



A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO THE PIOUS FLOCK IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Christ is born, give glory!

The birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world from sin and death, was accompanied by moving events. These reveal the profound significance not only of the incarnation of the Son of God, but also of the incarnation in family life of fundamental Christian virtues: love, humility, obedience, chastity, meekness...

The righteous and elderly Joseph showed wonderful meekness when he saw that Mary, his young *betrothed*, was with child, *before they came together*. He did not wish to denounce her, although according to the laws of the time he was perfectly entitled to do so. The meek old man *was minded to put her away privily* (Matt. 1, 18, 19) in order to save her from disgrace. Learning from the Angel of the mystery of the conception through the Holy Spirit, Joseph meekly and humbly took on himself the duties of head of the family and did all that was necessary for the preservation of the life and the upbringing of the Divine Infant among mortal men.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, showed an example of obedience not only to His Heavenly Father, but also to His Earthly Mother and his supposed earthly father. In all things He Who gave the Law submitted to the law given by Him. As the whole family journeyed home from Jerusalem to Nazareth, his parents could not find their son among their kinfolk. They found Him in the Temple in Jerusalem, talking of spiritual matters. When his parents reproached Him, He answered: *Knew ye not that I must be about my Father's business?* St Philaret of Moscow explains the meaning of this event thus: 'Despite the right from on high, he humbly bowed his head beneath the yoke of the commandment to honour father and mother: *He went down with*

them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them (Lk 2, 49-51). So important is the duty of obedience in the family that the Only-Begotten Son of God put off His Divine task in order to fulfil this duty before his earthly mother and even before the mere name of father, which Joseph bore until the timely revelation of the mystery that He had no earthly father. In this way, through His example, He could again sanctify the obligations and extol the virtues of family life’.

We call the Divine Infant, His chaste and Most Blessed Mother and the meek and elderly Joseph a family, because the Son of God Himself sanctified this family. He sanctified both His Most Pure Mother and her Betrothed, the meek servant of the great mystery of the Incarnation of God. But do we remember that all of us Orthodox Christians are called to holiness? Our Lord Jesus Christ was prepared to sanctify all who believed in Him, prepared to sanctify our families too, each one of which is called to become a little Church. Not without reason did the Apostle Paul compare the relationship between a married man and woman to the union of Christ and His Church – what can be higher than this comparison?

Nowadays the high calling of the family has been forgotten and trampled underfoot nearly everywhere. We can see signs of this at every step. Both Church and government are concerned by the devaluation of the institution of the family. His Holiness Patriarch Alexis devoted part of his report to the Synod of Bishops, in which hierarchs of both parts of the Russian Church for the first time took part, to the topic of ‘Orthodoxy and Concern for the Family’, and the Russian government proclaimed 2008 as ‘The Year of the Family’. It would be naïve to hope that the calls of clergy or some government measures could in themselves suddenly halt the terrible demographic crisis in Russia, return millions of uncared for children to their families or lower the previously unthinkable divorce rate. It will take the common efforts of the whole people of God, of all Orthodox Christians, to right today’s disastrous situation.

In our diocese there are for the moment no uncared for children who live on the streets and eat out of rubbish bins. But we have not avoided another misfortune: many, very many people, especially those who are little instructed in the Faith and who have little contact with the Church, live in casual relationships. These fall apart very easily, for in them neither takes responsibility for the other, because they do not feel any responsibility before God. Such relationships are fraught with terrible temptations, they

lead to physical and emotional suffering, the unbearable hardships of which we clergy often hear at confession and in conversations with the faithful. What is to be expected, when even primary school children are taught about vice, when in the great cities of our country leading politicians openly debauch themselves and then demand that the population accept their way of life as normal? Is this not worse than the ways of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Contemporary society has lost the correct understanding of marriage and the family, because it has lost the Gospel understanding of love. Almost everything is called love nowadays, from physical attraction and emotional closeness to human sympathy...this is why the word family is now used not only for a real family as commanded by God, but for the illegitimate cohabitation of a man and a woman and unnatural single sex unions. However, love is not a 'call of the flesh', but a divine, Godlike and God-given spiritual condition, which alone gives us inexhaustible strength for patience, humility, hope, fidelity and sacrifice for the sake of others.

May these festive days of the Nativity help us to enter more deeply into the Gospel meaning of love and family life, into the great task of bringing up our children, whom we are to raise not only as worthy citizens of society, but, above all, as worthy citizens of our Heavenly homeland. Let us pray to Divine Love, Incarnate as a Person, the Son of God, to teach us true love. Christ is born among us in a body, in order to renew our life in body and spirit. But for such a renewal we *must be born again*, for *Except a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (Jn. 3, 3). He who is born in Bethlehem cultivates within us this new birth and calls on us to work with Him, *to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* (Philippians 2, 12). Only renewed by being *born again* can we create a family and a society worthy of the high calling of Christianity. With thanksgiving and hope let us together with the birth of Christ celebrate our saving rebirth in Him. Amen.

+ Archbishop Mark

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