

RESURRECTION PASTORAL LETTER 2012

+ 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 God, and from us our fatherly love and hierarchal blessing.

Christ is risen!

“...the gospel will save you only if you keep believing exactly what I preached to you—believing anything else will not lead to anything. Well, then, in the first place, I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared first to Cephas (Peter) and secondly to the Twelve. Next he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep; then he appeared to James and then to of all the apostles; and last of all he appeared to me too...” (1 Cor. 15:2-8).

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

What immense joy fills our hearts this glorious day as we join Cephas-Peter, the Twelve, the Five-Hundred, James, all the Apostles, Paul and all faithful Orthodox Christians who through the ages by their lives bear witness to this truth, that Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Savior is risen from the dead. It is the greatest of our joys, because he assumed our fallen human nature, renewed it and raised it to a position of glory at the right-hand of the Father! From this place of honor, he extends to all humanity to partake of this redeemed and new human nature in which we shall exist without end in the age yet to come.

Saint John the Theologian reminds us that Christ died for our sins, precisely for us! *“...But if anyone should sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, who is just; he is the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours, but the whole world’s”* (1 Jn. 2:1-2). Having taken away the sin of the world, and thus destroying the sting or fear of Death, he has redeemed our personal lives, and thus we must preach this to the “whole world” so that it too may thank God for his love for all humanity. This love for all humanity is the over-throwing of sin and thus the destruction of Death itself and the gift of eternal life in Christ.

Most likely, Saint Paul wrote this Letter to the Corinthians sometime near Pascha of the year 57 A.D. The new community in Corinth was struggling against the pressures of the pagan Greek society in which they lived which was non-receptive to believe in a savior who was crucified on a cross, but was proclaimed to now be alive again. Who had ever heard of such a thing?

Paul’s reminder to the new believers is absolutely clear: Christ the Savior was seen alive by a multitude of the same individuals after he had been seen dead on the cross by most of them. They had heard the news in the City of Jerusalem that the Messiah had died on the cross; that he was taken down in the sight of the Roman soldiers and given over to burial by some disciples by a decree of Pontius Pilate himself (Matt. 27:45-60). This the Corinthians did believe, but they needed to strengthen their lives on this faith in the Good News, the Gospel, even if they had received it from Paul himself, because the society in which they lived was not receptive to the Gospel and they waived in their new faith in the Messiah Lord because of the unbelieving society around them. *“Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward,”* exhorts St. John the Evangelist (2 Jn. 8).

St. John the Golden-mouth reminds us that Christ our Lord died a genuine human death, a death not because of sin but only the death of the body; and his burial and resurrection was of the same body (Homilies on Paul to the Corinthians 38.4). Saint Peter writes: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”* (1 Peter 1:3). Commenting on this Epistle, St. Clement of Alexandria says: *“If God first generated us out of matter, the Father of our Lord later regenerated us into a better life”* (Adumbrations).

As a young child needs parental attention and love, it also at times needs discipline; so the infant community in Corinth needed Paul’s attention as do we today. His is a staunch reminder that: *“believing anything else will not lead to anything”* (1 Corinthians 15:2). This is what St. John Chrysostom states in his homilies on this Epistle: the Corinthians did not need to learn something new; they had to be reminded of what was already in their hearts, to be exhorted to live it. Christ himself reminded the disciples after his resurrection: *“This is what I said while I was still with you that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in the Psalms, has to be fulfilled. He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘So you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead’...”* (Luke 24:44-45).

What is it that must be believed exactly as he (Paul) had preached to them? That Christ crucified was raised to life on the third day and appeared to the multitude. We are here reminded that this event, this death and resurrection, took place a mere generation before. It is St. Paul himself who knew many of those who themselves were eyewitnesses to the resurrection, just as he himself was a personal witness by Christ's appearance to him. The Apostle appeals to both what was orally taught and what he later wrote. In Orthodoxy, these two traditions are one and the same: oral tradition and written tradition; tradition, meaning that which is given over to others by word of mouth and by written word. Before Scripture was written, the Gospel was spoken or preached.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul invites them: "*Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.*" (2 Corinthians 2:14). We, too, are the ones who "spread the fragrance," the joy as it were, of the knowledge of Christ everywhere in our own society.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem sees this list cited by Paul of those to whom Christ appeared to be unbiased. He says: "If you do not believe in one witness, then believe in the twelve, and if you don't believe in twelve, then believe in five hundred. Then, he says, there is James the Brother of the Lord, the first Bishop of Jerusalem whom you may say is "biased," but what about Paul, who himself says: He appeared to me who was his enemy the persecutor of his body, the believers" (Catechesis 14:22).

Dearly Beloved, like the Corinthians, we live in an un-believing society, an agnostic and atheistic society. There are even those who at one time believed that Jesus is the Christ of God "...who came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15); that he died on the cross in his flesh to kill the power of sin which is death; that this same body, born of the Holy Virgin Mary, was removed from the wood of the cross which is the new tree of life, was prepared for burial with myrrh and spices and laid in a new tomb.

Thus far, society is yet willing to consider; but that Jesus was raised up to live again, that he appeared to others, that in forty days he opened their minds to those scriptures written before his time and enlightened them as to how he fulfilled them; and, that he was taken up in a transfigured body as witnessed by his disciples. These events, society does not want to accept. It does not want to accept, because it means a change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh and repentance, of love for God and neighbor. It means a faith in the love of God for humanity, a love which is unfathomable to those whose own hearts are yet not open to the "Only Lover of Mankind."

St. John Chrysostom, that great orator, thus encourages us: "We ought to live for Christ not just because we belong to him, not just because he died for us, and not just because he rose again on our behalf. We ought to live for him, because we have been made into something different. We now have a new life" (Homilies on Paul to the Corinthians 11.4).

Like the Corinthians who knew the teaching of the Good News, the Gospel, we too, need to be reminded of it, be strengthened in it and live our lives in it, just as St. John Chrysostom exhorts us (Homilies on St. Paul to the Corinthians 38.2). St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his Catechetical Lectures explains what is our new life: "Now the life that is really and truly life is God the Father, the fount of life, who pours out his heavenly gifts upon all his creatures through the Son and in the Holy Spirit; and the blessings of eternal life are faithfully promised even to us men, through his love for us. There must be no incredulity about the possibility of that. For we ought to believe, because our minds should be set on his power, not on our feebleness. For anything is possible with God, and that our eternal life is both possible and to be looked forward to by us...and Paul says: 'and so we shall be ever with the Lord...' means the same thing as eternal life" (Catechetical Lectures 18:29).

Therefore, the exhortation of Saint Paul to the Corinthians is also of the utmost importance to us: "...keep believing what was preached to us...", and to read what is "in accordance with the scriptures," that is, according to what was preached and written down, that Christ did rise, that Christ did ascend, that Christ is alive and shall come again. At that time, we too shall rise, and we shall ascend, and we shall continue our existence in a life yet to come.

Christ is risen! Truly he is risen!

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

+Nathaniel

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop