



My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy in the name of our Incarnate Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ, as we are blessed to celebrate the Nativity of our Savior! Indeed, the whole universe celebrates this great day, as the Vespers Sticheria proclaims, “*Every creature made by You offers You thanks. The angels offer You a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds their wonder; the earth, its cave, the wilderness,*

the manger.” The hymn begins, however, by asking a question: “*What shall we offer You, O Christ, Who for our sake has appeared on the earth as a man?*”

As we prepare to worship, and to celebrate with our families, we are constantly reminded that for much of our society, this question is unimportant. In our materialistic culture, the decorations will be taken down a few days after the 25th, in spite of the fact that we are called to celebrate the 12 Days of Christmas. Indeed, there are a number of people—both nonbelievers and Christians—who do not understand that the 12 Days are not intended to *lead* to Christmas, but *follow* it, connecting two Great Feasts of the Lord: His Nativity, and His Theophany.

During all the 12 Days, the *Dodekaimeron*, we will see many examples of what our holiest Saints offered to our Triune God. On the Feast of St. Stephen (December 27th), the first martyr speaks of Christ with boldness, and witnesses Him with his life. Even the Holy Innocents martyred in Bethlehem (December 29th) are examples of the power of Christ, and how the impious Herod fears Christ, instead of loving Him. However, as we do not live in a place that calls Christians to witness our faith with our lives, what can we offer Christ, when He humbled Himself to be born in a cave?

After the Nativity has passed, the Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord (January 1st), keeps us in the Christmas spirit, while also reminding us that Christ honored His own commandments, by undergoing the circumcision He instituted. Even the Theophany (January 6th)—when the Holy Spirit takes the form of a dove, and the voice of God speaks over Christ’s Baptism—is an example of Christ’s humility. As the Forerunner, St. John understands that Christ is greater, as St. Matthew writes, “*John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’*” (Matthew 3:14-15)

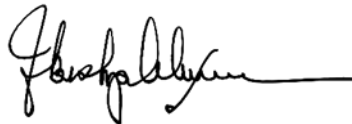
In the Sticheria, the Hymnographer offers the answer of what we shall give Christ: “*And we offer You a Virgin Mother*”, for she is also of the human race. However, this is another example of humility to God’s Will: like Her Son, the Second Adam, the Theotokos is a Second Eve, who replaces disobedience with acceptance of her own free will. Without her willingness to make the difficult journey to Bethlehem & to give birth

to God the Word in a manger, we could not be saved; just as our Lord condescended to be born in a manger, and to ascend the Cross so that we might be reconciled to Him.

My beloved ones, those of you who are reading this message perhaps do not look on Christmastime as you did in childhood. As adults, we now understand that what seemed magical—the tree, the gifts, even singing the *kalanda*—was really the hard work of our loving parents and families; and now that we have grown, we are burdened with the stresses of the holidays—paying for gifts, and traveling, or preparing meals. However, if there is one thing that we can take from the *Dodekaimeron*, it is that we always have a choice. The Theotokos chose to participate in our salvation, just as Christ chose to be born for our sakes. St. John put aside his objections to fulfill God's Will in Christ's Baptism & St. Stephen chose to give up his life for the life of Christ's Body, the Church. This *Dodekaimeron*, let us *choose* to rejoice at His Birth & at His Baptism, and when we choose to be happy, then we will have offered to God the greatest gift we can give Him: our open and loving hearts.

May your celebrations of all those Holy Days be filled with His blessings from above.

Καλα Χριστουγεννα και Καλη Χρονια!
Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alexios', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

+ ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta