

**The Address of His Eminence Metropolitan Saba to the
General Assembly of the 56th Archdiocese Convention
(Phoenix, 27 July 2023)**

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Your Beatitude, Our father in Christ, Patriarch **YOUHANNA X**,

Your Graces,

Beloved clergy,

Esteemed members of the Board of Trustees of our God Protected
Archdiocese,

Heads of Departments,

Members of the Order of St. Ignatius,

Members of the Antiochian Women,

Members of SOYO,

Our dear Young Adults,

Parish Council members,

and all the faithful of our Archdiocese,

It is with joy that I am present among you at the 56th Archdiocese Convention,
a gathering that is dear to all our hearts. We meet in the name of our Lord,

Jesus Christ, to rejoice in His presence in our midst, to rejoice in our communion/fellowship together through Him, and to be inspired by His Holy Spirit in order to illumine us for the service, uplifting and growth/progress of His Church, which He has entrusted to us.

Our teens at our Parish Life Conferences inspired me to begin my address with the theology of the image and likeness which you have chosen as a theme for this year's convention. The teens presented their papers with such theological accuracy, and heralded a promising Orthodox future for our Archdiocese. May God increase their blessings and bless us with them, their works and more of their likes.

Creation of Man

“Furthermore, God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let him rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the beasts and over all the earth and over everything that creepeth and moveth on the earth.’” (Genesis 1:26)

The uniqueness of man; that which distinguishes him from all other creatures, lies in the fact that he is created in the “Image of God.” And in that his uniqueness is not limited only to the “Divine Image,” but also in the fact that this “Icon” is called to be in the “Likeness of God.” This is what Orthodox Christian theology has known and taught from the very beginning.

As bishop of Lyon Saint Irenaeus (130-202 AD), preached that the “Glory of God is the Living Man.” Some of the Fathers of the Church define or identify rather than combine the “Divine Image,” or the “Icon,” according to which man was created to mean the totality of his nature. Because man is viewed as a single entity uniting all the divisions known to human culture such as body, soul and spirit. Church Fathers consider the “Image” to mean the supreme manifestation of man, referring to his spirit and his spiritual understanding. Saint Gregory Nazianzus says: “Being dust, I cling to the life of this earth, but also being a masterpiece of God, I carry within me the desire for the life to come.” This is the understanding through which man obtains the knowledge of God and through it he lives in communion with God.

According to our faith, this means that the “Image of God” in man is what differentiates him from animals: his freedom, the ability to choose and change, the knowledge of good and evil, the ability of innovation, the power of creativity and the reshaping of the world, to praise and to re-offer the world as a transfigured world...etc. We should be aware that the thought of the holy fathers avoided defining the image of God with any part of the human being.

Orthodox Christian theology makes a clear distinction between the “Image” and the “Likeness.” It defines the “Image” as man’s ability to live in God, while the “Likeness” is the achievement of this possibility.

In the words of the late Metropolitan KALLISTOS Ware (1934-2022), “The ‘Image’ is what man has from the beginning. It is what enables him to enter the spiritual path. While the ‘Likeness’ is what he aims to obtain at the end of his journey. Origen (184-253AD) the teacher wrote: “Man has acquired the honor of the ‘Image’ from the first creation. But the fullness of perfection of resembling identification with God will be granted to him only at the end of all things when God becomes all in all.”

Our belief is that man is created in the image of God. This means that our belief is that man is created to be in communion and union with God, and that if he rejects this communion, he will not become a human being in the authentic understanding. Apart from God a “Normal man” cannot exist. The state of the man who has cut himself off from God is abnormal. Thus, the meaning state of our belief in the “Image” is that God is the center of man’s existence. In other words, the divine element is what defines our humanity. If we lose our connection with the divine, we lose our connection to the human as well.

Orthodox theology is unique in saying that man is not only created in the image of God, but more specifically in the image of the Triune God. Since the “Image” of God in man is that of the Trinity, then man, like God becomes true to this divine nature through a life of mutual communion. The “Image” means a relationship, not only with God, but also with other people. Just as the

Triune Divinity lives one in the other and one for the sake of the other, so man, reflecting this image of the Trinity, becomes true to this aspect of his creation when he sees the world through the eyes of others. When he takes upon himself the joys and sufferings of the other.

Every human being is unique, but each, in his uniqueness, is created to be in communion with others. Hence the Orthodox tradition recognizes the communal priesthood not the isolated. A person lives either in the communion of a matrimonial family or in the communion of a monastic family.

The Fall

Did man lose the “Divine Image” with the fall of Adam and Eve? Our Orthodox theology does not teach that the “Image” was totally lost but rather that was darkened or blurred. What happened to man because of his fall from Paradise, that is, from the Divine Presence? What happened to man was that he could no longer comprehend the rank to which he was created and so he could no longer recognize how to reach or interact with that “Likeness.” By man turning away from God, the “Image” of God in him was distorted, but it was never destroyed or erased.

Man fell because he chose to reach the “Likeness” by relying on himself without God. This is the main sin right now. Let us contemplate the words of the book of Genesis: “When ye shall eat thereof...ye shall be as gods, knowing

good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). By moving away from his source, man lost what revives and grows the “Divine Image” within him.

The text of the Evlogetaria for the Funeral Service states: “I am an image of thy glory ineffable though I bear the brands of transgressions” (Antiochian Service Book). We still long for our origin, even though we no longer know it, that is because we still bear the “Image” of God, or to be exact, its remnant, and therefore we still retain a free will, even though sin restricts this free will of ours.

Saint John of Kronstadt (1829-1909) said: “We ought to never confuse the man created in the ‘Image’ of God with the evil that is in him, for evil is nothing but a stumbling block, a disease, a satanic fantasy. While the essence of the person is the ‘Image’ of God, and this has remained in him despite any distortion.” Orthodoxy rejects any interpretation of the Fall that leaves no room for human freedom.

How does Orthodoxy define the state from which man has fallen?

Again, to quote the Bishop of Lyon, Saint Irenaeus: “Man was given existence to grow and mature, to become strong, to attain the fullness of glorification, and to be glorified in order to be able to see God.” According to Saint Irenaeus, man, in his original state, was in a state of spiritual childhood, innocence and

simplicity tied to a moral purity. Man had to reach the divine “Likeness” through a slow journey. Saint Irenaeus does not see the fall of man as a fully matured rebellion, rather a reckless, hasty, and immature desire.

Saint Jerome (+420AD) considers man when he was first created “like a child” in need of “growing” into perfection. In other words: man, at the beginning of his creation was innocent and able to grow spiritually. This is the “Image.” But this growth was not automatic, rather the fruit of his cooperation with divine grace. Thus, by the good use of his free will, man was created to become perfect, slowly, gradually, in God and by him. This is the “Likeness.” From this perspective we understand the “Image” of God in man is a dynamic sense not a static one.

Simply, we understand the “Image” to mean that something of God exists in man. While man is called, in cooperation with his Creator, to cultivate this “Image” until it reaches its divine “Likeness.”

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How should we now begin to reflect, in reality, this theology of “Image” and “Likeness” within our Archdiocese now and in the future?

Everything in the church should be based on theology. The short answer is

that the “Image” is her message and that the “Likeness” is her vision. More clearly, we should state that those blessing we have been given in this Archdiocese such as: man power and organizational capabilities as well as the blessings of material and spiritual wealth that have been granted to us by God are the “Image.” On the other hand, the “Likeness” is the sanctifying of these blessings through the good deeds of our witness to, and the services for, those around us and the society as a whole.

To define the current image, we must first know what precious gifts we have been given. Here and now let us enumerate and give thanks to God for some of the great blessings we have in this Archdiocese. Here are just a few of the many attributes of this Archdiocese that I have noted from my visits in the past and now from my brief time as a permanent resident.

- Through the tireless efforts of our ancestors; the saints, hierarchs, priests, deacons, and laity that have preceded us; we have to use the language of engineering, been blessed with a firm foundation and even some of the framework in place. Each parish has its own church in which to celebrate the services, a parish hall for various social and communal functions.
- We have people who love God, rich in their faith, piety, zeal, and generosity towards the Church. Its continuity and the permanence of its existence is at the very center of their lives.

- We have been blessed with pious and zealous clergy, that have dedicated their lives to the service of their parishioners and seek to strengthen the witness of Antiochian Orthodox Christianity on this continent.
- We have been blessed with many departments and organizations that take care of and look after the spiritual life, pastoral care, and financial matters of the Archdiocese with decency and order.
- We have been blessed with volunteers, ready to serve the Church in any capacity with all sincerity and dedication wherever the service calls them.
- We have been blessed with active organizations and fellowships filled with generous people who are ready to serve the needs of the Church and of our less fortunate brethren in Christ.
- We have been blessed with the Antiochian Village, which serves as a vibrant and beating heart of the Archdiocese. A meeting place for both the young and the old, contributing to the unity of this Archdiocese.
- We have been blessed with programs for the study of theology. For the expanding of the knowledge of the faith in the hearts of believers and a place for the explanation of our faith to inquirers. Continuing education for clergy, present and future.
- We have been blessed with modest properties throughout the

Archdiocese.

