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Archbishop Elpidophoros Closing Remarks and Benediction, Lecture in Honor of Father George Alexson, The Catholic University of America

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Archbishop Gudziak, beloved brother in the Lord,

Reverend Dean Morozowich,

Protopresbyter George and Presvytera Joanna Alexson, whom we celebrate this evening,

Archdeacon John Chryssavgis, our learnéd presenter,

Reverend Clergy, Esteemed Members of the Catholic University Academic Community, and Dear Friends,

Tonight's lecture, A Spirituality of Imperfection: The Way of Tears in Saints Barsanuphius and John, has truly been a balm for this moment that we are living in. For if we have ever beheld imperfection in the life of the Church, it is this present moment in Ukraine.

And if our tears that are flowing in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Ukraine and, indeed, in Russia, too – where the people live under a truly deceitful rule – if these tears were ever a way to bring healing and restoration, then that time is now!

How I wish the clergy around the world were like our beloved Father George Alexson – committed wholeheartedly and unerringly to the truth and to the knowledge of the truth. His example, honored here this evening at the Catholic University of America, is an inspiration for us all.

Father George, I hope and pray that there will be many of our parish clergy – from East and West – who will follow your excellent example, and excel in their continuing formation as true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the parish priest usually feels the pressure to be a "Martha" to his community.

We all know the verse:

Ἡ δὲ Μάρθα περιεσπᾶτο περὶ πολλὴν διακονίαν….

But Martha was distracted with her much serving….1

There just never seems to be enough hands and enough time to do everything that even the smallest parish requires. But what every parish needs is that “good portion,” which is “the one thing needful” that can only be found at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2

And that is what you have fulfilled in your life and ministry, my dear Father George. You found the balance between Martha and Mary. Between ministry and μόρφωσις – the harmony of service to others and the ongoing formation of your own mental and spiritual character. And lo, there is no contradiction between the two. For as another son of the desert said: “A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian.”

Thus it is, my friends, that we are so grateful tonight to The Institute for the Study of Eastern Christianity of The Catholic University of America, and to the National Hellenic Society as well, for providing this occasion and venue for us to hear Archdeacon John’s presentation. It is a worthy honor for Father George, and a timely message unto us all.

The fratricidal war being waged against the sovereign People and Nation of Ukraine is a stark reminder of the “imperfection” of our Church, and it is truly a cause for weeping. There is much to repent of here.

The invasion commenced after weeks of buildup, on the day after the Feast of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna. When the Shepherd of Asia was faced with imminent death by the imperious force of Caesar, he replied:

“Eighty and six years have I been His servant, and He has wronged me in nothing. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” 3

Sadly, though, Shepherds of Russia have remained silent while their flocks in Ukraine are attacked by their own spiritual and ethnic cousins. And what is worse, some have even cried out: “We have no king but Caesar!” 4 – preferring the supposed glory of men over the glory of God.5 There have been sins of omission and commission, and each one is equally as damaging to the witness of the Church.

But in this moment of such imperfection, we can take a lesson in compassion from these beloved Saints, Barsanuphius and John. We can ask God to puncture our

hearts with grace and forgiveness. We can weep for those who suffer, as well as for those who inflict the suffering.

We can say to all those who bear the name of Christ, as well as to those whose conscience is for a pure religion of basic human values:

“Hold my hand and walk,” as Barsanuphius implores.

We must reach out to those who seem unreachable and attempt to guide them – through our prayers, through our words and through our deeds.

Thus, my dear friends, we will make alive again the wisdom of these Saints, whose clarion echo we have heard here this evening, and we will fulfill our high calling in Christ. May God bless us all, and may He bless and protect Ukraine.

BENEDICTION

Please rise and join me in prayer.

Let us pray to the Lord. Lord have mercy.

O God of our Fathers, Who wills to establish Your People in peace and safety, swiftly bring the war against Ukraine to an end, and plentifully bestow the comfort of Your healing grace throughout the land.

O Prince of Peace, Son of the Living God, turn the hearts of your Shepherds, so that they may protect Your Holy Flock and serve You in righteousness and truth.

O Divine Paraclete, wash over upon the People and Nation of Ukraine with the soothing streams of Your healing grace, and bring them abiding comfort, resilience and strength in this time of trouble.

Of this and more we beseech You ever so fervently, O Holy God in Trinity, Who is praised and glorified forevermore unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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