



My Beloved Ones,

I am filled with great joy to once again be able to greet you with those glorious words, “Christ is Born! Glorify Him!” As we prepare for a day full of warmth and beautiful memories with our family and friends, let us not forget, as the expression goes, “The Reason for the Season”: that through Christ’s birth, His Creation might be reconciled again to God.

As we celebrate this miraculous event, I wish to reflect on the whole of the Twelve Days of Christmas. Just as we must keep ourselves focused on Christ in the middle of buying gifts and preparing our homes, the Church is unlike the world in another way as well, for Christmas does not end on December the 26<sup>th</sup>.

The Twelve Days of Christmas serve as a bridge from our Lord’s Incarnation to that other Holy Feast, Theophany, or, Epiphany. So, from December 25<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup>, we honor different saints and events, as we continue to celebrate His Birth, and prepare for His manifestation to the world:

- On December 26<sup>th</sup>, the Church holds a special synaxis for the Virgin Mary, honoring her willingness to submit to God, so that the world might be saved through the birth of our Lord.
- On the 27<sup>th</sup> we commemorate, St. Stefanos, the first martyr of the Christian Church, who demonstrates the need for all Christians to boldly proclaim the Word of the Incarnation.
- On the 29<sup>th</sup>, we memorialize the 14,000 infants who were slain by King Herod in his vain quest to rid the world of the Messiah. Through them, we recall the price that is often required to know Christ in this fallen world.
- On January 1<sup>st</sup>, we mark the both the Naming and the Circumcision of our Lord on the eighth day after His Birth. By these signs, even as an infant, He shows His willingness to submit to God. On the 1<sup>st</sup>, we also celebrate St. Basil the Great, whose theology and good works serve as a model for all pious and Orthodox Christians.
- After three days of preparatory fasting for Theophany, beginning on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the services of the Eve of Theophany are very similar liturgically to those of both Christmas Eve, and Good Friday.

The point our Fathers wish to make is clear, my beloved brothers and sisters. There can be no joy without pain. Seeing Christ in swaddling clothes, we are reminded of those clothes in which He will be buried. Even during this festive season so full of warmth and light, we are made to remember the blood of the martyrs, like Stefanos and the Holy Infants.

However, just as there is no joy without pain, we are not meant to despair, but rejoice! St. Athanasios in his book *On the Incarnation* writes that our Lord, the Word of God, “...saw...the surpassing wickedness of men...; He saw also their universal liability to death. All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery... He took to Himself... a human body even as our own.... from a spotless, stainless virgin... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death...and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.”

My beloved, may we keep *this* reality in our hearts above all things in these coming days; and may the light of our Lord’s Incarnation and His Baptism, the glory of his Saints Stefanos, the Holy Infants and Basil the Great, as well the revelation of the Holy Trinity guide us now, and all the days of our lives!

**Καλά Χριστούγεννα! Merry Christmas!**

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta