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Keynote Address of Archbishop Elpidophoros at the Monastic Assembly (St. Nektarios Monastery, September 21-22, 2019)



MONASTIC SYNAXIS

Keynote Address

**By His Eminence Archbishop
Elpidophoros**

(St. Nektarios Monastery,

September 21-22, 2019)

Your Eminences, venerable members of the Holy Eparchial Synod,

Very reverend abbots and abbesses of the precious monasteries of our Church,

It is my privilege and pleasure to welcome all of you to this historical and national synaxis of monastic members of our communities and convents within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

This is truly a momentous and extraordinary occasion because we are able to listen to and learn from one another as spiritual fathers and mothers commissioned by God with the spiritual direction and pastoral protection of the souls of those entrusted to our care. It is the first time that, along with the members of the Eparchial Synod, your Archbishop is able to meet and deliberate with the heads of monasteries and convents of our Holy Archdiocese in order to define the role of monasticism in the broader society as well as to determine the responsibility of our monasteries within our communities.

Introduction: The power of community

It may come as a surprise to you that your Archbishop would wish to gather you together, but this meeting was among the foremost in my heart since my election to this blessed Archdiocese and Eparchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. And I say this for two reasons:

First, because as the spiritual father of our faithful throughout this beautiful land, where we are called to preach and plant the good news of the Gospel and the treasures of our Tradition, I feel that it is crucial for all of us to serve as brothers and sisters, as inseparable and invaluable members of the one and united Body of Christ. We are called and are obliged to work together for the glory of God and the care of His people. We cannot accept or afford to work in isolation, still less of course in opposition to one another when it comes to the service and salvation of our brothers and sisters.

However, there is a second reason that compelled me to invite you from your cells and communities in order to attend this meeting. This is because I share with you the love of dwelling within a brotherhood that teaches us silence and prayer, obedience and humility, as well as compassion and love. This is how we understand the words of the Psalmist David:

Behold, how beautiful and pleasant it is when brothers [and, we could add: sisters] dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life for evermore (133:1-3).

Indeed, there been no greater and no more graceful experience for me that my time in “the Great Monastery” as the Phanar is often described, where I was able to learn and to love the order of the services, the discipline of obedience, and the power of sacrificial love under the paternal guidance and gentle support of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who initiated me – along with the other members of the patriarchal court – into the mystery of the church and the majesty of service in the Body of Christ. It was there that I was instructed in the fine balance between worldly power and divine love, which should always inspire and inform our ministry as leaders whether in church administration, in parish congregations, or in monastic communities.

Moreover, for a period of eight years, I came to know monasticism more intimately and intensely through my tenure as Abbot of the historical Monastery of the Holy Trinity at Halki, which also houses the legendary Theological School that regrettably was forced to close its doors to seminarians in 1972. There, modeled on the image and example of communion in the Holy Trinity as reflected in the hospitality of Abraham (in Genesis chapter 18), I was blessed to develop and nurture a modest brotherhood – like a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32) and a small leaven (Matt. 13:33) – that invisibly and unassumingly multiplied the ministries of the Ecumenical Patriarchate through daily services, unceasing hospitality, and ongoing increase of spiritual, cultural and educational programs.

Thus, in light of my personal experience – but also in light of your ministry – of the power of community, I would like to highlight three dimensions of the monastic life as it shapes the way we touch the lives of our people:

1. The monastery as a place of silence and prayer;
2. The monastery as a place of obedience and humility; and,

3. The monastery as a model of the angelical life, but especially the evangelical life.

1. A place of silence and prayer:

My dearest sisters and brothers, I appreciate very profoundly and very personally the vital role that monasteries play in the life of the church. Monasticism constituted a decisive and formative element of religious life throughout history as well as in all Orthodox countries. To penetrate the heart and essence of Orthodox spirituality, you simply have to visit a monastery – whether a renowned republic like Mount Athos or the tiniest skete in the desert. You can learn about the Orthodox Church in books, but you can encounter its full glory by visiting a monastery.

It is no coincidence that monasticism emerged immediately after St. Constantine's conversion, when the persecution of martyrs ceased and Christianity became compromised with the ways of the world. With their ascetic rigor, monks and nuns became the new martyrs of the spirit in an age when martyrdom of blood no longer existed; they were the new prophets that – by withdrawing from society and pointing to the kingdom – reminded Christians that we are “in the world” but “not of the world” (John 17).

Whether we are speaking of St. Anthony and St. Pachomios of Egypt in the fourth century or St. Paisios of Athos and St. Iakovos of Evia in the twentieth century; whether in the sixth-century imperial monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai or the stavropegial monasteries of Mt. Athos, established in Greece from the tenth-century; whether living in tombs or on pillars; whether they took care of the poor and the sick or copied manuscripts and painted icons; whether “they wandered in deserts and mountains or hid in caves and holes, the world was truly not worthy of them” (Heb. 11:38). There has been an uninterrupted history of monastic presence and influence from the very origins of the Christian Church.

What is clear throughout the story of Orthodoxy is that the primary task of a monk and a nun is the life of prayer, and it is through prayer that they serve others. It is not so much what monks and nuns do that matters, as what they are. And when pilgrims enter an Orthodox monastery or convent, what they hope to find is a place of silence and men or women of prayer. Spiritual wisdom is certainly one of the important contributions of an Orthodox monastery, but spiritual silence also transcends all words of advice. It is the power of prayer and liturgy that proves to be the most healing force when pious visitors come to one of our monasteries. It is

the commitment of our monks and nuns that will bring about the conversion of people's hearts. The powerful cycle of daily services and intense practice of the Jesus Prayer; the quiet emphasis on fasting along with the repetitive focus on διακόνημα and διακονία or work and hospitality; these – above and beyond any individual words of advice – are ultimately the precious gifts of Orthodox monasticism to the contemporary world and what the faithful expect from those who have renounced the world and surrendered to a life of silence.

Therefore, my first paternal reminder to you is that your monastery should be primarily and predominantly be a place of refuge and refreshment for the weary and worried souls of our pious faithful. Before any word of advice or instruction, and beyond any word of correction or admonishment, your prayer and compassion should be their greatest protection and consolation.

2. A place of obedience and humility:

There is no need for me to underline or explain the importance of obedience in the monastic life. For both the novice but also for the mature monk and nun, the virtue of obedience – of dying to the world in order to rise in Christ (Gal. 6:12–15), like a seed that is planted in the ground in order to bear much fruit (John 12:24) – is the quintessential element of the ascetic discipline and repentance. For St. John Climacus, who devoted an entire step to obedience in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, “ὕπακοή is the mother of all virtues.”

Moreover, obedience goes hand-in-hand with spiritual direction by the elder or abbot, a teacher or trainer, who resembles another Moses leading the monk or nun into the promised land of forgiveness. As we have been taught by tradition, no one is saved alone; all of us need another person – “a skilled person or physician,” as the same St. John of Sinai writes – who through confession and instruction can lead us through the pitfalls of temptation.

All of you are well aware of the role of the spiritual father in the monastic as well as in the parish community. However, what I would like to draw to your attention are the temptations of spiritual direction or and dangers of confession that we frequently face in our responsibility as spiritual guides, whether bishops or abbots. Far too often, we presume that we are on a different level from those who approach us for forgiveness or counsel. This is arguably the most arrogant assumption that we could ever imagine. For while “we who are strong ought to bear the failures of the weak” (Rom. 15:1) and to “bear one another's burdens” (Gal. 6:2), obedience can never be blind or directed toward a human being, but

always transparent to God's love and aimed at the disciple's freedom. It is not the external prescriptions of asceticism that matter, but above all the internal disposition of the Christian called to humility and purity of heart.

As I mentioned earlier, your principal support to pilgrims should be contemplation and compassion. If, however, you are asked to provide a word of direction or guidance, then your advice should always be a source of encouragement and inspiration. At no point should we ever block the light of Christ; instead, we should always remember that Christ is the one who illumines and forgives. Just like those who approach us with obedience and humility, we too are to demonstrate obedience and humility. In the church, obedience is a circle where each one of us is called to obey our elders: laity to clergy, clergy to bishops, and bishops to their elders.

Dear friends, our faithful may see us as spiritual elders and leaders, but we should constantly confess that we are the worst of sinners. As we profess before Holy Communion at every Divine Liturgy, my humble exhortation to you is that we all recall the words of St. Paul to his disciple Timothy:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost (1 Tim. 1:15).

3. An angelical, but especially an evangelical life:

This leads me to my final point. If our aim is “to proclaim Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28), then we must at all times remember that the monastic life is – as St. Basil of Caesarea declares – “the way of life according to the Gospel” (τό κατὰ τό εὐαγγέλιον πολίτευμα). This means that, as celibates – whether ordained or monastics – we do not lead lives that are either better or superior to other Christians. In the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, “if virginity is honored, it does not follow that marriage is dishonored.”

Although monastics often take pride in and promote the fact that the celibate life is the *angelical* life, it is helpful to remember that monasticism is above all the *evangelical* life. Like all baptized Christians, we are called to “bear the cross and follow Christ” (Luke 14:27). We have exactly the same vocation as all Christians, but we simply live His commandments in a different way, learning to love as a community instead of within a marriage or family.

The ultimate purpose of all Christians is to learn to love, to reflect God's selfless

and sacrificial love for the world. Human beings are made to love; and, as Christ informed and warned us in the parable of the Last Judgment, the only criterion for salvation will be the measure of our love toward others. We will not be judge on whether we have fasted or how long we have prayed, but on the way we have responded to the material and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters. Just as there is a fundamental dimension of asceticism in marriage, there is also an essential element of love in monasticism. Love “is the great mystery” (Eph. 5:32) of the church and of community, of monasticism and marriage. If we neglect to express and communicate love to our neighbor, then we fail to fulfill the commandments and fail to respond to the call of Christ to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our strength, and all our mind, as well as our neighbor as ourselves” (Matt. 22:37).

Conclusion: We are all members of one another

Your Eminences, very reverend abbots and abbesses, if there is one message that I hope you will take with you back to your blessed communities, it is that we are all called to work together in the spiritual edification of our faithful. This is what it means to belong to the communion of saints and to serve the Body of Christ. This is what it means to be a church. Therefore, let me conclude with the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians:

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. But God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose . . . God has so composed the body . . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another (12:12-25).

May God inspire our deliberations at this synaxis, and may He always bless you and your monastic communities in your vital ministry for our Archdiocese.