



ARCHPASTORAL MESSAGE OF HIS BEATITUDE METROPOLITAN JONAH FOR SANCTITY OF LIFE SUNDAY 2011

January 23, 2011
Sanctity of Life Sunday

To the Venerable Hierarchs, Clergy, Monastics and Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America

Dearly Beloved in Christ:

The Orthodox Church is like St John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, or Jesus baptizing by the Jordan. We, like them, preach a message of repentance and the remission of sins in the new desert, the decadent culture of the modern West, mired in the chaos of moral collapse.

The Orthodox Church's message is a message of hope, of healing, of the transformation of one's life, of attaining to the fullness of personhood, of the realization of the divine potential in each human being. Yet, this message requires not only acceptance, but a voluntary cooperation by those who accept this message. The Church demands a serious discipline of all who would be members, all who would follow this straight and narrow difficult path that leads to salvation. It is a way that demands that we be crucified to the world and its desires, dead to the flesh and its demands, so that we can be focused solely on God.

The culture of this world cries out for "justice." It demands vengeance, and it despises the forgiveness of God. It cries out for bread in the wilderness; and when it is not satisfied with bread, it demands meat. It ignores the radiant Presence of God, and laments the fleshpots of Egypt. Nothing can satisfy its endless lusts for money, sex and power. In terror it refuses to even stand in silence and contemplate the abyss of death, ever trying to distract itself from the ultimate annihilation it so boldly preaches. This complete denial of death thus leads it to the kind of decadence that has overtaken us: greed, hedonism and licentiousness, which have led to gender confusion, depersonalization, and the loss of value of human life. A culture of hedonism leads only to the narcissism of a solitary individual, enslaved by his/her lusts, using others for the gratification of the passions.

The world validates abortion, the sacrifice of the life of an innocent child for the convenience of the mother, oblivious to the suffering it will cause that very woman. It depersonalizes the child, as a "fetus;" while at the same time developing technologies to save nearly identical fetuses in troubled pregnancies. The criterion is not the life of the child; the criterion is simply the desire of the parent: whether the parent wants the child or not. If so, no expense is spared. If not, it is a useless bother, a mass of flesh to be excised like a tumor. What is left, however, is a lifetime of regret, guilt, self-hatred and self-loathing. This is not just an act, but a state of sin.

The last thing the world wants to hear about is sin. And if it refuses to admit sin, neither can it receive forgiveness. Often rightly it cries out against the injustice of the hypocrisy of judgment and condemnation by those who are righteous in their own eyes. But no matter how loud the outcry, the reality of the sin remains, the broken lives and broken hearts. What it needs is to hear the call to repentance, and to heed it. It is the bitter medicine that alone will bring healing. But it is only bitter

in that it is the toxin that destroys pride, which is the cancer at the heart of the illness.

The Lord Jesus cries out through the Church, Repent and receive the remission of your sins! Whether those in the Church heed it or not, it is this good news that gives hope. To receive it is an act of humility. To accept the message of repentance, to transform one's life in obedience to Christ's teachings, is the means of life itself. It demands that we accept responsibility for our sins. But by accepting this responsibility, we overcome them and their effect through repentance. For having accepted responsibility for our own sins, we are no longer controlled by them, but rather, we gain control over our own lives. We can no longer live by following our mindless passions and desires; rather, we must live deliberately, in a disciplined way, denying the passions of the mind and of the flesh.

The Church's discipline of life is strict, but ultimately, it is the path to true freedom. It is a path to salvation and sanctity, shown again and again in the lives of the saints; it is the path to true personhood and true maturity. Those who would try to change it, so that it accords with the values and standards of the world, miss the point that the Church's discipline, morality and life is not of this world, and calls us above and beyond it. The Church's discipline, the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles passed on through the Fathers, is not judged by this world, but in fact is the conscience of the world, judging the world. The Church's discipline is the only way out of the morass of sin and brokenness, bitter self-enslavement and self-condemnation, and cycles of abuse.

The discipline of the Church brings us to freedom, because it not only is a code of behavior, but heals our souls, and allows us to give and accept forgiveness. This forgiveness, through repentance, cleanses and purifies, and allows us to accept ourselves and others without judgment. Thus, we are free! We live in God's freedom, and the fullness of his love.

Thus, however we have sinned, we can be forgiven. Whether we have aborted a child, or consented to it, we can be forgiven. If we bear a child as a single mother, we can be accepted in the community of the Church with love. If we have judged and condemned others, and burn with resentment, we can be freed through repentance. No matter what we have done, no matter how broken we are or how completely we have messed up our lives, we can be healed, forgiven, accepted and loved. And then maybe we can forgive ourselves, and attain to that true freedom.

The Lord said, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." How true these words are! They are freedom and they are life. No matter how much the world has pulled us down, how deeply it has had us in our grasp, if we accept this light burden and easy yoke of the Orthodox discipline of life through repentance, He is faithful to forgive us our sins. And thus with Christ and in Christ, we overcome the world.

With love in Christ,

+ Jonah

Archbishop of Washington

Metropolitan of All America and Canada