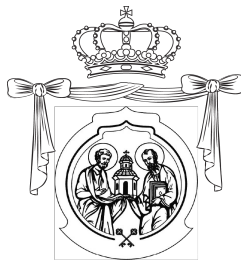


His Eminence
The Most Reverend
Metropolitan JOSEPH

The Right Reverend
Bishop THOMAS



Archbishop of New York and
Metropolitan of
All North America

Diocese of Oakland, Charleston,
and the Mid-Atlantic

ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA

GREAT AND HOLY PASCHA 2019

Beloved brother Hierarchs, Reverend Clergy, God-fearing Monastics, and all my Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ our True God:

Christ is risen! Indeed, He is risen! Glory to Jesus Christ, glory forever!

In the resplendent feast of Pascha there is a seeming contradiction. However, it is a contradiction only to the worldly-wise. Throughout the Great Fast, we are exhorted to make the effort to struggle ascetically, to put forth the effort to fast, to pray, and to give alms. The kontakion of the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete exemplifies this exhortation, "My soul, my soul arise! Why art thou sleeping? The end is drawing near and you will be confounded. Awake then and be watchful, that you may be spared by Christ God, Who is everywhere and fills all things."

In the fifth Sunday of Great Lent, we are given the example and writing of Saint John Climacus and told to "Ascend, my brothers, ascend eagerly. Let your hearts' resolve to climb. Listen to the voice of the one who says: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of our God' (Isa. 2:3), Who makes our feet to be like the feet of the deer, 'Who sets us on the high places, that we may be triumphant on His road' (Hab. 3:19)"

This exhortation is intensified the next week when we commemorate Saint Mary of Egypt who struggled ascetically for 47 years in the desert after living a life of debauchery.

Yet, when we arrive at this holiest of feasts Saint John Chrysostom exhorts, or so it seems, to the contrary:

"Let all pious men and all lovers of God rejoice in the splendor of this feast; let the wise servants blissfully enter into the joy of their Lord; let those who have borne the burden of Lent now receive their pay, and those who have toiled since the first hour, let them now receive their due reward; let any who came after the third hour be grateful to join in the feast, and those who may have come after the sixth, let them not be afraid of being too late, for the Lord is gracious and He receives the last even as the first. He gives rest to him who comes on the eleventh hour as well as to him who has toiled since the first: yes, He has pity on the last and He serves the first; He rewards the one and is generous to the other; he repays the deed and praises the effort.

Come you all: enter into the joy of your Lord. You the first and you the last, receive alike your reward; you rich and you poor, dance together; you sober and you weaklings, celebrate the day; you who have kept the fast and you who have not, rejoice today. The table is richly loaded: enjoy its royal banquet. The calf is a fatted one: let no one go away hungry. All of you enjoy the banquet of faith; all of you receive the riches of his goodness.

Let no one grieve over his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed; let no one weep over his sins, for pardon has shone from the grave; let no one fear death, for the death of our Savior has set us free: He has destroyed it by enduring it, He has despoiled Hades by going down into its kingdom, He has angered it by allowing it to taste of his flesh."

"The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11: 26)

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Yet, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear (Matthew 13:9-16) this is no contradiction at all but truth. It is in truth, the divine economy.

In his Paschal Orations, Saint Gregory the Theologian reminds us that our spiritual efforts continue and intensify in the glow of Paschal joy.

Yesterday I was crucified with Him; today I am glorified with Him.

Yesterday I died with Him; today I am made alive with Him.

Yesterday I was buried with Him; today I am raised up with Him.

*Let us offer to Him Who suffered and rose again for us ... ourselves,
the possession most precious to God and most proper.*

Let us become like Christ, since Christ became like us.

Let us become Divine for His sake, since for us He became Man.

He assumed the worse that He might give us the better. He became poor that by His poverty we might become rich. He accepted the form of a servant that we might win back our freedom.

He came down that we might be lifted up. He was tempted that through Him we might conquer. He was dishonored that He might glorify us. He died that He might save us. He ascended that He might draw to Himself us, who were thrown down through the fall of sin.

Let us give all, offer all, to Him who gave Himself a Ransom and Reconciliation for us.

We needed an incarnate God, a God put to death, that we might live. We were put to death together with Him that we might be cleansed. We rose again with Him because we were put to death with Him. We were glorified with Him because we rose again with Him.

A few drops of Blood recreate the whole of creation!

The purpose of our ascetical struggle during Great Lent is not a moral one but an ontological one. Saint Paul provides us with the integral insight into this great mystery.

“I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

The entirety of the Great Fast and Holy Pascha is not about moral improvement but rather our efforts to cleave to Christ Himself. If we cling to Christ and discard our own self, we live eternally. The spiritual life is about this and only this. We remain unworthy. We confess this unworthiness to Christ Who alone can save us. We must cling to Christ! No other person, no other method can save us. We are not saved through fasting or ascetical struggle. These are means to an end - cleaving to the Savior Who loves us and wants to save us is the only remedy to heal what ails us.

Glory to Thy holy Resurrection, O Lord!

Unworthily, I ask for your holy prayers during this paschal season.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bishop Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt. Rev. Bishop THOMAS (Joseph)
Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic

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