

RESURRECTION PASTORAL LETTER 2007

+ NATHANIEL

By the Mercy of God, Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Episcopate

To our beloved clergy, monastics and pious faithful of our God-protected Episcopate, Grace, mercy and peace from **Christ the Lord who is Risen** and from us our fatherly love and hierarchal blessing.

“You have been taught when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death; in other words when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection” Romans 6:2-5.

Christ is risen! Truly, he is risen!

Dearly Beloved:

What beautiful words Saint Paul has spoken to us; what expressions of hope and glory: “If in union with Christ...we shall imitate him in his resurrection!” Let us repeat his warning: “If in union with Christ!” Thus, eternal life is not something we ourselves can earn or accomplish, but it is a gift through Christ Jesus and through him only.

Born of earthly parents, we come into an earthly existence; reborn of water and the Spirit, we are born anew but into an eternal existence. “All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ!” (Gal. 3:27). Through our baptism we have become, as it were, “little Christs,” or Christians. Jesus has accepted us into his own life, and his death but also into his resurrection. We live in this hope that just as he rose from the dead in power and glory, so too, at the last day, we shall rise to an unending life. Thus we are called to live a new life on earth here and now but not simply a new earthly life but a totally new life which is an introduction to an unending life in the full kingdom to come. We acknowledge this life in Christ in the Prayer Before the Gospel: “For you are the illumination of our souls and bodies, Christ God...” meaning that our bodies as well as our souls are destined for eternal existence through the presence, the illumination, of our Lord and God and Savior in the temple of our bodies.

Unless the Lord Jesus willingly accepted to die on the cross for us, there would be no resurrection. By ascending the cross, however, he did put death to death by his own death, and after three days, because he is also the Author of Life, he rose from among the dead raising up with him all those who choose to enter the tomb, “in union” with him. To enter into his tomb, we must desire to be in union with him and being united to him, to live in him, through him, and for him, overcoming sin in our lives by his grace and overcoming the results of physical and spiritual death.

Saint Clement in his First Letter written in 96 A.D. (36:1 ff) exhorts us thus: “This is the way, dear friends, in which we found our salvation, Jesus Christ, the high priest of our offerings, the protector and helper of our weakness. Through him, we fix our gaze on the heights of heaven. In him we see mirrored God’s pure and transcendent face. Through him the eyes of our hearts have been opened. Through him our foolish and darkened understanding springs up to the light. Through him the Master has willed that we should taste immortal knowledge.”

Thus it is through Jesus and in Jesus that we shall be raised from the dead, but in the meanwhile it is through him and in him that our present life makes any sense; because, as Son of God, he reveals to us immortal knowledge and he transmits to us his own divine life in the All Holy Trinity. He it is who opens our eyes to see God: “It is not within the power of men to see God upon whom the angelic hosts dare not gaze...” (Heirmos Ode IX Burial Service), but in union with Christ he “...gives us in this present age the knowledge of your truth and bestows on us in the future age, everlasting life” (Prayer of the 3rd Antiphon, Liturgy St. John).

We need to remind ourselves of this union with Christ, and Saint Clement, in his Second Letter (20:2), encourages us: “But you must not be troubled in mind by the fact that we see the wicked in affluence while God’s servants are in straitened circumstances. We must have faith. We are engaged in the contest of the living God and are being trained by the present life in order to win laurels in the life to come.”

Why did we go into the tomb with the Lord to join him in his death unless it was to receive something greater, better than this earthly life and its death of the body? We entered the tomb so as to come out of it and to come out of it with the gift of unending life! No one willingly undergoes a trial unless there is something to gain, and thus, in accepting to be baptized into Christ’s death, we willingly joined Jesus in his death so that we can really join him in his gift to us of eternal life.

