My Beloved Ones,

During the next week we will observe feasts that offer us important lessons in belief and faith. On September 8th, we are blessed to celebrate the Nativity of the Theotokos & on the 14th, The Elevation of the Holy Cross.

Holy Tradition tells us that Mary’s father, Joachim, was descended from the family of King David, and that her mother Anna was of the Tribe of Aaron. So, Joachim and Anna were faithful Jews, who honored the Lord, and kept all His Commandments. However, Anna was unable to bear children, and in those days, people who were unable to conceive were often seen by their neighbors as having committed sin. It is for this reason that Joachim was turned away from the Temple, and his offering rejected. Joachim then went to the desert to renew his prayers, hoping that God might see fit to bestow upon his house the same blessing given to the Patriarch Abraham, and Sarah. While deep in prayer, both Joachim and Anna were separately visited by angels, who announced that the Lord had heard them, and that they would soon conceive a child who would be spoken of in the entire world, the Theotokos & Ever-Virgin Mary.

Concerning the Elevation of the Cross, Holy Tradition explains that St. Constantine’s mother St. Helen, made it her goal to find the earthly relics of Christ. When she arrived at Golgotha in the year 325, the former execution place was now a trash dump. However, guided by her faith, St. Helen searched with her heart, and she saw and smelled the plant which we now know as Basil, because it belongs to our King. Three crosses were uncovered: the True Cross of Christ, and the crosses of the two thieves crucified with Him. To determine which of them was the True Cross, a sick woman was brought before all three. She venerated the first and the second, with neither bringing any change, but when she kissed the third, she was instantly made well. When a funeral procession passed, the dead man was placed atop each of the crosses, and the True Cross of Christ raised him from the dead.

For as long as our faith has existed, the veneration of the Cross has seemed strange to pagans, ancient Israelites, and even many modern Christians. How can an instrument of death be worthy of devotion? Even St. Paul recognized this when he wrote to the church at Corinth, “…we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 23-24). Indeed, it is only when we consider how God turned all human logic upside down, that we begin to understand His intentions. Not only did He come to save humanity in the form of poor child born of a Virgin, who herself came from aged parents, even after His Incarnation, instead of vanquishing His enemies with a vast army, Christ chose instead to end death by death.

No rational explanation can be given concerning the ages of the Theotokos’ parents, but Joachim and Anna believed that God would show them His Will, just as St. Helen sought the True Cross from a spirit of true faith and deep belief in her heart. And so too will God comfort us, and make us delight in Him, if we seek to renew and strengthen our relationship with Him through prayer, fasting, and charity, beginning in this new Ecclesiastical Year, and always.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta