

A Christmas Message to the Pious Flock in the Diocese of Great Britain and Ireland

Today all things are filled with joy: Christ is born from a Virgin.

Since olden times the Birth of Christ has been thought of as a family holiday, which shows us a family ideal, an ideal of purity and chastity. Even in today's Europe where God is being forgotten, family members traditionally gather around the family table, trying to make each other happy with presents and are moved as they look at the image of the Infant lying in the manger. But can such an earthly outward celebration of the Birth of Christ *fill* our hearts with true *joy* and rejoicing, if the inward and Divine meaning of the family, of fatherhood and motherhood, has been lost by contemporary secular society?

Only in the Church of Christ does He Who is the Highest give us an example of the highest form of fatherhood and motherhood. The Son of God is born from before eternity from the Father without beginning. He was born in time by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin-Mother. He was born to save mankind from sin and its hideous and fiendish consequence – death. This birth is higher than the heavens and purer than the stars. The Saviour of the world enters our world through the Most Holy and Most Pure Virgin. This is our understanding and so every year we, Orthodox Christians, experience this greatest of events anew. The Light of the Birth of Christ has shone forth to us and lit the path to Christ and his salvation. God has become man through His immeasurable love for His creation and has opened the path of deification for us!

How grateful we should be to Divine Providence for the fact that to this very day we celebrate the Birth of Christ according to the Church calendar which has been handed down to us by the Holy Fathers – when all the noise and futility of the Western celebration has died down and the world around us is returning to its measured everyday life. With the weeks of consumerist frenzy over, we can quietly prepare in our Orthodox churches and families for the spiritual celebration of the Birth of Christ, the event that unites heaven and earth.

The ideology of consumerism has perverted the meaning of this great Christian feast, reducing it to a set of various customs and rituals that have lost their original meaning. What can the feast of motherhood, and all the more, of pure, virginal and chaste motherhood, represent, if in contemporary society childbirth has long ago ceased to be considered as desirable and natural? Even at playschool children are already taught a perverted attitude to sex and sexual life. Instead of love they are taught an animal attraction. The satisfaction of

sexual instincts is thought of as a sufficient value in itself, and not as naturally connected with the creation of a family, with the birth and bringing up of children. Many Western countries have already passed or are passing laws equating 'single-sex' marriage with the God-given union of husband and wife. And this is what children are being taught in State-run schools! So the State is betraying the millennial foundations of family life. Lawlessness is becoming the law, sin is proclaimed as normal and a lie as the truth...

Dear brothers and sisters, we shall not dare to allow such a mockery of our children who wish to keep their virginity until marriage and keep chastity within marriage. Our children must not from their earliest years learn of the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes (I Jn. 2, 16), they must not fall captive to legalised depravity.

The Church has kept and keeps the teaching, established by God, of the holiness of the family. The Church confesses the purity of the God-given order in family and in society. If marriage is considered, as it was before, as a holy sacrament, then childbirth will be a natural part of human life. If respect for our neighbour as the image of God is preached, then society will consist of people who will look at each other not as one wild animal looks at another wild animal, with malice and lust, but as one brother looks at another brother, with love and mercy. If human relations are based on chastity and a chaste marriage is considered holy, then family bonds will not fall apart in a multitude of inhuman divorces. If the Christian attitude to life and family values is restored, then Western humanity will cease to be a sick and withering tree which has more dying branches than new branches.

We do not need wars in which brother kills brother, we do not need illnesses which God allows to take hold of whole continents and kill young people, who are seduced by the preaching of sexual licence and all sorts of perversion. We need the pure love of God and of His creation. We need adherence to the Divine commandments in the form in which the Church has proclaimed them to the faithful since ancient times. We need the purity which is so fully revealed to us by the Most Holy Mother of God, Who for the sake of this purity became the chosen vessel of the Incarnation of the Son of God on our earth.

And when our life – both family life and social life – is based on this, then fog and darkness will lift, and we will be able to raise up new generations for the light of the love of Christ. Then the Saviour of the world will again and again be able to become incarnate in our hearts. Then He will raise us up from the darkness to His wondrous Light and we shall for ever become partakers of His eternal Divine love. It is worth living on this earth for this alone!

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

+ Archbishop Mark, Orthodox Christmas 2012