

CHRISTMAS PASTORAL LETTER OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC HIERARCHS OF THE USA

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.” (Isaiah 9:1)

The winter solstice arrives, and with it the dreaded darkness. Like the poet Dylan Thomas, we “rage, rage against the dying of the light.” We long for the fading light, hoping that the sun will return with renewed vigor, bringing light to our darkness and warmth to our winter. We raise our hopeful eyes to the fickle moon, which waxes and then wanes - tantalizing us with its glow, only then to withdraw it again. We look longingly to the faithful stars, whose pinpoints of light fascinate us with their artistry and draw our minds beyond our darkened world.



In the dark winter sky appears the wandering star which would come to rest over Bethlehem, the City of David. Two other wanderers also made their way to Bethlehem in the night: a carpenter named Joseph, and his pregnant wife Mary. Darker than the night around them was the human darkness which they encountered: doors of inns and doors of human hearts were closed to the homeless couple in need. As a result, the Divine Child about to be born received no hospitality except that of a dark cave, and lowly animals provided the only warmth - warmth which cold and hardened human hearts had refused.

It was in the dark cave that the impossible happened: a virgin became a mother, and the God of heaven came into the world as a fragile Child. These strange happenings give words to our Ukrainian Christmas carol, *Дивная новина*: Wondrous tidings! Today in Bethlehem the one Virgin Mary gave birth to a Son.”

When the Boy was born, the darkness of the cave was overcome: as the Nicene Creed tells us, He Himself is “Light from Light, true God from true God”. How appropriate that the coming of Jesus, Who is the Light of the World, should be proclaimed in the heavens by a brilliant star! Not only did the star shed its light upon the darkened earth, but it also led the Magi to look beyond the dim light of their astrology, allowing themselves to be led to the Child Who Himself is the Light beyond all human understanding. In the Baby, they found not only the goal of their search, but the fulfillment of their hearts’ desire.

Not all are as wise as the Magi, however. Darker than the winter night, darker than the cave is the darkness brought into the world by human beings who flee the light. Greater than the pangs of birth is the pain of those who suffer injustice at the hands of those who, like Herod, ruthlessly grab for power and control. Colder than the winter’s night are the hearts of those who act like the innkeepers of Bethlehem: thinking only of themselves, they selfishly enrich themselves while depriving others of what is needed for life.

Jesus was born in a cold, dark cave because He had been scorned; in this, as in so many ways, Jesus came to share every aspect of our life: the darkness, the coldness, the pain. We see hints of this in the icon of the Nativity: the manger in which the Baby lies looks like a sarcophagus, the swaddling clothes remind us of the shroud in which His crucified Body would be wrapped, the cave in which He was born is reminiscent of the tomb in which His lifeless Body would be laid. Jesus shared all our sufferings; in sharing the, however, Jesus overcame them, and He shows us the way to do likewise. He calls to us with the arms which He would open for us on the Cross, and our hearts want to respond: “Like a deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God: (Psalm 41).

We are drawn to warmth and light of the Church, where God speaks to us in symbols far richer than words. At the preparation table where gifts of bread and wine are prepared for the Divine Liturgy, we find a metal frame referred to as the “star” because it should include a small hanging star; as the celebrant places the “star” over the bread which will be consecrated, he says words reminiscent of the Christmas story: “The star came and stood over the place where the Child was.” Indeed, these words are from the Gospel of the day, which recounts the story of the Magi. The Wise Men sought Jesus under the star; Wise Men (and women) still seek Him under the “star”, recognizing Him as present on our altar and in our Church.

Hoping to be among the wise ones who seek Christ, we come to church where everything speaks to us of Him. We see the great lamp proclaiming to all that Christ, the Light of the World, is our light as well. As the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar at the time of the Great Entrance, we are reminded that we are to be like the angels who sing God’s praises: “we who mystically represent the cherubim and sing the Thrice-holy Hymn to the life-giving Trinity”; in our caroling, we join our voices to the angelic voices which filled the heavens and the earth on the first Christmas: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all on earth”. The Christ who came seeking the welcome of the innkeepers comes to us in the Eucharist and asks us to welcome Him into our very hearts. If we indeed receive Him with faith, our lives are transformed, and we are inspired to sing: “We have seen the true Light. We have received the heavenly spirit. We have found the true faith. We worship the undivided Trinity for having saved us.”

Our transformation is not just for ourselves: we are to become convincing icons of Christ for a world so desperate for the salvation which only He can give. At the Great Compline of Christmas, we sing “God is with us!” God is not only with us, but for us and through us as well. When others look at us, may they recognize the Christ Whose light we are called to reflect, Whose love we are called to share.

Christ is Born! Let us glorify Him!

+Stefan Soroka
Metropolitan-Archbishop of Philadelphia

+Richard Seminack
Eparch of St. Nicholas in Chicago

+Paul Chomnycky, OSBM
Eparch of Stamford

+John Bura
Apostolic Administrator
of St. Josaphat in Parma

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