



BY THE GRACE OF GOD

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**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Supreme Head of the
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“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” (Philippians 1: 27)

We extend our apostolic benediction, benevolent prayers and greetings to our brethren, His Beatitude Mor Baselius Thomas I, Catholicos of India, and their Eminences the Metropolitans; our spiritual children the reverend vicars, priests, monks, nuns, deacons and deaconesses, and our blessed Syrian Orthodox people all over the world. May the divine providence embrace them through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and St. Peter, chief of the apostles, and the rest of the Martyrs and Saints. Amen.

Our beloved, we inquire about your well being and offer our apostolic benediction and benevolent prayers as we say: Opening his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul offers thanks to the Lord while he prays for the Philippians that they share with him the grace of the Holy Gospel, i.e. the grace of the preaching of salvation contained in the holy gospel.

To this effect, the Apostle John writes similar words towards the conclusion of his gospel: “but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20: 31). This is the life that the believers in Jesus Christ are entitled to receive from the gospel. It is none but the life in Christ and with Him on earth and in heaven as designated by the Lord: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” (John 5: 39). Searching the Scriptures is the thorough study and attentive revision of their content. Whoever does this shall discover Christ the Savior around Whom revolve the true prophecies revealed by God and recorded in the books of the Old Testament. These oracles and prophecies were written by messengers of God who led a righteous life and were known by their honesty and truthfulness. The people of the Old Testament were entrusted to keep these oracles as the words of God (cf. Romans 3: 2). Some worshiped them out of ignorance and unawareness. They did not read them carefully and did not study them with faith, piety and fear of God to learn the correct time of their fulfillment. Thus, the Lord reproached them: “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me; but if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (John 5: 46-47). The gospel is a sincere divine detection and a strong spiritual bridge that leads us to the knowledge of the way of eternal life. This is because Jesus Christ came to the world so that we may have life (cf. John 10: 10) and He is the Way, the Truth and Life. He called us to receive Life. He reproached the Jews who refused Him by saying: “you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life” (John 5: 40).

The holy gospel is a reliable record of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ in words and deeds during His divine economy in the flesh. It does not impose on us orders. It does not give us commandments to blindly hold to. It does not list prohibitions. Rather, it presents to us Jesus Christ as a living paradigm to

longue for and a model to pursue carrying His cross. We shall follow Him so that we obtain eternal life through Him. This is what the Apostle Paul means by saying: “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1: 27). Likewise, he has expressed this idea saying about himself: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2: 20).

In this way, we learn that the true Christian is not the one who is born Christian. Nor is he the one who just believed in Christ and was baptized in His name. Rather, the true Christian is the one who lives in Christ after having crucified his self with Christ and transformed into the divine nature. He is the one who becomes a fellow of the divine nature. Consequently, Christ will live in him and alters him to become a young Messiah. Naming the Disciples of Christ in Antioch Christians (cf. Acts 11: 26) was considered to be a source of mockery and disdain. Contrary to the pagans and the Jews, the followers of Christ were gentle and humble. They loved even their enemies. They were honest in their interactions with people with the qualities and virtues of a man called by the Apostle Paul as ‘man of God’ who has to be “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (II Timothy 3: 17). The pagan citizens of Antioch saw human weakness in these qualities which Christ Himself had.

Consequently, they named His followers Christians because they saw a young Christ in each one of them. In the New Testament, the name ‘Christian’ became a source of pride and honor for the believer. The faithful who live worthy of the gospel of Christ are those who accepted Christ, followed His example and “to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1: 12-13). They are the ones who deny their own selves and live for Christ because life in Christ became the beginning of life for them. He became their head while they became the members of the body as specified by the Apostle Paul: “because we are members of His body” (Ephesians 5: 30). “For our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3: 20) and we are the children of heaven. We have to determine our duty in our earthly lives; namely that we are ambassadors of Christ and His mission observed by people. We are His sweet fragrance; hence, in our short and miserable lives on earth which decide how we spend eternity, we have to live as is worthy of the gospel of Christ. We have to study the laws of the kingdom of God made clear by the Lord in the holy gospel. We have to proclaim the Lord’s life in our lives: when we think, when we speak, when we act or do anything, we have to ask ourselves: ‘what would Jesus Christ do if He were in our situation?’ and act according to Christ’s will. In other words, we should be able to tell Him in deeds: Your will be done, not ours.

Indeed, through studying the holy gospel in the spirit of prayer, piety and fear of God, we discover the will of the Lord and we discover ourselves. As a result, we apply our deeds, words and thoughts as is commendable by the life in Christ. Consequently, He will live in us and we in Him. Hence, we will transcend the theories of religion to reach a point of practicality because faith without deeds is dead. Christ, the Good Samaritan, wants us to know that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1: 27).

This is how true Christians were living in the dawn of Christianity. They were true witnesses of Christ in their daily lives. Moreover, this is how they become a way to attract people. They were living for the Lord, believing in Him and thus received true life.

Indeed, life in Christ is not an easy task. It requires evenness, constancy, uninterrupted fight, patience and perseverance against the persecutions as should be any good soldier of Christ. The gospel spots this as the comfort in distress and the hope in despair. The faithful shall remain as the Apostle Paul directs: “I hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit” (Philippians 1: 27). The believers, those who are living as is worthy of the gospel of Christ, are unbeatable, unconquerable and invincible; rather, they are steady such that they consider their passions and sufferings as a gift from God as the Apostle Paul says: “for to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1: 29).

As life in Christ requires the “unity of the spirit”, so does the individual unite in the Spirit with Christ and with His mysterious body, the Church. As a result, he obtains communion through the gospel of Christ – the reason for which the Apostle Paul thanks the Lord in the beginning of his epistle. The individual also lives the unity of the one community along with the unity of the spirit of the nuclear family.

Our beloved, at this point, we care to stress the importance of the unity of the nuclear family. In our present days, Christian families are disintegrating because they are away from Christ. How beautiful it is

to have Jesus Christ as the Lord of the family and its head! How splendid it is when the members of the family live as is worthy of the gospel of Christ, enlightened by the light of Christ meditating the Living Word of God and acting accordingly. In the case where the members of the family remove the gospel of Christ from their homes, they remove the light that shows them the Lord. Furthermore, they remove Christ and welcome His enemy Satan. All sorts of vices will reign over the household and darkness will prevail in the family. Distortion will grow and conflict between the members will increase reaching the point of division: the household that is divided against itself will not stand.

In the occasion of the Great Lent, we encourage you to commit yourselves to this Holy Lent as is specified by the laws of the Holy Church and according to our tradition. Combine your fasting with prayers and charity along with repentance and return to God. In this way, you may live according to the gospel of Christ, firm in orthodox faith.

We urge you to contemplate and study the holy gospel: it is the source of virtues and the spring of spiritual and temporal blessings. The hearts of the members of a family that gathers around the holy gospel studying it in the Spirit of prayer and living it in their daily lives, will be filled with spiritual joy. They shall know their responsibilities towards God, towards their own selves and towards each others. Love shall prevail among them. The younger shall honor the elder while the elder shall look after the younger supporting him. Peace and harmony shall reign in triumph. The foundations of the nuclear family will remain strong and firm like a powerful building holding together and constructed on the rock of faith over which the gates of the abyss cannot win.

The Holy Bible is the foundation of a good family education. The Apostle Paul teaches his disciple Timothy: "and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3: 15-17). Such a man of God is described as follows: "his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night, he is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1: 2-3).

May the Lord be pleased with your fasting, prayers, charity and repentance and have mercy upon your beloved departed. May He spread His peace and security in the entire world pouring His abundant blessings upon your homes. May He make you worthy to live worthy of His holy gospel. May He grant you joy and happiness with His blessed Resurrection. May His grace be with you during these celebrated seasons and feast, always and forever Amen.

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