

CHRISTMAS 2018

Message of His Excellency Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay to the People of the Maronite Church in Australia

Dearly Beloved, Sons and Daughters of our Maronite Eparchy,

**“In Bethlehem, God has become Man,
and in Jerusalem, He has offered Himself for us.
Let us adore and worship him, for he is the Saviour!”**

1. Let us contemplate together the great mystery of the Incarnation, with these words from the Maronite liturgy for the Season of the Nativity¹; the divine mystery of how the Only-Begotten Son of God became man in Jesus Christ, and dwelt among us, not by human will but through a great act of divine love from God the Father, for the salvation of each human being.
2. This unique event in human history is renewed each year in our Christmas liturgy. We celebrate it again today, and after more than 2,000 years, we are still astonished and amazed to think that the Son of the Living God should clothe Himself in a human body, a body which is subject to weakness and to death. Although he was complete in the wealth of His divinity, He became a small baby, born in a humble and lowly manger.
3. This is the tale of the Nativity, a story of the mystery of our full and radical salvation: a story which attains its climax in the passion of the Son of God, His death and His resurrection. As St John the Apostle said: “For God so loved the world, as to give His only begotten Son; that whosoever believes in Him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting” (John 3:16). From the very first moment of His conception within the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus began his journey of self-sacrifice urged by his love for all humanity. From this was forged the correspondence between the night of His nativity and the night of His sufferings, through the dawn of His Resurrection, leading to the accomplishment of His plan of salvation. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection would not have been

¹ Christmas Day Morning Prayer, Maronite Divine Office

possible without the Incarnation. The contemplation of Christ in the manger should also lead us to contemplate him in the Holy Eucharist where we find Him truly present in a sacramental form: The Incarnated Messiah, crucified, risen from the tomb, the Living and Worshipped Christ, abiding amongst us forever in the Mystery of the Eucharist. Let us adore and worship Him, for He is the Saviour.

4. The good news of the Feast of Christmas is not only that God became man and dwelt among us, and nothing more. This Feast also reveals that God is neither distant from us nor foreign to us, He assumed for Himself a human face in Our Lord Jesus Christ: Emmanuel, God is with us. This is the true splendour of the announcement of good tidings to all peoples and nations at the Nativity (Luke 2:10). However, this truth of Christmas is unfortunately facing in our Australian society today a current of refusal, distortion and marginalisation and cannot find its place in most mainstream media, in the rush to publish stories which are sometimes dark and negative, lacking in truth and fairness. In addition, many TV programmes and movies now oppose the very meaning and purpose of Christmas.
5. Confronted by this bitter reality, we find ourselves today frustrated, living in the midst of an unjust world of bleak darkness, which almost obscures the vision of the Christmas Star, which nonetheless dispels the darkness, and lights our way to the Christmas manger. Here, more than ever before, we see the need to return to the unchanging and constant reality of Christmas, which carries hope and promise to us today, declaring that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Therefore, a new path is opened for us, where we hear the angelic voices proclaiming: "I deliver to you tidings of great joy ... Today there has been born to you a Saviour, the Lord Christ" (Luke 2:10).
6. But the truth of Christmas remains the feast of hope from which the faithful draw the spiritual strength needed to live their faith and preserve their morals and their family values, despite the many challenges and difficulties of the present time. At the moment, we are engaged in completing the second phase of our first Diocesan Assembly. The third stage will commence with the announcement of the Assembly's proposals and recommendations upon the feast of our father St. Maroun on 9 February 2019, with the launching of an ecclesiastical, pastoral and apostolic ongoing workshop. We shall strive during this time to

implement the decisions and recommendations for the renewal and strengthening of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, both as individuals and groups. We shall work together to preserve our spiritual heritage and consolidate the foundations of our Maronite identity, especially with the new generations of Maronites in Australia. Therefore, we invite you to continue praying, that our church's journey will be one of listening and responding to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

Dearly Beloved,

7. The Good News at Christmas is that Christ is born among us. He alone is the reason and purpose of our Christmas celebrations. He came to give joy, peace and salvation to whoever believes in Him. This is the revealed truth that we must seek to spread, to understand and in which to renew our faith. This is the wonderful story of Christmas, which we should not hesitate to announce, but rather to retell it again in every place and every home and every family, and to share it with everyone, especially our children, because it truly brings good tidings and leads all who accept it to great joy.
8. Let us ask the infant in the manger to give us the simplicity and trust of the shepherds, and the humility and faith of St. Joseph, to behold the child born by the power of the Holy Spirit, and to gaze upon Him with the love and tenderness of the Virgin Mary His mother. May the Star of Christmas light our path to Him, as it guided the Magi. Let us come before Him and worship Him, bearing gifts of gratitude, forgiveness, reconciliation and love.

Christ is Born... Alleluia!

Sydney, 24 December 2018.

+ Antoine-Charbel Tarabay
Maronite Bishop of Australia