My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

I cannot think of a time when I have felt something so close to despair. Despite long, personal familiarity with the phenomenon of depression, the current situations of our nation and world seem as dark as I have ever experienced them. Depression has to do with one's own thoughts and can be quite independent of external reality. What is going on in me at this time is not that.

War, political turmoil and polarization, the rise of "strongman" autocracies and the manifest fragility of democracies throughout the world, an economy in trouble, all of this and more occurring in the context of a pandemic that is not done with us yet—it's all too, too much.

Then I think of the cross. The miserable, tortured, undeserved death Jesus endured on that wood is not after all so different from the fate so many have endured and are enduring now. And that is precisely the point.

God's identification with suffering humanity is total. This is what the cross demonstrates. The creator of all joins with creation in its depths, in its depravity, in its despair, all to raise it to the height of inconceivable glory and grace.

Being a Christian does not mean you will not suffer, of course. Close fellowship with Jesus does not mean you will not become ill, suffer hunger, or be slaughtered in war. It certainly does not mean you will escape the death that is the fate of every human being without exception. The cross, that is, the death of God in Christ—if it is true—is the proof of this, as if one needed proof.

Being a Christian does mean that you accept this as the truth and are willing to bet your life on it. It does mean that Jesus Christ is with you in your hunger, your illness, your poverty, your despair, your torture, and in your death. He is right in there with you, alongside you, as he was alongside the repentant thief as they both hung in the throes of an unspeakably painful death: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43 NABre).

Our attention has been turned from the resurrection as the only solution to the problems humanity faces or has ever faced. God, in Jesus, does not keep us from dying—He dies along with us. We, for our part, rise along with him to a life we can scarcely imagine.
I have personally wrestled with this truth of our faith, as I am sure you have, too. My present circumstances of grief and mourning have challenged me to make more of my faith than piety or nostalgia. Facing death with all its destructive brutality in one’s own life and experience is the price of admission to the grand spectacle of God’s world, the awesome drama of God’s loving design for you, for me, and for the cosmos.

“Christ is risen!” is more than a slogan or soundbite. It is not a catchy phrase that gains market credibility by being stitched onto a hat or printed on a t-shirt. It is either the core of one’s being, or it is nothing at all. And if it is not nothing, then it is the key to overcoming the fear and despair that haunts us in our darker hours.

So may God personally engrave “Christ is risen” on your heart, since we cannot do so for ourselves. My prayer for you is that the light flooding from the empty tomb on the Third Day may illuminate all the dark spaces where fear and hopelessness dwell in you, whether it be fear of others, fear of the future, or the debilitating hopelessness that waits on hand to devour one’s very spirit. In the Holy Spirit, may the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the omnipotent love of the Father be the dynamic power you need to conquer whatever is trying to conquer you today.

As the Church, upon the wishes of the Holy Father, has consecrated Ukraine, Russia, and itself to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, so I likewise commend you to the protection and loving care of our devoted Mother. Let us pray for one another, for our country, for our Church, and for our world, that the “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) may prevail in our present, anxious circumstances.

Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

In the love of our Lord,

(Most Reverend) John Michael Botean, DD
a sinner,
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Pascha, 2022 A.D.