

CHRISTMAS 2022

**Message of His Excellency
Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
to the People of the
Maronite Church in Australia, New Zealand and Oceania**

Beloved Brothers and Sisters, Sons and Daughters of our Maronite Eparchy,

When God Became Man

1. With the birth of Jesus Christ in a lowly manger, God said to humanity: *I have come down from heaven for your salvation and ...behold, I have taken flesh from the Virgin Mary for your sake!*
2. Christmas is the story of the Son of God who becomes the Son of Man. This is so we can become children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and bear witness to the truth, so that we might inherit the Kingdom of Heaven through faith in Jesus Christ.
3. God chose a most fitting time for the incarnation of His Son: "but when the completion of the time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law." (Galatians 4:4)
4. He chose the most humble people, those who relied upon His mercy: Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds and the magi.
5. Likewise, He chose to be born in the most fitting place, for the prophet declared: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least among the leaders of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel." (Matthew 2:6)
6. In this way the secret and magnitude of God's love for humanity is shown, that: In Christ Jesus, God has revealed everything to us. The mystery is made real in the Incarnate Word, the Saviour who, through His humanity, came to restore the image of God in us, after it had become distorted by sin. God desires to show that His image in us is a source of truth and glory, true peace and good hope for all humankind. For "...we have seen His Glory, Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

7. In the greatness of God's love for humanity, we find the desired encounter between Creator and His creatures. Christmas presents an opportunity for the meeting of heaven and of earth, and signals the reconciliation of humanity with God, and the return of people to one another. Christmas also signals the journey of repentance, forgiveness and joy in the Lord.
8. How beautiful it is for us to acknowledge and profess first that perfection belongs to God alone; and second, that each one of us has weaknesses, that we make mistakes and we fall. With this understanding, we can no longer condemn each other, but rather, become reconciled with one another. In this way, we can only reject resentment, division and past grievances. It is then in the name of Jesus Christ, that we open the doors to love, reunion, and peace.
9. Given Christmas is also a time for family reunions and gatherings, it is a matter of course for us to celebrate the Divine Liturgy of the Nativity as a family, praying *with* each other and *for* each other, so that the grace of the Feast may enter our hearts and increase our faith and unity.
10. On this Feast, we must remember in our prayers those families who cannot be reunited for one reason or another, or those families who may meet but without the joy of the feast due to hardship.
11. Here I turn again to you, beloved sons and daughters of our Eparchy, to thank you for the charitable work and humanitarian aid you carry out on an ongoing basis, especially to our people in Lebanon. In this regard, I hope you can continue to give what you can to support schools and universities in our homeland, for the future of Lebanon is closely tied to educating future generations.
12. My dear friends, we can only celebrate Christmas when we renew hope in our hearts and in our lives. Refreshed by the spirit of this blessed Feast, we look at the coming year 2023 with even more hope, raising a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the opportunity to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary of the founding of our Maronite Eparchy here in Australia. On 13 July 1973, the Holy See issued a decree establishing the Diocese of St Maroun and appointing its first Maronite bishop.
13. After fifty years, we pause and gather together to thank the Lord for what has been achieved, especially in view of our churches, monasteries, convents, schools, aged care and other institutions. This has all been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Maronite community working closely with our priests, monks

and nuns. This Jubilee is an occasion to continue our march - the journey of holiness and our testimony to our Antiochian spiritual and liturgical heritage - and our openness to the will of God in this land of diversity and opportunities.

14. Our Golden Jubilee Year will commence on 9 February 2023, with the celebration of the Feast of our father, Saint Maroun, at Saint Maroun's Cathedral, Redfern. We shall close the Jubilee Year when we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 2023 at Our Lady of Lebanon Co-Cathedral, Harris Park.
15. Christmas abides for us as a feast of joy and wonder, which we can say we truly live with the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph as they look upon the face of the Divine Child, Emmanuel - God with us - and He saves us. For what God has prepared for the life of each and every one of us is infinitely better than anything we could have planned for ourselves.

Christ is Born... Alleluia!

Sydney, 24 December 2022.

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay

Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania