



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF CHICAGO

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΣΙΚΑΓΟΥ

NATHANAEL

By the Mercy of God, Metropolitan of the Holy and God-Saved Metropolis of Chicago

Archpastoral Encyclical “On Mercy”

1 September 2019, Feast of the Indiction

To the reverend priests and deacons, the monastic brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and the blessed faithful of the Holy Metropolis of Chicago:

With joy in the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and aware of both the opportunity and responsibility to *rightly teach the word of His truth* (2 Tim. 2:15), we offer this Encyclical Letter at the start of the Ecclesiastical Year 2019.

Our inspiration stems from the beautiful petition found in the Fervent Litany of our divine services: *“Further we pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, visitation, forgiveness and remission of the sins of the servants of God ...”* Each year, we hope to reflect upon one of the divine gifts referenced in this prayer. Since this is our inaugural Encyclical Letter, we invite you throughout the year to direct your hearts and minds with special attention to the meaning of **mercy** (*eleos*). We also encourage you to explore the theme of “mercy” in your family lives, youth and young adult programs, Philoptochos and evangelism ministries, religious education and Bible studies, retreats, camps, and sermons. By offering “mercy” as a theme within the Holy Metropolis of Chicago, our prayer is that all of us will strengthen our relationship with God and neighbor, deepen our understanding of God’s gifts, and practice our faith more fully amidst the challenges and opportunities of daily life.

Introduction

Within our Orthodox faith there are few words that appear as frequently and with such rich meaning as **mercy**. In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom alone, the words “mercy,” “mercies,” and “merciful” appear over 100 times. Our most common response to the petitions being offered by the deacon or priest is, “Lord, have mercy.” The divine services ask us on occasion to repeat “Lord, have mercy” three times or twelve times or even forty times. The Psalm recited most often in our liturgical life, Psalm 50(51), begins with the words, *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your great mercy.”* And the Jesus Prayer, which has been recited continually in the hearts of saints and faithful Christians down through the centuries and even to

this present moment, consists of a humble plea for mercy: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.*” Put simply, mercy is foundational to our understanding of God, of prayer, and of our lives as Orthodox Christians.

Mercy is the first of the gifts we seek in the Fervent Litany, and it is central to our Orthodox theology and worship; however, another reason to begin this series of Encyclicals with a focus on **mercy** is the acute need we sense today for mercy to guide our relationships with one another, both within the life of the Church and more broadly still throughout our family lives, our nation, and our world.

To begin, consider an example of mercy from the life of St. John Chrysostom. When he was Archbishop of Constantinople, St. John faced a challenging situation related to a certain political leader, Eutropius. Although Eutropius was a Christian in name, he had earned a reputation for greed and cruelty, and had embraced policies and passed laws that were contrary to the Church’s teachings and ethos. Many of the faithful—including St. John himself—had been harmed directly by Eutropius’ actions. In the year A.D. 399, however, the political tides turned and Eutropius suddenly found himself out of power and with many adversaries thirsty for vengeance and calling for his execution. Seeking protection in his time of greatest need, Eutropius entered the Cathedral in Constantinople during a Sunday Divine Liturgy and clung to the altar table weeping. St. John Chrysostom, seeing Eutropius’ desperation as well as the skepticism on the faces of those gathered in prayer, challenged his flock with this message on mercy:

“How, after this assembly has been dissolved, will you handle the holy mysteries [the Eucharist], and repeat that prayer by which we are commanded to say, ‘forgive us as we also forgive our debtors,’ when you are demanding vengeance upon your debtor? Has he inflicted great wrongs and insults on you? I will not deny it. Yet this is the season not for judgment but for mercy; not for requiring an account, but for showing loving kindness; not for investigating claims but for conceding them; not for verdicts and vengeance, but for mercy and favor. Let no one then be irritated or vexed, but let us rather beseech the merciful God to grant [Eutropius] a respite from death” (Homily 1 On Eutropius).