Listen to the words of Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, before his martyrdom in the year 110 A.D (Letter to the Smyrneans: I: 2, II: 3): “For it was for our sakes that he suffered all this, to save us. And he genuinely suffered, as even he genuinely raised himself. It is not as some unbelievers say, that his Passion was a sham. It is they who are a sham! For myself, I am convinced and believe that even after his resurrection he was in the flesh. Indeed, when he came to Peter and his friends, he said to them, ‘Take hold of me, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless ghost.’ For they at once touched him and were convinced, clutching his body and his very breath. For this reason, they despised death itself, and proved its victors.”

It has been and is this belief, this faith, that Jesus died on the cross, was buried three days and rose from among the dead, that convinced his disciples that truly, his life, his deeds, his words and works, his promises were from the Father and that God the Father bore witness to his Only-begotten Son by his resurrection from the dead in the flesh. It was this same belief that strengthened Saint Policarp of Smyrna (b. 69 A.D.) in the arena where he was confessing Jesus as Living Lord! “I bless you, because you have deemed me worthy this day and hour to take my part in the number of martyrs in the cup of your Christ for resurrection to eternal life” (Martyrdom of Policarp 14:2).

Thus it is and has been through the centuries and continues in our day and until the Lord’s own Second Coming, that believers have confessed the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ and that in union with him, they anticipate to be raised from the dead. Thus it is, that thousands upon thousands in the 20th Century confessed with their blood the belief in the real resurrection of Jesus and their anticipation that they too, at the sound of the trumpet, will be raised from the dead.

Dearly beloved, we know the lives of the saints after whom we are named and after whom we name our own children. We know that the saints are pleasing to God in all generations. So, too, our own lives are pleasing to God if we live in union with his Christ. The Father is glorified by the work of his Son on earth and the Holy Spirit empowers us to call on the name of the Lord for our salvation. Our Father in heaven is glorified by our lives as we live them in union with his Son, Jesus. “Your light must shine in the sight of men, so that seeing your good works they may give the praise to your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

The life we have in union with Christ Jesus is not a theoretical life but is the real and the true life. We have only one life. Just as his own life on earth in the flesh was actual and real by his birth of the Holy Virgin Mary, so too his bodily resurrection into a new life was real and not theoretic as some foolish folk now claim. To enable us to live this life in him, in union with the resurrected Lord, he has given us his own Body and Blood as food and nourishment to which Saint Ignatius of Antioch states: “...so also our bodies which are nourished by (the body and blood of Christ) and then fall into the earth and are dissolved therein, shall rise at the proper time, the Word of God bestowing on them this rising again, to the glory of God the Father. It is he who indeed grants to this mortal, immortality, and gives to the corruptible the gracious gift of incorruption” (Letter against Heresies 18:2).

Dearly beloved, we are celebrating the victory of Life over death, of Light over darkness. It is the celebration of all humankind from Adam and Eve until the Second Coming. But it is not simply a memorial, another event printed on a calendar. Today, we stand with the Holy Virgin, with the apostles and disciples as they embrace the Lord, as they break bread with him, as they exclaim to one another, "The Lord is risen!" Our celebration is not to be one of satisfying our earthly bodies with food and drink of this world but in partaking of the life-giving Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for the life of the world. We must partake today of the Eucharist on this Feast of feasts and Festival of festivals, so as to be in union with the resurrected Lord. This is why we repeat the Homily of Saint John the Golden Mouth, that the Lord calls us all to his banquet table to partake of the feast prepared by the Father, the sacrificed Lamb of God, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus who was laid in the tomb dead but who has triumphantly come forth alive.

Thus, having put on Christ, having entered his tomb, having come forth from it and come into the light of the eternal day, we must live a new life in him, having him dwelling in our hearts, receiving his pure body and blood as nourishment for the here and the hereafter, so that with the Apostle Paul we can say: "I have run the full distance and I have kept the right faith. And now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give me," (2 Tim. 4:7-8) that is to rise up unto eternal life.

Christ is risen! Truly he is risen!

Accept our fatherly love and archpastoral blessings on those near and those far away.

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop