

ARCHPASTORAL ADDRESS  
STATE OF THE DIOCESE 2014

When Pilate called Jesus and asked Him: “*Art Thou the King...? ... What hast Thou done?*”, the Lord answered him: “*My Kingdom is not of this world, ... now is My Kingdom not from hence.*” Pilate therefore said unto Him: “*Art Thou a King then?*” Jesus answered: “*Thou sayest that I am a King. ... For this cause came I into this world, that I should bear witness unto the Truth. Every one that is of the Truth heareth My voice.*” (John 18:33-37)

Now, what do you think about our condition, our position, our state of the Diocese? What is our life and in what attitude are our works in the Diocese? Is every one of us and every diocesan church and mission bearing witness “*unto the Truth*” – unto our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and do we in this Diocese hear His voice?

Several years ago a group of pilgrims from our Diocese visited Holy Mount Athos. Our intention was to see the real monastic way of life and to try to understand if we, the clergy and the faithful of our diocesan churches, can follow it in the world or not.

Fr. Archpriest Patrick Tishel expressed the same question very simply in his article in *The Good Seeds*, the newsletter of the St. Herman School: “How should we live our life in the world with families, children and busy schedules?”

As your Diocesan Metropolitan I am so pleased to tell you that this spirit of monasticism and monastic spiritual way of life is still alive in our Diocese.

Therefore, in this state of the diocese address, I will share with you how important for us it is to recognize all these good endeavors, to value and encourage their growth so that they may fully flourish in us. Our Orthodox faith is not an abstract academic subject, but an Orthodox way of life, a revelation of God, informed by participation in the Divine Liturgy, asceticism and prayer.

Fr. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose (of blessed memory) believed that authentic Orthodox Christian life is very difficult, and that one must grasp and hold onto it firmly with all of one's might, with a certain "toughness" and tenacity, even a fierceness, because everything in the world, everything in this life, is constantly trying to steal it away and substitute some cheap imitation.

Never forgetting the necessity of forcing himself in the Orthodox Christian spiritual life, Fr. Seraphim lived according to the following words of St. Macarius the Great: “In coming to the Lord, a man must force himself to that which is good even against the inclination of his heart, continually expecting His mercy with undoubting faith and force himself to love when he has no love, force himself when he has no meekness, force himself to pity and to have a merciful heart, force himself to be looked down upon, and when he is looked down upon to bear it patiently... force himself to pray when he has no spiritual prayer. And thus God, beholding him thus striving and compelling himself by force, in spite of an unwilling heart, gives him the true prayer of the Spirit, gives him true love, meekness, ‘bowels of mercies’ (Col. 3:12), true kindness, and in short fills him with spiritual fruit.” (Father Seraphim Rose, His Life and Works, pp. 458-459).

In speaking about the meaning of our life (on the Holy Mountain of Athos or in the world), Fr. Seraphim applied even to laymen in parishes: “We should strive, according to Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov's advice, to have Mount Athos in our hearts.” (p.463).

So, the meaning of our life, the ultimate goal of our lives, is to strive for salvation, to one day reach the Kingdom of Heaven. Knowing that, at any point in our lives, so much can change in a matter of seconds, we are challenged to fulfill each opportunity that we have, always keeping our actions oriented to salvation. This may seem frightening, but this doesn't mean that each of us is called to be a monk or nun; rather, it means working toward salvation in common ways, such as taking the initiative when someone is in need, whether it is emotionally, physically or spiritually. Opportunities to do this are thrown at us every day, perhaps in the simple form of standing up for someone, or loving someone and praying for them.

Knowing how challenging this can be, we are provided with many useful tools to help us, such as Holy Scripture, the sacraments of the Church and the writings of the Church Fathers. The Holy Scriptures along with the sacraments, are medicine for our spiritual healing. They can give us strength, comfort and guidance. The Holy Scripture is ever-present in the life of our diocesan Church, which models how it can also benefit us in our personal lives. Also, one thing that I love about our Orthodox Study Bible is that it contains a section where it offers specific psalms for comfort, strength, guidance, and so forth.

First of all we, who are in this world, also believe and know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as the sanctification of our souls and bodies. Externally, the one who is in Christ does not look any different from a criminal; it is internally that he is in

Christ. There is a story in the Gerontikon, which is a collection of the sayings and stories of the early desert fathers, when St. Anthony the Great asks God where he should go to see someone who had attained the grace of the desert ascetics, and God sent him to a cobbler. When St. Anthony announced that the Lord had sent him to be taught by the cobbler, the latter replied: “I, Abba, have never done anything good. I only struggle to keep the holy teachings of the Gospel. And further, I try never to forget my shortcomings and my spiritual fruitlessness. Therefore, as I work during the day, I think and say to myself: ‘O wretched man, all will be saved and only you will remain fruitless. Because of your sin, you will never be worthy to see His Holy Face.’ ” St. Anthony, greatly edified, upon leaving, reflected: “Humility! This therefore is the quickest path to the gate of Paradise; Humility is the robe in which God clothed Himself and came to earth as Man.”

The cobbler is now in the position of St. Anthony. St. Anthony is not as great as a cobbler: one who is unknown, unrecognized by the world, and yet living in the same holiness of life. That is the greatest thing. You might say: “Yes, Dedo Vladyka, but St. Anthony was in the holy and sacred place, and we are in the world. So, he was in a coveted position.” But it is not so. The great fact is that God is love and that we are Orthodox Christians. Whether we find ourselves in the desert, on the Holy Mountain or in Nashville, IN, or here in Chicago, IL, it is the same thing.

Because God is love, one realizes that the greatest blessings are the trials, not the easy things. Within our Diocese we are helped in order to love life, and we are given a grace that conquers death. The Lord Himself said: “*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10). Consequently, this is what is offered in our Diocese.

Orthodoxy differs from heterodoxy (the non-Orthodox) in a small way, but this small matter is the greatest thing. Orthodoxy gives us rest. A heresy is an easy answer, but it is one that actually tortures us because it ignores man. The way of Orthodoxy is filled with difficulties and crosses, but it leads us to the path wherein we glorify God for all things and are thankful for all things.

But we are “ungrateful bipeds” to God, Who helps everybody, the good and the bad.

One woman who visited the St. Herman Monastery in Platina was positively scandalized by the monastic lifestyle. Accompanied by the reluctant Fr. Seraphim,

she sauntered around the monastery grounds in a flaming red dress: “How boring your life must be here!” she exclaimed. “No television, no radio, not even a telephone! How can you stand it?!”

“We've very busy here,” Fr. Seraphim replied. “We don't have time to be bored.”

Later, when this woman had left for her home in the city, Fr. Seraphim made this observation to Fr. Herman: “The city is for those who are empty, and it pushes away those who are filled. The desert keeps those who are filled and allows them to thrive.” (p. 467).

Do you know that in a conversation when we say: “Glory be to God for all things”, then all things become holy? Therefore, in the Divine Liturgy we have the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist (thanksgiving). Giving thanks for all, everything becomes holy, sanctified. Whereas if we complain – we’re murmuring, we’re grumbling that things should change – but they don’t. One who lives in Christ and breathes in Christ – even if we put him in hell – would rejoice. One who complains and never says “thank you” – even if we put him in Paradise, would consider it hell. Therefore, it is greatly important to have trust in the love of Christ. And I think this is what our Diocesan Church teaches us. When we realize that whatever Christ does, He does out of love, then we accept everything with thankfulness.

Our life is not schizophrenic; a separation of the bodily from the spiritual. The Orthodox Church theology is not separated from life, nor is marriage separated from the Divine Liturgy. Our priest in the parish is a married priest. On the other hand, the monastic life is described with the terminology of marriage.

St. Maximus the Confessor, in discussing the married man's situation – “in the Kingdom of Heaven they are neither married nor given in marriage” (cf. Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-35) – speaks about the wedding and the union of the soul with the Divine, with God the Word. When the soul is wedded to God the Word, then man understands the nature of things. But before he weds God the Word, his soul is like a slave subjected to primitive devices. When he sees that everything is united in Christ Jesus and the humble man is the great man, he understands human weakness and is surprised by the love of God. Then he obtains another freedom. He does not see things as separated and mechanical! Everything proceeds without effort.

Usually we say that monastic life is difficult. Yes, it is, and no, it is not, because, when we love this life, we feel deprivation as a fullness and separation from others

as a union with them. So, whatever the Diocesan Church urges us to do, it does out of love, because the Diocesan Church is our mother: she who is with us when we are small and when we are old, when we are alive and when we have died.

Therefore, in all things (that the Diocesan Church urges us to do) we should say: “Glory to God!”

During the Great Lent I heard a sermon that I did not like. The preacher was speaking about fasting. He said that God gave the commandment to fast, therefore we have to fast – as if God were some kind of tyrant Who wants to make our life miserable and dark! Whereas, fasting in the life of our Diocesan Church is a kind of nourishment. In the Triodion we read that in the time of the Fast the Holy Spirit is the One Who feeds us, the Nourisher. We learn that when we have food we are to say glory to God that He feeds us. And also during our Great Fast, when we do not eat, we say: “Glory to God!” With joy we give glory to God and in sorrow we say: “Glory to God!” because in all these things God gives us His love and helps us to progress.

Therefore if someone says: “I am in the world; I am at a lower level of spiritual life; you are in the monastery; you are on the higher level.” I, as a monk living in the world, don't see that as being correct. We see from an Orthodox world-view that God judges things differently. Great is the one who is small and seemingly non-existent. Whoever is patient, suffers afflictions, and says internally: “God's will be done,” the grace of God visits him, and all within him becomes a doxology to God. This person finds himself in a state of spiritual health. And I think that the one who is in spiritual health is the one who has no complaints about any person or any problem or situation in his life. So, if we suffer from certain situations or certain people we say: “Glory to God!”

We actually say: “Glory to God” even more for those people who hurt us and those situations which can cause us suffering, because we understand, after the fact, what the Lord says; *“I am the Vine, you are the branches,”* and *“My Father is the Vinedresser”* (cf. John 15:1-5). Therefore all things are directed and ordered by this Divine Husbandman, the Vinedresser, Who is God, Who is all-lauded.

Consequently, things are simple: God is love; we are weak. But we have a great asset. That asset is that Someone loves us. He is the Good Shepherd, Who sacrifices His life for the rational sheep, calling the sheep by their own names, each one individually. He does not call them as a group: each one of the sheep has its own name, not its own number. Each one speaks its own language. Each one becomes a person. The Good Shepherd sacrifices His life to save all and each one

individually. And a sheep can become a shepherd when out of love he learns to sacrifice his life for others. Thus, he lives the reality that death has been abolished.

We all know that we have the potential of dying. As the Lord says, the living seed unless it dies it abides alone, but if it dies then there is much fruit (cf. John 12:24). We will live well when we feel and understand that there is One Who almightily loves and understands us. Out of love He created the entire world. Out of love He created each one of us. Each one of us has his own name. Each one of us can become a partaker of Divine Grace. In a single moment one can find eternity. As it is said, with one stroke of Divinity, Hades has been destroyed. And in one pearl of the Body and Blood of Christ one can find all of Paradise. So we can see, that Paradise is a tasting – as we sing: “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good!” – to know and understand that God is love. That's why in our Diocese we do not fear God because of the greatness of His majesty, but fear Him because of the greatness of His love. He humbles Himself and sacrifices Himself for us, the senseless ones.

We see in the Lord's Prayer – The Our Father, taught by the Lord – that the central phrase is, “*Thy will be done.*” We see that in the Garden of Gethsemane Christ said: “*Father, let this cup pass from Me*” (cf. Matt. 26:42; Mark 14:36). He was in agony and praying more fervently. Three times He said the same phrase, and He concluded by saying: “If it cannot be, nevertheless: ‘Thy will be done’ ” (cf. Mark 14:36). Therefore this phrase: “Thy will be done” is a voluntary offering of ourselves to the One Who is Love. When we say truly: “Thy will be done”, we have found rest: all problems have been solved.

This requires a boldness of faith and a sacrifice of love. Thus, we become part of the Vine, we become created in the Vine, we are fed by the juices of the Vine of life, we are nourished by the very Spirit in the life of Christ, the One Who Himself concluded “Thy will be done.” Thus, in this way, even though we are in this world, we realize that despite our weakness there is Someone, Who loves us. And the problems of life are not solved by our own logic, but by entrusting everything to Christ God. As we say so often in our diocesan churches: “Commemorating our Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed and Glorious Lady Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary with all the saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life unto Christ our God.”

We also express “Thy will be done” with that prayer we call the Jesus Prayer, in which we say: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Fr. Justin of Petru Voda Monastery in Rumania wrote: “The Jesus prayer shouldn't be

done only by monastics - this prayer is the duty of all Christians. For centuries, the life of the Church was grounded in it, because it destroys the passions, which are rooted in our hearts.... Therefore, Christians should always say the Jesus prayer with their mind, anywhere they might be: at home, at work, traveling on a bus, on a plane, cooking, fixing something - wherever they are, and whatever they might be doing.”