We live in a “mercy-starved” society where a spirit of vengeance and vindictiveness saturates the air we breathe, poisoning relationships in our cities, our workplaces, and our families. In addition, existing social structures often eclipse people’s experience of mercy and further weaken our capacity for offering it. This famine of mercy is no small matter. For it is in receiving and imitating God’s mercy that we find a source of ultimate hope and a way of engaging with our neighbor that can move us beyond divisions, beyond prejudice, beyond animosity, and beyond the status quo.

However, to receive God’s mercy we must do our part. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* records the following anecdote: A man of faith was constantly failing to live out Christ’s teachings, so he traveled to find St. Anthony and ask his advice. “*Pray for me,*” he said to Abba Anthony. The saint said to him, “*I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you*

yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Anthony 16).

In today’s mercy-starved world, we are all called to increase our effort and to pray that mercy would more fully shape our thoughts, words, and actions in fulfillment of the Lord’s saying, “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hosea 6:6).

I. Mercy: Definition and Overview

What exactly is mercy? In common conversation we use the word interchangeably with “pity,” “compassion,” and “sympathy.” For us as Christians, mercy has elements in common with all of these, but it is distinctive in certain ways as well. Mercy is more than a passive feeling evoked by people in unhappy circumstances; mercy implies *action*. As a counterpart to justice, mercy likewise entails that a person *refrain* from certain deeds (e.g., taking revenge, demanding restitution) and *perform* others (e.g., providing for needs, addressing problems). We typically speak of “having mercy,” but perhaps it would be more appropriate to say, “*doing* mercy.” Mercy, like justice, can operate whether or not affection is present: one can—and should—show mercy even to the unlikeable and unfriendly.

Mercy is the mother of patience, forbearance, kindness, and gentleness. For where mercy is, these qualities are also manifested. But mercy can also give rise to boldness, defiance, and even striving on behalf of the weak and defenseless, of those without status or voice. Mercy not only comforts the afflicted, but can also afflict those who are too comfortable in their indifference to the plight of others. Mercy is something offered freely and widely. Philanthropy, or voluntary care for one’s fellow human beings, is a specific kind of mercy. But mercy itself is broader still: for one can show mercy on any of God’s creatures; and indeed, as does God, upon the cosmos in its entirety. St. Isaac the Syrian wrote that the merciful heart is afire for all of creation, “for human beings, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing,” beholding them with eyes that pour forth abundant tears (Homily 71).

It is sometimes said that the Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, comes from the same root as the word for “olive oil,” *elaion*. In fact, the roots of these words differ, but olive oil is nevertheless a fitting image of mercy: for just like oil, it is in the nature of mercy to nourish and nurture, to soften and heal, to preserve and gladden those whom it feeds or touches. St. Dorotheos of Gaza offers a moving interpretation of Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, linking the palm fronds with olive branches to signify the combination of God’s victory and mercy: “*Let us similarly go to meet Christ our Master with palms as before a conqueror, for He conquered the enemy for us. And also with olive branches, supplicating Him for mercy, that just as He won the victory for us we might also be victorious through Him*” (Instructions 15, 165).

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament teaches mercy through two terms, *rahamim* and *hesed*. *Rahamim* comes from the root of the word *rehem*, “womb”: this word speaks of the

emotional power of mercy, such that it evokes feelings deep within the body, feelings of concern and solidarity and shared pain. (We find the same root in the Arabic equivalent of *Kyrie, Eleison*, which is *Yara, Burham*.) This character of mercy is illustrated by a mother's inward bodily sensations upon seeing her child in pain or peril. The same sense is conveyed in the New Testament Greek word *eusplanchnia*, containing as it does the roots *eu-*, "well" and *splanchnon*, "inward parts, bowels." Through these words, mercy is depicted as a visceral reaction to the hurting of another. In using such terms for God's mercy, the Scriptures communicate that God the Father loves us as like a parent, standing with us and sharing our suffering, a reality that will be powerfully manifested in the Incarnation of the Son of God in our human flesh.

