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Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America: Metropolitan Joseph's Address to Diocese of Los Angeles Clergy



The following are Metropolitan Joseph's opening remarks at the annual Clergy Seminar for the Diocese of Los Angeles, held in Alhambra, CA on February 3-6, 2020.

Beloved Brothers in Christ,

Christ is in our midst!

I pray that you, your families, and your parishes have been spiritually renewed by the holy feasts of Christmas and Theophany for this new secular year. May God

grant us all his spiritual and earthly blessings in abundance.

I am overjoyed to greet all of you on the occasion of our twenty-second clergy seminar in this holy diocese of Los Angeles and the West. For twenty-two blessed years, I have had the honor and privilege of presiding over this gathering of a clergy brotherhood that has always been and will always be close to my heart. We have experienced so many things together as fellow laborers in the Vineyard of Our Lord – all of the joys of ministry and all of its heartbreaks and disappointments. We have gathered each of these past twenty-two years to rejoice together and weep together, embrace one another and support one another, teach one another and learn from one another. I have cherished each and every moment of each and every seminar with you. I believe this year will be another blessed event that will nourish and inspire our ministries.

I ask that we use this time to reaffirm our brotherhood and our unity this week. We know the old Russian proverb: “One Christian is no Christian.” This can be equally applied to us as the clergy. Our priesthood is not our own – it is Christ’s priesthood. We share in it with all of our clergy and hierarchs. We must be unified with Christ and with one another. Our Lord teaches that in order to love, we must have obedience. We must be unified in love, and we must be unified in our obedience to the Orthodox Faith – in its teachings, its ethos, and its Tradition – and in our obedience to one another. Brothers, the evil one is at work – spreading his snares and seeking to divide us. Let us not pay attention and react to the noise with anger and defensiveness, for Our Lord kept His silence as the Lamb before the shearers. Let us concentrate here on our unity and brotherhood, and let us take it from here back to our ministries.

I am pleased to welcome as our keynote speaker Dr. Daniel Hinshaw, emeritus professor of surgery at the University of Michigan as well as a professor of palliative care at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary and a visiting professor at our Balamand University. His long and distinguished career has included the founding of the Palliative Care and Consultation Service at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan and providing volunteer hospice services in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Romania. He has published more than eighty papers in scientific journals as well as two books for St. Vladimir’s Press on the subjects of suffering and healing from the perspective of our Orthodox Faith.

During the recent Conference on the Family that took place during the meetings of the Holy Synod of Antioch this past October, our Father-in-Christ, Patriarch John X, personally invited Dr. Hinshaw to offer a paper on ministering to those who are ending their earthly lives. His paper, *Orthodox Christian Accompaniment at the End of Life*

, was enthusiastically received by all of those present, and I can say that he made our Archdiocese proud with his contribution to the conference. We look forward to learning from Dr. Hinshaw this week, and we are grateful to him for being with us.



The topic this year is “Living and Dying Well as Orthodox Christians in Post-Modernity.” Our role as priests is first and foremost teaching our people how to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. In our contemporary society, it seems that we have confused the role of the Church with worldly aims. The Church is not here to increase our wealth, make us better looking, or affirm us in our passions. The Church is here to prepare us for eternity, and this can only be done through a life of prayer, repentance, struggle, forgiveness, and service. Our mission as priests is hindered today by a culture that seeks to anesthetize us to the reality of our death and the final judgment through its endless distractions and entertainments. Churches are pressured to join this 5 numbing of our consciences through replacing worship with performances, repentance with affirmation, prophetic exhortation with stand-up comedy, confession with pop psychology, and the attaining of the mind of Christ with the adopting of “politically correcct” opinions peddled by politicians, actors, and athletes.

Nowhere is this kind of pressure seen more clearly than in how our culture approaches death and dying. As Dr. Hinshaw pointed out to the Holy Synod, medicine tends to concentrate on healing only the biological aspects of diseases, not the spiritual ones. A person who has been raised in the saccharine sweetness of contemporary religion is not equipped to face the suffering and pain of terminal illness. He has not been taught that these trials are allowed by God for his preparation for eternity. He has not availed himself of the means of repentance that bring the peace of his heart and conscience. He has not been sanctified by becoming a partaker of divine nature in the sacramental life of the Church. So many Christians end their life in despair, anguish, heartbreak, and anger. They thought that being a good Christian would give them health and material blessings, and they cannot understand why those blessings are being taken from them in their illness.

When a person dies, the culture does not want to deal with death. Instead of the funeral service of the Orthodox Church, that beautifully reflects on the transient nature of our life in the profound idiomela of St. John of Damascus, contemporary people want the artificially-beautified body enclosed in a casket with a ceremony that simply tells funny stories and amusing anecdotes about the one who has fallen asleep. There is no call to give alms or offer prayers for the reposed – only a “celebration of life” that may cheer up the grieving but does nothing of spiritual help for the one who died.

Beloved brothers in the Lord, let us pay special attention to the talks of Dr. Hinshaw, and let us not wait to bring what he teaches to our people. If we wait to

teach until there is someone who is sick, what good will that teaching be? If we do not teach about this eternally important subject, we are no better than the world – we have the form of Orthodoxy without its power to transfigure our flocks into a people prepared for life everlasting. Challenge the entire parish to consider dying well even in good health, even in youth. Do not wait!

One of the most moving experiences I have had in all of my years of ministry was visiting Khouriyeh Lynn Wilson in her last days. At first, I was struck by how much her physical beauty and energy had been worn away by her illness. But then, it was so clear that her spiritual beauty was shining forth brightly and her spiritual energy was strong and vibrant. Her face lit up with a smile and her eyes beamed with courage as she told me, “I am not afraid, Sayidna. I am ready.” With tears in my eyes, I knelt in admiration at her bedside while I offered my humble prayers for this pious woman. All of our people should be equipped to die as beautiful a death – yes, a beautiful death – as our Khouriyeh Lynn, and this is your call, beloved brothers. Do not wait!

I would like to offer a few words about pastoring those who are near death, in addition to what we will hear from Dr. Hinshaw. I am heartbroken when I hear from families of some of our faithful that their lovedone was not cared for when terminally ill. Perhaps their priest made excuses for why he could not visit more often. Perhaps when he did visit, he kept his 8 distance because he was afraid of getting sick himself. Perhaps when he talked with the family, he became uncomfortable and changed the subject to sports or jokes or television shows.

When you visit the sick and dying as a priest, you are bringing them Jesus Christ. You are bringing them the healing that the doctors and nurses cannot bring – true spiritual healing. Just as Jesus Christ sacrificially and courageously took up the Cross, you must be self-emptying and brave. Go to them. Unless the doctors forbid you for one reason or another, you should be at the bedside. You anoint them. Confess them. Give them Communion. You hold their hands. You weep with them. Be with them with your whole heart. When you are with their families, bring Christ to them as well. Do not distract them, bring them the healing that comes from Christ.

This is our call, beloved brothers. Our society has put so much trust in the healing of the body with all of the marvels of our technology, but we see the rise of bacteria that do not respond to our antibiotics and new viruses that are spreading throughout China as we speak. We can only trust in the healing of the whole person that we have in our Lord, Jesus Christ. And I, as the Metropolitan and Chief Shepherd of this Archdiocese, place my trust in you that you will bring this healing

to my flock.

Once again, I welcome Dr. Hinshaw to our seminar. Let us commit ourselves to taking this time to seriously consider his words and apply them to our ministries. We ask the prayers of our All-Holy Lady and the Holy Unmercenary Healers that our Lord will grant us to faithfully carry out our ministries when we go forth from here and that He will grant to all of us and our faithful a “Christian ending to our life – painless, blameless, and peaceful – and a good defense” at His fearful judgment seat.

— Source: antiochian.org