

NATIVITY EPISTLE
OF THE ADMINISTRATOR OF THE PATRIARCHAL PARISHES OF THE
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE USA,
HIS GRACE BISHOP JOHN OF NARO-FOMINSK

**To the Venerable Fathers, all-Honorable monks and nuns,
dear brothers and sisters!**

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” These words of the liturgical hymn, hearkening back to the biblical prophecy of Isaiah about Emmanuel (*cf.* Is. 7, 14), have become for us a verbal icon of the Nativity Feast. They proclaim the birth of the One Whose very presence will be the life of God among people, the fulfillment of the promise given erstwhile to Abraham, passed on from generation to generation of the people of the Old Testament, called into remembrance by the prophets, and realized now in the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” Out of the depths of the centuries the prophet Isaiah foresaw the imminent coming of the Messiah, Whose image was anticipated in the Bible in the images of righteous kings and liberators of the people. Throughout centuries of biblical history, the mystery of the presence of the God among His people and His absence from the surrounding pagan world had found its reflection in Israel proper. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, being the place of the revelation of God, at the same time also concealed Him in the darkness of the Holy of Holies, entry into which was accessible only to the High Priest, and only once a year.

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” In the New Testament the presence of God becomes all-penetrating. It begins in a small cave of the small Palestinian settlement of Bethlehem, and through the birth and growth of Jesus in fidelity to the Covenant spreads its power and authority to the very limits of the Universe, from the Nativity to the Paschal Mystery. For now the time had come when “neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (*cf.* John 4: 21). The worship of God in spirit and in truth, of which the Gospel speaks, has come to pass. It signifies the mysterious and true presence of God everywhere and in every place.

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” The Infant Child in the Bethlehem cave, the glorification of the angels, the wonder of shepherds, the worship of the Magi, the trepidation of Herod, the flight to Egypt, which, in accordance with Tradition, forced the idols to shudder, – all these narratives of the Nativity so familiar to us become, in the proclamation of the Church, testimony to the glory of Christ, a sign of Divine All-presence in the world and power over history. Indeed, according to Apostle Paul, “now we no longer know Christ according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16). God’s presence is no

longer exhausted by Bethlehem or Jerusalem, but reaches out to each one of us wherever we might be.

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” The Nativity event speaks to us about the presence of the God in the world and in history. It bears testimony to the fact that henceforth the former mystery of His presence in Israel and absence amongst the Gentiles, His revelations in the Tabernacle and in the Temple and His concealment in the murky darkness of the Holy of Holies, is not totally abolished, but remains in the human heart. From this moment forth, Bethlehem is in the heart of everyone, it is where the meeting takes place, where God is born. Everyone’s heart is now Jerusalem, where Herod’s power, self-interest, malice and madness, symbolizing sin – can and should make room for His Most Glorious Nativity. Everyone is called to hear the Angels singing of Christ’s glory, and called to worship, in the conviction of faith, the One Who has been Born, revealing to Him those very gifts of brotherly love, peace and love, which had been granted by Him.

“God is with us, understand, all ye nations!” These words, formerly addressed by Israel to all other nations, henceforth build up the unity of all those peoples who celebrate the presence amongst us of God Who Loves us. We, the biblical nations, that is, all people, in the unity of the Triumph of the Nativity, now proclaim our grace-filled transformation which has come to pass in Christ, Whose Nativity has made us the One People with whom God abides. “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21, 3). May the blessing of Christ the Savior, now born in Bethlehem, abide in our hearts. Amen.

+ JOHN,
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