

## **A Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Third Christian Millennium**

The Feast of the Nativity of our  
Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ  
in the Year of our Salvation 2000

### **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth**

The Hierarchs of the  
Standing Conference of the  
Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas

To all of the faithful clergy and laity of the  
Holy Orthodox Church throughout the Americas,

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. The commemoration of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ is an occasion for celebration and joy for all Christians. It offers an opportunity to reflect upon God's love for us. "For it was neither an angel nor an ambassador," who came to us, "but the Lord Himself, made flesh."<sup>1</sup> God entered human history in the flesh, and history was and continues to be dramatically and irrevocably changed by the encounter.

2. The direct entrance of God into human history is one indication of His care for us and for the world He created. The Millennium celebrates the event that shows us history has a purpose. History has a beginning and an end, an Alpha and an Omega.

3. People long to know God. The search for meaning is as critical for human existence as are air and water. Creation itself, as the handiwork of God points to Him. Yet, before the coming of Christ, the meaning of the world and our place in it remained difficult to understand. People created stories to help themselves explain the great mystery of their own existence, the world around them, and the One who was responsible for bringing them into being. Yet, knowledge of the true God eluded them. The Holy Scriptures speak of this lack of knowledge as darkness. "So God sent messengers to speak for Him, holy men and women through whom He worked wonders, prophets to announce the coming salvation."<sup>2</sup> Finally, God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ. When He came, the very one who had created the world was now clearly made known to the world, giving light to those who had been sitting in darkness.<sup>3</sup>

4. If lack of true knowledge is darkness, then the darkness that had enveloped our ancestors in many ways still surrounds us. It takes a different form in our day. People have developed more sophisticated ways of avoiding God's call, while at the same time never being able to satisfy their deep desire to know Him. The existence of para-religious philosophies and movements, cults and sects, not to mention rampant materialism and secularism that seek to supplant religion, are indications that people's longing for God has not diminished. However, the cacophony of voices often times make it difficult to hear and discern the true call.

5. As Bishops of the Church, we have been entrusted with the responsibility to teach the Word of God and to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Therefore, on this great occasion of the dawn of the Third Christian Millennium, we address you, the faithful Orthodox Christians living in North America. We offer to you words of encouragement and hope. Our intention is to make the Gospel of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ known and embraced by more and more people in this land to which God has called us.

6. We also invite all people of good will to listen to the Good News of salvation. Orthodox Christianity has a distinctive understanding of the Christian message that speaks profoundly to the need that people of our time have for knowledge of the true God. Because the Orthodox Church reaches back to the very foundations of Christianity, she has an experience of the spiritual life that is deep and nuanced. Because the Orthodox Church is composed of millions of believers who struggle with the cares and responsibilities of life, she also knows of the particular challenges we face everyday.

7. In what follows, we want to re-tell for you the Good News of God's love for us, the people that He created, and the world that He made. It is a message that has changed the lives of countless millions. But mostly, it is a message that can change our lives, if we believe and live in Him and the Son He sent to save us.

### **God's Plan for Our Salvation**

*"Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:5-11)*

8. The birth of Jesus Christ was an extraordinary event. We look back on it and, from the benefit of our historical perspective, are able to appreciate its significance. For those who participated in and witnessed His birth, its true importance was not immediately understood. Nevertheless, the Gospel records that each person who encountered this event knew that something unique and different was occurring in this birth.

9. The account of Jesus' birth begins with the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel to a young virgin, Mary (cf. Luke 1:24-34). The angel tells her that she has found favor with God, and that she will conceive and bear a son. Mary is perplexed and awed by this news. She asks how this will happen. The angel tells her that it will be by the power of the Holy Spirit. As proof of his word, the angel tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive, is now pregnant. Mary's immediate response is, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word."

10. A similar test of faith confronts Joseph, Mary's betrothed husband. When he discovers that she is with child, he is upset and resolves to "divorce her quietly" (cf. Matthew 1:18-25). However, an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit," and that this son "will save his people from their sins." When he wakes from sleep, Joseph has a change of heart and "does as the angel of the Lord commanded him."

11. We are told of shepherds informed of the birth by angels (Luke 2:8-20) who go to see what has happened; of wise men who had seen a star in the sky announcing the birth of a king (Matthew 2:1-12); of an old man, Simeon, (Luke 2:25-38) who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah; and a prophetess, Anna, who was living in the Temple in her old age also waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. Each of these people encountered this divine child and was forever changed by what they saw as God's presence among us, a dramatic sign of His loving concern for us. For her part, Mary "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

12. In one sense, starting to speak of God's love for us by recounting the birth of Jesus Christ is like beginning a story in the middle. The real beginning is in the creation of the world itself. Christians do not believe that the world's existence is an "accident" of cosmic forces. We believe with our whole being that God created the world and everything in it out of His love. He had no need to create. But He desired to create beings who were free, and capable of sharing in His own glory. For us, the world and those in it are here according to His plan and for a purpose.

13. The birth of Jesus Christ and His life here on earth is the most dramatic example of God's love for us. God, in Jesus, reached out to us, even when we were still distant and separated from Him as a result of our own actions (cf. Romans 5:8). He came and preached peace to those who were far off as well as to those who were near (cf. Ephesians 2:17). In the words of St. Athanasius, "He has united in peace those who hated each other ... and by His own love endured all things for our salvation."<sup>4</sup> All that God asks in return is that we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that we love our neighbor as we would love ourselves (cf. Matthew 22:37-40).

14. Our God is not remote. He is close and near. He makes Himself accessible to us. Even “though He was in the form of God,” our Lord Christ Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-8). This self-emptying of God is the mark of His love for us. “When He saw us whom He had created with His own hands perishing, the Creator bowed the heavens and came down to us.”<sup>5</sup>

15. God did this for our salvation and the salvation of the whole world. We could give many different definitions and interpretations to the word “salvation.” Perhaps St. Athanasius sums it up best: “God became human so that we might become gods.... [Jesus] manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father, and He endured shame from us so that we might inherit immortality.”<sup>6</sup> God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, became one of us so that we could become one with God.

16. Salvation means that the world is not an end in and of itself. It is a reality that points to the larger reality of God’s love for us and all that surrounds us. The world, time, history, our very lives are “an epiphany of God, a means of His revelation, presence and power.”<sup>7</sup> This is a point to which we shall return. For the present we would like to emphasize this: God is not an idea or a device of our imagination, but a reality, a tri-personal reality. He has made Himself known to us directly and personally. Not only did the Triune God create the world, but God personally entered human history when the Word became flesh. God not only saves and loves all that is, He also saves and loves each and everyone of us.

17. God’s action seeks a response on our part. As the Apostle James says, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). The Epistle to the Hebrews adds, “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). To some this scriptural verse might seem like a circular argument. If God were simply an idea, then indeed this would be the case. However, God calls us into a personal relationship with Him.

18. When we do not respond to God’s love for us, we are diminished as human beings. The act of faith that He asks of us is not so very different from the faith and trust we place in those people who surround us. When we do not respond to the love given us by the people who love us, we become shallow and hardened individuals.

19. God’s taking on of human nature, the Incarnation, is the concrete indication of His desire to be completely approachable. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” – literally, “pitched His tent” among us (John 1:14). God’s desire was to engage us directly on our own level, and to travel with us on our human journey. In the poetry of the Church’s hymns: “The Virgin gives birth to Him who is above being, and the earth offers a cave to Him whom no one can approach.”<sup>8</sup> These are human words trying to describe something that is beyond human comprehension: the person Jesus Christ is actually God with us in the flesh. This is who the early Christians who first encountered Jesus understood Him to be. Believing in Him and experiencing Him in our lives, this is who we understand Him to be.

20. Orthodox Christians have consistently affirmed the inherent dignity and value of every human person, because each is created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26). This dignity is expressed not only in our creation but also through the coming of Christ. With the Incarnation, divinity was united to our humanity in the person of Christ. Through this act of divine love, our humanity was profoundly enriched and transfigured. Through His words and actions, Christ revealed to us the Father who calls us to be His children. He gave to us the Spirit who enlivens us and bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (cf. Romans 8:16). Christ’s coming revealed that each of us belongs to God.

21. Our human dignity and value are rooted ultimately in God and His love for each of us. Our dignity and value are not dependent upon our stage of development, our race, our gender, our social status, our education, our mental or physical abilities, our age, our income or even our religious beliefs. We are each of supreme value simply because we belong to God. He is our Maker.

22. Jesus clearly affirmed the inherent value of each person when He lifted up those who were considered the marginalized of His day. He encountered, welcomed, ate with and healed people. Among these were people with disabilities, outcasts, poor and sinners. Our Lord affirmed fundamental dignity of each. In inviting them to follow Him, our Lord revealed the truth of their identity as God’s sons and daughters.

23. Christ’s actions and words of love frequently ran contrary to the religious laws and social customs of the time. His affirmation of the dignity and value of each person often clashed with the views of the leaders of the day who had little regard for those considered to be “the least” members of the community. Our Lord affirmed the worth of each person by identifying Himself with the needy, especially “the least” among us (Matthew 25:45).

24. The Incarnation has another important implication, especially for those who struggle to understand the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. The Orthodox Church has always pre-supposed the intrinsic goodness of matter. The Church understands this based on the account of creation found in Genesis. “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The Holy Scriptures openly declare the wonder of God’s creation (cf. Psalms 104). But in the Incarnation something even more profound took place. Matter – human flesh and blood – became the dwelling place of God Himself.

25. We see this theological affirmation at work in the worship of the Church. The Orthodox Church is perhaps best known for the holy images – the icons – it employs in its worship. For us, the icon is not merely art or decoration. It expresses our understanding of the implications of God’s decision to take on our nature. When He took on our flesh and blood He not only showed that creation “is good,” but also revealed that matter is holy, that the divinity could dwell in it. This is a radically different understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the material than we normally see in post-Enlightenment thought. Where other philosophies see a tension or even a mutual exclusivity between matter and spirit, body and soul, we see the potential for harmony and transfiguration.

26. Consequently, when we hear the words of the Apostle that our Lord Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ... [that] He is before all things and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15,17), we understand this to refer to Him as both the One who creates and the One who transfigures all that we see and do not see. Moreover, we understand matter itself as that which points us toward God.

27. Another concrete way in which this theological understanding is shown is in the Orthodox Church’s concern for the environment. This is not a new concern. Orthodox liturgy and prayer are replete with references to God’s creation. We bless the fruits of the earth and the waters of river and sea. The bread and wine, offered by faithful Christians, that God changes into the very Body and Blood of our Lord, is the most powerful sign we have that matter can be a means of sanctification. We, human beings, are composed of matter and spirit. God created us to be mediators between the visible and invisible worlds. So, we are charged to be stewards of the earth while we offer back to God the creation which He first offered to us.

28. In addition to giving us a clearer understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of creation, the Incarnation also reveals God’s plan for the world. As Christians we remember that we were created not just as part of God’s plan, but as central to it. The original word used in the Holy Scriptures for this plan is “economy.” The earliest Christian preachers spoke about the Divine Economy or the Economy of our Salvation. By this they meant first and foremost the Incarnation; but in a larger sense they also spoke about the entire plan God had laid out for us and for the world, even before the foundation of the world.

29. Economy is derived from a composite Greek word meaning the “management of a household.” It can also mean, in the same sense, “stewardship.” Today we use the word almost exclusively to refer to the management of material affairs; for example, we speak of the national economy, or micro- and macro-economics. However, the financial and material organization of a nation has as much to do with its cultural and spiritual climate as it has to do with material resources. Nonetheless, it would be useful to keep our current understanding of that word in mind as we talk about God’s economy: the way He decided to “manage” His “household.”

30. As we read in the Letter to the Ephesians, God “destined us in love to be His children through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will” (Ephesians 1:5). In order for us to know His plan, God spoke “in many and various ways ... to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2). Orthodox Christians believe that when God created us, He implanted within each one of us the desire and need to know Him. This need is so basic to our nature that we could liken it to our need for food and drink or to our need for human companionship. So, God reached out to us through prophets and holy people. Finally He sent His Son “whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world” (Hebrews 1:2).

31. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world was the culmination, the apex of God’s economy. Again, St. Paul tells us that God “has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to sum up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9-10). This phrase, the “fullness of time” is used in the Holy Scriptures to signal that Christ is the center of time as well as the total expression of the Father’s will, of His plan for us. Jesus, in a very real sense, sums up or recapitulates everything that came before Him, as well as all that comes after Him. God’s plan is made known in Him.

32. The Good News is that not only is this plan now revealed for us to understand but even to join as participants. The fulfillment of time has not terminated with the Incarnation of Christ the Word (Logos) of God. The work of the Incarnate Word (John 1:1) continues to the end of the ages. Time is fulfilled by the coming of Jesus into history, but in a greater sense, time is fulfilled by the degree to which humanity is more and more penetrated by the Incarnate Word. Our cooperation with God’s plan makes Christ more and more present in humanity, even in ways that we might not be able to perceive.<sup>9</sup> This is God’s purpose for us. We participate in Christ in the re-creation of the world.

33. St. Paul talks about this Economy or Plan of Salvation in two different ways. In his letter to the Ephesians (1:10) he tells us that Christ has “summed up” or united this whole plan in Himself. His saving work reveals the totality of God’s plan for us. He also speaks of the “working out” of our salvation (cf. Philippians 2:12) – the long view of God’s plan. St. John Chrysostom<sup>10</sup> sees in these two ways of looking at God’s plan, a path for us to participate in the unfolding of history. Our work– both personally and communally – is directed toward one purpose: that God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

34. Historically, Orthodox Christianity has resisted the temptation to view this participation in largely individualistic terms. The first followers of Jesus were not isolated individuals engaged in their private quest for truth. They were Israelites – members of an established and instituted community of the “Chosen People” of God.<sup>11</sup> As Christians we now participate in this community, now centered upon the coming of Christ, the Messiah. St. Peter tells the earliest Christians that, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.... Once you were not a people but now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2:2-10).

35. The plan of salvation revealed and actualized in Jesus Christ makes membership in the “holy nation” available to all people. In Christ, God adopts us as His sons and daughters. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). This message that Christ brought into the world is Good News.

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*God pours himself out in an ecstasy of love. He does not remain in the heavens and call to himself the servant he loves. No, he himself descends and searches out for such a servant, and comes near, and lets his love be seen, as he seeks what is like himself. From those who despise him, he does not depart. He shows no anger towards those who defy him but follows them to their very doors, and endures all things, and even dies, in order to demonstrate his love. All this is true but we have not declared the highest thing of all. For not merely does God enter into close fellowship with his servants and extend to them his hand, but he has given himself wholly to us so that we have become temples of the living God and our members are the members of Christ. The head of these members is worshipped by the cherubim, and these hands and feet are joined to that heart.*

St. Nicholas Cabasilas  
On the Divine Liturgy, 2:132

## **The Sin that Separates Us from God**

*“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*  
(1 John 1:8-9)

36. Just before the Lord was crucified, there was an incident that occurred between Christ and the Pharisees that illustrates how one can distort spiritual priorities. While teaching in the Temple, Jesus was questioned and provoked by the Pharisees as they tried to trap Him in His own words. Finally, He began to point out in very powerful language the discrepancy between what they considered to be righteous behavior, and what God had intended when He revealed His truth to them. At one point, Jesus turns to them and says: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24)

37. If we look at ourselves carefully and honestly, this is what most of us do as well. We strain out ‘gnats,’ considering ourselves righteous, and swallow whole ‘camels’ without even blinking an eye. The Lord is making the same point when He refers to the speck in our brother’s eye and the log in our own (cf. Matthew 7:1-6). This is why the great spiritual teachers of the Church have always taught that we should focus on our own sin, leaving other people’s sin to God’s judgment. The temptation to judge others, about which the Lord warns us, is as great today as it was when He walked the earth. It will be as real tomorrow as it was when Adam blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit (cf. Genesis 3:12). It is always easier to see another’s fault than one’s own.

38. Perhaps one of the more curious aspects of contemporary American society is its understanding of sin. The action of sin is not new, but American society’s understanding of it may be. Most people do not believe that they are actually sinning. Notice how the word sin itself has almost disappeared from our vocabulary. Even in church many people are uncomfortable when the word sin appears in a sermon or a hymn. Moreover, when the word is actually used, as we can see in the national debates on “declining morality,” it is used in an accusatory manner. This is a very serious problem, because it is very difficult to talk about the spiritual life without also talking about sin.

39. The best place in which to begin this discussion is with a solid definition. The Greek word for sin is “amartia.” It literally means “missing the mark,” as in archery or darts. You shoot the arrow and you miss the bull’s eye, sometimes by more and sometimes by less. The more experienced and skilled you become, the more often you hit the mark. While this metaphor may not be perfect, it is still a useful image to keep in mind.

40. Our first question should be: “What is the mark?” What exactly are we aiming for? The short answer is that we are to strive to be everything that God expects us to be, to truly reflect the image and likeness of God. Striving for holiness is not becoming something other than ourselves. It is precisely becoming ourselves, becoming authentic. Sin takes us further away from the “mark” and as a consequence we become something less than ourselves.

41. Throughout this letter we will speak about the salvation that God has offered us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. But “salvation” can be an abstract concept and difficult to grasp. It can become very real and personal if we see how in moving toward holiness our lives can be rescued. While salvation truly is cosmic in its scope, we actually see and realize its possibilities in us as we turn toward God.

42. When we become awakened to this new and different way of looking at our existence, we feel the distance between ourselves and God. This is another useful way of looking at sin. The difference between who we are and who we should be, the separation between us and God, is a reflection of sin. We engage in this self-reflection not to evoke guilt – although any person who becomes aware of this dimension would find it impossible not to feel guilty about any number of things. Rather, without acknowledging the distance between us and God, it is impossible to change. And we all need to change, because we all sin.

43. There are some who have suggested an interesting way of addressing the peculiarly modern struggle with guilt. They make a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate guilt. The contention is that most of us, having confused the two, spend a great deal of energy feeling guilty for things that are either out of our control or simply social convention, while we spend little energy feeling guilty over things for which we should be truly sorry. We become preoccupied with behavior that other people will see, while worrying very little about the things that God considers vital. Of course, there is a relationship between the two – especially if holiness is the mark.

44. We have witnessed recently the development of another curious (and one might even say bizarre) phenomenon regarding sin and confession. We refer to the television and radio talk shows where people admit their darkest and most intimate secrets to the entire world. Listening are millions of people who, instead of being embarrassed by this public display, tune in to be titillated. We certainly will not pretend that we can fully understand this phenomenon. That people take delight in the sins and sufferings of others is not new. But how can one explain a person who would be loathe to go to a priest to be forgiven his or her sins in the sanctity of Confession, but feels no compunction to share this sin in front of the listening audience?

45. There is something at work here that we should notice. The need to have the burden of our sins lifted has not disappeared simply because we have stopped talking about it. Some have observed that while confession has declined, visits to psychological therapists have skyrocketed. Self-help manuals abound on every topic imaginable. People’s desire to be in harmony with God has not lessened, even as they struggle to understand the anguish that they cannot bring themselves to call sin.

