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**"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," (Jn 1:5).**

Dear fellow Christians and all people of good will,

Merry Christmas! It is one of the most joyous of all holidays, and it envelops us in shining lights, traditional Christmas hymns and songs and an abundance of gifts. But the real reason why we rejoice - our Saviour is born! The miracle of Bethlehem proclaims God's coming. Just as the shepherds rushed to the Saviour who was born, so we are called to seek truth and meaning, to discover Him - the living God, who came so that no one should perish but should have eternal life.

The deepest meaning of Christmas - what we really celebrate - is the Lord's faithfulness, His constant presence with us and for us. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was told that her Son would be called Emmanuel, meaning: "God with us." The Lord does not forget us, He does not leave us, He is there even when we do not notice Him or are distracted by the problem in our lives. Christmas reminds us again of this closeness of God.

We are called not just to enjoy the idyllic view of the Nativity scene, but also to continue Jesus' mission. The Lord comes to dwell among us in the moments of each day; His birth is the bridge between earth and heaven. As we sit with our loved ones at the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day table, let us also remember those who are in need; those who feel abandoned; those who are hurt by the shards of broken relationships. It is in this daily life that we are all called to proclaim the Good News - that the Lord is near.

The holy and joyful night of Christmas Eve renews the longing for human closeness. May fellowship and compassion become joyful signs of Christmas for families, communities, and all Lithuanians around the world. We yearn for good times together, for the reconnection of broken relationships. Therefore, let us not close the door of the stable of Bethlehem in our daily lives. Behind those doors, something has happened that has transformed the world, your life, my life, the lives of millions of people. Let us open the door of our hearts to everyone who needs help.

As we celebrate Christmas, we look with great pain at war-torn countries, especially Ukraine and the land of Jesus' birth. The prophet Isaiah named the Messiah the Prince of Peace. We pray to Him to stop those who commit aggression and to help overcome all strife between peoples and nations. Let not the clash of weapons drown out the voices of angels proclaiming peace to men.

In spite of the difficulties we experience in our lives, let us hold on to the hope that God has given us. As Primo Mazzolari, an Italian priest, writer and freedom fighter, wrote: *"Unquenchable hope compels us to lift up our heads and open our hearts to the coming of the Lord. There is only one reason for this, and it is clearly written in the Gospel of John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it," (Jn 1:5).* Let us live this hopeful message and share it with everyone.

May you all have a joyful and peaceful Christmas!

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Delegate of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference for the Pastoral Care of Lithuanians Abroad