East, only those who were not ashamed to be with the needy, with exiles and the persecuted were granted the privilege to approach the Divine Babe. By opening to Him the doors of their hearts, of their home, by recognizing the sign of salvation in the Lord, who was born in a cave, these people were filled with divine joy in the midst of the darkness of night. For the Christmas mystery is found in the ability to enter into God's presence and encounter the newborn Christ by being able to be close: to be close to those who are weak and without protection, who suffer from cold and the lack of bare necessities.

Ukraine has undergone a strange year in which everything was bigger than life: hope and despair, assuredness and disappointment, gains and losses. But also great was the fear, that Darkness could sense, seeing that our breakthrough towards Light could emerge victorious. And Darkness sent upon us pain and bloodshed, injury and even death, so that the people might recoil in the face of such suffering and return to the same path of silent and uncontested submission.

There is no Ukrainian who did not take part in this test of Divine Providence, which still continues. In some ways today all of us find ourselves in the zone of risk, the zone of the Anti-terrorist operation. Similar to the shepherds, who on the place where they led their flock to pasture heard the song of angels in heaven and received the news of the birth of a Saviour, so too, each one of us, has his or her place of spiritual vigil, his "guard post," where we all must fulfil our Christian and civic mission. And even if some have become tired and would prefer to avoid this choice, they nonetheless find the strength for the task. Only passivity plays into the hands of evil.

This year our journey to Christmas led us along the path of the wounded and exiled. Our Church literally became a field hospital, set up in order to give refuge to the persecuted and to heal the wounds of the injured. But even after the Maidan, the Church did not cease to function as a hospital, for that is her vocation. Pope Francis reminds us of this: "I see the Church as a field hospital after battle."

None of us were ready for war, and yet it continues, uninvited – it breaks into virtually every Ukrainian home, especially in the Eastern territories of our Land. There is a danger that the boundary of human sensitivity to the pain and suffering of one's neighbour will diminish. Christians know that apathy kills no less than "Hrad" missile launchers. The task before the state is to wisely resolve the problem of aid to those citizens who have suffered. While the task before every Christian is to be close, to accompany those who are in dire need. This Christian unity with those in need, which we call solidarity, is what makes us strong. In it are revealed and through it we receive the power of the incarnate God, the action of the Saviour, who was born in order to make us free and undefeatable in God.

In the time of Christmas each one of us looks at the sky in the hope of seeing the light of the star of Bethlehem. For the New Year promises not to be easier or our choice to be simpler. Our greatest task for 2015 is to embark on the path of development of civilisation and a life of dignity. For this we must clothe ourselves in a godly, not worldly manner, by renouncing all unworthy compromises with the evil one. This applies to each one of us – even to the one who considers himself or herself as the least in this world. The task of directing one's life towards good also makes great civil sense, for when every Ukrainian man and woman will change, the country will also change. Together we must adorn ourselves with effective government structures, which will finally cease to be structures of sin. For government can be a blessing, if it becomes service.

Both tasks are impossible to fulfil if we don't experience doubt, don't make mistakes, don't step back. Let us not carry the pride of perfection, but rather let us admit before God our weaknesses and ask in humility: O God, help me in my weakness! A humble person does not lose faith in his strength, for, in the words of Ivan Franko, one "feels on his shoulder the hand of the Lord." Therefore, let us remember that despair, disappointment, the impulsive desire to rid ourselves of those, who have not fulfilled our expectations - these are the instruments, which allow Darkness to most effectively reacquire its lost positions. Let us not help it undermine our chances for success. Failing to always do everything is not the problem. Allowing our failures to make us lose heart is!

We have before us one task, about which we should never have any doubt. That task is to pray. The Maidan was victorious because people prayer, fervently and sincerely. Today let us not allow for a certain "being used to" war to weaken the intensity of our prayers. Let us direct all the strength of our soul, so that in our families and communities prayers for Ukraine continue to be raised unceasingly, so that our beloved land might be filled with the light of faith, as was the poor cave of Bethlehem, that our hearts might be purified, that a new life may be born. And then, having received God's blessings, we will be the happiest people on earth.

In the dark night of insecurity and fear, let our ancient koliada dispel all sadness and every worry... With this Christmas greeting I seek to visit each home, filled with good people, who receive the newborn God and Saviour and rejoice with feast of Christ's Nativity!

Today we extend our Christmas greetings to our soldiers, who celebrate this great feast in cold frontline trenches and shelters, with their chests forward, ready to defend their nation. With festive wishes we greet all those who lost their home and miss the warmth of their families, that all may be good and well in their lives.

With the song of angels announcing peace on earth and glory in the highest let us today visit those, who mourn the loss of family and friends, who suffer from their battle wounds, who are in captivity or imprisoned. As in this Christmas night joy overcomes sorrow and heavenly light - darkness, so in his Nativity let our Saviour fill us with the strength of his victory, of good over evil, of truth over untruth, and may a heavenly peace overcome war.

To all our faithful in Ukraine and throughout the world I send you my deepest heartfelt wishes for a merry Christmas, a tasty kutia, and a resounding koliada.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

+ SVIATOSLAV

Given in Kyiv
at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ,
on the Feast of the St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia
on the 19th (6th) of December, 2014 A.D.