We need to have a realization of our own powerlessness and the power of Him Who loves us, so that we may be calm and at peace, even though everything around us is in turmoil and threatening us, because there is One Who orders everything invisibly and guides all to the way He desires them to be.

If we would like to have a good spiritual life in the world, then we can follow the monk's practice: each step, everything we are doing becomes a prayer. And you who are here in the world – who have a family, a wife and children, who have to do your job – your very job, your work, become a prayer, just like a monk when he does his prayer rule: he gets up, he falls down, he gets up, he falls down; he doesn't seem to be doing anything, and yet that is a prayer. Even sleep is a prayer. And in waking up, we realize that during our sleep we have digested spiritual food just as we have digested the physical food that we have eaten. If we eat some bad food, we are not able to sleep, our stomach tortures us. If we are feeding ourselves spiritually with bad spiritual food, then we have nightmares, bad dreams.

Fr. Seraphim Rose assures us that our spiritual life in the world is not something bookish or that follows formulas. Everything we learn has to become part of our life and something natural to us. We can be reading about hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer, for example, and begin to say it ourselves - and still be blind to our own passions and unresponsive to a person in need right in front of us, not seeing that this is a test of our Orthodox Christianity that comes at a more basic level than saying the Jesus Prayer.

Wherever we are in our spiritual life, we are to begin right there to take part in the life of our neighbor, to offer struggles to God, to love each other, to become aware of the people around us, to see that we are responsible for them, for being at least kind and cheerful, trying to do good deeds. We are to be aware of the unhappiness of others, to cheer them and help them out. All of these things promote the life of grace in our Diocesan Church.

Truly to say, if we try to preserve our life in our own hands, by our own plans, we will, in the end, lose it. Whereas, if we say: Father, into Thy hands we commend

our spirits (cf. Luke 23:46), then we have already begun to live the eternal life; because, we realize we have given ourselves to a power that exists before us and that will exist after us. Out of love He brought us, who did not exist, into life. After we had fallen down, He raised us up and granted us His future Kingdom. Therefore, we have no trust in ourselves, but we have trust in Him, Who preceded us and will be after us.

It is a great blessing and a great obligation to be Orthodox. Wherever we are, that's where we should work out our salvation, instead of wandering around, looking for the perfect expression of Orthodoxy, the most elevated spirituality, the perfect staretz, etc. Stability and loyalty are great virtues. What is most pleasing to God is our perseverance, our humility in working out our salvation where He has placed us.

We know that the seeds of desert monasticism have already been planted in America. But the main point of this my state of the diocese address is the following question: "What's the use of all our work towards the desert ideal?"

It is so hard for our people to accept or even understand. It's as if there's some secret to it that people can't pick up just by reading about it. Maybe it really is beyond the capacity of contemporary American youth. We give them all these lofty messages to inspire them, but when they see the reality, that it means a life of struggle and deprivation without all the modern comfort and conveniences, their resolve weakens and they give up. So, in the end, is there really any point to what we're doing here?

Our beloved Fr. Seraphim Rose replied: "We have to answer for ourselves. The last generation has done its part. Let's do ours."

How? To know, go and show that we, in America, Canada and Australia, are a God protected Diocese and that God watches over us as His children. He holds us in the palm of His hand. God knows every struggle, every lonely night, every unfair situation. A little sorrow cannot fall to the ground without God knowing about it.

But God also loves all people, not only monastics. He even loves our enemies. He steps up and says to everyone of us: "Hey, you are messing with the wrong person. That's My child. That's My son. That's My daughter. If you mess with them, you are messing with Me. And who am I? Well, I am the all-powerful Creator of the universe!"



God looks at our enemies and says to us in effect: “You want some of this? Go ahead and make My day.” God says: “I am your protection. I am your deliverer. I am your healer. I am your strength. I am your wisdom. I am your victory.”

So, my dearest, beloved friends in the Lord, we are not alone. Almighty God has our back. He’s got a hedge of protection around us, a bloodline that the enemy cannot cross. There are brighter days up ahead. Favor, promotion, increase; no good thing will God withhold. Because we walk uprightly, we have His blessings to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thank you for your attention!

+ Metropolitan JOSEPH