- Last but not least, we have been blessed with many missions across this great land of North America. Due in no small part to a significant uptake in the interest in Orthodox Christianity. One U.S. statistical department recently considered the Antiochian Orthodox Church to be the fastest growing Christian church in North America.

We have, therefore, a great cumulative legacy left to us by those who have gone before us and that our faithful are working hard to keep active and develop. This great legacy needs to be preserved, sustained, and made permanent. A great deal of work will have to be done to highlight its importance and to grow and increase it in order to respond to the requirements of our witness to today's society. Therefore, the most important and pressing question for us, if we want to be honest witnesses of the Lord here and now, is, how does this image, we have, become the likeness we desire?

Challenges

Before we answer this question, we need to know the challenges and obstacles that face us. Many have asked me about my plans for the Archdiocese. I have answered them that I need time to know well how the Archdiocese is on ground, what are its possibilities, and what are its

challenges. And to hear from its members, I mean you, to know of their aspirations. Only then could I offer a comprehensive and realistic vision of the near future. One that is studied well and thoroughly planned in order to develop the executive mechanisms to achieve our goals.

First let us examine some of the challenges we face.

- **Secularism** is our first main challenge. Secularism is an attitude within society based on the liberation of various spheres of life (political, social, cultural, values, morals, etc.), and their complete independence from the religious field. Thus, man is living according to the values of the world. A world that, according to our faith, is searching for its original image. An image that was lost with the rejection of God, the source. People in this culture of secularism have no reference of comparison except themselves. Man has become the source and reference for himself and for everything. And this is the sin of Adam and Eve. God no longer has a place in the organizations of human life. Therefore, this ruling culture is producing different lifestyles that transcend all previously known taboos justified by personal freedoms. We are confronted with a society of strenuous work and excessive consumption. New moral values violate the sanctity of our homes, families, churches, and faith. Some people feel that we are in an anti-

Christian society. There is a question that has been asked in several of the parishes that I have visited: “How do we deal with our enemies?” When I asked: “What do you mean by ‘enemy’?” The reply was that; “Many in society are hostile towards us simply because we are Christian.”

In many parishes around the Archdiocese, we are also witnessing some who leave the Church. Especially among our youth who are educated and grow up in such a secular society. One common question that I have heard in my pastoral visits: “How do we bring our youth back to the church?”

- **Relativity** is the first-born consequence of secularism, and perhaps the most dangerous thing as it rejects the notion of an absolute truth. Relativity becomes the criterion. What suits you is the truth for you and what suits me is the truth for me. The sources of truth: God, the Church and the family have marginalized. Man became vulnerable to all kinds of common trends and religious discrepancies.

On the ecclesiastical level we face challenges of **the separation of theology and life**. The secularized society, not a religious society, becomes the most important factor in the shaping of a lifestyle. As a result, the phenomenon of religiosity became stronger than living a life with God and in God. Religiosity is limited to the practice of religious practices, rituals, ceremonies, customs, and folklore, but faith and the

life with God need more. They require purity in the human soul, growth in virtues, and the welcoming of the fullness of the presence of God.

- A shortage of eligible candidates **for the priesthood**. We have approximately 456 active and retired priests. The average age of active priests is 60. This means that in 5 years we will face the challenge of securing priests to continuing the ministry of Christ in our parishes.
- We are witnessing the beginnings of an economic setback, deterioration of individual finances, high cost of living, low wages, and signs of the decline of the “Life of Luxury.” The vast divide between the income of employers and employees is causing disinterest among the young in pursuing employment in the job market.
- Also, I hear about the fears of the retirement of a priest, who has been serving without compensation, because the parish is unable to afford a new priest, as well as from some parishes that are only able to afford one priest, they need more, but cannot afford it. The Archdiocese constantly receives requests by different parishes, not missions, for monthly financial assistance.
- **Poor coordination and communication that** threaten the optimal performance and even internal unity of the Archdiocese. The coordination between many of the departments and organizations working within the Archdiocese is weak. The well-intentioned initiatives that happen from time to time on the local level tend to

strengthen parochialism and independence of the rest of the Archdiocese. Much of our works are not done according to a shared and unified vision by the Archdiocese as a whole and its faithful, rather according to the vision of those doing them.

- **A misconception of church membership** where our ecclesiastical attitude is dominated by the spirit of membership that exists in clubs and non-church associations. This should not be the case in the Church that is the Body of Christ. This is reflected in the pastoral ministry in particular; for example, this causes the lack of pastoral visits. The warmth of the one body becomes weak, and the believer does not feel embraced by the community. But membership in the Church of Christ is a familial membership. The faithful are one entity, one body and their financial participation is the fruits of their faith and gratitude to God.

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Enough with the challenges. Let us look to the future and some of the visions and aspirations so that we may begin to build the comprehensive action plan needed to achieve our goals.

After 130 years of being in this blessed land, it is imperative that we become more active in our service to this country. We should solidify our Christian witness in this land that has given us so much.

- We need to develop and build ecclesiastical institutions based on the theology of Christian witness. To identify and prioritize these entities will require prayer, reflection, discussion, and expert advice. The Archdiocese can no longer bear the failure of insufficiently studied ill planned projects and initiatives.
- Economically, we need to stabilize and strengthen the financial resources of the Archdiocese. The finances are still dependent on the same limited resources. We have an opportunity to establish various institutions and endowments that provide ministry and service to society while being a financial investment. We need to pay serious attention to the education of our young and the care of our elderly to name a couple. We need to search for new investment opportunities. The saying is true: “Do not put all your eggs in one basket.”
- In such a multicultural Archdiocese, we should respect every culture. We need to learn how the Church unifies all the diversities and heals all divisions through the life in Christ. Here is where the example of the Great City of Antioch can be our guide. For many centuries, the faithful of Antioch used to pray in at least four languages: Greek on the coast, Syriac in the inlands, Arabic in the south and Armenian in the north.
- We should also renew our pastoral ministries, seeking out those that have been absent from the church lest they fall away forever, seeking them out for the sake of their salvation. In such a complicated society,

we need specialized pastoral ministries that are complimentary to the traditional ones. Pastoral ministries dependent on the priest alone is no longer sufficient in today's highly specialized world and huge cities. Our ministry should take into account the many challenges to the faith of each age and professional group. We need more deacons with customized ministries in our departments and fellowships.

- We need to develop a culture of joyful integration. The mentality of ostracism and monopoly should be rejected. In an open and borderless world, we need to interact more with the other Archdioceses of the Antiochian Patriarchate as well as the other Orthodox jurisdictions. Exchanging with each other ideas and experiences for the enrichment of all. No one lives alone. Our modern world is open. Let us wisely build good relations with the others Orthodox families.
- The spiritual thirst that I have seen in my pastoral visits to parishes requires us to pray fervently for God to send us monastic men and women, so that the Archdiocese will be revived by their prayer and ascetic struggles. Monasteries will be an oasis of comfort, peace, and healing.
- The Church itself, as an oasis, requires more effort in raising up priests according to the heart of our Lord – priests who as living images of Christ in front of our young people who can see in them what the love of Christ does to man and how God alone is really enough for man. We

can do this by beginning a campaign to instill a love of the priesthood in our youth. The testimony of a faithful and dedicated priest in the service of his parish influences the hearts of young people and endears them to the high mission of the priesthood.

- I also wish for the establishment of prayer groups in every parish, beginning with the encouragement of a family life filled with prayer and piety in the home, drawing from the fountains of traditional and living spiritual life in the Orthodox Church here and everywhere. Believers, themselves, should become oasis of God existed here and there in this world – a world longing for true life, fueled by the spark of seeking the best life that Christ wishes and provides for us. Today's exhausted people ask us to create specific ministries for new kinds of spiritual retreats and activities. We cannot comfort the oppressed people of today by sermons alone. Is not our church, centered social services and activities our greatest witness to the world?
- Last, but not least. Each of us has been baptized into Christ, anointed with the holy Chrism and have acquired the grace of the "royal priesthood," so let us do these works not only with our hands but our hearts as well. Calling to mind the words of the Apostle Paul that our works may be done "with decency and order."

Finally, I would like to express my great joy in meeting your beloved faces. I hope that our convention today will mark the beginning of a phase of planning, cooperation, and diligent work, aimed at making this archdiocese a place in which Christ takes pride, His beloved find solace, and holiness shines forth. These are the qualities that were embodied by Saint Raphael of Brooklyn, the founder of this archdiocese, who calls us to follow this example as we work together to build a beautiful future, guided by God's grace.

May God bless our efforts and make us a shining example and testament to His love for the world.