The other Hebrew word *hesed* expresses a different view of mercy. It comes from a root meaning "zeal, strong desire, unwavering commitment." (From this root comes also the word *Hasidic*, the adjective for certain Jewish people who maintain unchanged their people's expressions of faithfulness to their traditions.) Some have suggested that the best rendering of *hesed* would be "covenant loyalty." For example, Deuteronomy 7:9 reads, "*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant and mercy (hesed) to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.*" In the Greek of the New Testament and the Septuagint, *hesed* is most often rendered with *eleos*.

The Holy Bible thus presents mercy under two main conceptions. In the first, mercy is a feeling evoked by the neediness of another; in the second, mercy is an unconditional resolve to keep one's promises, regardless of the outcome or recompense or even the worthiness of the other party. In the prayers of the Divine Liturgy, we rightly appeal to "the mercies" of God in the plural. For our Lord graciously bestows on us both the kindness of His deepest affection and the unchangeability of His covenant commitment to save us, unworthy though we be, from the tyranny of the Devil. It is incumbent upon us, as the sons and daughters of the living God, to imitate our heavenly Father as we grow in expressing both aspects of the divine gift of mercy towards us.

II. God's Mercy toward Us and all of Creation

As the people of God, our understanding and practice of mercy begins with God's mercy. Jesus' teaching, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36), presupposes that we grasp to some extent the mercy that characterizes God. What then can we say about the nature of God's mercy? How does God's mercy exemplify and surpass the meanings of mercy we have described above?

One distinctive manifestation of God's mercy is connected to the act of creation itself. In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, following the Lord's Prayer, the celebrant prays, "*We give thanks to You, invisible King. By your infinite power You created all things and by Your great mercy You brought everything from nothing into being. ... ὁ τῆ ἀμετρήτῳ σου δυνάμει τὰ πάντα δημιουργήσας καὶ τῷ πλήθει τοῦ ἐλέους σου ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα*

παραγαγών.” Here we see that creation *ex nihilo*, “from nothing,” is presented as flowing from God’s great mercy. In His mercy, God creates the cosmos; God delivers reality from nothingness; God gives life to the world. The divine act of creation as an act of *mercy* recalls the meaning of the Hebrew word *rahamim* noted above, which connects “mercy” to “womb” (*rehem*), as well as to birth giving. Thus, Christ’s command: “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,*” relates to creation, to human beings as co-creators, and to the command given to Adam and Eve, “*Be fruitful and multiply*” (Genesis 1:28).

Another manifestation of the mercy of God lies in the way God cares and provides for us and for all of creation, trapped as we are by sin and death. In His mercy, God suffers with us, His children, and does not lose faith in us, despite our rebellion. Here we witness both meanings of mercy, *rahamin* and *hesed*, and we are reminded that the plan of salvation is itself an expression of divine mercy from beginning to end. Recall the words of the priestly prayer from the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great:

“But when man disobeyed You, the true God who had created him, and was led astray by the deception of the serpent becoming subject to death through his own transgressions, You, O God, in Your righteous judgment, expelled him from paradise into this world, returning him to the earth from which he was taken, yet providing for him the salvation of regeneration in your Christ. For You did not forever reject Your creature whom You made, O Good One, nor did You forget the work of Your hands, but because of Your tender mercy (διὰ σπλάχνα ἔλεους σου), You visited him in various ways...” (Prayer of the Anaphora).

Thus, the mercy of God can be seen throughout the history of salvation, in God’s compassionate covenants with our forefathers Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and in the voices of prophets who boldly called God’s people back to covenant faithfulness when we had swayed. In His mercy, God respected humanity’s freedom and creativity—even when we used our freedom to reject God’s love; at the same time, God never stopped extending divine love, compassion, and opportunities for us to repent and return to a right relationship with Him.

We see these features of God’s mercy in the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). The Prodigal’s father shows mercy to his son throughout the entire parable. He is merciful, first, in respecting his son’s freedom. Notice how the prodigal’s father does not forbid his son from leaving. He does not lock his son in the house or instruct one of his servants to guard the door, or berate him for wanting to venture out; instead, the merciful father allows his son to leave with his inheritance. Similarly, God respects our freewill. Archimandrite Sophrony of Essex reminds us, “*God does not violate our freedom. He will not force Himself into our hearts if we are not disposed to open the door to Him*” (On Prayer, 66).

While respecting human freedom is an expression of divine mercy, this does not mean that God is indifferent towards our choices. During the time of the prodigal son’s absence, we can be sure that his father’s heart was filled with concern and suffered out of love for his lost child. This, too, is a manifestation of the father’s mercy. In addition, the father remained steadfast in his hope that his child would return some day and reciprocate his love. He did not abandon his child, nor did

he cease praying and trusting in the possibility of reconciliation and reunion. Instead, his mercy endured.

One of our contemporary saints, St. Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia (+1991), was often approached by parents who were agonizing over their children's spiritual choices. "My son goes out drinking and dancing all night, what should I do?" "My daughter is living with her boyfriend, Father Porphyrios, what should I do?" "My children refuse to go to Church, refuse to fast, refuse to go to confession, etc., what should I do?" And St. Porphyrios, guided by the Holy Spirit, often gave them the same advice: **Speak less, pray more**. He writes, "*If you are constantly lecturing your children, you'll become tiresome and when they grow up, they'll feel a kind of oppression [and will rebel]. Prefer prayer and communicate with them through prayer. Speak to God and God will speak to their hearts...say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, give Your light to my children. I entrust them to You. You gave them to me, but I am weak and unable to guide them, so, please, illuminate them.' And God will speak to them*" (*Wounded by Love*, 203).

The parable of the Prodigal Son teaches mercy as both compassion to those suffering (*rahamim*) and zealous faithfulness to the covenant between God and humanity (*hesed*). However, it also points us to a third manner in which the mercy of God is manifested: God's willingness to relate to us in a way that goes beyond justice and that rejects vindictiveness. Over and over, the people of God have failed to keep our side of the covenant. Over and over, we have transgressed God's commandments. And yet, over and over God has invited us back, showing us mercy as a mode of relationship that surpasses justice. Seeing on the horizon his returning child, the prodigal son's father "was filled with compassion (*eusplachnisthe*)" [Luke 15:20], and rushed to embrace him. This is "doing mercy." St. John Chrysostom's response to Eutropius, which we described above, similarly exemplifies the concrete expression of mercy—not vengeance, not "I told you so," not humiliation and criticism—but Christian mercy.

At each matins service we pray the *Hexapsalmos*, the "Six Psalms," which emphasize God's saving power, steadfast love, and mercy. The fifth of these, Psalm 102(103), pulls together all three of the above meanings of mercy:

"The Lord is merciful (rahūm) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (hāsed). He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love (hasdōw) toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion (kōrahēm) for his children, so the Lord has compassion (riham) on those who fear him." (Psalm 102(103):8-13)

From this we see God's parental compassion toward us in our suffering and steadfastness in His covenant; yet we also see that God's mercy surpasses justice, for God does not "deal with us according to our sins" but instead deals with us mercifully. We must keep in mind, however, that God's mercy does not eliminate God's justice: His mercy extends, completes, and perfects His justice. Recall Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Do not think that I have come to*

abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). The same applies to God’s justice, which is fulfilled by God’s mercy. In our everyday usage, the terms “justice” and “mercy” seem mutually exclusive—one is either just or merciful, but not both. For Christ, however, this was not the case, a point emphasized by many of the Church Fathers, including St. Basil the Great who wrote:

“He is merciful, but He is also a judge, for ‘the Lord loves mercy and judgment,’ says the psalmist [Psalm 32(33):5]. And he therefore also says: ‘Mercy and judgment I will sing to thee, O Lord’ [Psalm 100(101):1]. We have been taught who they are upon whom He has mercy: ‘Blessed are the merciful,’ says the Lord, ‘for they shall obtain mercy’ [Matthew 5:7]. You see with what discernment He bestows mercy, neither being merciful without judgment nor judging without mercy; for ‘the Lord is merciful and just’ [Psalm 114(116):5]. Let us not, therefore, know God by halves nor make His loving kindness an excuse for our indolence” (The Long Rules, Preface).

III. Receiving God’s Mercy

In our lives as Christians, we have a tendency to interpret the mercy of God in extreme ways. Sometimes, we tend toward the extreme of thinking that our own brokenness, sin, and rebellion against God is so severe that God cannot possibly show us mercy. We can become despondent and even hopeless, questioning whether the very core of the Gospel’s message applies to us and even whether we ought to continue living. In such circumstances, reflecting on the immeasurable depths of God’s compassionate mercy, and being more merciful toward ourselves, can together help us to continue with hope, strength, and faith. In his pastoral letters, St. Barsanuphius reminds his spiritual children that God is a “*merciful and compassionate Master*” (Letter 63) who “*holds out His hand to the sinner until his last breath*” (Letter 72). Clergy play a vital role in consoling those who believe they are beyond God’s loving mercy and also in encouraging those who are suffering in this way to work with compassionate healthcare professionals.

Other times, we tend toward the extreme of thinking that God’s mercy is so great and so generous that we need not do anything or be at all concerned about our salvation. We convince ourselves that it is not necessary for us to struggle against sin or to go to confession because, “God is merciful and loving.” This extreme is just as spiritually dangerous as its opposite. While the mercy of God is, indeed, great and generous beyond our comprehension, God’s commandments are normative and God’s judgment is real. We must do our part. The Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount are clear, “*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you*” (Matthew 7:7). If we do not *ask, seek, and knock*, we will not receive, find, or be able to enter into the reality of God’s mercy. God is merciful and, at the same time, our salvation is not automatic. Thus, God’s mercy is absolutely necessary for our salvation, and offered to us regardless of how far we have fallen away; but our own freedom, faith, and struggle against sin is also absolutely necessary.

This dynamic of God offering mercy and humankind receiving God's mercy is experienced firsthand through the gift of the sacramental life of the Church. Beginning with our baptism and chrismation, and culminating in our preparation for and reception of the Eucharist, God's mercy and love for us initiates a perpetual exchange of gratitude, mercy, and love. St. Paul's words to Titus are instructive here, "*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy (κατὰ τὸν αὐτοῦ ἔλεον). He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*" (Titus 3:5). Frequent participation in the sacraments of confession, Eucharist, and Holy Unction are vital to our transformation through God's mercy.

In addition to the sacramental life, our personal and family prayer provides the space for God's mercy to enter more fully into our hearts and minds. "*A brother questioned Abba Poemen, 'What ought I to do about all the turmoil that trouble me?' The old man said to him, 'In all our afflictions let us weep in the presence of the goodness of God, until he shows mercy on us.'*" (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Poemen 122). Again, we must do our part. Ultimately, God's mercy enters our lives when we humbly open ourselves to God. St. Isaac the Syrian writes, "*For just as a shadow follows a body, so also does mercy follow humility*" (Homily 72). The humility of which St. Isaac speaks means acknowledging our need for God's forgiveness and healing; however, it also means refraining from judging others and in offering ourselves in philanthropic service.

IV. Our Response to God's Mercy: Thanksgiving and Mercy toward Others

God's mercy can bring us from brokenness to wholeness, from sickness to health, from spiritual death to resurrected life. This is the Gospel's proclamation, and the evidence of its veracity lies in the lives of holy women and men across the ages. Essential to this transformative dynamic is our own offer of mercy toward others. Christ's words are clear, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy*" (Matt 5:7).

In the lives of the saints, we see example after example of *mercy as a way of life*. We see it in the first century in St. Paul, whose heart burned with such love for God and his fellow human beings that he carried the message of Christ to gentile communities across the Roman Empire. Similarly, in the twentieth century, St. Maria of Paris felt such intense love for God and neighbor that she worked tirelessly to rescue Jews during the Nazi occupation of France. Other saints exemplified mercy through their extraordinary acts of almsgiving, of *eleimosyne*. Like Christ's apostles and disciples, who sold their land and other possessions and offered the proceeds for distribution "*to each as any had need*" (Acts. 4:35), subsequent saints like St. Paraskevi (+170), St. Anthony the Great (+356), and St. Irene Chrysovalantou (10th century) sold their possessions, distributed the proceeds to those in need, and entrusted their whole lives to God. Still other saints embodied mercy by caring for the sick, like St. Anthimos of Chios (+1960) who served as the chaplain of a leper hospital, offering compassionate mercy and steadfast love to his most vulnerable sisters and brothers without fear for his own life. Indeed, as we reflect on the full

“cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), we see that every saint bears witness in a personal manner to *mercy as a way of life*.

The saints’ lives of mercy may seem exceptional and even unnatural to us. In truth, however, we are *all* created to be merciful. To act mercifully and, ultimately, to pursue mercy as a way of life is to be authentically human. Despite the contrary messages pervading society today, “doing mercy” is in fact the most natural and most meaningful way for us to live and coexist.

V. Mercy in our Homes, Parishes, Workplaces, and Neighborhoods

There is a saying, “Charity begins at home.” This adage reminds us—as Saint Paul also does in 1 Timothy 5:8—that we too readily take for granted those nearest us. The people with whom we live, eat, pray, and work every day are the ones who tax our patience and test our love the most. When the Apostle Peter approached the Lord to ask about the limits of forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22), he did not inquire over frustration with a greedy bureaucrat or an abusive soldier. He asked rather, “Lord, how often shall *my brother* sin against me, and I forgive him?” If we are to be people of mercy, we will soon find that our “mercy muscles” are strained more by our siblings, our spouses, our parents, and our children than by anyone else in our lives. Therefore, like charity, let mercy begin at home.

Mercy in our homes means more than the natural affections between family members. It is in the home especially that the quality of mercy as *hesed/eleos* (covenant faithfulness) is revealed. Honoring pledges, fulfilling commitments, keeping promises—these are the hallmarks of familial mercy. And when mercy fails in a family relationship, it is most often in these terms, rather than in the matters of physical affection or terms of endearment.

It has been said that the greatest gift a man can give his children is to love their mother, and vice versa for a woman. The first gift of marital love is *fidelity*. One of the cruelest, most merciless acts a parent can commit against his or her children is to dishonor the integrity of marriage. Even when the betrayal remains a secret, the poison of infidelity seeps into family life in hidden ways. In the ancient Church, the constancy of Christian spouses was cited as a proof of the truth of Christ’s teachings. In the *Epistle to Diognetus* (5), an anonymous apologist for the Church states, “[Christians] marry, as do all; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.” And later on, Tertullian defends the Church’s honor by asserting, “*One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us—except our wives*” (*Apology* 39). Those who keep the Seventh Commandment keep mercy. Those who commit adultery do harm to their children that can hardly be reversed in a lifetime, as any experienced pastor will testify. For this reason, in our Orthodox sacrament of marriage we pray repeatedly that God would strengthen and confirm the word that the spouses have given to each other; and we warn several times as well that “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” Therefore, in mercy, let marital infidelity not even be named among us as Orthodox Christians (cf. Ephesians 5:3).

Mercy as faithfulness to one's promise applies also to our manner of parenting. There is great power in the example of a parent who keeps his or her word to children, both for reward and for chastisement. When parents fail to follow through on their word, children become confused and frustrated. Saint Paul wisely counsels (Ephesians 6:4), "*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord.*" The Old Testament Scriptures are a powerful witness to the faithful mercies of God in carrying out His promises to the children of Israel, whether for blessing or for discipline. As earthly fathers and mothers, Orthodox Christians are called to the same constancy of mercy that is accomplished through keeping one's word.

