

CHRISTMAS EPISTLE FROM METROPOLITAN VALENTINE OF SUZDAL AND VLADIMIR, CHIEF HIERARCH OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH, TO HIS FELLOW ARCHPASTORS, PASTORS, THOSE IN THE GOD-LOVING MONASTIC ORDERS, AND ALL OF THE FAITHFUL CHILDREN OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

My dear Brothers in Christ, honorable Fathers, Brothers and Sisters!

From the moment that the first star began to shine in the vault of the winter sky on Christmas night, we began to celebrate the greatest event in the history of the world. Since ancient times, our people saw this first star as a reminder of the star that mysteriously led the Magi, as they made their way to Bethlehem to worship the divine Infant Christ. At that time, two thousand years ago, this tiny Jewish village, which had once been glorious and great, but had then fallen into disrepair and oblivion, became the central point for the renewal of foundation of the world.

However, people did not become aware of this right away. Even until now, most people are unaware that they are called to take part in the life of the Divinity, and to cease being a piece of merchandise or a plaything in the hands of unseen, dark powers. “God became man so that man might become God,” the holy Church testifies to us. And this testimony is so exalted, that the mind of man can either hardly grasp it, or else it lets it in one ear and out the other, considering these words as nothing more than a beautiful phrase. But this is not simply a phrase!

At that time, two thousand years ago, according to the witness of our Lord’s favorite Apostle, John the Theologian, the Light of Truth “came to His own, but His own received Him not.” (John 1:11). The leadership of the Jewish nation, which was aware of the many prophecies and revelations concerning the coming Savior of the world, did not recognize Him in the cave in Bethlehem, and King Herod, after conferring with the priests and doctors of the law, gave a command to kill all male infants in Bethlehem and in the surrounding area, who were two years old or under. The babies of Bethlehem, who were not yet even able to speak, became the first martyrs for Christ. Their example reveals to us not only the evilness and inhumaneness of this world, which despises the Truth, but also shows us that in order to be saved, it is not necessary to have much knowledge and life experience. For salvation, it is enough to have the innocence of an infant, or a sincere outburst of

repentance, like the one which the good thief on the cross at the right of our crucified Lord had, when he heard in answer, "This day shalt thou be with Me in paradise!"

Paradise, my dearly beloved brothers and sisters, is the Church, where God Himself abides together with His people, imparting unto them the blessedness of heaven through the holy Sacraments of His Body and Blood. The holy Apostle John the Theologian, testifying with bitterness about the masses of the Jewish nation's falling away from God, (and this goes for us, Christians, as well), spoke the following inspiring words, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, [even] to them that believe on His name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13).

When we speak about the Jewish masses falling away from God, we do not mean any certain nation, e.g. the Jews, although the history of mankind since the new testament times shows how hard it was for their representatives to accept Christ. In Christ, as the holy Apostle Paul says, there is no longer Jew nor Greek. When it comes to salvation and inheriting eternal life, nationality means nothing. When we speak about the "Jewish masses," which did not accept Christ, we mean the whole contemporary unbelieving world, which lies in darkness. Just as with the Israel of the Old Testament, our present world has at its disposal the full revelation about God, about salvation; the Gospels have been translated into almost every language that there is, but genuinely believing people, who live Christian lives, are becoming ever fewer in number. As sad as it is to admit, more and more people choose darkness – ethereal and senseless earthly wealth, pleasures, entertainments, festivals, and passions. The light of divine Truth blinds contemporary people, prevents them from fighting against their passions, and for this reason, they close and turn their eyes away from this light.

It is especially difficult to admit, that, just as in the days of the earthly life of our Savior, the so-called "official religion" of our time is playing a hugely negative role in the general apostasy of the modern world, in contrast to its supposed call for people to come to God. Who was it that called out to Pilate more fervently than anyone else to crucify the Savior? Who was it that advised Herod to kill the infant boys of Bethlehem? Who was it that gave bribes to the Roman soldiers guarding the Lord's tomb to keep them quiet about the resurrection of Jesus? These things were all done by the old testament priests, doctors of the law, and Pharisees. And what does their example teach us? That, if men pervert religion, the Church, the Faith, into a "profession," a business, or a source from which profits may be skimmed off, then he starts down the path of anti-theism. This is just what happened to us in Russia, where the atheistic revolution of 1917 took place not only, and not so much, because some external forces fomented agitation and led the people astray, but most of all, because our church herself, having merged together with the government, ceased being the "salt of the earth," the conscience of the nation, and became more and more reminiscent of some kind of financial institution. The historic mistakes of our church have been redeemed by the blood of millions of Russian New-martyrs so that having been cleansed, they might stand before their Bridegroom-Christ in the pure white robes of innocence.

Persecutions cleanse and exalt the soul, whereas earthly prosperity and merging with the government and extreme wealth, by contrast, corrupt and estrange men from God.

Unfortunately, the “official” church in contemporary Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate, is, even now, actively becoming one with the government. Her hierarchs lead lives typical of millionaires, and the authority that the church has with the people is rapidly declining. From the overall historical perspective, the present situation may even evoke a new flash of anti-theism. We, the children of the True Church, the heirs of the New-martyrs and Confessors of Russia, must protect and defend the honorable name of Orthodoxy with all our might.

In our so-called Orthodox country of Russia, the True Orthodox Church continues to be subject to persecution. In the past year, the powers that be criminally ejected our believers out of several more churches in the Suzdal region, which we had restored from ruins with our own hands. No words of advice to our government officials, no appeal to their consciences, or even of common sense, had any result whatsoever. Corrupt judges did not even want to listen to our summations, but simply put their seal of approval on decisions that were handed down from higher up. The entire governmental system has become rotten to the core, and has ceased paying even the slightest attention to the law. The Moscow Patriarchate, which has merged with the government, does nothing to censure this abuse, but only blesses it, and pushes the government on to newer persecutions against True Orthodox Christians. How reminiscent this all is of the relationship between the Jewish church, with her priests and Pharisees, and the Savior and His first community of Apostles! The holy Apostles, the Disciples of Christ, preached only goodness and light, and their preaching was accompanied by demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit – healing of the sick, and even resurrection of the dead. But in the end, eleven of the twelve Apostles drank fully from the chalice that had been promised to them by Christ – they were executed for His name.

From the world’s point of view, all of this looks like utter defeat. But the “power of God is perfected in weakness,” and the head of our holy Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, has already achieved victory over this world, so that all of the tricks and devices of this world are senseless, and are nothing other than a gesture of despair on the part of those doomed to the destruction of the devil.

“He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward [is] with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed [are] they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without [are] dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.” (Rev. 22:11-15).

My dearly beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus!

On this endlessly bright and light-bearing day, there is only one thing to which I would like to call you. Do not be discouraged that there are so few of us; that our Church is persecuted; and that we have no earthly glory or power. Even if you find that you are completely alone, do not fall away from the True Church; do not succumb to the temptation

of the sparkle and mightiness of the Moscow Patriarchate and other heretical churches, which have fallen away from Orthodoxy into the heresy of ecumenism. We are the Christians of the last times, and we shall not be saved by healing the sick, or moving mountains, or by isolating ourselves in some cave somewhere and doing our ascetical labors there. We have a very small requirement – to be faithful to the end, and not betray our Lamb/Bride, God’s immaculate martyric Church, persecuted by the Herods and Pilates of our day.

Most of us are not celebrating this Christmas in opulent churches, from which we have been evicted, we are not wearing expensive and luxurious vestments, for we are poor. But our Lord also was not born in a resplendent building in the center of the capital city, nor in a king’s palace, nor in the dwellings of the powerful of this world. The circle of history has been completed; the Church, passing through historical temptations, and cleansing sufferings, has returned to that humble cave where Christ was born. And to be with Him, in shame, in persecutions, in sufferings, – this is our greatest happiness.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus! I wish you all a very Merry Christmas!

Lowly

Valentine

Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir

Nativity of Christ

2010/2011
Suzdal