



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR GREAT AND HOLY PASCHA 2021

Protocol No. 01-002/2021
Great and Holy Pascha
Sunday, May 2nd, 2021

Dearly Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen!

***Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is risen, and life reigns!
Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave!***

These powerful words from the Catechetical Sermon of St. John Chrysostom, proclaimed during the Matins of Pascha, set the tone for our celebration of the Feast of Feasts this year. As we do every Pascha, we praise our Resurrected Savior for His glorious victory over sin and death and the devil. We proclaim with unbridled joy: “Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen!” over and over again in as many languages as we can muster ... and with triumphant voices, we sing the hymn: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!” over and over again, in as many tongues as possible.

But this Pascha our celebration takes on new meaning. It was only last year that we found ourselves marking the Day of Resurrection much like the Apostles themselves did on the first Holy Pascha: “*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week ... the doors of the house where the disciples were gathered were locked for fear ...*” (John 20:19). We too found ourselves at home, behind closed doors, for protection from the coronavirus. We were able to grasp first-hand the confusion and sadness of the disciples, before that sadness was turned into joy with the Risen Christ’s appearances to them!

Beloved of the Lord: This unseen enemy sought to destroy two of the most essential aspects of our Orthodox Christian lifestyle – communion and community. By keeping us away from the Church, it cut us off from communion with Christ! His precious words pierce our hearts: “*Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you. He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*” (John 6:53-54). And by keeping the members of our parish family from each other, the pandemic introduced a separation in one of the essential marks of Christ’s Church since its very beginning: *koinonia* ... community: “*Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common*” (Acts 2:44).

Hopefully, in the midst of this unprecedented challenge, we were each able to strengthen our personal relationship with the Lord at our Icon Corner each day and night, and we made our home “a little church” for our spouses and children to pray together, read the Scriptures, and offer Reader Services in lieu of attending our temples.

As we are now blessed to begin safely attending divine services and gathering with our parish families, we must give thanks to God. We of course must proceed cautiously and safely, but we can again participate in the liturgical and sacramental life of our Church and the sacred fellowship of our communities. We must not forget that although modern technology has afforded us the opportunity to join in divine services via live stream, nothing is able to replace our being physically present in the House of the Lord and personally participating in the Holy Mysteries!

With the victory of our Savior over every form of darkness that comes from the devil, it is necessary for us to reclaim communion with Christ and community with each other ... slowly, perhaps, but definitely to be sure. It is my fervent prayer that our faithful will return to their churches, not just for Holy Week and Pascha, but each and every week according to the parish's schedule. Only in this way can our fear and isolation be transformed into love and fellowship. We have the assurance of the Lord not to be afraid: *"I am with you always, even to the very end of the world"* (Matthew 28:20). And there is no better time to begin than now – with the Feast of Feasts, Holy Pascha!

The events of our salvation, effected by Christ's love for us expressed in His Death on the Cross and His Resurrection from the Tomb, are presented to us each Holy Week in the divine services, the Scriptural readings, the sacred hymns, and the beautiful processions and other traditions that we treasure. These experiences are meant to inspire us to reflect each day on the depth of the love God has for each and every one of us ... and they are meant to encourage us to respond in kind, with our personal prayer life, our communal liturgical worship, and our obedience to His commandments.

But, my beloved, we must take our sacred Tradition one bold step further. We must strengthen our commitment to Christ. We must be changed in our way of life, and not compromised by the ways of the world. We must follow the example of the Saints, whose ranks we should seek to join. We must put into practice the words of the Apostle Paul: *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"* (Romans 12:2). And we must share in words and deeds the new hope and new life ... the forgiveness and reconciliation ... that Holy Pascha offers to each of us and to all the world. What more appropriate a message could we possibly offer to our brothers and sisters according to the image of God, who likewise have suffered not only through the pandemic but also the social unrest of the past year?

The Glorious Resurrection of Christ is the victory of the Light over darkness, Love over hate, Salvation over sin, and Life over death. It is the ultimate Triumph of the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves. As we share in it, may it bring us and those around us great joy and renewed gladness ... for *Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen!*

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing and my sincere love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Archbishop Michael".

Archbishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey