Archpastoral Letter for Advent 2021
of His Eminence, the Most Reverend Archbishop Stephen J. Enea

Metropolitan of the Americas and Canada of the Italo-Greeks
Bishop of Utica
Primate of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church

To the beloved clergy and faithful of the Holy Metropolitan Archdiocese of America and Canada of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church and to all Americans of good will: peace and apostolic benediction!

Christ is in our midst!

I would like to begin by paraphrasing the holy prophet Isaiah who said: "For Jerusalem's (America's) sake, I will not be silent until her vindication shines forth like the dawn. No more shall people call you forsaken, or your land desolate, but you shall be called My delight and your land espoused." (Isaiah 62:1,4).

Once again, beloved, we find ourselves in the holy season of Advent, making our spiritual pilgrimage to Bethlehem, to the stable where the Son of God is to be born in the flesh of a Virgin who knew not man. What an awesome mystery it is to comprehend: how the Eternal God brought about such a miracle, one that would forever change the course of human history and impact the lives of billions of human beings even to this very day.

Truly, there are many who do not believe in this act of God, who do not believe that God became a human being so that He could once again make us one with Him. Saint Athanasius (ca. 298-373), one of the great Church fathers, in his book On the Incarnation wrote: "God became man so that man might become God." This is truly an audacious and provocative statement. Yet, it is true, nonetheless. It has been quoted and paraphrased by many Church fathers and theologians throughout the centuries and is a clear teaching of the Orthodox Catholic Church to this very day, in what we know as the doctrine of deification.

In its simplest definition, deification means "in Christ" or "in God." Christ's Incarnation fully restores all of humanity to its full potential, because He took to Himself our entire human nature (including the sufferings due to sin, while not a sinful man Himself). In Christ, the two natures of God and man are no longer two but one; thus, there is perfect union in Christ, between all of humanity and God. Through union with Christ, we too can experience that perfect communion. We can become by grace what God is by nature (St. Athanasius of Alexandria) and can become children of God (John 1:12).

The clearest statement of this relationship can be found in the 17th Chapter of the Gospel of St. John, in the Great Prayer of Christ for the Church. Again, I paraphrase: "I ask that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they may also be in Us. I in them and You in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them with the same love with which You have loved Me" (John 17:20).

So, why do I make mention of deification? Because our Advent journey is one that leads us to deification. We are reminded daily during these forty days of Advent that that our earthly pilgrimage is to deification, that state of ultimate intimate communion with the Holy Trinity in and through Jesus Christ. Such is our destiny. Such has been our destiny since the creation of our first parents. But our destiny is not only to be one with God, it is to be one with each other.

We were not created to be islands unto ourselves, we were created for each other, to live in community, in harmony and peace, and most importantly, in the love that never fades but always endures, the love which is God and who is its only source. This love is always faithful and reliable. It is a love that is pure and knows no bounds. Sadly, however, many Americans do not know this love. They do not know it because they do not know God, nor His Son, nor His Life-creating and life-sustaining Spirit.

A quick look at our present situation in America will reveal the sad reality that we are in disunity. That disunity in all its forms has become a major barrier to our being able to find reconciliation and lasting peace among us. We are a people torn by political ideologies, the spurious opinions of an elite few, the fashionable opinions of the day, and a selfish desire to look after only ourselves and not one another.

Against the backdrop of our endless woes, ours has become a nation wrapped in desolation, division, and isolation. The prospects of a failed state stare us in the face: acts of anarchy, violence and bloodshed, a collapsing economy, social anomie, domestic and community violence, etc. Our country has become a house of horrors, with fear stalking our homes, highways, cities, villages, and towns. Not even the smallest hamlet is exempt from the machinations of those of our fellow countrymen who have no moral foundation, nor regard for the life and property of others.

The middle grounds of optimism have continued to shift and many genuinely ask, what have we done? Where are we going as a society and a country? Does America have a future? Where can we find hope? Like the Psalmist, we ask; from where shall come our help? (Psalm.121:1).

Whatever the temptations are to despair, we cannot to give up. When the Psalmist asked where help shall come from, he answered that it will come from the Lord. Therefore, like Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, we must stand before the mercy seat of God and plead the cause of our great country (Luke. 1:8). Like Abraham, we must plead for the Lord to save our nation because we have more than ten righteous men (Genesis. 18:16). Like Moses, we believe that if our hands are held up in prayer, the Lord will be on our side (Exodus 17:11). And it is the bishops and priests of the Church who must lead this campaign.

We must, bishops and priests, lead by example. We must sound the call to assemble the faithful, and we must lead them to the mercy seat of God. We must lead them in our Advent pilgrimage, on our journey to Bethlehem, to the mercy seat of the Infant King who descends from Heaven to restore mankind to its former dignity, glory, and greatness.

These are trying but life changing moments in the history of our nation. Politics and economics have imposed great and unbearable burdens upon the shoulders of the American people. Those who have been elected by the people to represent them have failed them. Rather than looking out

for all the people, our political leaders consider and act upon only what is important personally to them and their vested interests.

Hatred, bitterness, and resentment can be found on every street corner in every city of America. Ample plates of injustice, bigotry, and intolerance are served up everywhere and have become staples of the American way of life. God-given freedoms are rapidly becoming a thing of the past, especially under a government that has become increasing oppressive and both totalitarian and dictatorial. Religious freedom, especially the freedom to worship, is also rapidly fading from American society. And as God is continually pushed out of American society, our nation sinks lower and lower into the pit of abomination, lawlessness, and despair.

We need to pause, reflect, pray, be honest and courageous in facing tomorrow. Advent gives us the opportunity to do all these things. Advent is the season of joyful expectation; it is the time of our life both as Christians and as Americans that God has given us to rediscover our destiny and purpose. We must not hesitate in our journey to the mercy seat of God, for there alone will we find redemption and salvation.

We have done so much damage to ourselves and we have let others damage us. We have let others destroy our dreams. Our greatness among nations has been reduced to dust by those whom we trusted to lead us to even greater heights. We believed in promises that have turned out to be lies. We were told that progressiveness and liberality would restore the greatness we lost, but it has proven untrue. Why? Because God has never been a part of the solution to our problems. God's most basic laws, which have been the cords which has held our country together since its founding, and which have been the foundation upon which America's greatness has been built, have been removed and eradicated. Now, we watch with sorrow and frustration as our country limps and stumbles along toward where?

Yes, our dreams have been killed. Yes, our Country's greatness has been stolen. Yes, our cancer of corruption has metastasized. Yes, we are hungry, angry, thirsty, and starving. Yet, we stand firmly with the unshaken belief that no matter the temptations, the world has known worst times. These may be the worst of times, but for men and women of faith, they could be the best of times. They can be the best of times because these times can be of our purification. We must stand firm and resolute because, our Redeemer lives (Job 19:25) and because, like gold purified in the furnace, we will emerge brilliantly shining and precious in the sight of God.

Amidst the wails and laments, I hear people say, "It has never been this bad". But it has been worse. And there will be in our future even worse times. But God is always faithful; He will never break His promise and abandon us. This is what Christmas is all about. It is the feast of hope and promise. It is the feast of Light, the Light which never fades but illumines all people in all times and in all places. That light is Christ, who is the Light and the only salvation of the world. Advent leads us to that Light, to the place where He who is the King of Kings, who is God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God, and the Prince of Peace holds court among those of simple but profound faith.

COVID is still with us and has us firmly in its grip and its new Omicron variant has sent up everyone's stress level a few notches higher. Our lives have not returned to normal; they are still at the mercy of COVID and will continue to be until we are able to control the disease and rid

ourselves of its stranglehold on us. We still live with fear and uncertainty but hope always springs eternal. Christ is our hope. Christ promises us that evil will never subdue good and that is a promise we can believe in. Jesus Christ never lets us down; He is always faithful and always true. He is our help, our hope, and our salvation. He is the peace and consolation of our hearts and the only hope for good in our nation and our world.

Not unexpectedly, this Christmas is again coming against a backdrop of so much pain, sorrow, and uncertainty in our land. We all seem to have become sedated and inured to pain. Tragedy has been standing as our gate keeper. For two years now, a dark pall of horror, sorrow and death has consistently hung in our horizon threatening to eclipse the promises of the joy of Christmas. We have watched civil unrest and violence run rampant through many of our communities. COVID has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens. Racial disharmony and its attendant violence have found a home in our nation. Poverty and homelessness are on the rise, and it is becoming more and more difficult for families to make ends meet every month. And our government continues to fail us.

All of this should cause us to pause and ponder about the nature of the force of evil that is in our midst. It is important that we should remember that we are not one another's enemies; we need to stop blaming one another for all the evil that surrounds us. We must look to the source of this evil, who is none other than Satan himself, and together eradicate and drive him from our midst. We must not listen to his temptations nor allow ourselves and each other to fall victim to his false claims and promises of happiness, and freedom, and prosperity. Rather, like the friends of Job, we need to humbly appreciate the limits of our human understanding.

Evil will always reign unfettered where God is not present. Things like terrorism, hate, murder, selfishness, corruption, stealing, and indifference, just to name a few, are all fruits of lives devoid of God. Our only hope for eliminating these things from among us is a return to God. We must seek Him out and ask Him back into our lives. On bended knee, we must confess our sins and weaknesses before Him, at His throne of mercy, and beseech Him to come and dwell among us once again. We must acknowledge Him, in the person of Jesus Christ, to walk with us and lead us to greatness, to holiness, and to righteousness among the nations and peoples of the earth so that we may live as children of the Light, as beloved sons and daughters of the Eternal God and Father.

The challenge for all of us now is how to deal with the scars inflicted upon us by a derelict government which is still unable to or unwilling to protect its citizens and act in the name of and for the well-being of ALL its citizens and not just a certain segment of the populace.

Before America can be restored to its former greatness and glory, government, especially at the federal level, must understand that its power and authority, as well as that of the states and local governments, derives from God and His laws, laws which were the foundation upon which this nation and all nations of the earth were founded and established. There must be a return to this absolute moral foundation upon which a strong and enduring house can be built, one in which all people can find safety, peace, security, and happiness.

The larger issues now are whether the federal government understands the evil web of intrigues into which it has led the American people, and which threaten their lives, liberty, and pursuit of

happiness. How long can this circle of deceit last? The men and women of darkness have shown far greater capacity to shock and awe a forlorn nation by constantly blindsiding us all. When will it all end?

It will end when God is asked back into American society. It will end when every American bends a knee in thanksgiving to God for the many blessings which He bestowed upon a nation that once revered and honored Him and who rewarded that nation with greatness among the other nations of the earth.

Our government owes the nation an explanation as to where it is headed as we seem to journey into darkness. The increase in violence and the brutal attempts to remove God from America must be related to a more sinister plot that is beyond our comprehension. Are we going to remain hogtied by these evil people or will we allow them to continue their nefarious plot to seal the fate of our country and turn it into a Godless nation where the rights and freedoms of its citizens are determined by government and not by God? Are the people of this great nation, who once lauded and invoked the protection of God, destined to become a nation of slaves in bondage to an elite and powerful few? Who shall be our deliverer? Shall it not be God, who expects nothing of us except to live in His image and likeness? Shall it not be God, who only wants us to be truly happy and free? Shall it not be God who loves us unconditionally and who only wants our love in return?

The rut and decay in our country today is evidence of a people who have not yet seen the light. We must turn to the Light. Advent is the road to the Light. If we walk faithfully along this road, we will find our true destiny and the happiness we seek. America must therefore now pull together. It is not enough to blame our politicians or even the President alone. We found our way here by the choices we have made as a nation over time.

Today, there is ample evidence that we have literally returned to the cave, those times when life was brutish, nasty, and short. Each one of us has contributed to the darkness of our nation. But we have returned to the wrong cave. The cave we must seek is the one in which the Light of the world found shelter when He was born.

The star which caused the shepherds to leave their flocks and led them and the Magi to Bethlehem to worship and adore the Infant King is the same star that leads and guides us to the mercy seat of God, the place where we find our destiny.

The light of Christ which we all received at Baptism calls on us to act in the mind of Christ. In the waters of Baptism, we were washed clean and sent forth to be Christ to the world, to be His hands, His feet, and His mouth. To be a disciple of Christ is to live in Christ and have Christ living in you. Advent calls on us as Christians to embrace the promises of Christ and to adorn ourselves in the simplicity of Christ represented in Christmas.

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming to dwell among us. As we prepare for His coming, let us fill our oil lamps and go out to meet Him. The Church has offered us a roadmap by giving us the holy season of Advent, a beautiful and peaceful season in which to prepare ourselves for the coming of God, who deigned to come into this world by assuming our flesh and dwelling among us.

As the children of God, as disciples of His Son Jesus Christ, we are challenged to bring the Light of Christ into the darkness of our society. As we make our pilgrimage to Bethlehem, let us resolve to ask God, in the person of Jesus Christ, not only to reign in our hearts, but to reign over our nation and restore her and us to the greatness which was His gift to us because of our faithfulness, holiness, and righteousness.

St Paul reminds us that without Christ, our lives are characterized by immorality, filthy and indecent actions, worship of idols, and all manner of evil behavior. People become enemies and they fight, they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups, they are envious, they get drunk and have orgies, they engage in promiscuous sexual activity, and they dishonor their marriage bed (Galatians 5: 19-21). Such is the way of a Godless people and of a Godless nation.

When it is dark, we cannot see our way and we stumble. America has stumbled so much. It is time to for us to turn on the light of Faith once again. Each of us can make a change. As we continue our Advent pilgrimage amidst our pains and trials we can say with the Psalmist: "Our tears have become our bread" (Psalm 43:2). We have no reason to doubt that at the fulfilment of time, in His own time, the Lord will dispense justice to our nation. It will come as day follows light.

Many of us cry out to God for justice. We weep and lament our present situation. But God sees our tears and hears our cries of sorrow, and He knows and understands our pain and suffering. Be assured, beloved, that the Lord will respond accordingly, and with justice. With St. Paul, I say: "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, and the light of day is almost here, so let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:11-12). Let us unite and seek the Lord in sincerity because the Lord will vindicate the righteous.

A blessed and spiritually fruitful Advent to all of you!

+Archbishop Stephen