

**THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE
OF
HIS BEATITUDE PATRIARCH MAR BECHARA BOUTROS RAI
PATRIARCHATE OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST**

Bkerke, December 15, 2011

**“I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people:
A savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.”**

(Luke 2:1-11)

1. In the middle of the night, 2011 years ago, the light of the glory of God shone on simple shepherds over the Bethlehem cave, and his angel came to announce to them and through them to the whole world, the Good News: **“A savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.”** At the same time, in the skies over Persia, a unique star appeared, prompting pagan scholars to see it as a sign of the birth of the King of the Ages to come (Matthew 2:1-2). They came to Bethlehem: simple shepherds from near, and rich magi scholars from afar. They prostrated in homage before the Divine Child and presented Him with the gifts of their faith, hope and love. He reciprocated by sharing with them the Divine nature. We, in Lebanon, the East and in the countries of expansion, likewise prostrate before the nativity cave to be enlightened by the Light of Truth announced to the whole world, and to be sanctified by the grace of the Divine life bequeathed to us. The echo of the words of Pope Leo the Great, resounds in the depths of our hearts saying, “Christian, acknowledge your dignity, and become a sharer in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct” (Sermon 21, *On the Feast of the Nativity*, Para 3).

2. It is a joyous occasion for me, on behalf of the Patriarchal See, His Beatitude and Eminence Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, their Excellencies the Bishops, the priests, monks and nuns, and all the helpers here to express our best wishes to our brothers and sisters in Lebanon, the Middle East and the countries of expansion and to all citizens here and broad, at the birth of our Lord Jesus, Redeemer and Savior of all people, and the coming of the New Year 2012. Prayers accompany these good wishes so that the Divine Child may shower an abundance of graces and goodness, and bless the coming year with peace, tranquility and a dignified life.

3. Christmas – a Cave, a Star and a Tree.

The Cave reminds us of the Incarnation of the Word of God, as Luke recounted in his Gospel. It also presents us with examples to emulate, such as humility and poverty, two models that Christ our Lord followed because of his love for humanity, impelling us to change from within, through the grace of the One who entered our humanity. “The Son of God,” says Pope Leo the Great, “has so united Himself with us and us with Him that the descent of God to man’s estate became the exaltation of man to God’s” (Sermon 27, *On the Feast of the Nativity*, Para 2).

O how impoverished we are and in great need for God's love to abide in our hearts this Christmas, as it abided in the heart of His Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the hearts of the saints! O how impoverished we are for that love that would enrich us with human sentiments and ethics in our dealing with others and in all our communication, especially on the part of the authorities and representatives of the nation in Parliament and the Cabinet, that we may live the beauty of "communion and love" in our own family, in our social family and in our national family. **Communion**, first and foremost, is union with God at the committed spiritual level and union with all people at the level of relations, where every individual, group and member of society may give his/her cumulative worth; thus, a diverse and integrated society is established. **Love** is the bond of that communion, its springhead and its goal.

O how impoverished we are and how much we need **humility** before God and man that we may be able to leave the darkness of pride and egoism; the darkness of pretension and self sufficiency; the darkness of refusal of the one who differs in opinion and aspirations; from the darkness of forcefulness, haughtiness and the branding of others with treachery!

O how impoverished we are and how much we need the **virtue of poverty** of self and enrichment in God; poverty manifested in detachment from personal interest and from personal material and sectarian gains at the expense of the common good. Every person in authority is in need of this virtue; the one who is without it, is the weakest of the weak.

4. Christmas is a Star; and that Star is Christ is the "Word of God made flesh" (John 1:14), Who entered into a perpetual dialogue with every person, enlightening him on the path of life, revealing to him the splendor of truth amidst the darkness of perplexity and of lies. This Star led the magi to the new born Messiah. When the Star vanished over Jerusalem, the magi logically went looking for Him at the king's palace, where might, culture and knowledge were, but He was not born there. God does not appear where worldly power dwells, or where there is the power of riches or the power of weapons, or the power of authority. But the Word of the Holy Scriptures informed them that He was to be born in Bethlehem and **that Word appeared anew in the Star** which led them to the place of His birth among the humble and the lowly. There, the King of the world was born, to indicate that His Kingship is freedom and love. This King is not born except in the hearts of the truly free: those free from self, from their own whims, from their own perversions and from the enticements of the world. The King is born in the hearts of those who truly love God and love each and every person. They alone respect freedom in all its dimensions and witness to this love in their works and the exercise of their responsibilities. Come brothers and sisters; let us search for the Star in the Word of God, Who erected His tent in the Church and made of Her "the pillar of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

5. Christmas is a Tree, decorated and lit. This, in fact, is the Church, sparkling with the light of Christ, Her founder Who abides in Her; in fact, She is one with His Mystery. She is Christ in His fullness. This is how the Apostle John saw her: "the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband to be a new earth and a new heaven" (Revelation 21:1-2). This reality is present wherever people live in communion and love, vertically united to God through the Divine Word, prayer and the grace of the sacraments and, horizontally united with all people through solidarity, connection, cooperation and integration.

The **Christmas Tree**, with its twinkling lights is the **Face of the Church** reflecting Christ, the Light of the Nations. Glad tidings of joy are proclaimed to all people through His Gospel. His Gospel is the light of truth to minds, the light of healing grace to souls and the reviving light of love to hearts. This sparkling Church, like the Christmas Tree, is charged by Her Master to proclaim His Gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15); this Gospel decorates the Church with saints, prophets, martyrs and confessors. Come all you Christians! Let us decorate the Church with different kinds of talents and gifts, which the Holy Spirit poured out upon us and upon every person that we may be an “added value” in our society.

6. Greetings to all from in front of the Cave, Star and the Tree.

You who are in Lebanon we salute you and congratulate you on the Feast. Come let us build the nation with its mission, and live in the diversity of our Christian and Muslim communities among others, and in the diversity of our cultures, aspirations, opinions, and political and national choices, along with the beauty of our unity, solidarity and connections, and be for each other and our Lebanese society an added value. This is how Christians and Muslims wanted Lebanon to be when they invented their National Pact in 1943, and committed to living together, to be an added value for each other. After nearly seventy years of experience, let us renew our National Pact through a new social contract and continue writing the history of groups that have decided to live together in peace and overcome each crisis that comes their way by virtue of their geopolitical position. Let us build an “added value” state with stability and radiance of its role on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, within the Arab milieu, and the international community.

7. You who are in the countries of the Middle East we salute you with the best wishes of Christmas, in peace and hope, as you endure the tribulations of wars, conflicts and conflicting claims, having before your eyes and consciences many questions concerning the future and our common destiny. In the midst of darkness, may the light and glory of God shine on you as on the night of the Nativity of Christ the Lord when the angels chanted: “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth and good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). We look forward with you, through the wishes of Christmas and the New Year, to the birth of a real Arab Spring, one of peace and stability based on religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism, equality of citizenship and democracy, and distanced far from the singleness of race, religion, confession and opinion.

8. You who are in the countries of the expansion and under every sky we salute you and congratulate you on this Feast. May the light of Christ the Lord shine upon you with all His gifts and graces, and unite us with the joy of His Nativity, for He has been united with every person through His Incarnation. To you are our best wishes that the New Year may be filled with peace, goodwill and success.

To us and to all people in the darkness of this world, the proclamation of the heavens is renewed: “To us is born a Savior” (Luke 2:11). And we proclaim the message of peace and hope: “Christ is born! Halleluia!”