



The Serbian Orthodox Church
to her spiritual children at Christmas, 2023

PORFIRIJE

By the Grace of God

Orthodox Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade Karlovci and Serbian Patriarch, with all the Hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church to all the clergy, monastics, and all the sons and daughters of our Holy Church: grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, with the most joyous Christmas greeting:

Peace from God! Christ is Born!

*"Today the Only-begotten Son of God is born,
The splendor of His glory, The form of His being
and His eternity, the Father's expression, and Word,
He through Whom He created the ages,
through Whom all things, visible and invisible, have become".
(Saint John of Damascus)*

More than two thousand years have passed since in Bethlehem, a Judean town near Jerusalem, some unnamed provincial official of the Roman Empire wrote down two names, Joseph, and Mary, and probably on one of the days that followed, during the census, he wrote down another one, the name Jesus, as the newborn miraculous Child was called. He wrote them down with the same indifference with which he wrote down all the other names during the census and without suspecting that he was writing down a unique, unrepeatable Person, a Child Who will forever divide history into history before His Birth and into history after His Birth, and humanity into those who are unconditionally for Him, those who are against Him, and into a "third group," those "lukewarm" ones who are sometimes for Him and sometimes against Him, but always with a certain "reserve" and "dismissiveness." The census taker mentioned above did not even dream that the newborn Child, with His unusual name Jesus (Savior), represented the greatest gift of heaven to earth: He and His name were heralded by the holy Archangel Gabriel to the Most Holy and Most Pure Virgin Mary, who would become His Mother, and thus the Mother of us all. That Person and that Name is the Pledge of the reconciliation of God and Man after man's apostasy from God through sin, the Pledge of the liberation of mankind from sin, death, and the devil. How surprised would he have been if someone had told him that the ancient prophets, centuries before the creation of the Roman Empire, knew and spoke about the Divine Child, born in a cave, in a poor shelter for shepherds, and laid not in a cradle but in an ordinary manger for cattle? And how would he have laughed contemptuously if someone had stopped to assure him that the Roman Empire would collapse and disappear and that the inconceivable - for him and phantasmagoric - Heavenly Empire, headed by that seemingly insignificant Child, would be invincible and eternal? Yes, that clerk wrote down the name of the newborn Child, if he wrote it down at all, probably

without seeing Him. Yet about that Child prophesied, explicitly or implicitly, the holy prophets Isaiah and Micah and other Old Testament guardians and teachers of faith in the One, Only, and True God and Lord of the world and man.

In the middle of the 2nd century AD, there lived a philosopher named Justin, a man who devoted his entire life to the search for the Truth, not for just one of the "truths" but for the whole, ultimate, absolute Truth. Having studied the science and philosophy of his time – hence his name, Saint Justin the Philosopher - and not finding the Truth in them, he joined the Christian faith, confirming his devotion by martyrdom for it, which is why he was also called Saint Justin the Martyr. The question arises: what brought him to the faith that was cruelly persecuted in his time? It is the Light of Knowledge, he replied. It is the lofty wisdom beyond comprehension of Christian teaching, or rather the Revelation of God in Christ, who is the hypostatic, personal Wisdom of God, the Giver of supreme knowledge of God (cf. Philippians 3:8).

At the very beginning of the Holy Gospel according to Saint John (1:1), He is called the Logos, the Word of God, the Meaning, the Reason, and the Purpose of everything that exists and lives. He exists and lives from the beginning, from eternity, "in God" (Saint John 1: 1-2). As eternal and without beginning together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, He is also the Creator of everything (see Saint John 1:3; cf. Colossians 1:15 – 17, and Hebrew 1: 2-3), but also the Source of true life and unquenchable spiritual light: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). The Holy Church strongly emphasizes this truth in the first verse of the Nativity troparion, the solemn song on the Feast of His Birth: "Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the Light of divine knowledge..." In the final verse of the troparion, the church hymnographer emphasizes that on Christmas, the pre-eternal God was born as a Child for our sake. Let's just think of it: the pre-eternal God as a seemingly helpless newborn, and yet at the same time the same divine Person! In the kontakion, the second hymn of the Feast, the great Byzantine hymnographer Saint Roman the Melodist elaborates on this Mystery beyond understanding of our holy faith:

“Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One,
and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One!
Angels with shepherds glorify Him.
The wise men journey with a star,
Since for our sake the Pre-Eternal God was born as a young Child.”

God - a Child! Christ is born! What a miracle, what a secret, what good news, what a joy, the mother of all our joys! But let's not forget: a child lives in each of us until the end of our earthly life. The revelation of God, given to us in Christ by the Holy Spirit, is addressed precisely to the child in us. A child listens, hears, and, moreover, understands with spiritual intuition what we, the so-called or self-proclaimed adults, neither hear nor understand. The child in us gratefully responds to God for the joy of Christmas, a joy for which the burdened, weakened, cynical (read: sinful) world of "adults" is no longer capable. Honor to the exceptions, of course! Probably only children are still not surprised that God came into the world or descended into the world in the form of a Child, the God-Child, Whose Face shines to this day and forever from the holy icons, revealing to us what is the most subtle and joyful mystery in Christianity - the mystery of "eternal childhood of God." "Be like children!" our Lord tells us (Saint Matthew 18:3). If we listen to Him, we will understand the joyous good news of Christmas, that is, the mystery of His Nativity. A child is

helpless without parental love, care, and protection, but he is also a community asset because he cannot live alone, without others, without family, and without love. The God-born Jesus was also helpless by His human nature, and immediately after His birth, he was threatened with hatred and a death threat by the regional tyrant Herod, intoxicated with his power and authority, but absolutely unaware that this newborn child, in whom he saw his future competitor in the competition for power, he cannot kill. Because He is not the "King of the Jews" but the King of Heaven, the God-Man Who did not come into the world to rule but to be a "servant to all" and to sacrifice Himself "for the life and salvation of the world." He does not want us to fear Him. He enters our hearts and conquers them, but not with fear, not with proofs of His divine power, but exclusively with love. He does not see us as slaves and servants but as His "little brothers." We can only truly love Him—the God-born, the God-Child, when we are children in heart and soul. Fortunately, "a grown man is capable of returning to childhood"; moreover, he "becomes an adult when he loves childhood" and "when he longs for childhood" for its freedom, sincerity, and joy (Alexander Schmemmann).

And what do we see today, in the world and here? Do people, adults, but fallen away from God, love childhood and children when they kill tens of thousands of children without remorse? It doesn't matter whose children they are, Palestinian, Arab or Jewish, Russian or Ukrainian, or any other, including Serbian children; just because they are children, they belong to the Lord, the Giver of Life, and the Creator, but also to all of us, the universal family called humanity. Who had the right to answer, when asked about half a million children killed by the NATO army in Iraq, that, despite the cruelty, it was worth it? Who gave the right to Hamas to kidnap Jewish children and hold them as hostages, and who gave the right to the Israeli army to kill some eight thousand innocent Palestinian children in less than two months, almost half of all those killed in that war? Who had the right to sentence twelve Serbian babies to death, more than a quarter of a century ago in Banja Luka, all in the name of peace-making sanctions? Who had the right to kill the little girl Aleksandra Zec and her entire family in Zagreb, little Milica Rakić in Batajnica, and Serbian children in Goraždevac near Peć? If we continue to list the victims of the children's Golgotha, from Dachau and Auschwitz, Jastrebarski and Jasenovac, to today's execution grounds around the world, this Christmas message, dear spiritual children, will turn into an endless lament. We should also add the ominous fact that adults have managed to create a society in which there are more and more child abusers and child criminals. There are many examples - in America, in Europe, and elsewhere - but, unfortunately, also in the middle of Belgrade: the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school speaks volumes about this. We invite all of you, brothers and sisters, to fervent penitential and purifying prayer for the children and for all people in our nation, here and abroad, especially for the suffering but upright, faithful, and brave Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as for all people and nations on earth.

In today's gloomy reality, our only response worthy of our Orthodox Christian faith is the Christmas hymn. That's why: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men!" (Saint Luke 2:14; cf. 19, 38). Today, we celebrate the wonderful Day of Christ's Birth with these words of the Christmas hymn:

"The One without flesh becomes incarnate,
The invisible is seen,
The intangible becomes tangible,
The timeless receives His beginning in time,
The Son of God – becomes the Son of Man..."

Today, The Mother Church invites us:

"Christ is born - glorify Him!
Here is Christ from the heavens – let us meet Him!
Here is Christ on earth – be ye exalted!
Sing to the Lord, all the earth!"

We pray for peace everywhere in the world. We appeal to you to fight for the sanctity of marriage and family, especially for the upbringing of children "in fear of the Lord," which means piety and honesty, and not in slavery to selfishness and addictive diseases. We invite you to celebrate Christmas Eve in the family circle with your children, in the spirit of the centuries-old tradition of the Serbian people, with a *badnjak*-Christmas tree, in an atmosphere that will remind you of the poor Bethlehem cave, a shelter for shepherds and their flocks. In it, in an infinitely calm manner, the King of glory was born and was laid in an ordinary manger instead of a cradle because for Him, the greatest Guest, Emmanuel or "God Who is with us," "there was no place" in the human inns of that time (Saint Luke 2:7), just as no place is found for Him even today, not only in modern hotels but also in some human hearts.

Congratulating all of you, brothers and sisters, on this Christmas, as well as on the upcoming New Year of the Lord's goodness, we call upon you the blessing of the God and Father, and of His Only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, Who for our sake is born from the Most-Pure Virgin Mary, and of the Holy Spirit, - with the joyful Christmas greeting:

PEACE FROM GOD - CHRIST IS BORN!

Given at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade at Christmas, 2023.

Your intercessors before the cradle of the divine Christ-Child:

Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and Serbian Patriarch PORFIRIJE
Metropolitan of Dabro-Bosna CHRYSOSTOM
Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands JOANIKIJE
Bishop of Srem VASILIJE
Bishop of Banja Luka JEFREM
Bishop of Budim LUKIJAN
Bishop of Banat NIKANOR
Bishop of New Gracanica-Midwestern America LONGIN
Bishop of Canada MITROPHAN
Bishop of Backa IRINEJ
Bishop of Great Britain and Scandinavia DOSITEJ
Bishop of Zhicha JUSTIN
Bishop of Vranje PAHOMIJE
Bishop of Sumadija JOVAN
Bishop of Branicevo IGNATIJE
Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla FOTIJE
Bishop of Mileseva ATANASIJE
Bishop of Düsseldorf and Germany GRIGORIJE

Bishop of Ras and Prizren TEODOSIJE
Bishop of Western America MAXIM
Bishop of Gornji Karlovac GERASIM
Bishop of Eastern America IRINEJ
Bishop of Krusevac DAVID
Bishop of Slavonia JOVAN
Bishop of Austria and Switzerland ANDREJ
Bishop of Bihac-Petrovac SERGIJE
Bishop of Timok ILARION
Bishop of Nis ARSENIJE
Bishop of Buenos Aires and South Central America KIRILO
Bishop of Australia and New Zealand Metropolitanate SILUAN
Bishop of Dalmatia NIKODIM
Bishop of Osjek-Polje and Baranja HERUVIM
Bishop of Valjevo ISIHJE
Bishop of Budimlje and Niksic METODIJE
Bishop of Zahumlje and Hercegovina DIMITRIJE
Bishop of Sabac JEROTEJ
Bishop of Western Europe JUSTIN

Vicar Bishop of Moravica ANTONIJE
Vicar Bishop of Remezijan STEFAN
Vicar Bishop of Mohac DAMASKIN
Vicar Bishop of Marca SAVA
Vicar Bishop of Hum JOVAN
Vicar Bishop of Hvosno ALEKSEJ
Vicar Bishop of Novo Brdo ILARION
Vicar Bishop of Jegar NEKTARIJE
Vicar Bishop of Lipljan DOSITEJ
Vicar Bishop of Toplica PETAR

Retired Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla VASILJE
Retired Bishop of Canada GEORGIJE
Retired Bishop of Central Europe KONSTANTIN
Retired Bishop of Slavonija SAVA
Retired Bishop of Mileseva FILARET
Retired Bishop of Nis JOVAN

[Path of Orthodoxy Translation]