



ARCHPASTORAL TEACHING

On Life

METROPOLITAN NATHANAEL OF CHICAGO



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF CHICAGO

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΣΙΚΑΓΟΥ

September 1, 2020

Beloved Clergy, Monastic Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods, and faithful of the Holy Metropolis of Chicago, and all people of goodwill:

I greet you with joy in the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We offer this Annual Archpastoral Teaching, *On Life*, at a time when many are suffering. People are mourning deep losses; people are ill with COVID-19 or fearful of contracting it; people have lost their jobs or are experiencing a severe increase in job stress, especially those on the medical frontlines; people are confused and angry over systemic discrimination impacting many lives in our Metropolis; many people are absent from their churches and experiencing fear or worse, ambivalence over attending again. In 2019, when I offered the first Annual Archpastoral Teaching, *On Mercy*, I could not imagine how different the world would be just one year later. Nonetheless, we know “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and always,” so even in these tumultuous times, we are all invited to focus on what is always true, always right, always perfect—God’s love for us through His gift of life.

The reflection *On Life* is the second in our series exploring the precious gifts sought in the Fervent Litany of our divine services. As with our first Archpastoral Teaching, *On Mercy*, we draw from the splendid treasury of our faith, including Holy Scripture, the writings of the saints, and the worship services, to guide and inform us. The call to “do mercy” and to become a “Metropolis of Mercy,” which we issued with our first Teaching, is expanded here to a call for the protection and nurturing of the sacred gift of life in all its aspects. Our hope is that the faithful of all ages and walks of life, and in all the ministries of the Church, will creatively apply the profound teachings of our faith to provide loving care and a truly good life in these unprecedented times, and to share with all humankind the abundant life found only in Christ. *For Christ is our life.*

†NATHANAEL

Metropolitan of Chicago

Annual Archpastoral Teaching
for the New Ecclesiastical Year
1 September 2020

“On Life”

I.

THE DIVINE GIFT OF LIFE

In the Fervent Litany of the divine services, we open our hearts to God saying, “*Further we pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, visitation, forgiveness and remission of the sins of the servants of God...*” The first blessing we seek from God is *mercy*, and the second is *life*, which is, indeed, God’s first act of mercy for us. In His mercy and love, God opens a space for His creation to be; God brings the world and all creatures into existence and bestows life. As we proclaim during the Great Doxology, “*For with You is the fountain of life...Ὅτι παρὰ σοὶ πηγὴ ζωῆς.*”

What a wondrous gift life is! It is a gift known by all living things at the core of their being, instinctively desired and celebrated. At creation, God affirms that it is good, and every creature feels in its own unique way this goodness of life, and praises God in thanksgiving. We ourselves affirm this goodness in the joy with which we greet the emergence of new life in the spring, and most especially when we welcome the birth of a child.

Just as God’s mercy and love do not start and stop, so also His act of mercy in the work of giving life is continual. As the source and fountain of life, He is always present to and fills all things, continually sustaining and nurturing life. Indeed, He has created all things not simply to be—to exist as discrete entities—but to be alive in relationship with Him. None can live without Him, and separation or departure from God, who is the Giver of Life, immediately begins the process of life’s dissolution, corruption, and inevitable death.

Thus, life is not life when it is not lived in relationship with God. Without God, what is considered life is, in fact, a movement toward death. Put differently, when we are born into the world, our existence is limited by a finite number of breaths; but when we are reborn in Christ and remain in communion with Him, our existence moves from being finite to eternal.

Life...and Abundant Life

As the matrix in which all other benefits of life operate and are experienced, physical life is essential, and intrinsically good. However, in recent months, we have felt in an intense way the precious yet fragile nature of biological life, as the world has been shaken by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have lost their lives due to this virus, others have recovered, and yet all of us have been affected by it. Anxiety, uncertainty, and fear have surrounded us, and at times these elements cause us to feel both physically and spiritually short of breath. This danger with respect to the physical health of our society has caused us to feel more acutely that there is more to life than simple biological functioning. We have been thrown into a condition of “mindfulness of death,” and this situation reveals vital spiritual truths if we have “eyes to see” and “ears to hear” (cf. Matt 13:15). Communion with God is essential for life to be truly life, and it gives life its purpose. Creation exists not simply to be, but also to respond to God, to become what He calls it to be. For human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), this purpose is to grow in godlikeness, inheriting and participating in His life. Our lives find their meaning and perfection in this communion with God. He is the One who gives and fulfills life, the One in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

Our creation in God’s image and according to His likeness belongs to our shared humanity and is the foundation for the shared identity and dignity of every human being, in every land, in every time, of every race, gender, ethnicity, and creed. The significance of this teaching for today’s world cannot be overstated. On the one hand, there is a

tendency in our society to view the human being as having absolute value without having any reference to or relationship with God. This leads to an idolatry of the “self,” to a view of human freedom and power that leads not to liberation but to captivity by the passions. On the other hand, there is a tendency today to devalue and dehumanize others—especially when they look different than us or hold differing views than us—denying their intrinsic dignity, value, and goodness as images of God.

What we need is a true and authentic icon of human flourishing that avoids both worshiping and debasing the human person. We know from God’s self-revelation that who we are created to be—and this is true for every human being—is made manifest and perfectly realized in Jesus Christ. That which gives life its meaning, that which defines the good life for human beings, is the life in Christ; it is revealed to us by Christ, it is made possible through Christ, and it is actualized and perfected in Christ. *“In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people”* (John 1:4). Saint Porphyrios (+1991) speaks to this depth of Christ in our very being, and how we find our true selves in Him, when he says: *“Christ is everything...Christ is life, the source of life, the source of joy, the source of the true light, everything. Whoever loves Christ and other people truly lives life”* (Wounded by Love. 96-97). Not only is Christ the source, the goal, and the model of life for us, Christ is the Good Shepherd who *“lays down his life for the sheep,”* who comes that we *“may have life, and have it abundantly”* (John 10:10-11).

Life Lost, Restored and Renewed

This abundant life of growth in godlikeness and communion with God was lost to us in sin. Death was the inexorable outcome of this loss, and ultimately life itself became a march toward death—both biological and spiritual. We crave fullness of life, but without God where can we find it? A world that has lost sight of God seeks life in those things that merely stave off death, give us control of life (however temporary), and seem to fill life with meaning: power,

wealth, stability, health, work, and family. Popular opinion on “the good life” has hardly changed through the centuries. How many of us today spend long hours on our social or professional advancement, or the growth of our bank account or stock portfolio, or on providing possessions, schooling, and opportunities for ourselves or our children to ‘live well’ in the world? How many of us devote long hours each week to physical exercise and healthy cooking? But none of these behaviors, however good they may be or appear to be, can bring life out of death; none can satisfy the deepest or most fundamental purpose of human life. We need God to become truly who we are meant to be; unfortunately, we have lost our way to Him. At times, we feel inside of us a sense of darkness, brokenness, and emptiness; we are unsure why we feel this way and how to overcome it. During these moments, we may call to mind the words of prayer given to us by St. Augustine: “*You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You*” (Confessions, 1.1).

In His infinite love and everlasting mercy, God sent His own Son into the world that through His Incarnation, death, and Resurrection He might restore us to life and to the path of eternal life. “*In this the love of God was manifested to us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him*” (1John 4:9); and “*For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive*” (1Cor 15:22). This is the mystery of the life-giving tomb, the joy of the Feast of Feasts, that in the darkness of death a great light shines, and this light is the life of all people: “*Resurrection Day! Oh peoples, let us brilliantly shine! Pascha, the Lord’s Pascha! For Christ our God out of death passed us over into life, and likewise from earth to heaven, as we now sing unto Him a triumphal hymn*” (Katavasia of Pascha, Ode I).

The way in which we receive this abundant life begins with baptism, where we enter into the death of Christ so as to be born again and have new life through His resurrection: “*and you were buried with Him in baptism in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead*” (Colossians 2:12). Baptism creates in us a new reality, the presence within us of the living Christ, so that we may proclaim,

with St. Paul, “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20). Baptism is the gateway from life based on breath (*πνοή*) to life based on spirit (*πνεῦμα*). It is entrance into the life that does not end in death, into authentic and true life: “*Baptism confers being and in short, existence according to Christ. It receives us when we are dead and corrupted and first leads us into life*” (St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 1.6). The new life in Christ, sealed, perfected, and nourished through the sacred mysteries of the Church, becomes the way in which we live in God and bring to fruition the purpose of our lives.

How do we protect and nurture this divine gift of life, both in ourselves and in others? As creatures both physical and spiritual, a psychosomatic unity in which the health and life of both body and soul are crucial to the fullness of life, our care must be for both physical and spiritual life. The two intertwine, and we must attend to both. Let us consider each in turn.

II.

CARE FOR PHYSICAL LIFE

Our prayer for life is never so fervent—our appreciation of the gift of life never more acute—than when life itself is endangered. How many tears we weep when the life of a loved one is threatened, and how great is our joy when they are delivered from death. When deadly disease sweeps through our lives, and burgeons into pandemic, the precious value of the basics of life, beginning with simple survival, becomes manifest. At this moment of crisis, however, even as we awaken to the value of our own lives, we also recognize that protecting and saving the lives of others often means risking the very life we cherish. This is the loftier path of love in action to which Christ calls us. We see the deeper purpose of life actualized in the steady and persistent courage of those who are the first to respond and help in times

of danger, disaster and disease; and in the labor of those who provide food, shelter, medical care, counseling, protection, and the basic necessities of life, even when it entails risk and sacrifice. Christ Himself tells us “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” (John 15:13). When we respond in this way, we grow more alive, becoming what God invites us to be.

The Beginning of Life

We find to our sorrow that today the precious gift of life is attacked at every point, especially where it is most weak and vulnerable: at its beginning and at its end. The unborn and newborn whose voices are not heard and who have no power—their lives are at the disposal and direction of others. Who will speak for them? Our faith fundamentally affirms the value of each human life, beginning from conception: “*Already in the womb each of us is a spiritual creature, a person formed in God’s image and created to rejoice in God’s presence...A human being is more than the gradually emergent result of a physical process; life begins at the moment of conception. A child’s claim upon our moral regard then is absolute from that first moment, and Christians are forbidden from shedding innocent blood at every stage of human development.*” (*For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, §25). We oppose, therefore, the practice of abortion, except when the life of the mother is at imminent risk. Even as we defend these little ones, however, we cannot forget to protect and care for the lives of those who have entered into the tragedy of abortion, often because of poverty, abuse, neglect, or despair. Just as our Lord grants His gift of life to each person, so are we to cherish and support it in each. While at times it may seem that there are competing claims to our care for life, that is only because we do not love deeply enough. God’s love and care sustains all life, and so must ours. Our hands of mercy must uphold the women who are in need throughout their pregnancies, as well as the children born to them. The Mary and Martha House ministry of the Metropolis of Chicago¹ is a concrete example of this care. Furthermore, care for children must include their protection and development so that

they are safe from the horrors of abuse, neglect and impoverishment. Lives that are precious at their beginning continue to compel our attention and concern as they grow. We cannot claim to cherish life if we do not do the work of caring for it during each stage of growth, and in whatever context it faces threats (*For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, §25 and §16).

The End of Life

At the other end of life are those approaching the conclusion of biological life, and whose days are often characterized by limitation, loss and suffering. While these are persons whose many years of experience and growth speak to an increase of wisdom that warrants heightened respect, our society, in fact, often regards them quite differently. In our world today, we operate with a limited understanding of the value of the human person. We find that our society celebrates the autonomy of individuals and values them for what they know, do, own and rule. One of the messages this conveys is that insofar as the elderly, the infirm, and the disabled are concerned, they have value if they can function in such a way as to have meaningful impact on the world. If not, then surely life for them is burdensome and increasingly intolerable, stripped of ‘dignity’ or ‘quality.’ A growing consensus of voices even demands that we “assist” in ending such lives, since only by doing so do the sick or elderly assert their autonomy, worth, and dignity.

In contrast, we affirm that each human being, created by God in His image, has intrinsic value not because of his or her cognitive or physical abilities, but because of who he or she is: a child of God. Because each of us is loved by the All-Holy Trinity, we have infinite worth and inalienable dignity. For this reason, we reject euthanasia—euphemistically called ‘mercy killing’ or ‘physician-assisted death.’ We see such acts not as “merciful,” but rather, as contrary to God’s

¹ For more information about the Mary and Martha House, please visit: marthamarychicago.org

gift of life and discriminatory against the vulnerable. God calls us to see one another as Christ sees us: as infinitely loved. For us, however, bound by our physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations, it is hard—almost impossible at times—to see past the impairment that a person suffers. Perhaps this is most evident and poignant when interacting with a person suffering from dementia; we hear people say such things as, “He’s gone, my father (or spouse, or sibling, or friend) is gone; I can’t find him in there anymore.” We cannot see past the damage, and perhaps we will never be able to reach that person again in this life. In a real sense, they are lost to us.

While we often cannot see past the damage of this world, God does. Just as God sees past the damage of sin to the beautiful, beloved, unique person He created, He certainly sees past the impairment of physical injury and decay. We value life properly when we look at one another with these eyes of Christ. Valuing life also means to provide true Christian *diakonia* or service to those nearing the end of life, unable to care for themselves, or suffering alone. We are reminded that Christ, upon the Cross, made sure that his mother would be cared for by his beloved disciple, and that “*from that time on, the disciple took her into his home*” (John 19:26-27). While it is not always possible for us to provide all the care a loved one needs, it is always possible for us to make time for them, to honor them, and to show them our love.

Our *diakonia* should extend especially to those for whom the end of life is imminent. We recognize this care may include the need to reduce physical pain, if possible, without actively ending a person’s physical life, and we respect the important distinction families and physicians must make between not prolonging the dying process and intentionally causing death. We are invited to provide companionship as well as emotional and spiritual care during this critical opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. In this way we walk together with those who journey to the end of this earthly existence and into eternity, assisting them toward the fulfillment of our prayer, “*for a Christian end to our life, peaceful, without shame and suffering, and for a good defense before the awesome judgment seat of Christ*” (*Litany of Completion, Divine Liturgy*).

The Lives of Our Neighbors

While it is evident that the lives of the most vulnerable of humans—the unborn, children, the sick, those with disabilities, and the elderly—cry out for our care, many others’ lives are invisible to us. When we petition the Lord fervently for life, surely, we ask for the necessities of life and deliverance for those plagued with poverty, hunger, and homelessness, for the refugees and victims of disasters and wars, for all for whom the very conditions for physical life are wanting. Jesus tells us that the goodness and perfection of our own lives—in fact the very conditions of eternal life—depend on how we protect and nurture the lives of these least among us:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me (Matt 25:34-36, 40).

The authentic and abundant life we seek from the Lord necessarily embraces those who have almost no access to the goods of life, those among us who struggle to survive while marginalized and discarded by their neighbors—indeed, by their very brothers and sisters in Christ.

Some disasters and difficulties are beyond our control, but what of the horrors we inflict upon one another? When we see our fellow human beings not as our neighbor but rather as the inferior “other,” when we discriminate, oppress, manipulate, marginalize and victimize each other because of differences in race, creed, ethnicity, or gender, we ravage the lives of those Christ himself calls us to protect and love. Too often, our own selfish hearts lead us to think of ourselves as superior to our neighbors. However, through God’s grace, our nature can be renewed and made whole again so that we

see our neighbors as ourselves—indeed even as members of our own family. This becomes evident in Christ’s direction to begin our most fundamental prayer to God with the words, “*Our Father*.” The word “our” reiterates our communal life, our interrelatedness. The word “Father” reiterates our identity as children of God and siblings to each other. In a letter to his sister, St. Sophrony the Athonite (+1993) writes:

If we were to say only the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Our Father,’ with understanding of their deepest meaning, then all our life would change radically. If I am a child of the Father Who is without beginning, that means that I am beyond the power which death had over me...it means that I am really free in the sole true meaning of ‘free.’ One who remains in such a state perceives each fellow human being as a ‘child of the resurrection,’ who ceases from then on to be a nobody or a stranger to me, but becomes my eternal sibling (Letters to His Family, 170-171).

Racism in all its forms mutilates the life we share in common, as one human family. Made new again and reconciled to one another and to God in Christ, we rejoice that God “*has made of one blood all nations of people*” (Acts 17:26), and we especially are called to eradicate racism from our own beliefs and practices, and wherever we see it. St. Amphilochios of Patmos (+1970) spoke these simple words that apply to all of us, “*I was born to love people. It doesn’t concern me if the person is a Turk, black, or white. I see in the face of each person the image of God. And for this image of God I am willing to sacrifice everything*” (*Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit*, 59).

Perhaps the hardest voices to hear when we petition the Lord for life are those who have been driven to despair and the negation of life. We know there are many for whom addiction and depression become so overwhelming that an end to their pain is sought in the self-termination of life. Our fervent prayer for life compels us to find ways to bring light to the dark places of those overwhelmed by despair so they may find the way back to the desire for life. Here especially, where mind, heart and soul intertwine so inextricably,

there is need for the joint ministry of clergy, medical, and mental health professionals, together with the prayer and support of the faithful. Recognizing the immeasurable pain felt by those who have lost a loved one to suicide, our parishes should be places of respite and healing without stigma or shame. To help achieve such transformation, we must not limit the space of our parishes wherein such aid is provided. We need to find the courage not only to offer the basements and community centers of our parishes to groups that address such painful matters but, more importantly, our sanctuaries must become spaces where healing can occur without stigma or marginalization. When the Church consoles and breathes hope into people who are hurting—physically, mentally, or spiritually—she fulfills her mission to bring people to new life in Christ.

III.

CARE FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE



Protecting and nurturing life by attending to the basic biological needs of all people is crucial; however, it is not enough. No matter how much we seek a long and healthy life, we cannot forget that Christ’s primary mission was not to extend biological life. Certainly, He heals; however, He does so unlike any physician. Life—new life, which Christ offers, is fundamentally different from biological health. Jesus offers “*eternal life*,” which, according to the Scriptures, is the knowledge of God and of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Eternal life is intimate communion with the Father—to “know” Him—through His Son, by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Grafted onto Christ through Baptism, recreated and “*born of water and Spirit*” (John 3:5), we are to live toward the eternal life Christ grants in His resurrection. Pascha is the grounding moment and grounding truth of Orthodoxy. Our lives as Christians are a movement from death to life, and our goal is to live the reality of the resurrection here and now. Like St. Paul, we “*die daily*” (1Cor 15:31)

so that we may live in Christ (Gal 2:20). We protect and nurture this life through the sacramental life, worship, prayer, repentance, and keeping God's commandments through acts of love and mercy.

Furthermore, this life is fundamentally corporate: life in community—personal but never private. Because the life Christ offers is divine life, such *life* is love: “*He who does not love does not know God, for God is love*” (1John 4:8). Naturally, through such love we experience divine life: “*If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us*” (1John 4:12). Christ has made this union of love possible through His Body, the Church, in which dwells His Holy Spirit, through which we are made one with God and with each other. We share in this divine life as we become love in community. With St. Silouan we declare: “*Blessed is the soul that loves her brother, for our brother is our life. Blessed is the soul that loves her brother: the Spirit of the Lord lives manifest within her, affording peace and gladness...*” (St. Silouan the Athonite, 370-1). For most, the first example of communal love experienced is their immediate family; however, we also see it manifest in the many ways that people come together in fellowship, friendship, support and mercy.

Life within the Church makes manifest the love of God, but it is also the work of life—the Church exists “for the life of the world.” We give life to the world through the sacraments, worship, and prayer; through works of charity and outreach; by caring for God's creation; and through preaching and teaching the Gospel. These are indicators of a vibrant parish, the signs of a community that receives Christ's life and shares it with the world.

IV.

A LIVING PARISH: WORSHIP,
THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE, PRAYER



What Does Worshiping Together Have to do With Life?

The Holy Scriptures teach us that the praise of God is fundamental to life—even to all of creation. We see this truth especially in the Psalms: *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!* (Psalm 150:6) *Praise the Lord, you angels and hosts, sun and moon, stars and light, earth and animals, young and old, all peoples* (Psalm 148). Created in the image and according to the likeness of God, humans have a special vocation of praise. Because we can think of, speak with, and know God through a personal relationship, we have the ability and task of giving all creation a coherent and articulate voice in offering praise and thanksgiving. This action of thanksgiving is essential to life; through it we return ourselves and all of life back to the Life-giver, the source of life. When humankind ceased to praise, bless and give thanks, we turned away from this divine source of life, and slid into death (cf. Romans 1:20-32). In the self-offering of Christ for us, our vocation is renewed, and we especially live out this vocation in the Divine Liturgy when the priest, speaking for all the faithful, proclaims: “*Thine own of thine own we offer unto Thee.*” Thus, praise and thanksgiving—most perfectly realized in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist—is the life of the world; it is made possible and actualized through Jesus Christ and in His Body, the Church. In a very real sense, life depends on us, on each local parish, to offer such worship.

Life Through the Holy Eucharist

The Lord taught his disciples that He is “*the bread of life... the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.*” Christ goes on and states: “*the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world...He who eats My*

flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6: 48-51, 56). The center of our worship is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in which we partake of divine life through the Body and Blood of Christ. Each of us is personally vivified through participation in Christ, nurtured through the holy sacraments. This is *“a real birth and a sharing with the only-begotten Son, not of the surname only, but of His very Being, His Blood, His Body, His Life...[so] that the Father of the only-begotten Son Himself recognizes in us His members and finds the very form of the Son in our faces”* (St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 4.9). What a great mystery! How amazing to be so conformed to Christ so that His face becomes our face! And what a transforming miracle to not only have the face of Christ but also to see Christ’s face in every person we encounter! Such is the transfigured life imparted to us through the holy mysteries.

As we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, each of us personally, and most especially the Church in her unity, becomes the very presence of Christ in the world. But what happens when we cannot receive the Holy Eucharist because of certain conditions beyond our control, for instance, the COVID-19 global pandemic? Many times, the conditions of our reality have interrupted the regular worship of the Church. Throughout history, humanity has had to grapple with such things as disease, natural disasters, war, and persecution, all of which have interrupted parish liturgical life. While they may interrupt us, they cannot break the Church. No matter the context, we continue to worship as one united body by adding the voice of our “home church” (κατ’ οἶκον Ἐκκλησία, cf. 1Cor 16:19), to the choir of angels, saints, martyrs and the faithful of all ages. We experience ourselves as the one Body of Christ, the Church, not because of geographical proximity to each other but rather through Christ’s Body and Blood that streams through our beings, and by the unifying presence of the All-Holy Spirit.

This new life in Christ, granted to us and nurtured through the holy sacraments, also grows through the labor and guidance of prayer, and through keeping Christ’s commandments. God creates and intends us to live in unity with Him, and grants us His grace, but we also must seek and labor to receive His grace. We are to put off the

old man and put on the new, created according to God (Eph 4:22-24), imitators of God, walking in love as Christ has loved us (Eph 5:1-2), walking as children of light who seek what is pleasing to the Lord (Eph 5:8-10).

A Living Parish: Works of Mercy and Love Bear Life for Us and Others

We do not cease to be the Church when we finish our communal worship and prayers; we offer our newfound life in Christ to the world. We often refer to this phase in our daily lives as “the Liturgy after the Liturgy” because we are called to share the transfigured life with others. Through the sacraments we are renewed, clothed “*with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator*” (Colossians 3:10). As new people, we also act in a new way, the way of love: we now “*put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering...above all these things, put on love, which is the bond of perfection*” (Colossians 3: 12, 14). The change within us must translate to the way we live and how we act. Surely, we can all offer simple acts of generosity, compassion and service to those in need, and there are countless ways to reach out. Both personally and together, though the ministries of outreach in our parishes, we can take action. For example, we can work in a soup kitchen, gather goods for a food pantry, take part in Orthodox prison ministry, write letters or visit those in hospitals or nursing homes, distribute “blessing bags” to those on the streets of the inner city, fundraise for various charities, or step in to help wherever we see a need. Most recently, the Metropolis of Chicago has commissioned *HOPE*, our effort to help bring together the efforts of our parishes, local civil authorities, and other local organizations in an effort to help deepen our humanitarian impact in society.² When we take this kind of action, we lift others up in the life and love of Christ.

