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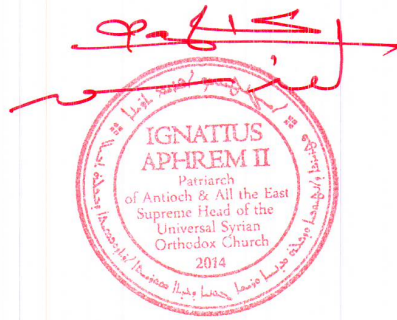


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By the Grace of God
Ignatius Aphrem II
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East
Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church



Our beloved Children in Christ,
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” (John 1: 4)

The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord draws our attention to the Great Divine Truth which is “the Word became flesh” (John 1: 14). It means that God took flesh in order to save man and that the relationship of eternal love between God the Creator and man the created is a relationship which was broken by disobedience has now been restored when God became flesh and “dwelled among us” (John 1: 14).

The Christian faith is based on this doctrine, namely that the Lord Jesus Christ is God incarnate, “so that by believing, you may have life in His name” (John 20: 31). With this faith, the Christian believer is sure that the darkness which did not overcome Christ, will not overcome him too (John 1: 5), because the Lord Jesus born in this dark world has become the light of the world (John 8: 12). How beautiful are the words of St. Jacob of Serugh, the Teacher of the Church, about the birth of Christ, where he says:

“**وَأَحْسِبُ وَحَيْثُ شُعْطًا تَهَيَّأَ وَثَبَّتْ: هِيَ الْفَيْحُ خَطْمًا مَعْصَمًا حَظَّضًا وَتَسَّوْهُوْهْ
دَهِ**”

“it is said that light shall appear from darkness; behold the sun (Christ) appeared from the people to the peoples and they became enlightened through Him” (Mimro 203: 62).

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This is the unique divine event which St. Paul calls a great mystery saying: “Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: God was revealed in flesh” (1 Timothy 3: 16). The incarnation of Christ brought back hope to the people, as it is proclaimed by the angels: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!” (Luke 2: 14). Through His birth, hope was renewed on the face of the earth, joy increased, and salvation was born. Indeed, great is this mystery that casts away fear from the hearts of people, drives away doubt from their minds and strengthens them so that they do not feel insecure but are certain that God – Emanuel - is with us (Matthew 1: 23) since the beginning because “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him” (John 1: 10).

However, today’s world is full of fear and anxiety; Truth is resisted, honesty and faithfulness are attacked, man is drawn to perish, seduced by irresistible temptations and by sin that is presented to him disguised in virtue or freedom. How dark is our world where injustice, evil, atheism and death are spreading; however, we do not fear, because we trust that Christ our God is shining in the darkness and in His light we see light (Psalm 36: 9). The angel’s good news to the shepherds strengthen us: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-11).

Let us thus seize this opportunity and contemplate the mysteries of the nativity, where we will encounter the humility of the Lord Who “emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” (Philippians 2: 7), abandoning His great glory in order to save us and discern His will to dwell among us as an infant, choosing the simplicity and the poverty of the manger over the luxurious palaces. We thus understand that God’s ways are different from the ways of man (Isaiah 55: 8), for His ways lead to salvation and holiness.

As the Middle East continues to suffer because of wars, destruction and the deteriorating economic situation which are affecting the people’s daily lives, we offer prayers to Christ, the King of peace, asking Him to shine His light in the midst of darkness and let His peace reign in our countries so that stability and security may return to our homeland. On this holy season of joy and hope, once again we call upon all decision makers and people of good will to do all they can for the safe return of the two abducted Archbishops of Aleppo: Boulos Yaziji and Mor Gregorius Youhanna Ibrahim, hoping to rejoice together in their return and celebrate with them these Christmas festivities and all other celebrations.

Finally, we wholeheartedly congratulate you all on the occasion of Christmas and the New Year. We pray that this year 2020 will be full of hope and that the Lord may bless all with security, peace, good health, success and prosperity. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.