



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

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ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF HOLY PENTECOST 2024

Protocol No. 01-003/2024
Sunday, June 23, 2024

Dearly Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

*“And the Lord added to the Church daily
those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).*

On this blessed Pentecost Sunday, I am mindful of how many times I have preached about Evangelism and growing our Holy Orthodox Church in America ... and how often I have said how much all of us would wish for a Pentecost moment in our parishes, where 3,000 individuals joined the Faith and were baptized at one time ... but that the more frequent experience of the first years of Church history presented in the Acts of the Apostles is of one person, one household, *one person*, one family, *one person* at a time ... coming to receive Christ, initiated in the holy Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist.

However, this Pentecost presents us with a new story to report in our parishes and in the Diocese. New people are coming to our churches, learning about our faith and converting to Orthodoxy in our communities – and not only our parishes and our Diocese, but in all the other Orthodox jurisdictions and in all the other regions of our country. Perhaps not in the thousands – but in the tens and twenties and thirties, to be sure – and in some cases even more! It is, I believe, a record number of inquirers, catechumens and recent converts who are joining themselves to our Faith in this country.

These are sincere people, searching for the True Faith, seeking the True Church, yearning for the life and love of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. As we thank God for this great gift ... we must ask ourselves the question, Are we prepared to properly receive them into the Church of undivided Christianity and grow them in the “faith delivered to the Saints once for all” (Jude 3) in our parishes?

On the first Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit ... they preached the Gospel to everyone they came into contact with. Peter offered a simple, single sermon, and “about three thousand souls were added to them” (Acts 2:41). On this Pentecost 2024, are we filled with the same Spirit, willing to share our faith with anyone we meet, ready to receive everyone the Lord brings to our diocesan churches?

Those now coming to our communities have made a bold decision, traveled a great distance, sometimes visited several traditions before making the choice to embrace the Church whose birthday we celebrate this very day! We must make certain that we offer them permanent membership in the Body of Christ ... ours cannot be for them just another “stop” on a never-ending quest. Here lies the challenge.

Many of them have come to Orthodoxy through the internet, from reading books, or from listening to speakers. Most of them know the Scripture, Church history, the teaching of the Holy Fathers and the great councils, and are enthusiastically learning the lives of the Saints. But Orthodoxy is much more than intellectual, academic, scholastic knowledge ... it is in the words of Acts “a way” of life – the lived experience of the living God. The early Church was a community which worshipped Christ the Savior, received His Body and His Blood, and offered the same to those who did not yet have these blessings.

Saint Luke provides us this model description of the first community of Orthodox Christians two millennia ago: *“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking the Bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:44-47).

This is an account of daily, lived experience – a way of life, not just “head” knowledge of a creed. The converts of the first Pentecost did not have a catechumenate before Peter’s sermon ... but they spent the rest of their lives after their Baptism learning and growing in the faith, practicing its precepts and sharing its graces – which is what we know as the ongoing process of “theosis” – becoming like God.

For us Orthodox, this process begins at baptism, even if that happens as an infant. Our Church is the only one that makes our children “full members of the faith” at 40 days old ... and they spend the rest of their lives, growing in the faith **by experience**. Children learn to kiss the icons, bless themselves, or come to Communion **by experience**. And that experience begins in the parish church and is sustained in the family. Children imitate what they see their parents doing in the parish church and in their home.

This is the Biblical formula of the Old Covenant – children were named (and males circumcised) on the 8th day ... presented in the Temple on the 40th day ... grew in the faith into adulthood as members of the *qahal* (the Old Testament church). Such was the experience of our Lord Himself ... which is why we embrace it ... this is why even whole families ... whole households (that included infants and children) were baptized in the early Church (Acts 11:14; 16:15; 16:31-33; 18:8; and I Cor. 1:16).

My point here is this: our new inquirers, catechumens and converts need catechetical instruction in Orthodoxy, to be sure ... but that is not enough. They need to experience the faith, live the Way, in the family of the Church. But what if their family at home isn’t Orthodox? Perhaps their biological family is not yet Orthodox, but their parish family is ... and it is up to us to give them that experience – by teaching, yes; but even more so by example! The example handed down to us by the Saints, who received it from generations before them ... back to the early Church.

Therefore, on this Pentecost Sunday, grateful for the gift of the record number of new members of our diocesan family, I urge all our parishes to ensure a joyful welcome, a smooth transition, and a lifelong commitment for these individuals who have been added to our “family in faith” – by studying and following this checklist:

- 1) Everyone who comes through the doors of our church is greeted warmly and lovingly and welcomed into the embrace of Our Lord through the care and kindness of all our parish family;
- 2) A solid presentation of catechism is offered to these new members, teaching them the faith in general and addressing the specific questions and challenges they bring from their previous faith experience;
- 3) We should learn from each new person their “conversion story” – where they came from and how they got here – and celebrate their adoption into our family of faith;
- 4) We should also share our story: how we were raised, why we joined, why we stayed, or how we returned if we had strayed ... all of us are converts like them, even if we were baptized at 40 days old; and
- 5) Most importantly, we must guide them in the lived experience of Orthodoxy ... by our best possible example; we must teach them the Way of life that our faith embodies – a life of prayer and fasting, attending services and reading Scripture, participating in holydays with processions and prostrations, receiving faithfully and frequently the Sacraments of Confession and Communion, offering our time, talent and treasure to the service of our parish, and helping in any way we can those in need in our family, our neighborhood, our parish or the strangers whom we meet.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: we cannot love something we do not know. It is true in friendship ... especially true in marriage; but it is also true in the case of our faith. We cannot love the Church unless we know her and revere her ... and we get to know her by experience, according to Orthodox Tradition. And as members of the Church, we must be examples to those who join our family of that lived and loved experience – which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, Who brings all who come to Christ to faith in Him.

On this joyous Pentecost, let us all resolve to re-ignite the flame of the Holy Spirit, lit in our hearts on the moment of our Chrismation, and continue to come closer to Christ, following the model of the saints before us, becoming more and more like God ... and offering our experience in the Church to those who have come seeking the True Faith in our parishes and missions, and helping them to finally have the home they have sought in our family of faith.

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

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