

GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA

CHRISTMAS ENCYCLICAL 2011

STYLIANOS

By the grace of God

Archbishop of Australia

To all the Clergy and devout faithful
of our Greek Orthodox Archdiocese

Brother concelebrants and God-protected children in Christ who is born,

The Providence of God which, in His Goodness and Love for humankind, has called everything into existence, "from non-being" into "being", has also made us worthy not only to exist for a period of time, but to identify, in the world and in time, the wonders of the Divine Omnipotence.

Therefore, as we celebrate Christmas once again this year, in other words the Mystery of the Incarnation of God the Word (Logos), we are invited to approach God as Infant in the manger with **humility** and **gratitude**, in order that we might experience "*according to the measure of the gift of Christ*" (Eph. 4:7), the peace of God "*which transcends all understanding*" (Phil. 4:7).

Humility is imperative here because it relates to the "great Mystery of godliness", as the Apostle Paul preaches with devoutness (1 Tim. 3:16).

Gratitude is also self-understood, because this Mystery concerns the human person directly; every human who was created "in the image of God" in order to approach "the likeness of God" (see Genesis 1:26).

If the Incarnation of God the Word for St Paul constitutes the great Mystery of godliness, for St John the Evangelist this Mystery is illumined by the abundant light of God's love, which is the only cause and source of Creation and the salvation of the world and humanity.

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believes in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life." (Jn. 3:16)*

Having now identified the Love of God as the pre-eminent cause of the divine Incarnation, we must not forget that this Love has two characteristic features which distinguish it from any other meaning of love.

It is primarily **general**, in that it is directed to “every person who comes into the world”, and secondly, it is **unreturnable**, in that it does not presuppose some exchange, but is offered **free**. For this reason it is called **Grace**, because it is offered as a gift to every person, so long as one does not reject it, denying the gift.

St. Maximus the Confessor who was the most mystical and profound Theologian of Byzantium says to us that, just as Mary the Theotokos gestated God the Word by the Holy Spirit, in the same way, every faithful is able to “gestate” the Word of God, becoming one’s self a “God-bearer” and a “Christ-bearer”.

However, as much as this teaching of St. Maximus might sound irreverent, even “blasphemous”, we should recall that centuries before him St. Paul had preached to all the nations that unprecedented point of his theology, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

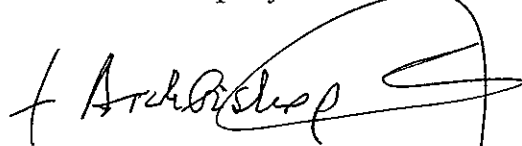
Of course, it is not only St. Maximus who consistently insisted on this **experiential** character of Christian theology. Other Fathers of the Ancient Church called the Incarnation of God the Word a “Second Creation”, as for example, St. Athanasius who taught explicitly that “God became human so that we might become god by grace” and that “He became poor, that we might become rich by his grace”.

In concluding, we are able to say that the “theology”, not only of Paul, but also of Peter and John, is an extended and precise **consequence** of the New Testament teaching with regard to Grace, which also constitutes the “**fullness**” of God’s salvific Truth in the history of humankind.

Furthermore, we are able to comprehend even more clearly the deeper meaning of this “**fullness**” from the epigrammatic words of John “for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17).

To God the Word, who became Incarnate for all people, be glory and honour and worship to all ages. Amen!

With fervent prayers to God

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'f Archbishop', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Archbishop STYLIANOS
Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia

Christmas 2011

Translation FSS