

# Christmas Epistle

Of His Eminence,  
Metropolitan **Valentine**,  
of Suzdal and Vladimir,  
First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

My beloved brethren in the Lord, Archpastors and Pastors, Right  
Honorable Monastics, Brothers and Sisters, beloved of God!

“Christ is born, praise Him,  
Christ is come to earth, exult ye,  
sing to the Lord all the earth,  
and chant unto Him with rejoicing, ye people,  
for He is glorified.”

(Irmos of the Canon for the Nativity of Christ, Ode I)

By the mercy of God, we have become partakers, yet again, in the great mystery of the birth of the Divine Christ-Child. Again and again, the holy Church, and all heavenly and earthly creatures together with Her, offer thanksgiving to the newly born Divine Christ-Child, for having saved the race of man from sinfulness and the curse of death.

Both angels and men brought praises in song to the Divine Child, to Him Who brought peace, calm, and good will. The earth gave the newborn Christ-Child a cave. The skies sent a star to shine upon the Christ-Child. Wise men hurried from the ends of the earth bringing their gifts. Shepherds were in amazement, and glorified the humility of the newborn Christ the King.

The eternal and ever-lasting light, which shines forth from the light of God the Father, appeared under the cover of flesh in order to enlighten all creation, to open up the minds of men, to rouse their consciences, and to open the way for us that leads to our heavenly Father. The Son of God becomes incarnate in a world, which had been taken captive by evil, amongst people who had lost their inheritance, and were exiled from their kingdom. “For, behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee,” said the prophet (Is. 60:2). The Virgin, like the cherubim, brings forth out of her pure bosom the unapproachable God, Who has become approachable, visible, and palpable.

No one was aware that God had revealed Himself in the flesh (1Tim. 3:16), neither in Judea, where “God is known,” (Ps. 75:1), nor in the city of God, Jerusalem, where Herod has his throne. Only to the Magi, who had been enlightened by spiritual wisdom, and to the simple and pure-

hearted shepherds, was this great mystery revealed.

For what reason did the Almighty God find it desirable to reduce Himself to the form of a slave, and to be born in the poor little town of Bethlehem, on the very edge of the civilized world? In order to reveal to man the bounteousness of His love. The great kingdoms of this world did not merit of this love of God's, neither by the great philosophies of man's mind can it be attained, nor can it be measured by the depth of human sorrow and sufferings. There is only one thing of value worthy of God's love, and that is man himself; all of him, in his entirety. As the holy Fathers of the Church teach us: God desired to give Himself entirely to man, so that man might give himself entirely to God.

The infant Jesus is born in the bowels of the earth, in a tiny little Palestinian cave, for the sake of His love for man, and for his salvation. He came in order to teach us, and to heal our spiritual and bodily ailments.

The Word became flesh; the Divinity was melded together with humanity in an indivisible unity; God took into Himself, into His hypostasis, the flesh and blood of human nature, having become in all things like unto us, in order to destroy the sinful passions that dwell in us, and by His voluntary death, to kill, that is to render powerless and without authority, him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. (Heb. 2:14-17). How beautifully the services of the Church intone that the incorruptible God was wrapped in swaddling clothes, in order to loosen man's bonds of death; the Word was laid in a manger of irrational beasts, in order to abolish the irrational passions of rational man; was born in a desert, in order to enliven the barren nature of man; God was registered as a citizen of an earthly kingdom, so that we may be registered as citizens of the kingdom of heaven; the Son of God became the Son of man, in order to make us sons of the Most High.

There is nothing higher and more salvific than this mystery of God's love, and all that is left for us to do, is to thank Him, with tears, for His great mercy towards us, prodigal and fallen, having lost our divine glory, and gone to work for "the citizens of a foreign country." (Lk. 15:15). God gives us salvation freely; all He wants from us in return is love and humility. As long as we are encumbered with the things of this world, as long as we think that we are smart, strong, and healthy, and that we are capable of arranging our lives like we want them to be, God waits to begin His activity inside us, which is the work of our salvation. But as soon as we recognize that before God we are nothing but dust and ashes, that our righteousness is unrighteousness in the eyes of God, that nothing that we have here really belongs to us, but that we received it from Him (1Cor. 4:7), then we turn our eyes to the Lord and offer Him

tears of repentance and of gratitude.

It is difficult for a rich man to be saved; and so God shows us the way to voluntary poverty. It is difficult for a man to be saved when he is “on top of the world,” steeped in power and honors; and so, God leads us along the path of persecutions, patient endurance, insults, slanders, and ridicule. This is the path of Christ, the path of His entire life on earth; it is a path strewn with thorns, but it is a path, which saves. From the very beginning, from His birth right through to His death on the Cross, the Lord showed us the path of humility. For humility brings God to dwell in us, but pridefulness brings the devil to dwell in us.

Of late, those difficult times experienced by Orthodox Christians have gradually started to make their way back, when, for the sake of the Orthodox Faith, many were put to death as “counterrevolutionaries,” after being blamed for having political motives. The days are coming, when under pressure from the leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate, our Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church will have its churches taken away, will have its incorporated status revoked, will have its prayer houses closed, thinking that in so doing, they will deprive us of a place to say our prayers. But we must remember the words of Christ, that the gates of hell shall not prevail, and that we don't need to be incorporated, or registered with the government, in order to pray to the Lord God.

Over the past year of 2006, the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church has had to endure enormous pressure on the part of the local, regional and provincial authorities of the Russian Federation. They won't allow us to incorporate our dioceses, they have illegally taken away our church of St. Olga in the city of Zheleznovodsk, in the Stavropol region, have been hindering us in every way possible when we try to open new parishes, have been turning up the pressure on us, making threats, provoking personal attacks upon our clergy, and much, much more.

The year 2006 has seen the Vladimir regional administration sending us one commission after another with the aim of quietly taking away from us the churches that we have restored, in a way that would not require them to use to the courts.

My beloved pastors and flock! I call upon you all to be vigilant and prudent, recalling the advice of our holy Fathers, that discretion is the mother of virtue. It is essential that all legal methods be employed to safeguard the churches that we have been given, and to simultaneously prepare ourselves for the return to saying our prayers in the catacombs, remembering the way of the cross of Christ our Savior.

In order to be able to withstand in times of trouble, my dear ones, we

must remember that it is essential to constantly give each other those divine gifts, the gifts of humility and of love, which we were given by the Divine Christ-Child.

I warmly greet you, my flock, beloved of God, both in Russia and abroad, with the great feast of the Nativity of Christ. I prayerfully wish you patience, humility, mutual love, and salvation from the Lord.

**+VALENTINE,**  
Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir,  
First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church