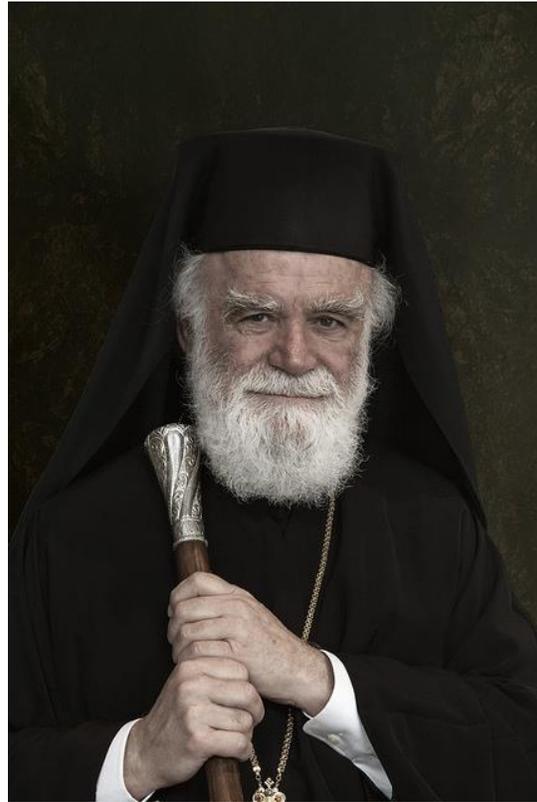


My Beloved Ones,

This Sunday, we are blessed to celebrate one of the first Great Feasts of this new Ecclesiastical Year: The Nativity of the Theotokos. As we begin this new Church year it seems appropriate that this feast point the way to the beginnings of our salvation: from the Nativity of the Theotokos, we then commemorate Her Entrance into the Temple as a child in November, and then the Nativity of Her Son and our Lord at Christmas.

As we think on this new year, we once more have a chance to reflect on the mercy of our Creator. Remember, the Virgin Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna were from pious families. Tradition has passed on to us that Mary's father, Joachim, was descended from the family of David the King; and that her mother Anna was of the priestly tribe of Aaron. So, Joachim and Anna were faithful Jews, who honored the Lord, and kept all His Commandments.



However, Anna was unable to bear children, and in those especially fallen days before the coming of Christ, people who were unable to conceive were often seen by their neighbors as cursed by God because of some grave sin. It is for this reason that Joachim was turned away from the Temple, and his offering rejected. Deeply hurt, when he explained the pain he felt to his wife, she of course, felt great shame as well.

Joachim then went to the desert to renew his prayers, hoping that God might see fit to bestow upon his house the same blessing given to the Patriarch Abraham, and to his wife Sarah. While deep in prayer, both Joachim and Anna were separately visited by angels, who announced that the Lord had heard their cries, and that they would soon conceive a child who would be spoken of in the entire world.

Returning to Jerusalem, Joachim embraced Anna by what is now known as the Golden Gate. Prophetically, Ezekiel wrote that the Lord told him, *"This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut."* (Ezekiel 44:2). Mystically, this Gate is meant to symbolize Mary's role as the Theotokos, the "Bearer of God" who remained a Virgin all her life: before, during, and after the birth of Christ.

Consider for a moment, the plight of Joachim and Anna, and how we would react in their situation. Though their hearts were greatly saddened, neither he nor she, allowed

themselves to curse God. Indeed, they used their grief to inspire prayer. In this way, when we are faced with a difficulties or pain, we should also turn our tearful faces toward God, and not away from Him.

God's ways are indeed mysterious and not understandable to human logic. No rational explanation can be given concerning the ages of the Theotokos' parents (and the later Incarnation of our Lord) but Joachim and Anna did not demand answers, even in their old age. Simply, they understood that God would make His Will for their lives known to them, if they sought Him through fervent supplication and prayer. And so too will He comfort us, and make us delight in Him, if we seek to renew and strengthen our relationship with Him, beginning in this new Ecclesiastical Year, and always.

**+ALEXIOS**

Metropolitan of Atlanta