46. It requires a certain strength to recognize how we have distanced ourselves from God. In popular thinking, however, the self-confident or self-assured persons are the strong ones. They are the ones who can “make things happen,” by ordering and controlling their lives for their own benefit. More than likely you know that spiritual wisdom has always called this pride or arrogance. St. Maximos the Confessor says that pride and arrogance come from two kinds of ignorance, namely ignorance of divine help and human weakness.<sup>12</sup> This attitude is the source of all separation from God. Our society places a high value on self-confidence. Yet, the further we move away from God, the more we need to assert our self-reliance. This is not accidental. There is an inverse correlation between prideful self-assurance and separation and alienation from God.

47. Humility, which contrasts with pride, is a posture of thankfulness. It also leads to a habit of examining our own conscience. Inexperience in the spiritual life may lead us to confuse humility with weakness or lack of conviction. But this is a misunderstanding. Nikitas Stithatos reminds us that “we humans look at outward forms, but God looks on the heart.”<sup>13</sup> How many examples could we cite even in our own time of powerful people who have been brought down by their own arrogant sense of invulnerability? “Know yourself,” Nikitas continues, “this is true humility, the humility that teaches us to be inwardly humble and makes our heart contrite.” The arrogant heart is deaf and insensitive – above all to God, but also to other people. It sees people as things, and abuses creation as if it were its alone.

48. This is a particular challenge for us who are citizens of the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. We have always felt that we have been particularly blessed and called by God. We have much for which to be grateful. As a people, we have oftentimes showed our gratitude to God by our generosity to our neighbors, the ones next door, as well as the ones across the oceans. However, this sense of being “blessed,” if not accompanied by a humble and gentle heart (cf. Psalms 51:17), can lead not only to self-destruction, but also to the abuse and destruction of others.

49. We are renewed by being certain of God’s love for us. We began this section by talking about the difficulty modern America has in speaking about sin. We suspect that one of the reasons for this is that people are not sure of God’s love and forgiveness. We have fallen into a terrible cycle. Having grown further away from God, we feel His presence in our life less and less. Rather than turning back to Him, we try to make it on our own. We live with the delusion that the soul’s persistent longing for God can be otherwise satisfied. But the emptiness does not go away, because nothing can substitute for God’s love. St. Paul reminds us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

50. Rather than address the root cause of sin, we simply seek ways of alleviating our pangs of conscience. St. Maximos the Confessor speaks about this syndrome as the pleasure/pain cycle related to sin. The consequences of sin usually cause a degree of pain – sometimes physical, but usually spiritual. The methods we seek to ameliorate the discomfort often involve the same sort of behavior that initially caused our pain. Rather than cutting to the heart of the problem, we exacerbate it. St. John of Damascus states the question a little more existentially when he asks: “What earthly pleasure is untainted by grief?”<sup>14</sup> There is a spiritual principle here that we can see at work in the world around us.

51. Two examples from our daily lives might help to illustrate. Many of today’s environmental problems have as their root cause the mitigation of “pain,” or at least discomfort. The planet is warming because of the excessive use of carbon-based fuels. As the climate gets warmer we turn up the air conditioning to cool off. But in order to run the air conditioners we need to burn more fuel, which in turn heats up the planet.

52. Again, we feel that our lives are getting more and more busy. We recognize that the most important things in life are our relationships with family and friends. We sense that there is something missing in our lives. So we engage in more “personal” activities. We enroll our children in more extra-curricular programs. These activities, instead of enriching our lives, cause us to feel all the more detached. We spend even less time with the ones we love.

53. These small, even mundane examples point to a greater truth. If we want our environment to be preserved, we personally need to choose how we will consume. If we value our family relationships, we personally need to choose how we will spend our time. If we desire spiritual well-being, we personally must change our heart.

54. God is calling us constantly, even when we are deaf to his call. At some point, we must become keenly aware of this call and awaken from our spiritual slumber. This awakening is repentance. It means to heed God’s call and to have a radical change of heart. This involves a movement of our soul toward God. St. James tells us, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). We can rededicate ourselves to God if we allow Him to show us His unfailing love. This enables us to pick ourselves up, no matter how many times we might fall; or to shoot as many arrows as we may need until we are able to hit the mark. The Apostle reminds us that God, “out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

55. One of the most sublime aspects of Christian theology is how our Lord redeemed us by His suffering and death on the Cross. We cannot make any claim at being exhaustive here. However, we would ask you to reflect on this. God knows our nature. Were He to confront us directly with our sin, we would react by justifying ourselves and hardening our hearts. (Have you ever noticed what children do when they are admonished?) What, then, does God choose to do? He becomes one of us. He lives with us. He works with us. He teaches and heals us. And finally He becomes the object of our jealousy and hatred. He takes all of this on Himself, even to the point of death, so that in watching Him outstretched on the Cross, dying, our hearts will melt and we might repent.

56. When we recognize our own sin then we can appreciate “the Father of mercies ... who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Knowing that God loves us and forgives us allows us to “love one another, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

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*How is it possible for sin and grace to dwell in the same heart, as if there were two different hearts? The illustration of a fire may help. If you have a fire below a vessel and you put some wood on it, the fire flares up and the water in the vessel heats up and boils. But if you fail to put more wood on the fire it begins to fade gradually and goes out. In our hearts is the heavenly fire of grace. If we pray and meditate on the love of Christ, we add wood to the fire and our hearts burn with longing for God. If, on the contrary, we are negligent and give our attention to worldly affairs, vice enters the heart, takes it over and torments us. Nevertheless, the heart remembers the peace which it tasted earlier and begins to repent, to direct itself afresh towards God. On the one hand, then, peace is brought nearer, on the other, we are seeking it fervently in prayer. It is like stirring the fire which is warming the heart. The vessel of the heart is very deep, so deep that the Bible says God searches the abyss of it. If a person deviates from the way of God's commandments, he puts himself under the power of sin. And because the heart is a deep abyss, sin goes right down into it in order to take over its territory. So it is necessary for grace also, slowly, to descend to those depths.*

St. Macarius  
Homily 40, 7ff. (PG34, 765ff.)

## **The Joy of Our Witness**

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)*

57. The fundamental impulse of the Church is to share the Good News. The Lord Himself charged His Apostles to preach the Gospel everywhere. Both “apostle” and “mission” have the same root meaning: “to be sent.” The Apostles were first and foremost missionaries. The Church is both the product of and agent for the proclamation of the Gospel. We who believe today are both the result of their mission and agents charged with sharing this Good News with others. The energy that drives this impulse is the same joy that the Apostles had: the experience of knowing Christ our Lord, risen from the dead.

58. Personal witness and personal experience form the basis of mission. St. Paul lays out the basic rationale and methodology of mission. He says, “But how are they to call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!’ ... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Romans 10:14-17).

59. When said like this, it becomes so simple and obvious. Without us, the Gospel would not be preached. God designed it this way. There needs to be person-to-person contact for the Good News to be transmitted. We trace our lineage through the millennia to the Apostles themselves. But each person in that line was told the story and believed, and believing shared his or her joy with someone else. We could cite many examples, but we will choose just one.

60. Following the Lord’s Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, Philip was led by an angel to go to Gaza. There he met an Ethiopian who happened to be a high-ranking official in the court of Candace the Queen of Ethiopia. He had been worshipping in Jerusalem. His heart was open. He was already searching for God. Philip found him reading from the book of Isaiah and asked him if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian said to Philip, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Philip took the opportunity and told him of Jesus – His life, death and resurrection, and the salvation offered to all in His name. The Ethiopian believed and was baptized! The Holy Scriptures record that his response was one of going forth in joy (cf. Acts 8:26-40).

61. We speak of the Church as being Apostolic and Catholic. The first meaning of “Apostolic” is that the Church is in the line of the Apostles. However, Apostolic also means to proclaim the Gospel actively to everyone that we might encounter. It means that we, like Philip, are sent into the world. Moreover, when we refer to the Church as Catholic we mean that the proclamation of the Good News belongs to all people and to all times.

62. At the urging of Philip and as a result of his own joy, this man from Ethiopia felt compelled to proclaim Christ and to share the Good News with everyone around him. From this one encounter on the road to Gaza, a whole nation became Christian. From the power of God that manifests itself when the Gospel story is told, peoples' lives can be and are changed. We should never discount the chance meeting or the odd question. We can never predict when God will present us with an opportunity to witness to our joy in Him.

63. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the Gospel, because, "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'" (Romans 1:16-17). Our willingness to witness to the Gospel by our words and actions reveals the power of God to those around us. We speak the words that are lodged in our hearts, words that have become for us living water.

64. Mission should not to be reduced to words alone. Mission implies care for the whole human person. It means reaching out to everyone around us. The Gospel is for all people. Reaching out may also require that we think through our preconceptions of who our particular parish is meant to serve. These may not be just the people of our own ethnic, social or economic group. In some places it may mean selflessly serving an inner-city neighborhood in which we find ourselves. Regardless of where we are, our neighbors should be able to recognize the richness of our faith by the way we live and serve others.

65. Mission is first and foremost a person-to-person encounter. It requires that we engage the person in front of us in a real and genuine way, being as open to that person as we would like for him or her to be with us. In the name of Christ, we put ourselves on the line, becoming transparent to others so that Christ can work through us. Mission thus causes as much change in us as it does in the person to whom we announce the Good News.

66. Mission means action. St. James counsels us: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). When our Lord encountered people, He addressed actual, physical needs they had. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, comforted the despondent, and raised the dead. It was through His ministry to their physical needs that they knew His love and concern. Fundamentally, we are psychosomatic beings, that is, we are composed of both matter and spirit. We have both physical needs and spiritual longings. It is difficult, if not impossible, to hear the Good News of salvation if one's stomach is empty. If one is sick or even dying, how can one know the love of God, if someone does not come and minister to one's pain? Our preaching is hollow if it is not accompanied by concrete actions.

67. Our Lord said, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor does one light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16) Jesus put in plain words the relationship between the proclamation of the Gospel, our own good works, and the willingness of people to worship the true God as a consequence. How are people to know the power of God if we who claim to believe do not act any differently than those who make no such claim? Or, as St. John says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

68. One of the distinctive characteristics of Orthodox Christian thinking is that it sees the Gospel message not as law, but as relationship. We speak of the mystery of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in terms of the relationship of love that exists among them. We speak of the “economy” or plan of salvation in terms of the desire of God to heal the relationship between us and Him that we damaged through sin. We see in the example of our Lord the way in which He reached out to those who were separated from God. He ate with publicans, welcomed harlots, and consoled thieves even while on the Cross. The missionary principle of the Orthodox Church is to meet people where they are, on their own terms, in order to show them how much more they can become through the love of God.

69. Practically speaking, how does one do this? We have many examples in the holy men and women who have preceded us. St. Isaac the Syrian describes the compassionate heart of the person of true faith: “What can one say of a soul, of a heart, filled with compassion? It is a heart which burns with love for every creature: for human beings, birds, and animals, for serpents and for demons. The thought of them and the sight of them make the tears of the saint flow. And this immense and intense compassion, which flows from the heart of the saints, makes them unable to bear the sight of the smallest, most insignificant wound in any creature. Thus they pray ceaselessly, with tears, even for animals, for enemies of the truth and for those who do them wrong.”<sup>15</sup>

70. The primary witness we can offer to one another is the holiness of our life. This testifies to the truth of the Gospel’s message in a way nothing else can. The heart of the spiritual person is open to the pain of others. Such persons have become transparent love, having left their own egoism behind. The spiritual person ascribes infinite value to the most unassuming of persons, because the Son of God Himself, in becoming incarnate, gave this infinite value to every person. At the same time, the example of humility offered by the holy person humbles the pride of others, in this way constantly reaffirming the God-based equality between people.<sup>16</sup>

71. The greatest gift we have to offer our nation is the rich spiritual tradition of Orthodox Christianity. This tradition is grounded in the real difficulties presented by life, but it also points to a way in which we might understand and transcend these difficulties. It is a profound commentary on human psychology and behavior, and also shows how we might overcome the demons that tempt our souls. It presents the world we see around us as real and good, while lifting us up to another, even more glorious reality.

72. One of the most effective missionary tools we have is the worship of our Church, especially the Divine Liturgy, the Eucharist. In Eastern Europe and the Middle East, during the 400 years of Ottoman Turkish rule, the liturgy was one of the primary methods of preserving and proclaiming the faith. People who were illiterate learned the Holy Scriptures and teachings of our faith by listening to the readings and hymns of the services. During the over 70 years of Communist persecution in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and the over 50 years in the other nations of Eastern Europe, our Christian faith was literally saved by the liturgy. When it was impossible, on pain of imprisonment and even death, to preach the Gospel, the Word of God was made known through the liturgy. Countless martyrs were educated in the school of faith, love and joy that is the Divine Liturgy. The suffering and death accepted for Christ by the hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Christians was a true “martyria,” a true witness to the death and resurrection of Christ.

73. In this country we have a different challenge. Among the forms of “persecution” that we face is complacency and self-satisfaction. We must pay careful attention to the way in which we conduct worship, and especially the Divine Liturgy. The Eucharist is the summing up of the whole reality of the salvation of the world. The Church of Christ gathers to remember the saving acts of God so that She can become the agent for the transformation of the world. In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom we ask that the Holy Spirit come down upon us and upon the Gifts. We must take care that the celebration does not become a mechanistic ritual, but remains a living action, an active prayer of the entire assembly that at once changes both us and all those around us.

74. We who participate in the Divine Liturgy know of its power to transform. Many have had the experience of inviting a friend or family member who may not be Orthodox to attend the Divine Liturgy. We know how people sense upon entering an Orthodox Church that this is a different and special space – the “heaven on earth” experienced in Constantinople in A.D. 988 by the ambassadors of Vladimir, the Prince of Kiev, in his search for a faith for his people. Yet, have we used this missionary gift to its fullest potential?

75. Often the liturgy is celebrated in a language that is not understood by all. And even when the language may not be an impediment, the indifferent manner in which the liturgy is sometime celebrated serves to distance rather than draw us near to God. We must not make Orthodoxy exotic. It should be approachable and accessible. The liturgy is the action of the people; people should be drawn into this action. The liturgy is the action of the Body of Christ; it should build the holy community that is the Church. In the Divine Liturgy, there are no spectators, only active participants. When celebrated carefully, with faith and with love, God’s transforming power can be felt by all.

76. This transfiguring power of the Liturgy also requires us to act. Recently some have begun to speak of the “Liturgy after the Liturgy.” This means that the spiritual work of the Divine Liturgy must continue even as we leave the Church. As we are changed, so must we work for that change within the society around us. As we are sanctified, so we are charged with bringing this sanctification into the world.

77. From the very foundation of Christianity the Church always concerned herself with the well-being of the most vulnerable. The Greek word “philanthropos” – from which we take the English words “philanthropist” and “philanthropic” – originally was a title attributed only to God, because He alone is the one who truly loves humanity. Gradually, those people who reflected God’s loving compassion for us, for the weakest among us, also came to be known as “philanthropists.” To be philanthropic is more than to give money to a charity; although it is that, too. It is to become loving and compassionate, especially to the least among us, in the same way God is loving and compassionate to us.

78. Through our words and through our actions, we must show the world the liturgy that brings heaven to earth, so that earth can be brought to heaven.

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*“You are the salt of the earth.” The word is entrusted to you, Christ says, not for your life but for the whole world. Nor am I sending you to two cities, or ten or twenty, nor to one people, as I once sent the prophets, but over land and sea, to the whole world, a world in very evil condition. For when he said, “you are the salt of the earth,” he showed that all human nature was rendered unsavory and corrupt by sin. Therefore, he looks for those virtues in them principally which are the more necessary and useful for taking care of the many. The person who is gentle, modest, merciful, and just does not shut up his good works in himself, but is concerned that those fair springs should flow for the benefit of others. Again, the one who is pure of heart, and a peacemaker, who feels the urge for truth – such a person orders his life for the benefit of all.*

St. John Chrysostom  
Homily on the Gospel of Matthew, 15,6

## **Preaching the Gospel in a Pluralistic Society**

*“And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:3-4)*

79. One of the unique qualities of the modern era is that the average person in many parts of the world encounters a degree of diversity – cultural, philosophical, and religious – unprecedented in human history. Even a hundred years ago, a given people usually remained in a specific place. When you journeyed there, you expected to encounter the culture, religion, and language of the people of that region. Travel was difficult and visitors few. This contrasts sharply with our own experience, when travel is easy, communication instantaneous. Most major cities number as citizens people from all over the world. Although encountering people with worldviews different than our own can be enriching, it can also cause tension and conflict. We see this on the world stage just as we see this in our own neighborhoods. How can we be one human people while still preserving what is unique about each of us? This question has been the Church’s concern from the beginning, but it takes on a new urgency in our own time.

80. The Church has used two biblical events to illustrate this tension, even as She has tried to understand how to overcome it. The first is the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), and the second is the account of the Holy Spirit’s descending on the Apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13).

81. In Genesis we read that in the beginning everyone spoke one language. This enabled people to begin to build a tower “with its top in the heavens.” They said that they wanted to “make a name” for themselves. The problem was not that they were cooperating, it was how they were cooperating. Their cooperation led them to believe arrogantly that they could challenge God. Seeing how their arrogance was bringing them to evil purpose, God “confused their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Unable to communicate with each other, they scattered throughout the world abandoning their tower.

82. The Holy Spirit’s action at Pentecost is the antithesis of Babel. After the Lord’s Ascension, the Disciples remained in Jerusalem waiting for the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had directed them. On the day of Pentecost they were gathered together in the upper room. There came the “rush of a mighty wind” and “tongues of fire, distributed and rested on each of them.” “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” Because it was a great feast, people from all over the world had gathered in Jerusalem. Hearing the sound of the wind, a great number came to find out what was happening. When the Disciples began speaking to them, “each one heard them in his own language.”

83. The Tower of Babel divided humanity. The Holy Spirit restored that unity on the day of Pentecost. However, the unity which we have in the Holy Spirit is different than the pre-Babel unity in one very important respect. The unity of Babel was predicated on a uniformity of language, and one can presume, culture. The unity which the Holy Spirit brings preserves our particular and distinctive characteristics. It is a unity in diversity and a diversity in unity. The Orthodox Church has always used this Pentecost event as a way to understand how diverse people can be one in Christ. Historically, unity of faith has not necessitated one language or even one uniform practice for the entire Church. Sharing one faith, we can be one Church, even as we acknowledge our ethnic and cultural diversity. The question is, what are the “limits to diversity”? When does difference in practice become difference in faith?

84. The first experience that the Church had with this tension was at the Apostolic Council held in Jerusalem in A.D. 49 (Acts 15:1-29). The Apostles had to decide whether or not the non-Jewish converts to Christianity had to adhere to the Jewish Law. These new converts challenged the Jewish Apostles to think about what was central to the Christian faith. After much prayer, deliberation and struggle, the Apostles decided that faith in Christ did not require these Gentiles to become Jews. It was a decisive moment for the Church. The Apostles made a distinction between faith and practical expressions of the faith. They also recognized that as Christianity moved away from its Semitic milieu, it was going to confront a different worldview.<sup>18</sup>

85. The problem for the Apostles and those first Christians was not simply preaching monotheism to a polytheistic world. It was to make a Gospel, that presupposed very different categories, relevant to a culture that was in many ways hostile to the Christian worldview. The debates surrounding the Ecumenical Councils and other local councils of the Patristic period testify to the fact that the process of “inculturating” the Gospel – that is, showing how the Gospel speaks to the issues relevant to a particular people, time, and culture – was not an easy task.

86. For example, the ancient world placed a high degree of importance on unity or even uniformity. Individuality was to be subordinated to the good of the whole or the group. This is the perennial tension between the “one” and the “many”; in the language of our day, unity and diversity. In contrast, the Gospel placed a unique importance on each person. The Church found the evidence for this in the Incarnation of the Word who desired to save both the world, and most importantly, each individual soul.

87. A related difficulty that the Church encountered was the way in which many in the ancient world conceived of history. Many saw history as a series of repeating cycles. Consequently, much Greek philosophical thinking was consumed with discussing the beginning of things. For them, the result of any action was simply the consequence of the initial “seed.” Nothing could alter it. The Gospel saw the world very differently. History was of supreme consequence. We were not subject to the inevitability of our destiny. The world had a beginning, but more importantly it would have an end. God had entered history to alter its direction decisively. The modern world has become absorbed with history – look at the importance we give to “facts” as “impartial” arbiters of the truth – without giving much thought to the direction and purpose of our history.

88. The Christian experience of the Godhead as a tri-personal reality sharing a singular essence turned this argument on its head. The Christian belief that God took on human nature to transform history and creation directly challenged preconceived assumptions about history, human beings, God, and the integrity and inviolability of a particular essence (i.e., if you are a human being you cannot be God; if you are God, you cannot be a human being). At every point and in almost every way, the Christian message began to change the way the Greek and Roman world thought. These questions were more than simply relevant or valid to people of the time. They saw them as vital. Everyone – the Church Fathers, the intellectuals, the pagans, the workers on the street – saw these questions as central to their existence.

89. We should also remember that the persons who were raising these questions on behalf of the Church were themselves a part of the intellectual life of their time. St. Basil the Great was trained in philosophy in Athens. St. John Chrysostom studied under the greatest pagan rhetorician of his time. St. Gregory of Nyssa had an extensive knowledge of human anatomy and biology; some think he might have studied to be a medical doctor. St. John of Damascus was well acquainted with the science of his time; for example, he knew, as did most knowledgeable people in the East, that the earth was a sphere, that it traveled around the sun and that the moon was a “reflecting” light.

90. When the Gospel entered a new cultural situation, it engaged that culture on its own terms. The people who were responsible for preaching and teaching did not hide from this responsibility. They did not try to make the Greek and Roman world into a Semitic one. They were themselves full participants in that world. But they gave Christian answers to the religious and philosophical questions that were being asked. They began with their faith experience and from that faith experience began to reinterpret all they had learned and understood. They treated those who disagreed with them with respect, while insisting upon the truth revealed in Christ. The debate was lively because a great deal was at stake.

91. If the Christian message seems not to be reaching the people of our time we should ask ourselves: Are we offering answers to questions that no one is asking? And perhaps more importantly: Are we willing to engage honestly the many vital questions that people are asking? People want to know if the Christian Gospel has anything to contribute to our time. We believe that it does, and the missionary task before us will not be an easy one.

92. We presently live in a world that has been shaped by the principles of the Enlightenment, but this worldview has reached the limits of its possibilities. The Church must detach the Gospel from this worldview. We live in a period of cultural transition. If we are to avoid being marginalized, we need to learn a lesson from the Patristic period and enter into a deep dialogue with the surrounding culture. People long to know God. They are searching for the truth. If we do not help them with their search, others certainly will be stepping into the breach.

93. The Church has followed certain principles in Her encounter with different cultures. The first is that every people, in every time period, is constantly being called by God. We are being called not only as persons, but as a 'nation' to embody those virtues that befit creatures created in the image of God. What flows from this is the belief that every people and indeed every culture is able to be transformed and sanctified. We should not despise the people around us.

94. Our vocation, as those who are called to proclaim the Good News, is to help distinguish between that which is good and helpful in a culture or society, and that which is false, leading to ruin. St. Paul's advice to Timothy can be a guide for us: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

95. The second principle to keep in mind is that God is directly present in creation in a real and vital way. St. Gregory Palamas articulated this when he spoke about the difference between God's "essence" and His "energies." He used the image of the sun and its rays. Like the sun, God's inner reality is inaccessible to us; but like the rays of the sun, He is constantly giving us light and warmth. God who is totally different from us, is still present through His life-giving energies that surround and permeate the whole creation.

96. Similarly, St. Maximos the Confessor spoke of the Logos of God (the Word of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity) having seeded the whole of creation so that all created things have within themselves an inner rationale (a "logos" proper to itself) that was placed there to testify to the Creator. This concept, which had been present in pagan philosophy as the "spermatic Logos," was also used by the earliest Christian writers. They based this connection to Christian thought on the first chapter of John's Gospel where he speaks about Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

97. Most of us are not accustomed to thinking in these theological and philosophical categories. It might make more sense if we spoke of the "DNA of salvation." When God created the world through His Son, He embedded within the "DNA" of everything the sign of His wisdom. This is what the Psalmist expresses when he says: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all" (Psalms 104:24). God's mark is everywhere. Those who pursue the truth, be they scientists or philosophers, believers or agnostics, will come upon the same Wisdom present even in the most minute corner of the universe.

98. The third important principle is that salvation involves more than human beings and human societies. There is a cosmic dimension to mission. The Lord spoke of a world, indeed a universe, that is shaped and transfigured by His saving love. We say in the hymns of Theophany (Epiphany) that our Lord's first act of salvation was to cleanse and restore the water – which stands for the whole of creation. St. Paul speaks about the creation waiting with eager longing for the liberation of the children of God (cf. Romans 8:19). We must not be narrowly anthropocentric as we proclaim the Gospel.

99. When we look at the society in which we live, we see that even though its roots traditionally may be Christian, nonetheless, there has been a steady distancing from these roots. We certainly observe this to be the case here in North America, and it is also more and more true in traditionally Orthodox countries. We see a growing number of people who are actively searching for 'meaning' in their lives, however they might understand that word. There has been a rise in attention given to various religions and philosophies presenting themselves as alternatives to Christianity. What is very significant is the large number of people who have grown up outside of any Church, with only the most superficial, and often confused, understanding of the Gospel. In short, our own society has become a primary "missionary territory."

100. Unlike other times and places, when the Gospel was preached, most people in our society believe that they *already know* what Christianity has to say. For better or for worse, the Church's history, but more significantly the history of those people who have claimed to act in the name of Christ, has negatively shaped peoples' views of the Christian faith. Our challenge is to frame the proclamation of the Good News so that it speaks in a new and fresh way, breaking through these prejudices.

101. At the same time, we should not forget that many of the foundational principles of modern society are the direct result of the Christian Gospel. Would we speak of human rights had not our Lord taught us the value of every human life? Would we speak of freedom had not our Lord liberated us from the fear of death? Would we speak of equality if our Lord had not lowered the heavens to become one with us? These principles were embedded in custom and law by people who were living out the Christian Gospel. Although the rationales currently offered for these principles have moved away from their original theological premises, they nonetheless have their basis in the faith experience of those whose lives were changed by the coming of God into the world.

102. Coming out of a Christian worldview, our society has attempted to balance the rights of the individual with a communitarian impulse. What is lost as these principles are separated from their original Christian foundation is the balanced emphasis on the importance of community and responsibility for the other, especially the weakest among us. There is an ancient Christian saying: *unus Christianus, nullus Christianus* – a single Christian is no Christian. What this means is that there can be no individual or isolated Christian. We are Christians in community, in relationship to one another. We would also claim that this is critical for society as a whole.

103. The increased erosion of community in the name of individual rights can be attributed to the inability to appreciate that personal identity can be maintained and supported within society. The reemergence of unapologetic racism and ethnicism have a similar root. Here the individual totally identifies with the group and sees the 'other' as a threat. Can our understanding of the Holy Trinity – as a community of three distinct persons who exist in total love while sharing everything in common – be helpful?

104. As we observed above, people have gone searching to fulfill their need for meaning. Yet, this search often involves popular and personal “spiritualities” that lack a coherent theology. “New Age” religions that mix and match according to personal taste give the illusion of spiritual fulfillment, but lack the qualities of true worship. The substitution of purely humanistic social and political movements for a true relationship with God is another example. These tend to be distractions at best, and idolatry at worst. We have watched as some have ended tragically.

105. But perhaps the most distressing sign we detect today is the degree of cynicism on the part of some young people and the adults influencing them. There are those actively seeking to take away or distort the idealism, so characteristic of youth. We see this as a symptom of the hopelessness that affects some young people, be they poor or affluent. Perhaps this helps explain the acts of indiscriminate and merciless violence that we have witnessed in our nation and around the globe. In some places the suicide rate, especially among teenagers, is higher than the overall murder rate. As Christians we have a responsibility to give an account to others for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Peter 3:14). But even more, we have a responsibility to show them that our hope is more than words, that our love is more than sentiment. People can live without a great many things. They cannot live without hope. It is our obligation to bring the truth and therefore hope to our young people. It is likewise our responsibility to shed light on the many wonderful works and ministry done by our young people across the North American continent, so as to give hope to others and bear witness to the love that our young people have for God. There is a profound message in this.

106. The recent almost unprecedented economic growth in North America, coupled with the collapse of totalitarian communism in other parts of the world, has given us the sense that our economic system is the best and perhaps the only way of organizing a society. We will not, at this time, enter into a detailed commentary on the Christian principles one might use to organize an economy. Rather, we will limit ourselves to a few general observations.

107. The disparity of wealth distribution between the richest members of our society and the poorest is growing at an alarming rate. There is always an “underclass.” Now there is a permanent underclass that is definitely unaffected by the rising economic tide. This is not only unjust but creates a sense of hopelessness. This is very troubling, especially in our society that claims to be predicated on a notion of classlessness, or the possibility of persons to change their economic status through gainful employment. The Church can and must help ameliorate the condition of the most vulnerable. But the problem is structural, and needs to be addressed structurally.

108. As bishops who have ties to many churches that suffered terribly under communism we believe that we have an understanding of that system that few other Americans share. The common belief that communism was predicated on atheistic materialism is true. However, we acknowledge that our capitalist system is no less predicated on purely materialist principles, which also do not engender faith in God. There is no place in the calculus of our economics to account for the “intangibles” of human existence. Reflect on how the simple accounting phrase “the bottom line” has shaped our whole culture. We use it to force the summarization of an analysis devoid of any externals or irrelevancies to the “heart of the matter.” This usually means the monetary outcome.

109. We spoke above about the origins of the word “economy;” and how it was used by the Fathers of the Church to describe God’s plan for our salvation. Contrast this meaning of economy to the narrow sense in which we use it today. In spite of the growing need many people feel for meaning in their existence, we seem to be trapped in a substantially materialist understanding of life. This understanding sets God in a compartment far away from the concerns of the “real” world. In spite of the religious rhetoric which falls so easily from the mouths of some, many of those who have great wealth fail to share their wealth with others, while many of the poor are consumed with get-rich schemes that promise to solve their problems. Can our Christian understanding of “economy” help our society see life as more than “bread”? (cf. Matthew 4:4)

110. As Orthodox Christians we must have a view of mission that focuses both on the salvation of persons and on the transformation of the cultural context. There is nothing more precious than one soul. Certainly, the surrounding environment can provide support and encouragement in the Christian life. Orthodox mission has traditionally been oriented toward both. As we preach the Good News to those around us, we must be thinking about this question of the cultural context of Orthodox mission in North America. It must become a subject of study and reflection, not only in our seminaries, but also in our parishes and homes. We are not suggesting that there is such a thing as a “Christian culture.” There is not. However, the risk of not engaging and transforming the culture in which we live is that the Orthodox Church will become just another sect.

111. To transform our culture we must be prepared to enter into a dialogue especially with those of other faiths. Such a dialogue must be constructive. It must be based on religious conviction. This will require that we strengthen and deepen our own theological understanding. Dialogue is more than tolerance. In dialogue we recognize that while different than I, the “other” does not exist simply to exist. Rather he or she exists as a person who has something to say to me. I am obliged to listen respectfully to what that person has to say. I need to relate what he or she says to my own convictions and evaluate it in the light of my own beliefs.

112. This is not syncretism. Religious syncretism rests on the assumption that each of the participating parties has a positive contribution to make, and that these when collected and collated constitute a whole. New Age religions contain many syncretistic elements, but there are also varying degrees of syncretism in other popular philosophies and ideologies. For us, dialogue means that while we may recognize positive elements in another religion or even philosophy, these are always to be judged against our own beliefs. We have no interest in forming another religion. But we do have a great deal to say to one another.

113. Sometimes we forget that religion is not about “religion,” but about our relationship to God, to one another, and to creation. A dialogue with those around us can begin with the obvious challenges of the new millennium. The technology which we created has taken on a life of its own. We should weigh its best uses, while ameliorating its dehumanizing aspects. The ecological crisis, in some ways a child of our technology, poses one of the greatest threats to the environment and to our human existence. There is little debate about this. The causes of the crisis may be technological, but the source of the problem is spiritual. We need to talk with one another about the best ways of improving life for all human beings while preserving the biosphere. The advances in medicine, genetics, and other biological sciences pose new concerns to which we must respond. We are in need of serious theological reflection on the nature and meaning of life.

114. The reality of a pluralistic society means that there is religious, racial, and ethnic intermingling. We know how prejudice eats away at the fabric of society. We have experienced how it can lead to violence and war. As we begin to engage in dialogue with our society in this new millennium, we need to learn how to talk with one another, to dialogue with the other, in mutual respect and love.

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*The holy Church includes many people, men, women and children without number. They are all quite different from one another in birth, in size, in nationality and language, in style of living and age, in trades and opinions, in clothes and customs, in knowledge and rank, in welfare and in appearance. They are nonetheless all of them in the selfsame Church. Thanks to her, they are all reborn, newly created in the Spirit. The Church grants to all of them without distinction the grace of belonging to Christ and of taking his name by calling themselves Christians.*

*Faith, moreover, puts us in a position which is extremely simple, and incapable of separation, in such a way that the differences between us seem not to exist, because everything is gathered together into the Church and reconciled in her.*

*No one lives alone any more, no one is separated from the others, but all are mutually joined together as brothers and sisters in the simple and indivisible power of faith.*

*Of the first Church, Scripture says: "The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul", (Acts 4:32) in such a way that all the many members looked like a single body, truly worthy of Christ himself, our true Head. And speaking of the action of Christ in the Church, the Apostle asserts: "There is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither circumcised nor uncircumcised, neither barbarian nor Scythian, neither slave nor freeman, but Christ is all and in all." (cf. Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11) Christ with the unique power of goodness and with infinite wisdom reunites everything in himself, as the center from which the rays go out.*

Maximus the Confessor  
Mystagogia, 1 (PG91, 664)

## **A Community of Healing and Reconciliation**

*“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in me, and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)*

115. We must continually remind ourselves that the Church is a community of healing and reconciliation centered upon Christ and His Gospel. The Lord came into our midst to reconcile us with the Father (cf. Romans 5:10). This divine act of love was expressed time and again in His teachings and His actions. As the Apostle Paul reminds us God, “reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19). Faithful to the Lord who is its Head, the Church seeks always to be a sign of God’s love for all, and the means through which the Lord continues to heal and reconcile His people.

116. Divisions among Christians are a tragedy which cannot be ignored. These divisions diminish the message of the Gospel of Salvation and impede the mission of the Church in the world. These divisions among Christians often divide families and contribute to alienation within our society. Recognizing this harsh reality, the Church has always sought to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). When divisions have occurred, the Church has consistently sought both to bear witness to the Apostolic Faith and to seek reconciliation so that the world may believe in Christ and His Gospel.

117. The involvement of the Orthodox Church in the quest for the reconciliation of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is an expression of our faithfulness to the Lord and His Gospel. By seeking the reconciliation of divided Christians, we are in fact sharing in our Lord’s ministry of reconciliation. As the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference said, “the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement does not run counter to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It constitutes the consistent expression of the Apostolic Faith within new historical conditions, in order to respond to new existential demands.”<sup>18</sup>

118. This commitment of the Orthodox to Christian reconciliation does not mean that we approve of every endeavor which is called “ecumenical.” Indeed, we hold that genuine ecumenism must always be rooted in the quest for Christian truth and directed towards a visible unity through which the historic faith of the Church is proclaimed. It must contribute to the salvation of all and give glory to the Lord who calls His disciples to be one so that the world may believe (cf. John 17:21).

119. In many parts of the world today, Orthodox have been deeply troubled both by those who tend to diminish the richness of the historic Christian faith and by others who have engaged in proselytism directed towards Orthodox believers. Neither of these developments can contribute to genuine reconciliation. Indeed, these tragic developments serve to deepen our conviction that true reconciliation can be founded only upon a common profession of the Apostolic Faith which is free from all expressions of coercion.

120. The Orthodox Church recognizes that the healing of the division with the Oriental Orthodox Churches is a preeminent challenge before us. Following decades of informal dialogues and more recent formal discussions, the international Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches has declared (1989): “We have inherited from our fathers in Christ the one Apostolic Faith and tradition, though as Churches we have been separated from each other for centuries. As the two families of Orthodox Churches long out of communion, we now pray and trust in God to restore that communion on the basis of the common Apostolic Faith of the undivided Church of the first centuries which we confess in our common creed.”

121. Mindful of this formal dialogue between the two families of Orthodox Churches, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) has decided to establish a Joint Commission with representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in America. This Commission will take into account both the theological studies of the international Commission, as well as the cooperation and opportunities for common theological studies which have existed in North America for many decades. The Commission also will address the pastoral issues confronting our people and parishes in America.

122. SCOBA has been responsible for establishing and overseeing formal, bilateral theological dialogues with a number of other churches here in North America. A dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church was established in 1965. Subsequent dialogues were established with the Lutheran Church and the Reformed Churches in 1968. Begun in 1962, a dialogue with the Episcopal Church has recently been reestablished. While each dialogue is distinctive, each has been concerned with identifying points of doctrinal agreement as well as those points of disagreement which deserve further study.

123. These bilateral dialogues, which have been sanctioned by SCOBA, have frequently served to foster Orthodox ecumenical witness at the local level. In many places, Orthodox clergy and laypersons have come together with Roman Catholics and Protestants for theological reflection, Bible study, social witness and prayer for reconciliation. Such activities have done much to overcome old misunderstandings and prejudices among Christians. In addition, these activities have become important means through which both clergy and laity share in the reconciling ministry of Christ our Lord within our society today.

124. Our ecumenical concerns involve us in relationships with other Christians and their churches. Our relationship with persons of other faiths are of a different character but are also very important. As Orthodox Christians, we recognize the different faith perspectives between us and the adherents of other religions. At the same time, we affirm the need to treat all persons with dignity and respect. Living in this multi-religious society, we also affirm the critical need for respect and understanding of different religious traditions. These differences in religious belief and practices can not be used to justify any form of prejudice or discrimination. On the contrary, we encourage Orthodox Christians to join with all persons of good will in addressing the serious moral challenges which we face together in this society.

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*What, then, is his prayer and how does he make it? He asks "that they may be one, as you, Father are in me and I in you, so that they may be one in us" (John 17: 21) So, he prays for the bond of love and harmony and peace which brings those who believe onwards towards the unity of the Spirit, as if it were, a natural and substantial unity. Clearly, we are to imitate the characteristics of the unity we understand to exist between the Father and the Son, a unity that means agreement in all things and mutual progress towards unity through undivided oneness of mind ...*

*In order that we might go forward towards unity with God and with one another, and might ourselves be mingled together, even though we differ, considered in the particularity of soul and body, by the features that we know make us distinct, the Only-Begotten contrived a certain strategy through the wisdom that is his own and by the will of the Father. By providing a blessing for those who believe in him in the form of a single body, namely his own, through mystical communion he formed them as a single body with himself and one another. For who could tear apart, who would alienate from natural union with each other those who are bound into union with Christ through his holy body? (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:17) Christ, after all, can not be divided. For this reason the Church is called Christ's body, and each of us his members, according to the mind of Paul (cf. Ephesians 5:30). But if we are a single body in Christ, not only with each other but even with him, who has come to be within us through his own flesh, how is it that we are all not clearly one, both in each other and in Christ?*

St Cyril of Alexandria  
Commentary on the Gospel of John, XI, 11

## **The Community that Remembers**

*“Do this in remembrance of me.”* (Luke 22:19)

125. The Lord, “on the night when He was betrayed” (1 Corinthians 11:23), gathered His Apostles together to celebrate the Passover. He was aware of what was about to happen to Him, and wanted not only to prepare His Apostles for His coming death, but also wanted to show them the real significance of His death and resurrection. During the meal He took bread and wine, blessed them and gave them to the Apostles saying, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). He told them that this bread and wine were now His own body and blood; that by partaking of them, they were partaking of Him. From that night on, over the last two thousand years, the Orthodox Christian community has remained faithful to the Lord’s charge. Orthodox Christians have gathered to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in times of persecution and in times of freedom, and it is this remembrance that has shaped who we are.

126. Memory is the key to identity. In remembering where we were born, who our parents and family are, the school where we studied, our friends and our neighbors, we know who we are. There is a basic psychological function at work upon which rests our self-consciousness and even our health. Those of us who have had the experience of a loved one who has been afflicted with Alzheimer’s Disease, know that the most painful aspect of the disease is the loss of the memory of the person despite continuing life.

127. Human culture is largely a product of memory. Even before the written word people transmitted their collective memories through epic poems and myths. The invention of writing allowed the preservation of experience and knowledge. By recording our memories – and today we have many means available to us in addition to writing – we also hope to make available our wisdom and experiences to future generations. Memory links us to both the past and the future.

128. Implicit in the idea of memory is relationship. Our personal memories are linked to people and the events in our lives shaped by those people. Our communal memories operate in the same fashion. Nations or peoples have a common remembered history that ties them to one another, as well as to those who preceded them. If a national or ethnic identity is to endure, it must be successfully transmitted to the next generation.

129. Memory, then, is dynamic. New events shed light on old ones. New persons deepen our experience of others. Time can cause memories to fade or even disappear. And of course, choice, our choice, is clearly a factor. As the Psalmist says: “In bed I remember you, as I lie awake I reflect on you, mindful of how you helped me” (Psalms 63:6-7).<sup>19</sup> As Americans, we pride ourselves on being able to “remake” ourselves. This altering of our identity is accomplished by deciding what we will remember and what we will choose to forget.

130. Our survival is entirely dependent on our remembrance of God, and God's decision to keep us in His memory. Our identity as God's people is tied to the remembrance of the saving acts of God. "You shall remember," God told the Hebrews, "what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm, by which the Lord your God brought you out" (Deuteronomy 7:18-19). This liberation takes on new meaning, perspective, and dynamism for us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Passover (Pascha) from slavery to freedom becomes the Passover (Pascha) from death to life. We remember the saving acts of God, and this remembrance grounds us as it renews us.

131. The remembrance to which we are invited brings together past, present, and future in one movement of thanksgiving and hope. As Orthodox Americans we remember the Orthodox mission that evangelized native peoples of Alaska more than two hundred years ago, bringing the Gospel of Christ in a manner in which it respected their cultures while showing love for the people. We remember the immigrants who came to America seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity, and building Orthodox communities and institutions. We remember the men and women who entered the Orthodox Church by their own free choice and decision, seeking the apostolic faith brought to our own time without interruption or dilution.

132. All liturgy is intended to continually re-present to us the saving works of God. When you participate in the holy services of our Church, listen carefully to the prayers as they are being read. One of their essential characteristics is how they draw upon examples from the Holy Scriptures to recall in detail the saving works of God. God has no need to be reminded of what He has done for us. We are the ones who need our memories refreshed. We are the ones who need to be reminded that God's promise is forever. Think how powerful it is when the celebrant says: "as You were present then, so also be present now!"<sup>20</sup> By remembering God's saving power we are assured of His love for us.

133. We see something similar in the liturgical use of the word "today." At Christmas we hear the choir sing, "Today the Virgin gives birth ..." At Theophany we hear, "Today the Master hastens toward baptism ..." On Great Friday, standing before the precious Cross, we hear, "Today is hung upon the Tree ..." And on Great and Holy Pascha (Easter) we hear, "It is the day of Resurrection ..." Our remembrance of God's saving acts is not nostalgia. Through remembrance we ourselves become participants in God's saving work. With David we say: "How can I repay the Lord all his favors to me? I will lift the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord" (Psalms 116:13-14).

134. The center of our remembrance is the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy. In the Divine Liturgy, we, the eucharistic community, call to mind the entire economy of God in the person of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. We remember “all that came to pass for our sake, the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and the second, glorious coming.”<sup>21</sup> We ask that the Holy Spirit, as at Pentecost, descend upon us and the presented Gifts. The saving work of God moves from the remembrance of the past event to the present; from “theory” to actuality; from then to now. We are made holy. We are made into the Body of Christ. It is for each of us a personal, as well as communal event.

135. It should be clear from what we have said that this remembrance belongs not in our head, but in our heart – the center of the spiritual faculty. We remember not in order to dwell on the past but to know where we are going. We said above that one of the remarkable aspects of the American character is the openness to remake oneself. For Christians this idea echoes the newness we find in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17). But remaking oneself without a grounding in true existence is a recipe for confusion and even disaster. The newness that we desire can only be found in God. Forgetting one’s past is not the same as forgiveness given by accepting God’s grace. Re-inventing oneself is not the same as being renewed in the Holy Spirit.

136. The Church is not a museum and we are not Her curators. The Church is a living and breathing community, the Body of Christ. Liturgy as remembrance is not slavish adherence to particular forms. Rather, we remember God’s saving work to know who we are so that we can act in the here and now. We remember as a community and in a community, because we know that we are joined with Christ along with our brothers and sisters, and are not unconnected individuals. It is not accidental that the Church is organized around local eucharistic communities charged with remembering and acting.

137. We should keep in mind that when the Apostles went out from Jerusalem to the four corners of the earth to proclaim the Good News, they established churches – communities – that became the living repositories of the Gospel of Salvation. We have become used to thinking about the Church in restrictive institutional terms. This is a valid observation – institutions are vital to human existence. But we can forget that the Church is not bricks and mortar, hierarchies and clergy, departments and committees. She is not even, strictly speaking, particular rituals and forms. She is first and foremost the community that remembers the mighty actions of God.

138. Look closely at the language we use when we describe this reality. We speak of communion between us and God. But we also speak of communion between churches. And finally we see this manifested concretely in the communion which we share when we partake of the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. The word “community” shares the same root as “communion,” because it is a manifestation of the same reality. Through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the community becomes one with all those who preceded, and with all those who are yet to come. It is present at once in the here-and-now and in eternity. The true community maintains this communion with God and with all those who keep His remembrance.

139. On the American continent, this communion of the Orthodox Churches has been concretely embodied in the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) for forty years. Of course, the question of how to organize the Church here in a more traditionally canonical way has preoccupied us – bishops, priests, theologians and lay persons – for longer than that.

140. We should not forget that many practical steps toward that end have been and are being taken. We can point to a number of cooperative efforts under SCOBA. There is the Orthodox Christian Education Commission that helps to coordinate religious education. There is the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, the official mission and evangelism agency of our Churches. There is the Orthodox Theological Society in America. There is the International Orthodox Christian Charities that stands as a model for world Orthodoxy in the realm of international relief organizations. There is the cooperative effort to train Orthodox youth workers and the efforts to bring our young people together. We spoke above about the variety of theological dialogues and consultations with other Christian churches that are coordinated and overseen by SCOBA.

141. On the regional and local level, we could speak of the projects and endeavors that parish clergy and lay people of all of the Orthodox dioceses, have undertaken to manifest visibly the mission and unity of our Church.

142. We are planning to invite all of the beloved brother bishops, the hierarchs of the member Churches of SCOBA, to gather in the spring of 2001 to discuss matters of local pastoral concern.

143. Let us remind ourselves that unity – all unity – is a gift from God to us. It is not our own doing. We prepare ourselves to accept this gift by our spiritual disposition, by our openness to one another. The work we have done until now and the work that remains to be done, help us to open our hearts continually.

144. None of us yet knows how a future Orthodox Church on the North American continent will be organized. We must discover how to balance the richness of our diversity with the need for a cohesive administration. This discussion will have to continue until a consensus is reached by all those concerned.

145. The future of our Church lies in our willingness to work together. There is probably no better place for us to center this activity than the local parish. Our parish is the place where each of us, from bishop to smallest child, was taught and nurtured in the bosom of the Body of Christ. This local parish has many faces. It is a grand cathedral with thousands of participants and it is a small hut with a dirt floor. Given our missionary experience in America, it is a store front and it is a warehouse space. What makes it heaven on earth is that there, in that place, the Church gathers to remember the saving acts of God.

146. The truth is that parish life in North America is very different than in traditionally Orthodox countries. Parishes are organized differently. The activities that are centered in them are different. There are ethnic, cultural, and charitable aspects to parish life that simply are not emphasized in other places, or perhaps are irrelevant or not needed there. We take special note of the involvement of laypersons in our parishes. This is consistent with Orthodox ecclesiology, and also reflects the American spirit of activism and volunteerism. The challenge for us is to learn what keeps our communities vital while remaining faithful to what has been entrusted to us. It is remembrance that allows us to do this.

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*Because we are composed of a dual nature, soul and body, we need a dual birth and dual nourishment. We receive our birth by means of water and Spirit, that is, by Holy Baptism. We find our nourishment in the bread of life, that is, in Jesus Christ himself. When the moment arrived for him to undergo death for us of his own free will, in the night in which he was to be handed over to his enemies, he established a new covenant with his disciples, and through them with all those who believe in him. He washed his disciples' feet, offering in this a symbol of Holy Baptism. Then, breaking the bread, he gave it to them saying: "Take and eat; this is my body which will be broken for you for the forgiveness of sins." In the same way he gave them the cup with the wine and the water saying: "Drink, this is my blood."*

*If sky, earth, water, iron and air have been created by the Word of God, so much more certainly this noble being called humanity has been formed by him. And if the Word himself became flesh by the pure blood of the Virgin, will he not be able to make the bread his body and the wine and water his blood?*

*In the beginning God said: "Let the earth bring forth green grass." And so after that the earth, watered by the rain, in obedience to God's command, brings forth its fruits. Then God said: "This is my body, this is my blood," adding: "Do this in memory of me." After that, all the mystery takes place, thanks to his all-powerful Word, and proclaims its faith in the Lord.*

*It is a new kind of planting. The rain comes down on it, that is to say, the power of the Spirit comes down, and overshadows it.*

St. John of Damascus

On the Orthodox Faith, 4, 13 (PG94, 1137ff.)

## **A Community of Hope and Joy**

*“So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”* (John 16:22)

147. It has never been easy to believe in the Resurrection. Think about those holy women who went to the tomb to anoint the Lord’s Body on the third day after His death on the Cross. What they encountered there was something that none of them could ever have imagined: an empty tomb, radiant angels, and Jesus risen from the dead. Astonished, they ran to tell the Disciples (cf. Matthew 28:8).

148. Think about the Disciples. After the Lord’s death they sat huddled and confused in the upper room. When the women, Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and the others, came to tell what they had found, they simply did not believe it. The Gospel of Luke reports that to the Apostles “these words seemed to them like an idle tale and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:11)

149. Even after the Lord had appeared to the other Disciples in the upper room, Thomas, who had not been present (cf. John 20:24-29), still would not believe the story. It was not until the Lord appeared to him and told him to touch His wounds that he finally declared: “My Lord and my God!”

150. The joy that the women and the other Disciples felt was still an earthly joy. They were happy, just as anyone of us would be, that someone whom they knew to be dead was alive again. However, they had not yet understood that Jesus’ rising was not simply a personal event. They could not yet comprehend the cosmic significance. After their initial joy, the Disciples went back to their regular lives. They went fishing (cf. John 21).

151. Not until the Holy Spirit had enlightened them on the day of Pentecost did they begin to appreciate what had occurred. The Lord’s rising from the dead became *their* personal event. This was not another resurrection like that of Lazarus (John 11:43), or Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:41). It was a victory over Death itself. This was now a different kind of joy, the joy that “no one could take away.”

152. This joy is spiritual. It is the realization in our hearts that nothing can harm us because God, in the person of His Son, has freed us. But many people, even among those who believe, confuse this joy with a happiness that is earth-bound not centered on the Lord. You do not need to be a psychologist to recognize that people pursue material objects thinking that these things will make them happy. We live in a society comprising six percent of the world’s population and we consume two-thirds of the earth’s resources. Happiness eludes us, yet we continue to hope.

153. In fact, we live by hope. This is true for everyone, believer and unbeliever alike. We could not continue from one day to the next without hope. We hope that the sun will rise in the morning. We hope that our nation will be at peace. We hope that we will have a job. We hope that our family and loved ones will be well. We may long for certainty, but we live by hope. St. Paul makes an obvious, but important point when he says: “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?” (Romans 8:24) Our question is: on what do we hope?

154. For Christians our hope rests on Christ, on His resurrection. “For if Christ has not been raised ... [our] faith is in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:17). His resurrection gives us an assurance that suffering and death – all too common in this present existence – do not have the final word. St. Paul, speaking from his own experience of pain and trial, reminds us that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). And so, we live by hope which is that place between sadness and joy.

155. St. Symeon the New Theologian, in a remarkable explanation of the hymn, “Having beheld the resurrection of Christ,” differentiates between those who *believe* in Christ’s resurrection and those who have *beheld* His resurrection. He says that a great many people believe in His resurrection, but there are not so many who see His resurrection. And, leading us deeper into the meaning of that phrase, he asks: why do we say ‘beheld’ when we now live hundreds of years from that event? Moreover, even of those who were present, the soldiers guarding the tomb, the women bringing myrrh, the Disciples hiding out of fear, not one of them was an “eyewitness” to the event. He tells us what we should already know, “that the resurrection of Christ takes place in each of us who believes, not just once, but every hour of every day, when Christ the Master arises in us, resplendent and flashing with the lightening brightness of His Divinity.”<sup>22</sup> When that happens we know the power of Christ’s resurrection because we ourselves see Him risen. His resurrection will be our experience as it was the experience of the very first Christians. Then we will have that joy that no one will take away.

156. In the spiritual tradition of the Church, great guides like the Desert Fathers advise us that we should always be thinking about our death. Not in a morbid fashion, but in order to put all of our life into immediate relief, to help us prioritize. This question of death has dominated human thought from the moment we were able to engage in any act of self-reflection. Everything in our being screams out that we do not want to, that we should not, pass into nonexistence. Even for those of us who try to avoid thinking about it, it preoccupies us in ways that we hardly notice. It has the power to shape and influence our behavior. If we might say out loud that “we can’t take it with us,” we, nevertheless, consume and accumulate goods as though we hope that we can. Long before modern psychology proposed its own theories surrounding it, we have known in our hearts that the fear of death is the foundation of all fear.

157. Throughout this letter we have used the words “Good News” when referring to the Gospel. Good News is a direct translation of the original Greek word “Evangelion.” The Good News that the first witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection proclaimed to the world was His victory over death. It was Good News then, and it remains Good News for us today. It is Good News because it addresses this primary human question.

158. The spiritual life is not just for a select few. It is for everyone. The life in Christ needs to be more than a two-hour segment on Sunday morning. It must permeate our entire being. The only thing that satisfies our true longing, gives us real joy, is communion with the living God.

159. One of the challenges we face is that the language of religious experience used today has been shaped by many different voices. Many of the virtues and spiritual practices that we know from our own experience lead to God are not valued today. Emotionalism is confused with spirituality. Thus, we are somewhat reluctant to even speak of the joy which God gives us, for fear of being misunderstood.

160. Listen to this spiritual advice from St. Diadochos: "Initiatory joy is one thing, the joy of perfection is another. The first is not exempt from fantasy, while the second has the strength of humility. Between the two joys comes a 'godly sorrow' (2 Corinthians 7:10) and tears unaccompanied by grief; 'For in much wisdom is much knowledge; and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow'" (Ecclesiastes 1:18).<sup>23</sup>

161. As a society we have forgotten that wisdom comes only by the grace of God and as a spiritual gift that should be cherished. Joy is a gift that God gives us to encourage us in the spiritual life. The world is full of joy and our Lord has given us these signs as a means to comfort and hearten us on the road of life. Some mistake this foretaste as the whole, or see any pleasure as good.

162. In the hymn, "Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ," there is a verse: "for through the Cross, joy has come into the world." Here we come face to face with the heart of the Christian paradox, the one thing that the "world" will always reject: true joy, true happiness, true community, true fulfillment comes only through the giving of ourselves out of love for our brother and sister. This is what the Lord means when He says: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17:33). We find true joy in our love for the other, the same love our Lord showed us on the Cross.

163. St. Paul declares: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:35-37). As Christians we not only choose the path of Christ, we choose it with joy, because it fills us with hope.

164. And so, beloved brothers and sisters, "may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13). "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). As we stand at the dawn of this Third Millennium of our Salvation, let our faith be a witness to the entire world of God's love, even as the faith of the countless holy men and women who preceded us has been an inspiration for us.

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Love of God the Father, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with each and every one of you.

+ Archbishop Demetrios, Chairman  
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

+ Metropolitan Philip, Vice Chairman  
Antiochian Orthodox Christian  
Archdiocese of America

+ Metropolitan Joseph, Secretary  
Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church

+ Metropolitan Nicholas, Treasurer  
American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox  
Greek Catholic Diocese in the U.S.A.

+ Metropolitan Theodosius  
Orthodox Church in America

+ Archbishop Victorin  
Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese  
in America and Canada

+ Metropolitan Christopher  
Serbian Orthodox Church  
in the United States and Canada

+ Metropolitan Constantine  
Ukrainian Church of the USA

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