

To the Reverend Clergy and Monastics, Parish Council Presidents & Parish Council Members, Brother Archons & Sisters of Philoptochos, and to the Youth of the Metropolis of Atlanta:

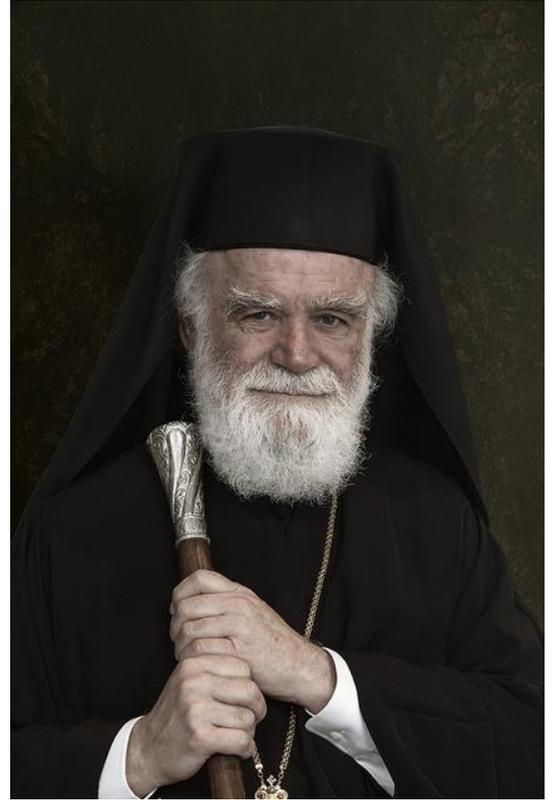
My Beloved Ones,

This coming week, we will be blessed to experience a fresh start, as we mark the Ecclesiastical New Year on Wednesday, September 1st. As Orthodox Christians, we are so blessed to experience a new year three months before the secular new year ends. This means we have an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual changes we can make in our lives, and in turn, how we might use our growth to benefit our society.

Particularly as we have also just begun a new academic year, it seems to me that the Gospel for the New Year is especially appropriate: as both God and Man, our Lord was, as a man, a diligent student of the Scriptures. We read on September 1st, how our Lord enters the Synagogue at Nazareth, and taking the scroll of Isaiah, he reads the prophecy that concerns Himself. We pray that our students' eyes will be opened like the eyes of the blind man, and that grace of the Holy Spirit which transformed Disciples will grant our young people discernment, understanding and wisdom in learning. Truly, it is this same Spirit which inspires our Lord to declare His mission. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Luke 4:18-19)

"The year of the Lord's favor" is indeed a powerful phrase; so powerful, in fact, that it may seem difficult to believe in a fallen world such as ours. How can this Ecclesiastical New Year represent the year of the Lord's favor when our society is so divided and in such pain? Truly, when faced with such obstacles, it can be a temptation to fall into despair as we ask, "How can I, as one person, help to make change happen?" However, the simplest way to better our society, is to try to change it at the smallest level: first, in our own hearts, and then extending to our families, friends, neighbors, school classmates, and among our parish homes.

When we can demonstrate kindness to those classmates and friends who are less fortunate; when we can show mercy to those with whom we disagree, then our fellow human beings can see the Light of Christ working within us; the same Christ whom, as St. Paul says in today's First Letter to Timothy, was *"...himself human..."* and *"...who gave himself a ransom for all."* (1 Timothy 2:5-6) We are called to echo the sacrificial love of Christ as we take up our own crosses, and this is the kind of radical difference from a materialistically oriented and self-interested society, that will help to begin that



process of change. When our coworker, or our fellow student sees us overcome our judgements with compassion, maybe they will take this lesson into their hearts, thereby spreading the Gospel message to their family, friends, and neighbors. Like the Paschal candle, this light will grow from a single flame in a darkened sanctuary, to encompass our world, then eventually, the whole world.

My beloved ones, as I extend my prayers and blessings for a peaceful beginning of both the Ecclesiastical New Year & the new academic year, I ask that you also pray for me, and for your brothers and sisters in Christ. May we all, by our prayers to the Lord, become instruments of His Holy Spirit, providing the light that our world needs so very much.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta