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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily on the Fifth Sunday of Lent



Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral

Brooklyn, New York

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, on this Fifth Sunday of the Holy Fast, we broadcast from the Saints Constantine and Helen Cathedral in Brooklyn, New York, an historic parish that once served as the Cathedral of our Holy Archdiocese, and as such, is still honored with the name, “Cathedral.”

Here we are at the end of Lent, and yet we are still in the middle of this unprecedented global pandemic, which continues to require that we employ the utmost caution—even for only the clergy to perform the Divine Services. We all know at this point that the coming Holy Week and Pascha will be unlike anything we have ever experienced in our lives.

Just two days ago, the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Bishops convened—that includes all canonical Orthodox Hierarchs in the United States. Working with our brother Hierarchs, and after thorough consultation with public health and insurance officials, law enforcement, theologians, legal counsel, and pastoral care professionals, we had to come to the conclusion that this year, the services of Holy Week and Pascha will unfortunately have to remain as we are doing the services now, without the assembly of the Faithful. This is very painful for all of us, but the safety and health of our communities must be the most important consideration, as well as the directives from our civil authorities.

So, as I celebrate here with Fr. Evagoras, the Deacon and the chanter, I ask myself, what is it that you, the Faithful, can receive from our continued yet highly restricted worship? You are deprived of the Eucharist in our current conditions. How do you partake of the experience of God, even as we, the clergy, continue to offer the Divine Liturgy for the health and salvation of the world?

It so happens that today we celebrate Saint Mary of Egypt, who spent forty years in the desert, deprived of receiving Holy Communion, and she waited patiently until the night she passed from this world to receive the Eucharist one last time. She is a great Saint – we dedicate to her memory one of only fifty-two Sundays in the year – but she was called “an angel in the flesh” and we are all not such angels.

Then I thought of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to His Disciples, on the night He gave Himself for the life of the world:

Ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρός μου μοναὶ πολλαί εἰσιν….

In My Father’s house are many mansions….[1]

With these encouraging words, our Lord and Savior assured His Disciples and all of us of His presence at every time and in every place. In this hour of global pandemic, which isolates us from one another – a precaution for our health and the common good, I wanted to bring these words of our Lord and this message of comfort to you all, as a special exhortation not to despair, when a judicious confinement of our activities divides us from our communal worship and

experience.

You see, the secret of the Christian life is that even when you are deprived of everything you recognize as your religion, the entirety of God is always within you. As the Lord said to His Disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, when all hope had disappeared:

Ἐάν τις ἀγαπᾷ με, τὸν λόγον μου τηρήσει, καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ἀγαπήσει αὐτόν, καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐλευσόμεθα καὶ μονὴν παρ᾽ αὐτῷ ποιήσομεν.

If you love Me, you will keep My word, and My Father will love you, and we will come to you and make a cloister – a monastery – a μονή within you.[2]

This word, μονή, is the origin of the word “monastery” – the place where one dwells alone with God. It is our blessed assurance that God is always with us, and that we can always keep His word and be an entire monastery with the Holy Trinity residing in our hearts. Indeed, being that cloister of God –even in isolation from all others, is in fact the basis for our extension in and through the Spirit to every other person of faith.

My beloved Christians, be of good courage! We are never deprived of God! The only deprivation we can ever know is if we deprive ourselves of the experience of His abiding love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. And we do this by depriving others of these very same virtues through selfishness and egocentrism.

During this time when we must refrain from community and even Holy Communion, let us reach down into our hearts for the sake of our souls. Let us enter inside one of those “many mansions” that our Lord Jesus Christ prepared for us. Deep within, we will find the communion that knows no physical form, but that endures forever, because God has truly come unto us – Μεθ᾽ ἡμῶν ὁ Θεός. Deep within, God is making each of our hearts into a monastery for Himself, mystically uniting us together in the one spiritual community of the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who is praised and glorified forever.

Amen.
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