



March 17, 2024  
Protocol 03/001

To the clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Orthodox Church in America, my beloved children in the Lord:

Christ is in our midst!

I greet you at the outset of the Lenten fast, and I assure you of my prayers for you during this sacred season. I pray that the coming Forty Days will be a time of soul-saving struggle for all of you.

When a traveler sets out on a long and difficult journey, he endures the road by keeping his destination in mind. Similarly, at the beginning of the Fast, it is helpful for us to look forward, toward its end, towards our final destination. We look towards that destination so that we might properly direct our Lenten efforts, our prayer and fasting and almsgiving.

And what is the destination toward which the Lenten efforts are directed? What is the end of our journey?

We are going to see a king enthroned, to witness a ruler coming into his kingdom.

When the Lord took his seat in the place of judgment and Pilate stood before him, the Roman governor addressed the King of Glory with inquiries concerning the nature of his kingdom.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” (Jn. 18:33)

“So you are a king?” (Jn. 18:37)

The kingship of Christ was a stumbling block for Pilate then, and today, twenty centuries later, that same kingship remains a stumbling block for many. The Lord had already stated the matter plainly to his would-be judge: “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world” (Jn 18:36). But Pilate refused to understand. “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” he asked the Lord (Jn. 19:10).

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In his willful ignorance, Pilate remained convinced that his earthly authority, delegated by the emperor, made him the judge over the Man who sat before him, when in fact, it was that Man who had taken his seat to pass judgment over the world. Pilate thought that he held the life of this Man in his hand, when in fact, it was that Man who held the life of the world in his palms, palms soon to be pierced by the nails of torment. Pilate believed himself to be an agent of the rule of law, when in fact, it was Christ the Law-giver who was making ready to “reign from the tree” (cf. Ps. 95:10).

In short, Pilate thought the earthly empire of Rome was the measure of all kingship, when in fact, the greatest kingship is the otherworldly reign of Jesus Christ.

Today, earthly states and the passing polities of this world continue to assert themselves through violence, warfare, the application of crude power. In this unsettled time, we are filled with sorrow and anxiety at the sharp increase in partisan political tensions, together with vitriol and factionalism, in the lands where the Orthodox Church in America sojourns. We are filled with sorrow and anxiety as we hear of wars and rumors of wars in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Armenia, Yemen, throughout the Middle East, in East Africa, in the Korean Peninsula. We are filled with sorrow and anxiety as we see our fellow Orthodox Christians persecuted, suffering, and endangered in Ukraine, in Russia, in Gaza. As our Lord tells us, these frightening circumstances are characteristic of the troubled age in which we live—“but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6).

“The end is not yet,” but, as Orthodox Christians, we should be *living for the end*. We are called by Christ to live for the last things, for the kingdom that does not belong to this world of time. Thus, it is with acute sorrow that we observe today many Orthodox Christians manipulated by the false powers of this passing age. Confusing the temporal for the eternal, many have chosen the Pilate-like paths of violent aggression, apology for violence, and religious imperialism and nationalism. As tragic as Pilate’s lack of vision was, it is all the more tragic when those who have been illumined by holy Baptism choose short-sighted ideologies that place their hope in a this-worldly future rather than in the eternity of Christ’s kingdom.

Witnessing this confusion, and this idolatrous embrace of ideology, I pray for those who have been deceived and led astray. Moreover, I see how, in certain places that present themselves as safe havens for the Faith, those who pray for peace are jailed and suffer as prisoners of conscience, and I pray for those who are persecuted. I see how, in other lands, the legitimate interests of the state, distorted by the passions of nationalism, have become a cause for the unjust treatment of Orthodox Christians who desire nothing other than fidelity to the holy Canons and Tradition of the Church, and I pray for those who are oppressed. I see how, in my own Church, political divisions have infiltrated many of our communities, and I pray that we all might resist the temptation of diabolical division along ideological lines, instead growing in unity of mind, striving together to put on the mind of Christ.

Even as we shun the temptation to place our hope in this fleeting world and its crumbling powers, we must be clear: Christ reigns even now, in the present. It is in the present that we encounter him who is

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named "I AM." Although Christ's kingdom is not of this world, nevertheless, Christians are called to become heirs of that kingdom even in this life. The kingdom is not found in a place or a time; it "is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God," says the Lord, is within us and in our midst, in the midst of his disciples, in the midst of the Church (Lk. 17:21).