² For more information about *HOPE*, please visit: chicago.goarch.org/HOPE

A Living Parish: Sharing the Good News

The greatest gift of life that Christians offer the world is the Gospel of God's victory over death and of salvation made possible through the new life in Christ. Jesus tells us that He is the Truth the Way and the Life, and that none come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The Gospel is the gift of divine love that brings eternal life to the entire world. Unfortunately, not everyone has heard 'the Good News,' τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον, which means that we Orthodox Christians have a responsibility to share what we have received with all those around us. St. Paul urges us to take action when he says, *"And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how shall they hear without someone preaching?"* (Romans 10:14). The work of the apostolate is the greatest act of love Christians can offer to others. St. Symeon the New Theologian reminds us of this connection between love and sharing the Gospel when he says: *"By this is known a love that is in accordance with God, that one should not only seek to gain possession of the good for oneself, but also strive to make its riches known to one's brethren and urge them on to seek it, and find it, and be enriched by it"* (Discourse 32:94-98).

Christ exhorted his apostles, and through them He exhorts the whole Church, to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). This is not a job for someone else; it is our work as Christ's disciples. He gives this commandment to us as an expectation to be fulfilled by the Church, not in some broad or esoteric sense, but rather as a living action to be carried out by each Christian in each parish. The harsh reality revealed by recent statistics is that we are not growing our parish communities, people are not embracing the Orthodox Church, and some—including beloved friends and family—are leaving the Church. Now is the time for our parishes to embrace with enthusiasm this charge to bring the Gospel to others, and actively invite everyone to Christ. Now is the time to move beyond what we have already done, and think and act in ways that make the parish a welcoming and dynamic community that offers Christ to all people.

We undertake this work of sharing the Gospel one-by-one with those people we encounter every day, each of us striving to be a reflection of that “Light that lightens the world.” We do this work as parishes that reach out to our neighbors and communities to show them the true example of what Christians are and what they do. We share the Gospel through missionary work in the local community, through support of missionaries who travel to other nations spreading the Word, and through works of mercy and outreach, such as care for the hungry and homeless. Knowledge of the faith necessarily breeds action in sharing the love of Christ with others through good works. Finally, in Christ’s words we hear the exhortation both to share the Gospel with others and to grow continually in our own faith. A living parish, therefore, offers a new life in Christ through many avenues of education and participation, including Church school for children, adult religious education, Bible studies, workshops and retreats, the Sunday sermons by the parish priest, prayer groups, and expanded worship opportunities.

CONCLUSION



Gifted with the grace of new life in Christ, we are called to share “living water” with a suffering world. In this, we are to imitate the Mother of God, the Theotokos, who gives life to the world through giving birth to the Source of life. Even though we cannot physically give birth to the Incarnate God as she did, we can become Christ-bearers, making Him truly present to the world through our lives. This is the Gospel, the Good News, which we share with the world, the joy of reconciliation and new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the gift of life we celebrate at Pascha and at every Sunday Divine Liturgy—and, indeed, at every moment of our lives.

We begin the Fervent Litany asking for *mercy*, and then for *life*. How helpless and needy we are when we cry out to our Lord for mercy, depending on Him for everything, even, and especially, for life in

all its forms—biological life, spiritual life, and eternal life. Exploring these themes through these first two Annual Archpastoral Teachings has led us better to understand what God offers to us in these blessings, and how they change us. We have seen that we become the doers of mercy through the divine mercy we receive, and the givers of life to the world through the divine life God pours out for us and in us. In our prayer of intercession in the Fervent Litany, we then move to a plea for *peace*, the grace that brings reconciliation, restores unity and enables life to thrive, and which will be the focus of our next Teaching.

As we begin the new Ecclesiastical year, let us give thanks to God for the magnificent gift of life that He has given us, even in the midst of all the uncertainties and challenges that are facing us. Throughout this Ecclesiastical year, and for every day of our lives, let us rejoice in the new life bestowed by the Holy Trinity, and let us sing ceaselessly the great hymn of the Orthodox faith that we declare and offer to the world: “Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling on death, and to those in the tombs He has granted life!”

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

†NATHANAEL



Metropolitan of Chicago



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