

CHRISTMAS 2023

**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,

... And peace on earth!

When Our Lord Jesus Christ was born in a cave at Bethlehem, the sky witnessed a divine liturgy, whereby the angels celebrated the birth of the Holy Child of whom the prophet Isaiah had said: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). The hosts of heaven sang their great hymn on that Christmas Eve: "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace and good will to all" (Luke 2:14).

This angelic hymn has become an anthem for the Church on earth, that we repeat in our masses, prayers and celebrate in our liturgies. It expresses the essential Christmas message of divine glory, peace, and hope.

Christmas is the Glory of God

Saint Irenaeus says that the glory of God is man alive. The incarnate Word of God who became a human being is this perfect expression of the living and life-giving human being, for He offers eternal life to everyone who believes in Him. Through an act of love, God created the universe and raised man from nothingness, graciously giving him existence and life. However, man strayed and sinned. And through that same act of love, God sent His only Son to redeem man from sin and death. Through the mystery of divine incarnation, the Lord Jesus united Himself with human nature, resembling us in everything except sin. He is the New Man who reveals the glory of God and the greatness of His love for every human being. Humanity is called to live so as to glorify God in our lives, deeds, and words. In accordance with the monastic tradition of our Maronite Church, we join with the angels in proclaiming: "Glory be to God ... always to God!"

Christmas is the Peace of God

Sadly, the plain truth is that there is little peace on earth today. The news of wars and conflicts among individuals and nations that we hear and witness make us suffer and worry because the promised peace on the social, political, or economic level is lacking and fragile. However, when we look at the radiant face of the Child Jesus, shining with the light of heaven, peace enters our hearts because He is our peace and has proclaimed peace to all people, far and near (Ephesians 2:14-17).

Christmas is a continuous invitation for us to experience God's peace in our hearts and lives, independently of whatever is happening around us. Peace is a gift from God to us, according to the Gospel of Saint John: "My peace I give you," (John 14:27). Without God's peace in our hearts, there is no peace in the family, and without peace in the family, there is no peace in the society. Without peace in society, there is no peace in countries, and without peace in countries and among nations, there is no peace in the world. Peace is the heavenly message to our earth at Christmas, and we are invited to accept it in our hearts and embrace it in our lives. **It is not enough that we accept the gift of peace because peace is a choice and a journey that we work to build every day.** In this way, we become true peacemakers and not just lovers of peace, according to the Gospel of Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Christmas is the Feast of Hope

The Birth of the Lord Jesus ignited hope in hearts; human life and existence became meaningful and purposeful. This hope was experienced by the shepherds who made haste to the cave of Bethlehem, where they saw Mary, Joseph, and the Divine Child in His manger, for they believed what the angels told them; and having seen, they returned rejoicing and joyfully glorifying God.

We too can feel and experience the same hope when we listen to the voice of the Lord Jesus, calling with love and tenderness: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28). **It is only Jesus who gives us a true, firm and unchanging hope.**

Christmas opens the doors of hope in our world, which is trapped within the grim walls of materialism and consumerism. It invites us to be children and messengers of hope to today's humankind, because the future is in the hands of those who plant hope in souls.

Dearly Beloved,

We thank the Lord for His abundant grace and blessings upon us in this year in which we celebrated the fiftieth jubilee of the founding of our Maronite eparchy, and we look forward to the New Year, reaffirming our faith in God, and with renewed hope. With the announcement of His Holiness Pope Francis that the upcoming year is the 'Year of Prayer,' we unite in prayer for peace throughout the world, especially in the Holy Land and Lebanon. We call for an immediate end to war, killing and destruction because the land where the Lord Jesus Christ was born and lived must always be an oasis of love, justice and peace.

The desired peace on earth is not merely the cessation of wars or the silencing of the sounds of weapons. It is not just a social or economic program, nor is it merely a philosophical or reformist ideology. Rather, the desired peace on earth is a person named Jesus Christ, who is the true Prince of Peace and its source. The peace He gives is not as the world gives, for it is eternal, true and everlasting. This peace was born in the manger in Bethlehem, manifested on the cross, and shone with the salvific lights in the resurrection, dispelling darkness, defeating evil, and heralding the dawn of new life.

Christ is Born ... Alleluia!

Sydney, 24 December 2023.

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay

Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania