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**SAINT PHILIP’S FAST (PYLYPIVKA) PASTORAL OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC HIERARCHY OF THE U.S.A. TO OUR CLERGY, HIEROMONKS AND BROTHERS, RELIGIOUS SISTERS, SEMINARIANS**

**AND BELOVED FAITHFUL**

*God is our refuge and strength; a helper in afflictions which mightily befall us.*

*Therefore, will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.*

*Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*

*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Psalm 45, prayed during the Great (Holy) Hours

*Glory to Jesus Christ!*

Beloved in Christ,

The whole world has been anxiously watching the new wave of the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic over the past weeks. Rather than joyfully expecting the gracious gifts of autumn and Advent, we go about our days with a sense of tension, fear, and maybe even dread, all brought on by increased awareness of human mortality.

For this reason, at the beginning of the Christmas Fast we address all of you with words of spiritual consolation and encouragement to trust in God’s mercy. St. Philip’s Fast, or *Pylypivka*, is upon us. It is a time of understanding and spiritual preparation–­not so much for the birth of a boy as for the coming of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

We ought to think of the Nativity of our Lord as a God-revealing moment. There are others scattered throughout the gospels such as the Baptism in the Jordan when the Father declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Jesus shows us in these instances who he is, where he comes from, and where is going. His every vector moves through the Father. Of course, the Resurrection is the climax of God revealing Himself to beloved humanity through victory over death and the gift of eternal life to “those in the tombs,” to those who have lost Eden.

The Fast before Christmas is also a *great* fast. It is a time of gladness in waiting for the coming of the Messiah into the history of mankind. By coming into the world, he changes the world, because God becomes human for the deification of humanity. Our return to Him renews the harmonious union of heaven and earth.

The liturgical texts of Christmas reveal the feast’s theological meaning:

*Bethlehem make ready; let the Manger be prepared; let the Cave receive. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away, and God has appeared among men from a Virgin, formed as we are and making divine what he has put on. And so Adam is renewed with Eve as they cry, ‘God’s good pleasure has appeared on earth to save our race’.* (Royal Hours, First Hour)

Not only are Adam and Eve renewed, but we too, their descendants, are renewed in our original dignity as children of God through the incarnation and the birth of Jesus. The Nativity of Christ signifies and makes real the beginning of humanity’s salvation from the poison of sin and death. Therefore, the Christmas Fast is a period of joy, not of sorrow. We give up all earthly and temporary joys for the sake of true Joy–celebrating the birth of the God-Man, His coming in our nature, which He takes up to Heaven.

Today the world is afraid of a new virus that can harm the body, even destroy it. Yet Christ was born in the time of a census, turmoil among nations, and oppression. We must not forget that the Holy Family was also far from home and without a comfortable place to stay. Christ may not have been born into a pandemic, but He was born into a place full of viruses and infections, among the unsanitary conditions of the cruel world. However, even here, in the poorest place, He is greeted by the warmth of animals and the joy of shepherds. The stable and manger support the weight of God’s great love and mercy for man.

*Before your Nativity, Lord, the heavenly hosts looked with trembling on the mystery and were struck with wonder; for you were well pleased to be born as a babe, you who adorned the vault of heaven with stars; and you have been laid in a manger of dumb beasts, you who hold all the ends of the earth in the hollow of your hand; for by such a dispensation your compassion and great mercy have been made known. O Christ, glory to you!* (Royal Hours, Third Hour).

During the period of Christmas fasting, let us discover the Word of God: Christ, who is incarnate and born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Word is incarnated and so it becomes flesh. Let us discover the Word, let us incarnate It in ourselves. We should first prepare ourselves by embracing repentance.

And so, may our expectation of the birth of Jesus the Savior be filled with joy and trust that shines in our families, with the people around us, and with those who expect a great change in mankind and in the universe because *“God the Lord has appeared to us.”*

May the blessings of the Lord be upon you!

+Borys Gudziak

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Metropolitan of Ukrainian Catholics in the United States

+Paul Chomnycky, OSBM

Eparch of Stamford

+Benedict Aleksiychuk

Eparch of St. Nicholas in Chicago (author)

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