Christ's rule is not postponed to the future age, but neither is it merely another earthly reign; it is the eternal reign of God already manifest in time among the people of God. This rule is revealed and made real whenever men proclaim the Name of Jesus Christ, not merely in word, but in deeds. Christ's kingdom is love, mercy, and forgiveness; it is repentance, self-sacrifice, and virtue.

The champions of Christ's kingdom, then, are not those who rise up to defend it from earthly attack. The Lord once rebuked St. Peter for his mistaken recourse to a crude, material sword (Mt. 26: 52-4), and St. Paul reminds us that, in our struggle, "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

The champions of Christ's kingdom, rather, are those who bear witness to the Passion and Resurrection of the Savior by, in their flesh, completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Col. 1:24). These stalwart soldiers and knights of Christ are, in the first place, the holy martyrs—not those who kill in the Name of the Lord, but who die in the Name of the Lord. "Blessed are those who die in the Lord henceforth" (Rev. 14:13).

Many Christians today believe, and viscerally feel, that the kingdom of Christ is under attack. This is true. Satan is always going about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. As St. Paul indicates, there is a war underway. But that war is spiritual in nature; earthly swords will do no better than St. Peter's blade did when he turned it against Malchus. To seek to defend the kingdom of God with tanks and airplanes is to accept Pilate's debased notion of kingship rather than embrace the exalted rule of Jesus Christ; using violence to establish a kingdom is the way of Herod, not of the tiny martyrs of Bethlehem. To believe that salvation depends on earthly rulers and regimes and favorable conditions for the faith is not the way of the martyrs, but the way of emperor-worship. In this regard, we must remember that many saints gave their lives rather than offer even a pinch of incense in worship of Caesar.

Of course, we desire that our earthly rulers provide us with a favorable situation for the propagation of the faith, for the peace and welfare of the churches of God, and we pray for this at the Divine Liturgy and the other holy services. Moreover, among the saints there is an entire rank of right-believing rulers. Indeed, from the time of Sts. Boris and Gleb to the time of St. Nicholas II and his royal family, there is sometimes significant overlap between the ranks of the right-believing rulers and the ranks of the martyrs and passion-bearers. Some of those rulers were effective; some were less effective. What they had in common was a fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, beginning in their own personal lives. The holy rulers were not those who sought earthly power; they are those who, presented with power,

remained faithful to the Lord and turned their earthly power back over to his service as best as they could.

Thus, our way forward consists neither in vainly grasping after earthly power nor in capitulation to the dark spirit of the age, but in fidelity to the Gospel according to our circumstances. We must reject sin—through repentance, confession, and preaching to those who have ears to hear. We must strive for the kingdom—through worship, charity, and virtue. We must fight for the faith—against the old Adam, against the devil, and against the passions. We do not reject the world’s dark ideologies by embracing the vanity of external violence and power. Instead, we reject the world’s dark ideologies by putting sin to death in our flesh through the violence of the ascetic life and the grace-filled power of God in whom is our hope and trust.

As we speak of the violence of the ascetic life, I point us back towards our Lenten efforts. In the face of tragedy and conflict, it is characteristic for all manner of organizations and companies and parties and public figures to offer up their “thoughts and prayers.” However, as Orthodox Christians, we are invited truly to pray, truly to fast, to bear some small martyrdom, some small witness, in our bodies. By the grace of God, this ascetic struggle, this little martyrdom, connects us to the Lord, his saints, and all those who suffer innocently. During these Forty Days that Save Our Souls, I exhort all of you to make a genuine effort to fast for peace and to pray for those who suffer. Platitudes are not enough: real ascetic effort is required. This ascetic effort makes concrete the hope and trust that we place in the kingdom to come.

It is this hope in the coming kingdom and this trust in the Savior that gave the martyrs the power to accomplish the greatest feat of arms—willingly to die, and thereby to join in Christ’s conquest of the world, death, and the devil. May God give us all the strength and the courage necessary to follow the way of the martyrs and to reject the false paths of human violence, power, and pride.

To our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, who suffers with all the innocent sufferers and lives in the deaths of all the martyrs, be unending glory and adoration, together with his Father and his Most Holy Spirit, now and unto everlasting ages. Amen.

Sincerely yours in our Lord Jesus Christ,  
With all the blessings of the Holy Forty Days,

+TIKHON  
Archbishop of Washington  
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

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