

06/02/2023

Archiepiscopal Address, 32nd Annual Leadership 100 Conference



My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

What a joy to be with all of you again! I am delighted to be with Leadership One Hundred, for as many reasons as there are members of this truly stellar organization.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple – Ὑπαπαντή, in Greek, which means, the “Encounter.” It was a moment when those who were faithful, who were involved, who were practicing their faith – just like you – got their first glimpse of their Savior. There was Symeon the Elder – the priest who received him in his arms. There was Anna, the Prophetess, who had waited over eighty years to catch sight of her Lord and Creator. That is patience of a kind we rarely see today! And how did God appear to them? As a little baby, only forty days old. I commence with this observation of the happy coincidence of the Feast with our Conference, because when I spoke to you last year, I spoke about the Centennial Year of our Archdiocese. And there was a lot of reflection on those wonderful

spiritual and physical ancestors who bequeathed to us this marvelous Archdiocese of America.

But that was last year, and now we have the next One Hundred Years before us. And what will we encounter?

I believe, that just like those devoted souls waiting in the Temple in Jerusalem, we have the opportunity to encounter Christ once more as the little Child. To encounter the Holy Infant Who cannot yet speak, yet Whose Presence speaks louder than any peal of thunder.

Our good Greek Orthodox People – and I mean everyone: cradle, convert, of every and any ethnicity – our people are waiting in the Temples of our Archdiocese – τους Ναούς μας – all across the country. And they are waiting to encounter the Living God.

Not that God is absent! We are the ones who get caught up in our routines, and yes, our rituals – such that we often do not engage consciously with our Faith. Saint John Chrysostom understood this very clearly, for he remarked – and remember, this is sixteen centuries ago:

The gifts of God are so great that people can scarcely ever believe it. And it is not surprising if they cannot understand them, until they know them by experience.

I don't know about you, but I am comforted by the fact that even the great saints of the Church who lived long ago, see the problems and challenges that we face with the same perspective. It gives me a sense of equilibrium, as we work to make the Church both relevant and revealed to the People of God.

My Friends – this is where my sights are set – on how we bring the experience of Christ into the lives of our Faithful. Just as Jerusalem, in the time of our Lord, had a fully functioning Temple – with incredible rituals going day and night – yet the direct encounter with the Living God was absent from so many. Indeed, they were waiting for the One promised to come.

In our temples – our parishes and communities across this great nation, – we also have expectant souls, waiting for the encounter with God – for their very own Ὑπαπαντή. We have all the accoutrement needed for the experience – clergy, temples, liturgy, chanting, aesthetics. So, what exactly is lacking?

Now we've come to the marrow of the matter. If we, as Greek Orthodox Christians, are going to grow and retain our own people, then we must offer them the

experience that is so magnificently and marvelously symbolized by the panoply of the Church, in all her glory.

This means that our clergy must be experienced themselves, and this starts, in a formal way, at the Seminary. And you – the laity of the Church – must insist that we accept and guide you in the experience of God, which truly is a wonderful revelation to the world. It is a revelation of unconditional love, of kindness and compassion, of mercy and forgiveness. If these virtues are not front and center in our communities, why would anyone desire to practice the Faith? It certainly would not be for the sake of pleasing God; for God stands above any and every need.

My beloved Christians:

We are the ones with the need. As the Lord said to Martha, when she complained to the Lord that her sister, Mary, was spending too much time in the experience of the Lord, and not helping enough in the kitchen. He said to her:

“O Martha, Martha ... you worry and fret over so many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

What a lesson for us to learn over this next hundred years. To find the “one thing needful,” the “one essential” that makes all of our efforts and all of our sacrifices worth it!

The spiritual needs of our people must be our chief concern as we go forward into our second century here in America. We have a tradition that goes back two millennia! We have every advantage and every blessing. The Church that has been bequeathed to us is replete with grace. But as the Holy Chrysostom observed: The gifts of God are so great that people can scarcely ever believe it.

Our mission, then, is to help them believe – whether that is through education, programs, retreats, or one-on-one ministry. Whatever it takes to bring people into the experience of the Living God, this is our direction and orientation for ministry.

My friends, our Church is like a carpenter who has every tool available to build the most beautiful house. But the house does not build itself. We must pick up the tools that are at our disposal and use them.

When a young person goes off to college, and they confront a world that perhaps their family had not prepared them for, the Church needs to be present in the college and university settings to bring the experience of Christ to the fore in that

young person's life.

This is why we have Orthodox Christian Fellowship; why we have the new Pan-Orthodox Youth Ministry; why we dedicate resources and personnel at the Archdiocese to provide coordination and programming. But the program is just a container, it is not the content.

The content of our faith is to be found in the relationship with God that can be achieved by the innumerable aspects of the Church – whether worship, or fellowship, or teaching, or counseling – whatever it may be. Each and every ministry is an opportunity for the Encounter with Christ. And He comes as the Little Innocent Child. He did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

As you think about your life in the Church, and what matters to you most about it – I also want you to think about how Leadership One Hundred can be an engine of positive change in the Church. How can we introduce our brothers and sisters to the Living God by living out His commandment to love one another every day.

There is no greater commandment. It is the sum and substance of all the commandments. It is the price of humbly upholding our Orthodox Faith, not by comparing ourselves to those we see as, “less than.” We uphold our Faith by living in the experience of God's love for all of creation. And we need to teach and to know how to live in that experience to the degree that we are able. We have to connect to our faith.

My Friends:

Leadership One Hundred has enabled achievements in this Archdiocese which were not even imagined when it was founded decades ago. But the ultimate achievement for any human being is to be in relationship with God, and thus, be in relationship with all the inhabitants of His creation.

We need not be afraid. God will encounter us as He did two thousand years ago in the Temple. As a vulnerable Little Child Who will accept us, guide us, and love us to perfection.

I am asking that you work with me, that you work with the staff of the Archdiocese, and that together, we forge new pathways for our people to the full experience of the Godhead. We have all the tools to accomplish our goals. Let us place hands and hearts to the task, and together, build up this Archdiocese for the next hundred years.

Thank you for your attention, and now, if there is time, I believe I can take a few questions.

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