



By the mercy of God Almighty
John X
Patriarch of Antioch and all the East
to
My brothers, Pastors of the Holy Church of Antioch
My sons and daughters, all over this Apostolic See

"Bethlehem has opened Eden: come let us see!... come, let us seize Paradise hidden in the cave! ... here the Virgin has borne a child, quenching Adam's thirst..."

With these words, voicing the hymnographer, the Holy Church invites us to contemplate the Nativity of Christ. The Nativity of Christ is the birth of light and the birth of hope in the journey of our lives. His Nativity is the birth of our humanity yearning for the elixir of eternity. His Nativity is the birth of joy dispelling the darkness of worldly preoccupations.

In poor Bethlehem, the humble Enriching-God came to us. A child came to us from a virgin mother to quench the thirst of our hearts and humanity for the Creator.

From a cave beneath the earth, the Inhabitant of the Heavens, the Lord and Master of the Highest, chose to gaze upon humanity, which He loved. He became human to elevate humanity to the heights of His divinity and adorned its weakness to pour upon it the strength of His might. The Virgin was adorned with pure robe, divesting from His heavenly abode onto the soil of the humble land.

In Bethlehem, from the lands of Palestine, south of Jerusalem, adjacent to Jordan, from the cedars of Lebanon and the vicinity of Damascus, and from the expanses of the East, came to us the "East of the East," Christ the Lord. He came to us over a thousand years ago, planting His Gospel in the ears of the apostles and our

ancestors. He reigned in souls, ruled the throne of the heart, and dwelled in the manger of the soul, making of this eastern land a manger of His Gospel. This land received Him as a child in the depths of her cave, crucified on her calvary, and rising from the grave of her garden. This East of ours is more than just land; it is identity, existence, and being. This East is baptismal font in Christ for us Antiochian Christians. The bleeding of the migration of Christians from their East is like the bleeding of a spear that pricks, once again, the side of Christ in the Calvary of His passions.

As we approach the celebration of Nativity, we draw near to the cave and lean towards her Child, entrusting Him with our entire lives, beseeching Him—the Lord of mercy and the God of all consolation—for mercy upon those who preceded us to meet His holy face. We ask Him for peace for our beloved East, which He embraced willingly for our salvation. We pray for Palestine and the bleeding Gaza, crucified on the altar of the interests of nations and the condemned silence regarding the atrocities that have occurred and are happening there. We pray for Syria and Lebanon and for the peace of the entire world. We ask Him to instill, with the might of His silence, the strength of peace amidst wars and conflicts and to plant in hearts the seed of His growth and the breeze of His peace. We pray for our brothers, the abducted Metropolitan of Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, who have been missing for more than a decade in international condemnation and outrage, and our prayers are for every abducted person suffering the price of human exploitation in the marketplace of interests.

Many blessed returns to our sons in the homeland and abroad, and to all people. May God bless these days and fill them with grace and blessings from the Child of the cave, the Father of Lights, and the God of all consolation. Amen.

Damascus, December 20, 2023.