



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS ^{OF} ATLANTA

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΑΤΛΑΝΤΑΣ

April 15, 2020

To the Reverend Clergy and Monastics,
the esteemed Archons,
the esteemed Parish Council Presidents and members
the esteemed Philoptochos Presidents and members,
And all the faithful of the Metropolis of Atlanta:

My Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

As we approach the middle of Holy Week, I wish to offer some thoughts during an uncertain time. We have heard stories of grandparents separated from their grandchildren; and though this is an understandable protection, it is still painful. Similarly, as spiritual people, it is understandable that we miss being in the home of our Heavenly Father, who took on flesh for our sakes, and gave Himself up, as the Divine Liturgy says, “...for the life of the world.” However, despite our absence from our parishes, Christ is risen from the dead—whether or not we are in church.

If we think of the life of St. Mary of Egypt, she was literally not permitted to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchere because she was a great sinner. Another way of looking at her story though, is not that God was denying her the sacramental life, but He was guiding her. I do not try to judge when I say that we too live in sin, whether these sins are in our desire for material things, or in our relationships. Therefore, we should consider the Coronavirus not as a punishment from God, but as opportunity to grow closer to Him. Our Heavenly Father is the God of Love, forever ready to welcome us, Prodigal Sons and Daughters, if we show a willingness to repent.

I was blessed to receive a message from an Abbess whom I greatly respect, Gerondissa Thekla of the Convent of the Panagia Panagoritissa in Quebec, Canada. Her message, which I will quote in part, offers a beautiful reflection on the power of God, even in the absence of Eucharist.

To summarize, when the Gerondissa first entered the monastic life, a lack of monks and priests meant that her convent did not receive the Eucharist on the Great Feasts. The Abbess writes that instead of complaining or becoming angry (as the Devil wishes), “*We would fast as if preparing for Holy Communion, we would gather together in our chapel which was an extension to a hallway... We would read the services and at the end, our Most Holy Gerondissa Makrina would “commune” us by giving us Great Holy Water and Holy Bread. She would always counsel us that, “If we would be as we should be spiritually, then it is possible noetically to receive Holy Communion from Holy Angels, just like we have read many times in the lives of the Saints.”*

Gerondissa Thekla goes on to describe the “...many heavenly moments which we never encountered again even after when we had a permanent priest and would serve forty-day liturgies... The chapel would be fragrant as if someone had sprinkled it all over with myrrh. Our eyes would stream with endless tears. Our heart would leap from the Grace of God. On the days that we supposedly “communed”, without even realizing it, we would speak softly because we felt as if we had partaken in some sacred ceremony. Saying the prayer, our mouth would taste as if we had taken a very fragrant candy. We would feel the presence of Holy Communion, even though we had not received it... No matter what I write, it is not possible to describe the feeling of Christ’s grace that we lived back in those days of deprivation, because there are not words to express this.”

In a few years, the number of Priests’ grew, but when her obedience brought her to Canada, a similar situation occurred. Though there were enough clergymen to serve the Sisters during weekday Liturgies, the priests’ responsibilities to their home parishes meant that, again, the nuns were left alone to support the younger novices during the Great Feasts. However, the Gerondissa had not forgotten how a lack of Communion had mysteriously uplifted her. “...Whoever prepares themselves with humility, without grumbling and protesting, but with much prayer and faith in the Providence of God, and receives Holy water and Holy Bread in replacement of Holy Communion and contemplates that theoretically “God did not permit me to receive Holy Communion, as being “unworthy and unprepared”, then this person will be filled by God’s grace of endurance of martyrdom, of which Saint Luke the doctor would say: “I loved much the grace of martyrdom, which so wonderfully cleanses the soul”.

If you still feel sadness at missing Divine Liturgy, I only ask that you think, not only of Gerondissa Thekla, but again, of St. Mary of Egypt. When she became an ascetic, she lived for 47 years without any community at all. She did not attend church and received Holy Communion only once. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” (Corinthians 3:16) St. Mary of Egypt knew this, which is how, despite living without any sort of community, St. Mary was still a faithful Orthodox Christian who lived in purity, until she was prepared to greet her Heavenly Father. And so, my beloved, I encourage all of us to take strength, for as long as we may be apart from one another, it will certainly not be the 47 years which St. Mary dedicated to her spiritual life.

I would like to take these thoughts just a step further: how many times in our life do we use the many wonderful media tools we have, simply for pleasure—whether for movies, television or sports? Like St. Mary of Egypt, before her conversion, we too are focused on these things which make us feel “better”, but really provide no true spiritual nourishment. In spite of the fact that we cannot attend the services, I, His Grace Bishop Sevastianos, your clergymen, and our Archbishop, His Eminence Elpidophoros, continue to commemorate this Holy Week, as well as to honor those fighting this virus, the sick, and those who have fallen asleep.

I firmly agree with the Gerondissa when she writes of this pandemic that, “The tempter wanted to close the churches; let us make our homes into churches. He shut 11

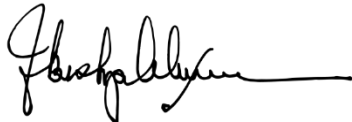
churches; let us open 11 thousand. May each home become a church; let prayer be raised like a torch of fire towards heaven; let the incense fragrance all the neighbourhoods; may the candle and the vigil lamp always be lit. Let us attend the services through electronic correspondence, praying together... If we do this, instead of closing down the churches, they will grow and spread and whole cities will become churches. Then God will give His blessing, and seeing our repentance and our faith, He will cast away this evil plague and give us the freedom along with our churches to live many years working for Him."

I think of that phrase, "...working for Him." How, especially, can we work for Him during this time, this struggle, which as St. Paul says, "...is not against flesh and blood, but against... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)? Let us look at this time in our homes, not only as a time for spiritual growth, but living out the Word of the Lord, who instructed us to feed, clothe and visit those in need: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40). Even in this time of social distancing, we can still care for those who are vulnerable, by helping provide their food and their basic needs, or just to call our friends and remind them we love them.

I offer all these thoughts to encourage positivity in this time when it seems negative. Participate in all the coming Holy Week services throughout the Metropolis: offer your own processions, respond to the petitions. Truly, when we are together in prayer, we are together in spirit, even if we are far from one another physically.

Please know that you have my love and blessings, praying for your forgiveness, as I hope you will also pray for me. May we grow, so that when God gives us the ability to be together in person, our prayers and hymns will be full of the Paschal spirit. I remain,

Paternally yours with love in the Lord

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alexios', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

+ ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta