

*Nativity Encyclical**

THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD AND THE DIVINE GARMENT OF MAN: ADOPTION TO SONSHIP AND BECOMING CHRIST

Beloved Brethren in Christ and Children in the Lord:

A. Holy Baptism and our Adoption to Sonship

Blessed be God, Who has found us worthy once again, today, to celebrate radiantly, Divinely, and thankfully the great Mystery of the Dispensation of the Incarnation, by which the Son and Word of God, through the Good Will of the Father and the coöperation of the Holy Spirit, becomes man, that man might by Grace become God.

Our Orthodox worship reveals Divine mysteries to us. The Divinely inspired hymns and overshadowing of the All-Pure Mother of God, who became “a heavenly ladder by which God descended”¹ and who has proved to be the “bridge conducting those on earth to Heaven,”² have already initiated us into the “Divine darkness”² of Orthodox theology.

Yet, for edification and spiritual consolation, let us attempt to enter a little further into the lofty dimensions of this great Feast, with the Disciple of Love, the Holy Apostle John the Theologian, as our guide: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt in us”; “but as many as received Him, to them He gave power to become the sons of God.”³

With holy Baptism, every Christian is born anew in Christ. He receives the divine gift of Adoption to Sonship in Christ. He becomes a child of God.

This great gift of Adoption to Sonship has very striking results: It makes us temples of the Holy Trinity, since holy Baptism is accomplished not only “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,”⁴ but it is made effective by the three Divine Persons, “the anointing God, the anointed Son, and the anointment of the Spirit.”⁵

Beyond this, we should take note that this Adoption to Sonship, through holy Baptism, holy Chrismation, and holy Communion, means that we receive a kinship and likeness to our Saviour Christ, so that we are literally “clothed” in Him; that is, we become by Grace what He is by nature: “For as many as have been Baptized into Christ,” says the Holy Apostle Paul, “have put on Christ.”⁶

Children in the Lord:

B. We are Clothed in and Become Christ

And thus, our clothing and garment of Light is the God of Lights Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has given us the “Spirit of Adoption to Sonship”;⁷ that is, He has given us abundant Divine Grace, that we

might become and be called “sons of light,”⁸ of noble birth, and free in Christ our Saviour.

The direct response, on our part, to the gift of Adoption to Sonship is a continuous effort to become Christ, that is, an effort to preserve this “ineffable and incorruptible and spiritual garment”;⁹ to remain continuously clothed in “the garment of salvation, in our Lord Jesus Christ, the ineffable light,” “in power and truth”;⁹ to be transfigured radically and entirely into a new being, that “Christ be formed in us.”¹⁰

The Divine Paul instructs us that all that are truly “sons of God,” are governed and directed by the Holy Spirit: “...for as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”¹¹

It is a common teaching of the Holy Fathers of the Church that all who are clothed in Christ are clothed, likewise, in the Holy Spirit, for the Divine Comforter is also called the “clothing of the faithful.”¹² Now, our putting-on of Christ and the Holy Spirit is not, of course, something external, but is rather an internal transfiguration: “Christ and the Holy Spirit,” says St. Photios the Great, “we do not put on like a garment cast over us from outside, but as the heart and thoughts are filled with light and the face with Grace.”¹³

St. Basil the Great describes the consequences of our being clothed with Grace in this image:¹⁴ iron, the Saint tells us, when it is immersed in the furnace and is clothed in fire, is changed and transformed; it is purified of corrosion; instead of being hard, it becomes pliable; while it used to be black, it now is fiery and glows. The same sort of thing happens to the Christian when he is Baptized in the fire¹⁵ of the Holy Trinity and clothed in the fire of Divine Grace: he acquires spiritual purity, he casts off the hardness of wickedness, he is enlightened and enlightens, and he is warmed and gives off warmth.

“For the true God Himself,” says the St. Athanasios the Great, “wears us all, so that all of us might wear God. As many as are bearers of the Spirit bear light; those who bear light are clothed in Christ; and those who are clothed in Christ are clothed in the Father.”¹⁶

Indeed, only those who remain faithful to the Adoption to Sonship of holy Baptism have truly been clothed in the Holy Trinity and will be found worthy of the perfect Adoption to Sonship after the general Resurrection; for the former Adoption to Sonship is “like a seed and a root and a beginning,” whereas the latter is the “fruit and result of the former.”¹⁷

Beloved children in the Lord:

C. Love and our Becoming Divine

The indescribable Condescension of the Word which we celebrate was the outcome of Divine Love: “For God so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”¹⁸ Therefore, it is Love, as I constantly remind you, that must be the chief characteristic of the sons of God in power and truth. A reliable criterion for our progress in becoming Christ and Divine is Love, since it is through Love that we become like

unto God and are clothed in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

“When a person acquires love,” Abba Isaac the Syrian instructs us, “together with it he clothes himself in God.”¹⁹

Therefore, let us always have before us this Love of God for man; let us maintain continuous communion with the source of Love through the precious Mysteries; and let us cleanse our hearts from dark passions with constant repentance and the watchful, prayerful, and ascetic life of our Church. Then we will abide in Love; then we will abide in God; then we will be, in power and truth, living temples of the Holy Trinity.

The Saints assure us with amazement—“Oh, what a great and inexplicable gift of Grace!”—that “a person that dwells in love, this person dwells in the Holy Trinity. And likewise, the Holy Spirit dwells in him. Do you see the great gift of Grace, my brother Christian? Do you see the dignity that is gained by a person who has love for God and his brother? For he is a temple and dwelling-place and abode of the super-essential and most royal Trinity, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,”²⁰ the one true God, to Whom is due all glory and worship and thanksgiving unto the ages. Amen!

Your Intercessor Before the Incarnate Lord,

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Notes

1. Akathist Hymn, *Oikos* 3.
2. See St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, chapter 1: “What is Divine darkness?”
3. St. John 1:14, 22.
4. St. Matthew 20:19.
5. Cf. St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, chapter 12, § 28.
6. Galatians 3:27.
7. Romans 8:15.
8. St. John 12:36; I Thessalonians 5:5; cf. Ephesians 5:8.
9. St. Makarios of Egypt, “Homily 20,” §§ 1-3.
10. Galatians 4:19.
11. Romans 8:14.
12. St. Photios the Great, in St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, “Commentary on Galatians 3:27.” See also the expression of St. Makarios of Egypt in the homily cited above: “the garment of the Spirit,” “which is the power of the Spirit.”
13. St. Photios, *ibid.*
14. St. Basil the Great, *On Baptism*, “Homily 2,” § 10.
15. Cf. St. Matthew 3:11: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”
16. St. Athanasios, in St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, “Commentary on Romans 13:14.”
17. St. Photios, in St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, “Commentary on Rom. 8:23.”
18. St. John 3:16.
19. Abba Isaac the Syrian, “Homily 81” [Greek text].
20. St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, “Commentary on I John 4:16.”

* Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XX, No. 1 (2003), pp. 2-4.