Truth and mercy go together. They are inseparable. We see this clearly in the Scriptures, where mercy (*hesed*) and truth (*'emet*) are linked as attributes of God (e.g., Genesis 24:27, 32:10; Exodus 34:6; Psalms 25:10, 89:14, Tobit 3:2). When we hear the Lord's command, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36), we receive also the instruction to be truthful, just as God is true.

Basic honesty is a constant concern of Christ and His Apostles:

"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices." (Colossians 3:9).

"Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." (Ephesians 4:25)

"... Let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation." (James 5:12)

In our parishes, therefore, let forthrightness and truth be the hallmarks of our dealings with one another. For honesty also is an aspect of God's mercy.

We live in a world where casual deceit is accepted as a standard operating practice. Too often this habit enters with us into the life of the Church. There is the temptation to tell people what they want to hear; to withhold information that might be difficult or painful; to speak flattery and "smooth words" in order to manipulate perceptions and manufacture consent. Like Christ Himself, the holy prophets (cf. Isaiah 30:10) and the Apostles (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:5) resisted any impulse to shade the truth, to go along verbally in order to get along politically or financially. Those who use language to hide their meaning—whether they be laity or clergy—dishonor the name of Christ that they bear, and as the Prophet Jonah (2:8) testifies, "*They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.*"

Let us, therefore, speak the truth to one another, not only out of mercy, but also in the manner of mercy. For it is possible to speak truths—especially criticisms and complaints—in a way that is unbrotherly, unkind, and unhelpful. For this reason, Saint Paul counsels (Colossians 4:6), "*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.*" An Orthodox Christian prays, both in the season of Great Lent and otherwise,

“*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, keep watch over the door of my lips.*” (Psalm 141:3) It is easy to wound with the tongue. Diplomacy in the expression of truth is no vice, and bluntness as a manifestation of pride is no virtue. Mercy exercises restraint in all our speech, even as we strive to tell only the truth.

Mercy in our parish life must also entail that we flee from gossip and slander, remembering that “*Love covers a multitude of sins.*” (1 Peter 4:8). Nearly every parish priest knows of parishioners who stopped attending regularly because of an unfounded rumor against them or their family. It is a sin against mercy to give ear to gossip, and an even greater sin against mercy to spread gossip. Therefore, in obedience to the Apostolic injunction (Ephesians 4:29), “*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.*” In this way we imitate the God of mercy and truth.

In our parishes, one of the greatest expressions of mercy is found in the application of the customs and canons of the Church. The Lord said, “*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27). Mercy recognizes that every human situation differs according to individual needs. It is for this reason that Canon 102 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council gives spiritual fathers latitude in their application of the canons. To apply the canons with unthinking exactitude (*akriveia*) in all cases is as irresponsible and unmerciful as to extend a careless dispensation (*oikonomia*) without attending to spiritual needs. A penance that is fitting in a monastic context might not be appropriate in a parish setting for a family man or woman. True paternal love errs always on the side of mercy. True spiritual fatherhood strives to cultivate maturity and discernment rather than childish dependence and unquestioning servility.

As we go forth from our homes and our churches, the quality of mercy we bring to our communities at large, to our workplaces and schools and offices, should be a paragon of self-control, restraint in word and action, forbearance, deliberateness in thought, calmness of spirit, and gentleness of heart. Above the din of conflicting voices and accusatory rhetoric, let the prudence and silence of an Orthodox Christian heart, steadfast in prayer and confident in hope, be the witness of mercy to those around us, whether they be just like ourselves or different in every way. It is no betrayal of the unique truth of Orthodox Christianity to approach those around us with respect, openness of heart, and interest in dialogue. In this way, we manifest the mercy that we have received from Christ, who reconciled our race to God even while we were still enemies (Romans 5:10).

Finally, perhaps the most immediate and direct way that we can “do mercy” as students and working people, as families and parishes, and as neighbors within our cities, is through almsgiving and philanthropy. While mercy should mark all of our relationships, to be a Christian implies a special responsibility to care for the most vulnerable members of our society. Our Lord Himself states that He has come “*to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free*” (Luke 4:18). This does not mean that the gospel excludes others—instead, it means that God’s mercy goes first to where it is most needed. Today, we must recover this focus on our suffering neighbors, which

was the animating spirit of the early Church. Even Julian the Apostate, the fourth-century emperor who sought the demise of Christianity, acknowledged that Christians “support not only their own poor, but ours as well” (*Epistle* 896). Would the same be said of us now? Is it not possible that one reason so many people have abandoned our churches is because we have abandoned our basic identity as almsgivers, as *doers of mercy*? Consider St. John Chrysostom’s words, “*You are not able to become propertyless? Divide your possessions with Christ. You do not want to surrender everything to Him? Hand over even a half share, even a third share*” (Homily on Matthew 45:2). Concrete acts of almsgiving and philanthropy are not merely one option among many from which we may pick and choose: sharing our material blessings is a requisite response to Christ’s commandment: “*Be merciful*” (Luke 6:36).

The familiar Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:35-36) challenges us to see Christ in every marginalized person—in every person who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison. If we genuinely desire to draw near to our Lord Jesus Christ, let us draw near to the homeless, the immigrant, the incarcerated, and the sister or brother who suffers from physical or mental illness. If we genuinely desire to *do mercy*, let us reach out also to those peers in school, to our coworkers, to our fellow parishioners, and to our neighbors who are experiencing the pain of loneliness. It is a sign of our times that, despite being hyper-connected through technology, and despite living in overpopulated cities, so many among us feel isolated and abandoned.

Beginning with the Old Testament law (e.g., Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 14), God has directed us to care for widows, widowers, and orphans precisely because they have lost their closest loved ones—their spouse or parents—and are thus physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually vulnerable. Yet, the call to mercy should also inspire us to spend time with and extend care to others who are suffering, including: those who are bullied; those with disabilities; those who have lost a child—either during pregnancy or after birth; those who have suffered domestic violence and neighborhood violence; and those enslaved by forms of addiction.

As members of families and of the Body of Christ, may we embrace the mission of mercy and utilize our God-given creativity, expertise, and resources to offer mercy-centered ministries to our vulnerable neighbors. If every parish of our holy Metropolis were to expand or introduce even one such ministry, the potential for authentic Orthodox witness would grow exponentially.

Conclusion

The Scriptures reveal to us that mercy is not just an act or an attitude of God: mercy is part of the very name of the great I AM, as that name was revealed to Moses on the mountain (Exodus 34:5-6): “*And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, the LORD, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.*” Here again we find the linkage of *hesed* and *’emet*, mercy and truth together. We hear them together again on the night of Pascha at the proclamation of the Gospel from John 1:14, where the Evangelist translates *hesed* as *charis* and applies the Name of God to the person of Jesus Christ—“ *...And*

*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of **grace** and **truth**; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”*

The Son and Word of God is mercy and truth just as the Father is mercy and truth. In being people of mercy, in conducting ministries of mercy, in speaking words of truth and mercy, in thinking thoughts of kindness and mercy, we do more than simply practice good works: We become like Christ, who is mercy and truth. We are made perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect in His mercy and truth. Mercy is the path to *theosis*. Mercy is the road by which God became man, and the road by which humans become divine.

Seeking this destiny which is our inheritance as sons and daughters of God, ever more fervently let us pray in our homes and churches and in every place of God’s dominion, for that mercy which God so richly lavishes on all and for the zeal, in turn, to live as *doers* of mercy.

Remaining your fervent intercessor before the throne of Christ Jesus for *mercy* as well as “...life, peace, health, salvation, visitation, forgiveness and remission of the sins” for all of us and for all our world,

†NATHANAEL

Nathanael
Metropolitan of Chicago