

# *St. Mary's Romanian Orthodox Church*

A Parish of the Romanian Orthodox Dioceses of Canada

## *The "Priest's Page"*

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CHRISTMAS ISSUE

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### **HIS GRACE IOAN CASIAN THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX BISHOP OF CANADA**



### **PASTORAL LETTER - CHRISTMAS 2020**

Christ's incarnation - the healing and strengthening of our human nature

## PASTORAL LETTER AT THE FEAST OF THE LORD'S NATIVITY, 2020

† IOAN CASIAN  
*by the mercies of God,  
Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada  
To our beloved clergy and Orthodox Christians,  
peace and joy from Christ the Lord,  
and from us, hierarchical Blessings.*

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory,  
the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and  
truth." (John 1, 14)*

***Most Reverend Fathers,  
Beloved Faithful,***

The Feast of the Lord's Nativity brings joy and blessing through the opportunity it offers us to live the mystery of encountering God the Word as a newborn child in the manger of Bethlehem. Every time the faithful await this feast because it strengthens and sustains them in the faith they profess. The preparatory prophetic readings, the liturgical rhythm and the ascetic and spiritual dynamics of the Advent create a special atmosphere for the Christian believer.

### **Why does God decide the incarnation of His Son and not another way of salvation?**

*"So, why are you looking for the reason for the coming of Christ, go back to the first book of the Scriptures - urges St. Cyril of Jerusalem. (...) All creatures are good, but none of them is the image of God, except man. The sun was created only by a command; but man was formed with the hands of God. 'Let us make man in our image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26). But this miracle of the creatures that was delighting in paradise was driven out by the devil's envy. The enemy rejoiced when the one who was envied fell. Would you have wanted the enemy to rejoice unceasingly?" St. Cyril shows us that although created good, in the image and likeness of God, as the crown of His creation, man lost paradise due to the wickedness and deception of the devil. Man was tempted and deceived even though he had received the command from God not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

### **What are the consequences of the fall?**

*"The wound of mankind was very deep - says St. Cyril. There was no healthy part in it from head to toe. No patches, no oil, no bounds could be put on. For this reason, the prophets wept and suffered, saying, 'Who will give salvation from Zion?' And again, 'Let your hand be upon the man of your righteous arm and upon the son of man whom you have strengthened, and we will not abandon You.' And another one of the prophets prayed, saying, 'Bow down Your heavens, O Lord and come down;' The wounds of mankind are too many and too deep for our cures. They have killed your prophets and broken your altars. It is impossible for us to right the wrong, we need You to straighten it. The Lord listened to the prayers of the prophets. The Father did not overlook our perishing nation. He sent His Son, the Lord, from heaven."*

Man's fall from the paradisiac state deeply marked his nature. It produced such a deep wound that man could not heal himself. The Jewish people, by their prophets in the Old Testament, saw no other possibility than God's help as a way of salvation from the evil. Their prayers express man's helplessness and limitation in this regard and the need for divine intervention. And the One whom God the Father sends is His very Son through whom He made all things. Christ comes to heal the deepest wound which is death. The corruption that pervaded man's nature, precluded him from achieving his vocation to grow in the likeness of God and to become son of God: *"He became man that we might become gods, - says St. Athanasius the Great."* God wanted to bring man back to the fullness of the first union with Him in life and knowledge.

### **How could Christ accomplish this healing?**

*"Let us strive to comprehend the mystery – says St. Basil the Great. The reason God is in the flesh is to kill death that lurks there. As diseases are cured by medicines assimilated by the body, and as darkness in a house is dispelled by the coming of light, so death, which held sway over human nature, is done away with by the coming of God. (...) But when the grace of God our Savior appeared and the Sun of righteousness rose, death was swallowed up in victory, unable to bear the presence of true life. How great is God's goodness, how deep his love for us!"* The main obstacle to man's healing from death is destroyed by the Incarnation of the Son of God. The possibility for man to achieve the likeness with God in his own person is now reopened. God descends through His Son to the suffering creature to heal it not temporarily but once and for all. Christ, through His restored human nature, becomes the leaven and the medicine that heals and restores the health and purity of the nature of all people. He heals human nature from disease and death through the flesh taken through the Incarnation from the Virgin Mary. God's grace overcomes death, His light overcomes darkness, and man's health is restored in Christ through victory over sin and death. All of this was done by God out of His great goodness and love.

*"The Lord has taken from us what is ours to save mankind. He took what is ours, to give more grace to the weakened part, that the sinful mankind may become partaker of God. For where sin abounded, grace abounded much more - says St. Cyril."* The Incarnation of the Lord restored, strengthened and healed man's nature from within. God wants it to be partaker of divine grace again. The instrument of sin, that is, human nature, restored in the person of Christ the Savior through death and resurrection, becomes the medicine for eternal life.

God causes the strengthening of our nature in two ways through the Incarnation: (1) at the level of faith and knowledge - by the contemplation of the miracles and the glory of Christ as the Son of God: *"How did we behold his glory? – Ammonius of Alexandria asks. We beheld it through the star of the magi, the angels, the shepherds, Anna, Simeon, Gabriel, the miraculous birth of the Virgin, the voice of the Father who acknowledges Him, the Spirit descending upon Him and many other divine signs and healings."* The miracles performed by the Savior Jesus Christ were moments when people's faith and hope were strengthened; (2) at the level of the new, deified life - through the nourishment of eternity, that is, the Holy Communion, present in the Divine Liturgy: *"What you can see here, dearly beloved, at the Lord's Table, is bread and wine; but this bread and wine, when the word is applied to it, become the Body and Blood of the Word – St. Augustine says."* The Body and Blood of the risen and transfigured humanity of Christ have become by Communion the leaven of the renewal of human life.

Through Incarnation, the Son and Word of God descends into our human existence. He becomes circumscribed and accessible as a human person but at the same time reveals Himself as a divine Person. Thus, the relationships experienced by people with Christ as a fellow man are felt as relationships with God too. In this way man experiences his relationship with his neighbor as *a relationship of fullness, grace and truth with God* who constitutes the life of the Church. *"Let us all, young and virgins, old and the younger ones, run, with God's help on the path of purity. (...) Let us not cast aside the glory of purity. The crown is angelic, and the deed is superhuman - urges St. Cyril."* Let us descend into the cave of Bethlehem with St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary, with the silent creatures, to be closer to the manger where the Infant Jesus was born.



### ***Beloved Christians,***

The year 2020 was designated as the *Homage Year of the Pastoral Care of Parents and Children* and the *Commemorative Year of the Romanian Orthodox philanthropists*.

We have all tried through the various activities at the diocesan or parish level to deepen and promote the teaching of the faith and the Christian vision of human life and ethos with the conviction that they heal. The Christian vision of what it means to be a father is well emphasized in the words of St. Paul: “*For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus, I have begotten you through the Gospel. Therefore, I urge you, imitate me*” (1 Corinthians 4:15-16). Teaching is easier than giving birth because the true father in the Christian understanding gives life to the newborn according to God’s commandment in Christ. He gives birth not only bodily but also in faith, spiritually. As the Son of God is born eternally from the Father, so also the son of a father is born from his father and grows in the same spirit and ethos with him. The eternal loving relationship of the Father for the Son is the model for the human father-son relationship. But both - father and son - are sons of God by grace. God’s spiritual fatherhood embraces the father and the son together. They are both sons of God who bear His image and strive to achieve His likeness.

Philanthropy is the embodiment of God’s command: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (Mark 12:31). Human philanthropy is the concrete expression of divine philanthropy. It is the manifestation of the deepest virtue to which man is called - love. Living it in our world means anticipating the mystery of God’s kingdom.

Due to the pandemic, 2020 was a time of suffering, fear, doubt and loneliness. Because of the health restrictions imposed, philanthropy and love could no longer be expressed as naturally as in less turbulent times. The clergy and the faithful prayed for those in need, cared for and listened to them, giving their time and showing generosity. However, this situation, due to the time spent at home, made us rediscover the importance of family, the support, the closeness and the intimacy it can offer us in more difficult personal moments.

One of the philanthropic gestures we can make during this period is prayer for those who lost their lives during the pandemic, especially the older and more vulnerable. Let us light a candle for them and let our prayer accompany and help them.

On this great feast of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us descend into the manger of the Bethlehem of our person and discover like the Magi the Holy Infant as Son and Word of God! I urge you to acquire by grace and effort a pure soul like the saints in order to give birth to Christ to the world by word and deed and to transform the apparent defeats into steadfast, meaningful and faith-strengthening victories.

I thank you all - clergy and faithful - for your prayers, love, support and sense of responsibility in these trying times!

On the occasion of the Feasts of the Nativity, New Year and the Epiphany, I pray that *every good and perfect gift* descend into the souls of all of you, bringing peace, joy and health through the Holy Spirit!

***Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!***

Your brother in humble prayer to Christ the Lord,  
the One born in the cave of Bethlehem,

† IOAN CASIAN

*Saint-Hubert/Montreal 2020*