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His Eminence Metropolitan Evangelos of New Jersey issues Independence Day Encyclical



Independence Day 2020

The Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy
Esteemed Members of the Metropolitan Council, Esteemed Members of the Parish Councils, Philoptochos Sisterhood, Faculty and Students of the Catechetical and Greek Afternoon Schools, Directors and Participants of all Youth Organizations, and all devout Orthodox Christians of the Communities of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of New Jersey

My Beloved in the Lord,

We are all graced with an abundance of gifts from God which are too manifold to enumerate and too precious to fathom. These gifts encompass each and every aspect of our lives and include every person we meet, every sight we behold, and every breath we breathe. Yet none of these can compare to one particular gift which God has given to humanity, and to humanity alone – *freedom*.

“Freedom” is an exceptionally substantial term and it is truly impossible to describe its vast meaning for us Orthodox Christians. In contemporary society it amounts to an individualistic expression of self-determination and autonomy. We often speak of a freedom *from* something. Yet, in Orthodoxy it has a deeper meaning since we envision it as a freedom *towards* something. Freedom in the Orthodox context does not entail doing whatever we desire, but in receiving this gift from God, it must then reflect the manner in which we received it. Thus, we must use our freedom in love. God gave us this gift not

out of compulsion, but willingly out of His own love for us. So too are we called to exercise our freedom in love because we are a reflection of our Creator and, as such, our individuality is not entirely our own. Therefore, it is evident that this gift of freedom is not a freedom *from* another, but a freedom *towards* love especially as we hear in Scripture, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love”* (Gal. 5:13).

It is with this understanding of freedom – Christian freedom – that we should reflect on its meaning as we celebrate our nation’s 242nd anniversary of its independence. We often hear countless politicians, media personalities, and fellow citizens who reference the word *“freedom”* as a rallying cry, sometimes as a means to remind us of the sacrifices that were made to *“form a more perfect union.”* Other times, however, it is lamentably used as an empty declaration the means of which are to further a particular point of view. This application of the term *“freedom”* often reduces it down to a mantra to be broadcast rather than elevating it as a principle to be upheld. Furthermore, it becomes far too easy to lose sight of the essence of this gift which God has made us beneficiaries.

In exercising our freedom in love, we are enabled to right wrongs when we see injustices, to heal pain when we encounter suffering, and to bring tranquility to a world in chaos. It encourages us to lift up the dejected, to comfort the marginalized, and to give voice to those too frail to be heard. It opens our eyes to the plight of our neighbor regardless of race, gender, age, socio-economic status,

or nationality because every person bears the unmistakable and distinct image of Christ within them and is entitled to their God-given dignity of personhood. Freedom in love motivates us to advocate for those whose freedoms are oppressed such as our Mother Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the nation of Cyprus, the Syrian and Armenian peoples, and countless others who have endured untold horrors and atrocities within the past century.

If, however, we choose to use our freedom in another way - in a manner that promotes exclusion, apathy, or that seeks to set a chasm between us and the other - then we create for ourselves an unbridgeable divide which not only separates us from our neighbor, but also eternally separates us from God. This would denigrate the very gift of freedom given by God and entrusted to us to safeguard. Squandering this gift would evoke the fear of one of our founding fathers, John Adams, when he said, *"Oh posterity! You will never know how much it cost the present generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in heaven that I ever took half the pains to preserve it."*

Let the celebration of our nation's independence inspire us to seek this freedom in love continually within our hearts and minds so that it may permeate our very being and so that we may be encouraged to become ambassadors of freedom everywhere and for every person seeking justice throughout the world. *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"* (2 Cor. 9:15).

With Paternal Love and Blessings,

† E V A N G E L O S
Metropolitan of New Jersey