

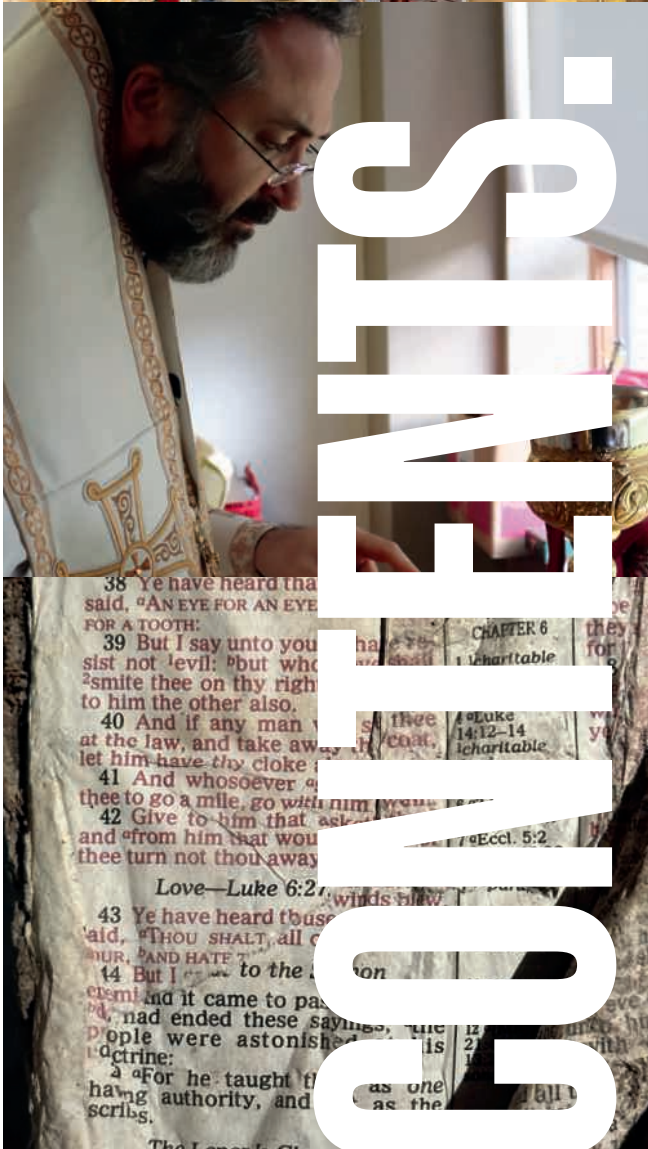
THE WORD

THE PHILOKALIA: THE
SPIRITUAL LIFE OF
THE PRIEST

ORATORICAL
FESTIVAL JUDGES'
CHOICE 2025

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
AT THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY

THE WORD



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Address of Metropolitan SABA to the General Assembly of the 57th Biennial Archdiocese Convention

His Eminence Metropolitan Saba
Chicago, IL
July 24, 2025

“All things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28)

Your Graces, the bishops; reverend members of the clergy; esteemed members of the Board of Trustees; heads of departments; members of the Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch; ladies of the Antiochian Women; our dear young adults; members of Teen SOYO; members of parish councils; and all our beloved and faithful people of our God-protected Archdiocese:

Excuse me for not talking about the theme of this convention¹ because of what is happening in the Middle East. Many of our parishioners in our Archdiocese ask me about the spiritual and theological attitude toward suffering in general. I came back to the theme of another convention which is a quote from Romans: “All things work together for good for those who love God” (8:28). I want to start with this verse today because we, as a church, should counsel and support the wounded and suffering people.

¹ “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

All of us here love God—or at least, that is what is expected of us. The one who loves God emulates Him and, as he entrusts his life into His hands, strives to be after God’s own heart. He accepts all that happens



EDITORIAL

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to him or her with contentment and faith, believing it to be for his or her benefit and salvation.

This theme is profoundly deep—and at the same time difficult for anyone who has not wholly surrendered their life to God. Facing the self and subjecting it by replacing our will with the will of God requires constant spiritual struggle that consumes the years of our lives, with the hope that the words “Thy will be done” might truly come to life within the depths of our souls.

I was seized by longing after finishing my first year of university to study theology. I secretly traveled to Lebanon without informing my parents and told them from there that I had left university to study what my heart desired. My father followed me in a fury and brought me back by force—after the abbot of the monastery had asked me to first finish my university degree. So I returned obediently, but with anger.

After finishing university, I began my theological studies. Then I discovered a great difference in myself between my first and second departures. I also realized how much life experience I had gained through university, along with my intensive involvement in church life through the Orthodox Youth Movement. These gave me the ability to better understand theology, relate it to pastoral care, and present it in a smooth and connected way with real life.

Was what happened, although against my will at the time, for a greater good or not?

Michael Lapsley is an Anglican monk from New Zealand. He served in South Africa during the time of apartheid. He resisted the regime fiercely but nonviolently. The authorities expelled him to another country. He continued his struggle and one day received a letter bomb that exploded when he

opened it, costing him both arms and one eye, and leaving his body riddled with shrapnel.

He remained in the hospital for seven continuous months, followed by two more years of treatment to learn how to manage his new life. Despite his condition, he continued his advocacy. After the apartheid ended, he returned to South Africa and established the Institute for Healing of Memories—places where all South Africans of all races came together to share their pains and confessions to one another. Through forgiveness, he paved the way for healing and the liberation of souls from a horrific past. He expanded this work by establishing similar centers in many other countries.

In his book *Redeeming the Past*, he writes: “That [bombing] experience was a true purification of my being.” Let us listen to his words as he reflects on the very verse that I have been expanding on:

“I used to resist racial discrimination and the separation of blacks and whites with intense stubbornness. But after the incident, I began to feel a gentleness within myself and a deeper understanding of both the victim and the oppressor, so that God could use me in founding these centers.” (Adapted from themes in Michael Lapsley’s life and writings, especially *Redeeming the Past: My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer*, 2012.)

How does the believer receive and interact with evil? How does one transform suffering into something for their own good? These are questions every believer faces. Many people reject the idea of God’s existence because of the immense and diverse forms of evil in the world. Others have discovered God precisely through these evils. And many others have found meaning and purpose in their lives after passing through great suffering.

Yet many have died without knowing the answer—but their loved ones, after their passing, have come to recognize the good that came through their trials.

The Book of Proverbs says: “For whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:11–12).

The word “reproves” (or “disciplines”) as rendered in the original Greek *paideia* conveys the meaning of nurturing and training a child through the use of instruction, counsel, rebuke, or discipline. Some modern translations even render it as “rebukes” instead of “disciplines.”

So, “discipline” here means refinement. It is a tempered form of reproof or punishment meant for correction.

These two verses from Proverbs speak of God’s discipline as part of His paternal love. The fundamental idea is that divine discipline is not a harsh punishment but a means of guiding the person toward the right path. In the religious

context, divine discipline is seen as an expression of God’s love, as He corrects those whom He loves, just as a father does with a child, to make him wiser and more upright.

In this positive context, Christians view the trials they face with full trust in God, who grants them strength and inner peace to endure them. This is also the task of spiritual fathers—to strengthen and comfort their spiritual children.

For example, Elder Ephraim of Arizona, in comforting one of his spiritual children, wrote: “How much a person loses when he suffers and forgets his sonship and does not realize that he is being disciplined as a child of God” (*Counsels from the Holy Mountain*, p. 13). To another, he encouraged: “Trials come to teach us how to become bearers of hardship, trained warriors, followers of Christ who was crucified for us, brothers of all the saints who walked the thorny path of the Cross ... and believers who keep the holy commandments, facing trials caused by the world, the devil, and the flesh” (p. 19).



Are we ready to give thanks for both joys and sorrows, for health and illness, for peace and war, and so on? Are we ready to give thanks for everything? It is from thanksgiving that the journey begins—towards accepting what happens to us with faith, courage, and surrender to God. From there, we draw strength, ability, and wisdom to transform evil into good for ourselves and for others.

Complaining and grumbling increase our feelings of frustration and despair. They darken our vision, making the suffering we endure even heavier on us and more damaging to our souls.

Let us begin, then, with thanksgiving. If we look at the reality of our Archdiocese, we will find many things for which we can thank God and rejoice in with a positive spirit. At the same time, we will also find many things to complain about and criticize with a negative spirit. Our Christian faith calls us to choose the former. So let us begin with the positive aspects and ask ourselves how to develop an attitude of faith that fosters them, and how to avoid the negative outlook that is often fueled by our impure passions.

Many are concerned with financial matters in the Archdiocese and complain about what they call a “loss of trust.” Three years ago, we began a financial audit covering all aspects of the Archdiocese. During this conference, you will hear the audit report of the past year prepared by a specialized company, and you will have the chance to discuss it with the professionals. This is a good thing.

The auditing journey began at the Archdiocesan level, not to stop there, but to gradually extend to all departments, institutions, and parishes. Our goal is to manage our income and expenses with utmost

accuracy, transparency, and effectiveness. The auditing process will reach all our churches and institutions.

Will we thank God for this and appreciate the efforts of those undertaking it, or will it pass without us giving it any importance? Will we volunteer to involve our parish in it, or will we place roadblocks to prevent the audit from reaching us?

We thank God for our youth who dedicate themselves to the priesthood and for the theological institutions available to them that offer necessary education and formation. We are serious in this regard. We have begun personally following up with them and providing what is needed so that their pastoral service in the future may be more effective. But we are still in need of more men willing to serve.

Will we continue to complain about the shortage and wait for those inclined toward the priesthood to come to us, or will we work to cultivate and nurture priestly vocations in the hearts of our young people? And how?

Our work with the youth still exists, but it weakens here and there and remains routine and uncreative—at least not to the desired degree—while a thirst for authentic spiritual life among the youth continues to grow, along with the challenges they face—spiritually, morally, economically, and in terms of values.

Many are drifting away from church life because the Church does not speak to them. How do we help them break free from the isolation of the parish and move into the wider embrace of the Archdiocese? This requires reflection and dialogue. Our youth need to exchange experiences, build friendships, live in community with one another, and discover the role of the Eucharist in their lives and relationships.

What are we doing to communicate with our youth and help them realize that the Church is their Church? We have superb youth—they thirst for the springs of Orthodox spiritual life and are not ashamed to say it. But what are we offering them now? Some activities they no longer need the Church to access. (The same activities that the world is offering them.)

Why don't we listen to them enough? Why do we insist on remaining clergy and laity who simply observe them, allowing only what we decide for them? Why do we hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in them? "It is enough to listen to their cries to understand what gnaws at them from within. Let us share in their joys and what inspires them, so that we might discover the best ways to reach their hearts" (Raymond Rizk).

In my last meeting with the bishops of the Archdiocese and the archiepiscopal vicars, it was revealed that in our Sunday schools, the highest rate of attendance among our children does not exceed 50%. Shouldn't our ambition be 100%? How do we achieve that?

We thank God that the vast majority of our parishes and missions are blessed with the presence of a priest who provides sacramental and liturgical services. We also thank Him for the launch of the voluntary diaconal ministry, which aims to ensure pastoral care for all age groups within the parish. But will we encourage our young people to embrace this ministry, or will we continue to merely observe?

We must understand that continuing traditional pastoral care that relies on a single priest—or at best, two—is no longer sufficient to provide optimal pastoral care to our faithful. The diversity of pastoral needs in our time, the increasing

challenges to the faith, and the wide geographical spread of our parishioners' homes, coupled with the long distances and time required for clergy to reach these homes, all demand that we develop and promote voluntary diaconal service.

Some parishes consist of enormous numbers of families and are cared for by only one priest! One of our parishes in Montreal has 1,565 families—not individuals—and one priest! I inform you that we will hold a Deacons Symposium following the Clergy Symposium next year, and I await your support. Our vision is that each parish will have several trained volunteer deacons, each specializing in a particular pastoral service.

Many new challenges now require specialized care. We must provide social workers and counselors trained to deal with marital issues, addiction of all kinds, elder care, accompanying the dying, visiting the sick, home-based spiritual gatherings, weekly retreats, and other specialized ministries that are now more necessary than ever.

We thank God for the Missions Department. In the past, we served and followed up with new missions only once their faithful had already organized themselves. Today, we proactively seek out scattered faithful and invite them to collaborate with us in forming missions, encouraging and supporting them. Moreover, we give thanks that some of our established and thriving parishes have begun to sponsor the creation of new missions, nurturing them until they mature and become independent churches.

We no longer merely wait for a request to form a mission—we now encourage their establishment and take them under our wing until they grow and stand on their own.



We thank God for the Archdiocese's ability to welcome many catechumens and prepare them for full membership in the Church. We are grateful to have begun standardizing this preparation process by initiating the establishment of a Catechesis Program. The first version of the required program is now ready and will be distributed to several priests across the Archdiocese to be implemented for catechumen formation throughout the upcoming year. They will provide feedback, which will help us finalize the program. The new program will be in a two-year pilot phase, during which the relevant committee will collect observations, comments, and suggestions from various parishes before establishing the final version.

One of our priests described the influx of converts as a "surge." This requires us to be very discerning and

thorough in receiving inquirers. Let us be cautious not to rejoice merely in numbers at the expense of spiritual quality (and health of our parishes).

We also look forward to soon establishing a special ministry for the newly illumined. After their baptism or chrismation, they must be accompanied spiritually and pastorally for an extended period so that they may integrate into Church life with a pure Orthodox spirit. They must experience the parish as a Eucharistic community, a true fellowship, a genuine family of Christ, and acquire the Orthodox mindset and conscience.

Orthodoxy, beloved, is not an ideology; it is a way of life, founded upon faith that has been articulated in doctrine so that it may be preserved and passed down by the faithful. There is a vast difference between doctrinal faith and ideological thinking.

In our previous convention, we stated that the infrastructure of the Archdiocese had been completed—meaning church buildings, parish houses (fellowship halls), and associated facilities—and that it was now time to begin supporting Church departments and institutions that serve in evangelical, social, and humanitarian work. This requires funding, especially in light of rising living costs, which are not matched by a corresponding increase in income. For this reason, some of our churches have begun to suffer from financial strain, resulting in a decline in spiritual services.

Now is the time to enter the realm of investment, especially real estate, in order to support and provide dignified services for Church ministry. Why are we content to invest all our funds in large financial institutions? Land and property prices are rising. Some pastoral service projects are coming to a halt due to lack of liquidity. Should we not think seriously about increasing our financial resources through other means, in addition to tithes, donations, and endowments? I brought up this issue in the previous convention as well.

There is also an increasing demand for service-oriented institutions such as schools, nurseries, and similar establishments. These typically begin small and grow over time, which is preferable. My advice to you is this: at both the Archdiocesan and parish levels, try to develop a comprehensive vision and begin with what is feasible, no matter how small. This is how we seek God's blessing in any project. If it grows and succeeds, it will be a sign of His blessing; if not, we cancel it and move on to another initiative.

Are you aware that we currently lack designated funding for some programs that are essential to the continuity of the Archdiocese? For example:

- **Emergency support for priests,**
- **Pastoral training and care for seminarians,**
- **Provision of traveling priests for areas in need of new missions, and**
- **Launching specialized pastoral care programs.**

We thank God for the few institutions that have already started to emerge. We all agree on the need for more service institutions. So why don't we, as various Orthodox entities in the same geographical region, begin cooperating to establish such institutions—whether a school or a home for the elderly, for example? This way we pave the road toward the unity we desire, when God wills and blesses it, rather than merely talking in theoretical terms while teaching our people a spirit of division and tribalism foreign to our Antiochian tradition over the past 2,000 years.

We thank God that The WORD Magazine and Joy Magazine are still ongoing. The former has undergone a clear upgrade in layout, while the latter has started to improve and diversify. Likewise, the Archdiocese's publications have started to be released. Today, we need to think deeply and professionally about the best ways for these tools to serve as a means of:

- **Strengthening the unity of thought and vision in our Archdiocese,**
- **Reinforcing the bonds of brotherhood among us as believers, and**
- **Deepening the connection between us and our Archdiocese, parishes, and institutions.**

Yet we still face the challenge of ensuring that these publications reach all our parishes. This is an open question for discussion. I regret to inform you that many parish service leaders have shown

little interest in the Archdiocese's publications a troubling sign.

We thank God for the archival resources that document our heritage. But we must push the Heritage Preservation Center forward. Much of our history remains locked in the pages of The WORD Magazine, which is now over 100 years old. This material needs systematic digital archiving, along with other written, visual, and oral materials documenting the history of the Archdiocese.

We also need to revive and reconstruct our Orthodox cultural traditions. Let me offer some examples:

- **Feast days of saints are not reflected in the celebrations of their namesakes,**

- **The rhythm of feasts is not accompanied by the social or material expressions that affirm the feast day—apart from the Christmas tree and Easter eggs.**

Where is our lived tradition, springing from our faith and Church? The Orthodox tradition includes specific foods associated with particular feast days.

We thank God for the beginning of monastic life in the Archdiocese. I ask that you accompany it with your prayers so it may grow with God's blessing and grace.



- **The Monastery of the Life-Giving Trinity has begun with the Hieromonk Paul in Memphis, Tennessee.**

- **We also hope that the arrival of the three nuns who will begin monastic life at the Antiochian Village will not be delayed.**

We thank God for the Antiochian Village, the heart and reservoir of the Archdiocese for the past 50 years. May God have mercy on our father in Christ, Sayidna Philip. Tens of thousands of our children have spent their summers in its camps, and we called upon them during the last board meeting to establish a Friends of the Antiochian Village Association.

Until now, the Village does not have its own designated endowment to cover part of its maintenance and development expenses. This year, we began by allocating a small endowment for the camp.



- **The main chapel at the camp is no longer sufficient for the large number of people it hosts during camp sessions or conferences.**

- **We now face the challenge of having to build a large church at the Village with a capacity of 350 to 400 people.**

- **We also need a cemetery for the Archdiocese, where our beloved departed can be laid to rest and remembered at every Divine Liturgy, especially those offered on Saturdays for the departed.**

Strengthening the Village will positively impact all aspects of the Archdiocese—beginning with the camps of each region. It is the heart that pumps blood into the arteries of the one body, especially once a women's monastery rises upon its grounds.

We thank God that the Archdiocese is not confined to a single culture, but rather, like our American society, it is composed of multiple cultures. Would it be too much to ask that we equip our priests and acquaint them with the various cultures present among the faithful of the Archdiocese?

“

**WE ARE A PEOPLE
WHO BELIEVE THAT
THE HOLY SPIRIT IS PRESENT
AND ACTIVE
IN THE CHURCH.**

”

There are three main cultures represented among us, and alongside the primary English language, many other languages are spoken. So how do we pastor all these cultures? What kind of training do our clergy and parish councils need in order to properly minister to everyone?

We look forward to training sessions for parish council members, as well as ongoing training for our clergy.

In the meeting of the bishops, there was also agreement that the Parish Life Conferences need to be re-evaluated. The number of participants is decreasing year after year. There is a near consensus that the original goals for which these conferences were established decades ago need to be reconsidered in light of the societal and economic changes of recent years.

There are many suggestions on the table, and this calls us to study the matter thoroughly so that everything we do truly fulfills the purpose for which this work was originally created. I call upon you to study the Parish Life Conferences at the level of the regional deaneries and districts, and among both the clergy and faithful. I look forward to hearing the results of your discussions soon.

There are important questions in this regard:

- **If some of our activities involve significant expenses, what about the faithful who cannot afford to participate?**

- **What do we offer them? What are the alternatives?**

- **Not everything we examine needs to be canceled, but perhaps developed or supplemented with other necessary activities.**

Lastly, and certainly not least, this important gathering of ours the General Assembly also needs development and restructuring. We must move beyond merely presenting reports followed by a few questions, and shift towards workshops, discussion sessions, and clear recommendations (or action plans). Otherwise, we will remain locked in a routine that weighs down the Archdiocese with stagnation and stifles creative energy.

We are a people who believe that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the Church. So why do we not allow the Spirit of God to ignite in us new initiatives, visions, aspirations, and bold efforts? I hope that by the next convention, we will come together with a renewed mindset and emerge with recommendations that shape the next two years at the level of both parishes and the Archdiocese.

Let us look together toward supporting one another, that we may prepare our souls to become a dwelling worthy of the Lord, in accordance with His saying: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23).

Thus, relying on our Lord and His power, and opening ourselves to His Holy Spirit, who

performs wonders and gives life, who from before the beginning “was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2)—we may work through Him and according to His will, walking the path of transfiguration.

As our brethren at St. Elias Church in Damascus cleaned their church up on the day following the tragic terrorist attack, and as our priests and seminarians who were on the pilgrimage to Jordan and Lebanon noticed that their church is forever adhering to the Orthodox faith in every way possible regardless of centuries of instability, war, various persecutions, and martyrdom for merely carrying the name of Christ, so shall we draw from their daily witness and strength to continue witnessing to Christ in a world that masquerades without shame to the teachings of Christ and His Gospel.

Drawing continuous strength from His living presence in us and within us, and touching the effectiveness of His words for us—“trust, fear not, I have overcome the world, I am with you always even unto the end of the world”—we continue our Christian witness so that our Church may become a sun that never sets, always shining brightly, lighting the darkness of this fallen world in which we live, transforming it into a world redeemed and saved.



THE PHILOKALIA: The Spiritual Life of the Priest

**22ND BIENNIAL CLERGY SYMPOSIUM
ANTIOCHIAN VILLAGE CONFERENCE & RETREAT CENTER
JULY 22–26, 2024**

Metropolitan Basilios of Australia & New Zealand

What is Philokalia? And why are the texts and teachings of the Philokalia important for someone who wants to understand the role and attributes of the spiritual father?

Spiritual fatherhood and the figure of the spiritual father occupies a central position in Orthodox spirituality; it is for that reason that it was always of interest to speakers and researchers. Many articles have been written, and numerous papers have been presented at various conferences on this topic.

There is no teaching in the Philokalia about the pastoral work of the priest, no advice or instructions on developing pastoral skills, on how to deliver a good sermon, or on how to make a fruitful pastoral visit to a sick and terminally ill patient! But the text of the Philokalia presents a comprehensive teaching about spiritual life.



If, for every Christian, the teaching of the Philokalia constitutes a framework of preconditions with regards to spiritual life, one can understand how much more this is so and is required in advance with regards to the spiritual life of the priest (spiritual father).

1. The present lecture is based on the texts of the Philokalia, which span the period from the 4th to the 14th century. This enables an overall approach as well as the possibility to present various teachings and opinions of the Fathers on the topic of spiritual fatherhood, and by extension its essential characteristics and charismatic features, so that one can ascertain that the teaching and experience of the Neptic Fathers, although they differ outwardly, is essentially the same. This proves that the patristic tradition is unified, for the Spirit that guides the Fathers is one.

2. In the present lecture, an attempt has been made to present the pertinent spiritual qualifications and spiritual gifts that the spiritual father should have.

3. The Philokalia is a work that includes teaching handed down from teacher to disciple for over a thousand years. In the teaching of the Fathers, the figure of the elder is described in all detail. Let us not forget that the Philokalia includes texts by numerous spiritual fathers and at the same time by numerous spiritual children of charismatic saints, as for example St. Symeon the New Theologian and his spiritual father Symeon the Pious, as well as his spiritual child Niketas Stithatos; or St. Maximus and St. Thalassios the Libyan; St. Gregory Palamas and his spiritual father, St. Nikephoros the Solitary.

It is for this reason that the study of their texts becomes necessary in order to understand correctly the genuine and Orthodox spiritual fatherhood. Their teaching is not the product of rational reflection but an experience of asceticism, obedience, and perfection in Christ.

4. Through the texts of the Philokalia, everything is referred to God, who is literally the “Father” as the prototype of the ministry of the spiritual father. I also refer to the topic of penance (*epitimia*), which is not mentioned directly in the texts of the Philokalia. On the basis of God’s “pedagogical withdrawal,” which never involves the notion of punishment but only of healing, I have formed a clear idea about how the spiritual father can be inspired as to the way in which he will perform spiritual fatherhood and understand the true nature of penances (*epitimia*) so as to use them as pedagogical means.

5. In our days, the important and sanctified bond of an elder or spiritual father is in danger of being distorted and misunderstood through an anti-hesychastic teaching. Hesychasm, as an ascetic therapeutic method, has been the heart of Orthodoxy since the times of the Apostles till our days. The purpose of this lecture is to offer, based on the texts of the Neptic and hesychastic Fathers of the Philokalia, the experience of the Neptic tradition with regards to the figure of the spiritual father. I will demonstrate the value of stillness, asceticism, and prayer in the therapeutic process, firstly, of the spiritual father himself and, subsequently, of his spiritual children. I tried to present the true meaning of obedience to a spiritual father as a means to be set free from self-love and selfishness, on the

one hand, and as an imitation of the obedience of the Son to God the Father, on the other. This way of stillness and obedience is the one that prominent spiritual fathers have followed and continue to follow throughout the ages.

6. The lecture does not mention spiritual gifts and virtues in an abstract way but rather presents the “Philokalic process” of therapy according to the Neptic Fathers, which aims at restoring the image of God in the human person and at transforming the latter into a “Philokalic human being.”

7. Philokalia is not confined to the past, neither does it end in the 14th century with St. Gregory Palamas, but it extends into our own times. We have examples and testimonies from contemporary saints and spiritual fathers, for instance St. Silouan the Athonite, St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. Joseph the Hesychast, St. Paisios, St. Porphyrios, St. Sophrony, and others. These holy fathers experienced in their lives the Neptic and hesychast tradition of the Orthodox Church within our times and are regarded as the successors of the hesychast and Philokalic tradition. In their person we see embodied and encompassed the entire hesychast and Philokalic experience of the Church in the past. This proves that patristic tradition did not end at a certain point in time, neither did it cease to exist, but continues to be alive until our own times. The tradition of our Church is alive and uninterrupted, and according to the Apostle: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

8. The Philokalia is a work “for the general profit of all orthodox people,” just as St.

Nikodemos and St. Makarios envisioned it in the prologue of the first edition of the Philokalia. If for every Christian the teaching of the Philokalia constitutes a framework of preconditions with regards to spiritual life, one can understand how much more this is so and is required in advance as to the life of the spiritual father. In our days our churches were replaced with a clinic and the spiritual fathers with a psychologist. Contemporary psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists have undoubtedly important counseling work to do. But we must emphasize that the Neptic Fathers proved to be true anatomists of the human soul centuries before the emergence of modern psychology. In this respect, Orthodoxy does not reject, neither provides generalized opinions on these issues, but uses with discretion whatever it regards as useful and salvific for the faithful.

In the Orthodox tradition there is a special emphasis on the necessity of having a spiritual father guiding the faithful in their spiritual life. According to the Neptic Fathers no one starts walking on an unknown road without a guide who is going to show him/her the right direction. Besides, in the life of every person, success or failure in a task depends in many cases on their right or wrong choices regarding advice or opinion. A right or wrong choice with respect to a spiritual father can contribute to salvation or the loss of one’s soul.

The bishop is called “father after God.”¹ Thus, the spiritual father par excellence is the bishop. The bishop through the holy ordination gives birth to fathers of the Church, that is, the presbyters. The presbyters in turn and with the

1 The Martyrdom of Polycarp, p. 12.

permission (blessing) of the bishop become fathers and beget a spiritual child within the Church through baptism and the regenerative mystery of repentance (*metanoia*).

It is not essential for the spiritual father to be a priest; in other words, spiritual fatherhood is not always related to priesthood. In this case, spiritual fatherhood is a personal spiritual gift (charisma), and the spiritual father is virtually a charismatic and prophetic figure that has taken on this ministry thanks to the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. Then the spiritual father can exercise the guiding and counseling ministry regardless of the mystical authority to “bond and loose” sins.

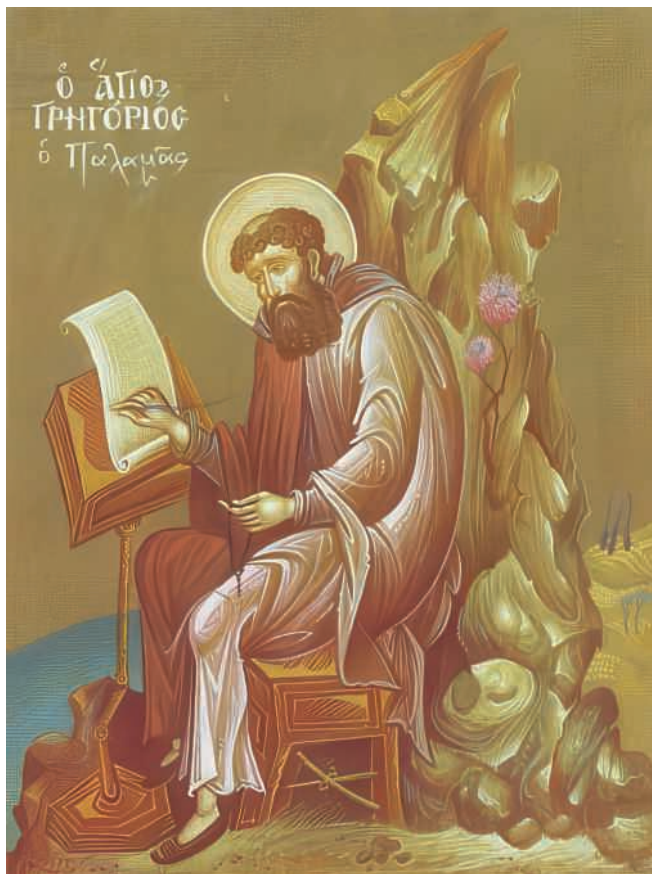
Spiritual fatherhood does not involve the notion of authority; it is a taking on of responsibility and sacrificial ministry. Christ in His life and conduct exhibited a vivid example, in light of which the spiritual father can imitate Him and can be inspired by Him. Christ Himself witnesses that He is the “Good Shepherd”² who came to “seek and save the lost;”³ and not only that, but He also sacrifices Himself for the sake of the sheep. He is the Teacher and Lord, and the one who washes the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper.

Spiritual fatherhood and the figure of the spiritual father occupy a central place in Orthodox spirituality, wherein the necessity of a spiritual father for the guidance of the faithful with regards to the spiritual life is particularly emphasized: “give me a word, so that I may be saved” was the life conduct for both monastics and laypeople, and that is exactly what they

would ask from the great figures of spiritual life, seeking in this way the divine will.

Christianity is not a philosophy or a teaching, but a way of life. In their entirety, the texts of the Neptic Fathers of the Philokalia constitute a witnessing of “this life.”⁴ Thus, it is necessary for us to return to the origins, the sources, the authentic teaching of the Fathers, especially when we want to delve into such a spiritual matter as the issue of the spiritual father, which constitutes the pillar and foundation stone of the spiritual life.

The absolute and complete devotion of a spiritual father to their ministry is dictated by the initial exemplar (prototype) of God, who is presented as a Father. God is good and absolute love, but as a physician of souls He has in



² Jn. 10:11.

³ Lk. 19:10.

⁴ Acts 5:20.

mind the healing of patients and so He allows temptations and tribulations to come, depending on what disease of passions and decay of sin a person suffers. Thus, He prepares His medicine by considering the sin that has its nest within the soul. The spiritual father is inspired by and imitates the prototype, God, and functions as a father and a pedagogue, not as a law-keeper or a judge. He is the “dispensation of divine philanthropy,” and thus he should exclusively be an instrument of the benevolence of God and should only act in this capacity.

Although the bond of spiritual fatherhood is an important and sacred institution, it is in danger due to a variety of misuses and deformations: the most dangerous of these being on the part of the disciples—the personality cult (glorification) and idolization of the spiritual father, and on the part of the spiritual father the oppression of the disciples’ freedom. One finds the true and genuine content of spiritual fatherhood in the person of Christ and His relationship with God the Father. The relationship of God the Father with His Only-begotten Son is presented as the infinite offering of love from the Father to His Son, while Sonship is presented as the infinite self-abandonment of the Son to the will of the Father.

Being a spiritual father presupposes the communion and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If the spiritual father is the one who cultivates the spiritual life of his spiritual children and keeps their communion with the grace of the Holy Spirit alive, then he has to acquire himself the communion of the Holy Spirit in advance. Participating in the Holy Spirit has to come

first, only then can it be transmitted to others. The spiritual father as a person is the one who lives according to the Spirit, the one who is full of the Spirit, the Spirit-bearer, the one who has (active) inside himself the Holy Spirit. The acquisition of the Holy Spirit does not come without conditions; it requires the spiritual father to prepare his soul so that he can receive the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit within himself. The spiritual father should strive to reach as much as he can in both perfection and virtue. He is the one who through asceticism, nepsis, and stillness (*hesychia*) has been reformed and transformed into an image of God.

“Haste to find an unerring and perfect teacher,” writes St. Kallistos, and adds that “by seeking with diligence and faith you will not fail in your goal.”⁵ From these words, it can be noted that the initiative with regards to spiritual fatherhood does not come from the teacher, but from the disciples. The spiritual father is always aware of his unworthiness and incompetence to take on such a responsibility.⁶ The disciple prays and searches, and then he decides to hand over (entrust) them to a spiritual father. Thus, it is the spiritual children who reveal even to the spiritual father his ministry, and it is not the elder who imposes himself upon the disciple.

It is only thanks to his virtue that the spiritual father draws disciples to himself, while the reputation of his virtue declares his gifts to the people. The gifts of the Holy Spirit operate according to his receptivity and strength,

5 Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos, *An Exact Method and Rule according to God* 15, Philokalia V.

6 Fr. Sophrony writes characteristically: “The awareness of my poverty was profound, but nevertheless I could not quit from the spiritual ministry bestowed upon me. I did not seek it in any way.” Sakharov, Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 237.

along with the support of the divine power that bestows him.⁷ According to St. Peter of Damascus, the so-called spiritual works are lifeless, if they are not performed with the cooperation between human effort and divine grace. Human asceticism draws close the grace of God and, simultaneously, the grace acquired through holy baptism and the other sacraments assists the whole process.

The guidance in the spiritual life as “art of arts and the science of sciences” requires a great experience. The spiritual father should acquire personal experience and know as much as possible the whole range of spiritual conditions about which he will dare speak to others. This will be acquired through his obedience to a spiritual father, from whom he has been taught the rules of spiritual life and struggle against passions.

7 Maximus the Confessor, *Various Theological Chapters*, *Sixth Century* 13, Philokalia II.

The spiritual life has a “dynamic character,” and the acquisition of virtues does not happen at once, but gradually. The Neptic Fathers regarded asceticism as a means and not as a goal. The perfect athlete is not the one who fling himself into external bodily asceticism, but the one who gets involved in the internal work of the mind.⁸ Thus, the final goal is to guard the inner man, but this is done through bodily effort.

Since the goal of spiritual guidance is one’s cure, the spiritual father should firstly pass through the stages of spiritual advancement and acquire his own cure. Then he will become capable of leading others to their therapeutic end. The words of St. Gregory the Theologian are clear on this: “A man must himself be cleansed, before cleansing others: himself become wise, that he may make others wise; become light, and

8 Niketas Stethatos, *Third Century of Chapters on Knowledge* 69, Philokalia III, p. 345.



then give light: draw near to God, and so bring others near; be hallowed, then hallow them; be possessed of hands to lead others by the hand, of wisdom to give advice” (Oration 2, 71).

Stillness (*hesychia*), as it is referred to by the Neptic Fathers, constitutes a method of therapy and knowledge of God. As such it can find a way into being practically implemented into the ministry of guiding the souls of the faithful, for the pastoral work of the Church consists in the therapy and Theosis of its members. Stillness and *nepsis* purify the soul, illumine the mind, and bestow upon it the gift of discernment (*diakrisis*), which is regarded as the most important talent of the spiritual father. The spiritual father, endowed with the gift of discernment, uses it thoroughly within his pastoral ministry. He acts through *oikonomia*

(economy) and, while sometimes he insists on the exactitude or the strict observance of the commandments and rules, on other occasions he has recourse to economy (a benevolent application of the legal rule).

“Acquire inner peace and thousands of people around you will find their salvation” (St. Seraphim of Sarov). Holy stillness and asceticism are inviolate preconditions for the purification of the soul from the passions and for its communion with God. It is not superfluous in the life of a Christian, even more so in the life of the spiritual father, who takes on the ministry of guiding souls. The spiritual father—living within a society where the pollution of noise and images indeed dominates and enslaves the whole person, causing thus the loss of freedom—needs to go away, concentrate, and



be in silence every time external conditions threaten to break up the inner communication with God and one's self. However, fleeing and being isolated are not regarded as goals in itself; the incentive is not the liberation from duties and earthly concerns, but to have withdrawal and solitude permeate one's spiritual life and pastoral work towards the perfection in Christ.⁹

Solitude is a condition of the heart and not an issue of geography. The real journey of the elder is not so much his withdrawal into the desert as it is his spiritual withdrawal into his heart. St. Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia, a contemporary saint, was appointed to the church of St. Gerasimos, the chapel of the Athens Multiclinic in the area of Omonoia Square, for 33 years, he said: "in the multitude of people, the world and the noise of Omonoia, I would raise my hands and live within myself just as if I were in the wilderness of the Holy Mountain."

Troubles and *logismoi* (thoughts) cloud the eyes of the soul and prevent one from seeing things clearly, whereas in the condition of silence one can be purified from the passions, be aware of his own spiritual sickness, and finally acquire the ability to discern and judge rightly both things in general and the guiles of the demons in particular. "The ear of the hesychast will receive from God marvelous words" (St. John of the Ladder).

Peter the Damascene writes about silence as follows: "silence is above everything and without it we are not able to purify ourselves and become aware of our sickness or the guiles of the demons; furthermore, we will also not be capable to perceive the power and providence of God within the divine words, both those

9 Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 42, 24, p. 36, 484B.

being chanted and those being read."¹⁰

Within his ministry of guidance, the spiritual father knows that he is a sinful and weak person. He confesses his weakness, but this should not prevent him from declaring the teaching of Christ on virtue and eternal life; not only what he has achieved and realized with regards to the teaching of the Gospel, but the entire teaching of Christ. For the spiritual father does not preach for himself, nor does he offer Christ in his own measure, but preaches Christ in His fullness.

Spiritual fatherhood as "an art of arts and a science of sciences" does not come without prerequisites. The spiritual father in his experiential journey towards spiritual fatherhood should be endowed with specific gifts and attributes. Firstly, for the spiritual father, self-knowledge is not just an issue of moral concern, but a practical issue essential for the right performance of his ministry. Self-knowledge leads to the knowledge of God.¹¹ The one who has acquired self-knowledge and the knowing of God is in a position to know the soul of another person and to transmit to it the healing of the Spirit. The spiritual father's self-knowledge is a result of his own reference to and dependence on another experienced and informed spiritual father, as well as the constant confession of his own sins. Self-knowledge makes him lenient towards others, compassionate towards sinners, and sympathetic to those confessing.

Spiritual and scientific knowledge are essential qualifications in the ministry of guiding the

10 Peter Damascene, *An Exposition about False Knowledge*, Book I, Philokalia III.

11 Makarios the Egyptian: "You want to know God? Know thyself in advance."

souls of the faithful, but it is impossible for one to become prudent and wise—in the spiritual sense—if he is not interested in becoming truly educated through the wisdom from above. This wisdom from above is given, thankfully, to those who ask and look for it with faith, humility, and love, regardless of if it includes human wisdom and education or not. The Neptic Fathers did not show contempt for, nor did they exclude, the knowledge that one acquires through study or listening to others. It is essential for the spiritual father to be educated to such an extent that he may be able to minister the needs of his spiritual children. On the other hand, the power of secular knowledge should not be over-emphasized but should be regarded as “assisting and secondary in nature” for the spiritual father, so that there might not arise any danger of turning the pastoral work into a sociology or philosophy and at the same time undermining the grace.

The ability to teach has always been interwoven with the pastoral ministry of the

spiritual shepherd and it is regarded as a basic and necessary precondition for the pastoral ministry of the Church. The spiritual father is not just a teacher who teaches, but the one who gives birth and does so through his words. Living words accomplish the regeneration of the faithful. The spiritual father who speaks rightly should believe that his words come from God; for truth is not the one who speaks, but God who acts. The spiritual father needs the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding every person and in each case. The word that God has endowed humans will become, in the mouth of an experienced spiritual guide, a means of spiritual therapy. Through his words the spiritual father is capable of effecting spiritual therapy, and he has the power to restore the souls of people.

The element of free choice is particularly important in understanding the human being as created *in the image of God*. Freedom is the atmosphere within which Christian truth moves and expresses itself. Obedience presupposes the sacrifice of one’s own will and leads without much effort to spiritual progress. In effect, rooting out one’s own will is not a loss, but a cure for our sick will through the will of God. Through obedience, the faithful voluntarily submit his own free will to God. God accepts the gift and offers to the faithful not only his original freedom, that is, the potentiality to choose between good and bad, but also his final freedom, which is the participation in the eternal divine glory. Renouncing one’s own will in obedience to a spiritual father has to be done in a free spirit and with a willing heart. It constitutes a voluntary and free act. Faith

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in God is realized within obedience, just like the only begotten Son and Word of the Father has shown, since he became “obedient to death, even death on a cross.”¹²

The spiritual father, when he demands absolute or unconditional obedience, is not about a goal in itself, nor for the sake of domination. It is about a therapeutic method that aims at delivering the disciples from the false and deceptive ego so that he can enter into true freedom. The purpose of the spiritual father does not focus on the constant dependency of his spiritual children. The objective of the spiritual father is to guide him towards spiritual maturity, to lead him from childish spirituality to spiritual adulthood, according to the saying of St Paul: “and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”¹³

Regarding the issue of repentance, we should mention that the spiritual father himself needs repentance; a spiritual father who does not live constant repentance cannot minister to the needs of others. A Christian on one hand needs spiritual guidance to advance securely in their spiritual life, and on the other hand needs the sacrament of repentance and confession for the remission of their sins. Here we have two different procedures. In some cases, the sacrament of repentance and confession may relate to spiritual guidance and thus the latter, as well as the therapeutic tending of the faithful for the removal of their passions, can take place during confession, especially if the spiritual

father is a priest and a confessor with permission to act in that capacity. The spiritual father is the

¹² Phil. 2:8.

¹³ Eph. 4:13.

instrument via which the remission of sins is realized by God.

The whole process of the sacrament of repentance, as the pastoral possibility par excellence within the Church, presents—both in terms of language and means—much similarity to the practice of medicine. It is about the “therapeutic method” of the Church.

Sin is the disease of the soul and *epitimia* (penances) are the medicine that cures it. Despite the important role that *epitimia* plays, they do not constitute an essential part of the sacrament of confession, nor some kind of supplement to it, for the remission of sins is given for free and without them. The *epitimia* in the Orthodox Church has a pedagogical, therapeutic, and restorative objective. They are placed within the context of the therapeutic and pedagogical ministry of the spiritual father.

The Church is a communion of persons, and the pastoral care of people should be personal. It is unacceptable for a pastor in general or for a spiritual father in particular to guide and lead people by ignoring the special conditions of their upbringing, their circumstances, and whatever constitutes the personality of each one.



Just as the canons and the *epitimia* of the Church aim at the cure and salvation of people, something similar happens in the case of the implementation of economy (*oikonomia*), which is a kind of leniency and condescension with regards to the strict observance of rules. Either in the case of the strict observance of rules or in the case of implementing *oikonomia*, the spiritual father should—when there is some special need—minister in a fatherly manner and pursue with discernment the success of the spiritual advancement and salvation of the repenting person. This is so because spiritual ministry is not limited to the imposition of disciplinary interventions but pertains to the salvation of souls.

The spiritual knowledge of the human condition and the limitations of human nature, as well as its needs, makes the spiritual father strict towards himself and lenient towards others. In the ministry of spiritual fatherhood, meekness is the rule of behavior and conduct of life. There are cases, though, when he is called to express himself through holy anger. Strictness has to be only the final choice in dealing with an issue and when it is necessary for the spiritual father to use it, he should distance himself both from rage and the passion of anger. For his spiritual children, the spiritual father is on the one hand a loving mother and on the other a relentless father.

The work of spiritual fatherhood, as we have already mentioned, is “an art of arts and a science of sciences”¹⁴ and this entails that the responsibility of the spiritual father is indeed huge and exceeds common

human limits. Before God, everyone takes on the responsibility of their personal salvation, but the spiritual father takes on the huge responsibility of the salvation of his children. Being aware of the cross-like burden of his accountability regarding the souls of his disciples is a basic precondition for accepting spiritual fatherhood; for he will be held accountable not only for himself but also for them, since he took on responsibility of their salvation.

Love is the feature par excellence, the cause and the essence of spiritual fatherhood. Fatherly love is the one that unites the spiritual father with his spiritual children, while the response of his spiritual children sustains their unity with him. The fountain of love is God, who is the absolute love. Self-love resists the love of God and the love of one’s brothers. The spiritual father is the image of the Good Shepherd, who has “the greater love” and “lays down his life for the sheep.”¹⁵ Love towards God finds its practical expression and implementation in the love we show towards our brothers. Spiritual fatherhood is a cross, which no one can bear without love—especially till the end. The spiritual father is set on fire due to his desire for the salvation of his children and asks to bear their cross; to be saved or to perish with them.

The prayer of the spiritual father for the sake of his children is already a kind of duty and a taking on of responsibility. Prayer is an expression of love. The spiritual father’s prayer and his intercession continue with a greater confidence after his death.

14 Neilos the Ascetic, *Ascetic Discourse*, Philokalia I.

15 Jn 10:11.

ARCHDIOCESAN OFFICE

ORDAINED

AULTMAN, Nicholas to the holy diaconate by Bishop MOUSA on April 12, 2025, at St Nicholas Cathedral, Brooklyn, NY.

BYNUM, Steven (Moses) to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on July 27, 2025, at the 57th Biennial Archdiocesan Convention, Chicago, IL.

CARPENTER, Dn. Luke to the holy priesthood by Bishop THOMAS on May 28, 2025, at the Church of St. Philip in Souderton, PA. Fr. Luke is assigned to St. Philip Church as the assistant priest.

FAKHOURI, Dn. Symeon was ordained to the Holy Priesthood by Bishop ANTHONY on June 15, 2025, at St. George in Upland, CA, where he is attached.

HADDAD, Najeeb (Paul) to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on June 8, 2025, at St. Mary Church, Hunt Valley, MD.

HADDAD, Nader (John) to the holy diaconate by Bishop ANTHONY on July 20, 2025, at St. Mary in Palos Heights, IL.

HANNA Robert (Spyridon) to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on August

15, 2025, at St. Mary Church Palos Heights, IL.

HICKS, Jason to the holy diaconate by Bp. JOHN on May 25, 2025, at St. Paul Church in Katy, Texas. He is assigned to St. Patrick Church, Bealetton, VA.

JAKEL, Nathan to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on March 30, 2025, at St. Philip Church Souderton, PA.

KASSAB, Dn. Nicholas to the holy priesthood by Bishop JOHN on June 21, 2025, at St. George Orthodox Church, Norwood, MA.

KERR, Dn. Joseph (Stephen) to the holy priesthood by Bishop JOHN on May 18, 2025, at St. John the Baptist Church in Frederick, MD. Fr. Joseph is attached to that parish.

KOUBEK, Sophrony (David) to the holy diaconate by Bishop JOHN on July 10, 2025, at St. Euphemia Church in Rockland, ME.

RASK, Timothy to the holy diaconate by Bishop JOHN on May 24, 2025, at St. Joseph Church, Houston, TX. He is assigned to that parish.

OLMSTEAD, Sbdn. Justin to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA at Sts. Sergius and Bacchus Church in Kousba, Lebanon, on

June 22, 2025. Deacon Justin is attached to St. Ignatius Church in Mesa, AZ.

NAJM, Dn. Simon to the holy priesthood by Metropolitan SABA on June 29, 2025, at Our Lady of Balamand Patriarchal Monastery Lebanon.

NUNU, Nicola to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on August 24, 2025, at Basilica of St. Mary Palos Heights, IL

SHAND, John (Robert Aristides) to the holy diaconate by Bishop JOHN on June 15, 2025, at St. Mary Church in Pawtucket, RI.

SHAND, Dn. John (Robert Aristides) to the holy priesthood by Bishop JOHN on June 22, 2025, at St. George Orthodox Church, Norwood, MA.

SPENCER, Fr. Jeffrey to the holy priesthood by Bishop THOMAS on July 6 at the Church of St. Ignatius at the Antiochian Village Camp in Bolivar, PA. Fr. Jeffrey is awaiting assignment while serving at the Church of St. Elias in Atlanta, GA.

ZAYED, John (Nasser) to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on July 20, 2025, at St. George Church, Cicero, IL. He is assigned to that parish.

WILEY, Galen (Matthew) to the holy diaconate by Metropolitan SABA on April 6, 2025, at St. Anthony Church, Bergenfield, NJ.

WILEY, Dn. Matthew to the holy priesthood by Metropolitan SABA on June 08, 2025, at St. Mary Church Hunt Valley, MD. He is assigned to the pastorate of St. Nicholas Church in Urbana, IL.

ASSIGNED

SOLBERG, V. Rev. Paul to the pastorate of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Jefferson, NC, effective July 1, 2025.

GHANTOUS, Rev. Fr. Habib to the pastorate of St. George in Terre Haute, IN, effective August 1, 2025.

NEWMAN, Fr. Nicholas to St. Mary in Wilkes-Barre, PA, effective August 1, 2025.

NIQUA, Rev. Fr. Anthony to the pastorate of St. Nicholas in Grand Rapids. MI, effective August 1, 2025.

NASSER, V. Rev. Fr. Michael as part of the faculty of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in NY.

LAICIZED

BRUCE, Benjamin to the rank of laity on June 30, 2025.

RELEASED

HINDE, The Rev. Silouan of St. Lawrence Orthodox Church, Felton, CA.

CLAUSING, The Rev. Methodius of St. Lawrence Orthodox Church, Felton, CA.

HULTER, The Rev. Deacon Lawrence of St. Lawrence Orthodox Church, Felton, CA.

RETIRED

MIHAI, V. Rev. Fr. Vasile of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Jefferson, NC.

ELLISON, V. Rev. Fr. James of St. Nicholas Church in Urbana, IL, effective March 1, 2025.

ALBERTS, V. Rev. Fr. George of St. George Church in Wilkes-Barre, PA, effective August 1, 2025. Attached to St. Michael Church in Greensburg, PA.

DECEASED

Kh. Maggie Hock, 71, on June 20, 2025. For many years, she led the Archdiocese's Dept. of Marriage and Parish Family Ministries. In recent years, she served as a professor at the Antiochian House of Studies (AHOS).

Kh. Maggie once served as coordinator for the Archdiocese's Dept. of Christian Education for the Diocese of

Wichita and Mid-America prior to her appointment as director of Marriage and Parish Family Ministries. She was a licensed psychotherapist and mediator (LMHP, CPC, LPC), specializing in crisis and trauma, individual, marital, parenting, group therapy, and corporate dynamics.

She was married to Archpriest Don Hock, pastor of St. Mary Church of Omaha, for 52 years,



parenting five children and enjoying 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Before their arrival in Omaha in 1992, the Hocks served in an Antiochian parish in California for six years. Before that, they served as missionaries to Western Europe where they ministered in numerous multicultural communities.

In addition to her husband, Kh. Maggie is survived by her children Holly, Hannah, Heidi

and Don; and her grandchildren and great-grandchild. She was predeceased by her youngest daughter, Hilary.

Doug Skaff Jr., member of our Archdiocesan Board of Trustees, on June 10, 2025.



He was a devoted husband and father, proud son and brother, respected public servant, and passionate West Virginian. He was deeply committed to his church, his community, and to lifting up those around him through both service and kindness. Doug's love for West Virginia extended into his political career. Elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates in 2008, representing Kanawha County, he served multiple terms, including as House Minority Leader from 2020.

Doug is survived by his wife, Marisa Skaff; sons, Andrew, Elias, and Alexander; parents, Doug Sr. and Maryann Skaff; sister, Teresa (Mikey) Abou-

Assaly; brother, Thomas (Caitlin) Skaff; nieces, nephews, and many extended family and friends.

Mr. Ralph "Raphael" Abercia, 101, on July 16, 2025. He was a member and an honorary member of the Archdiocese Board of Trustees since its inception in the 1940s, a North American Chairman of the Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch, and a lifelong steward of St. George Church of Houston, TX.



He was born August 24, 1923, into a Lebanese immigrant family and lived during the Great Depression. Ralph was a successful attorney, also enjoying successes in real estate and financial services. A lifelong Houstonian, he was also an active philanthropist, supporting numerous causes related to his church at the local and Archdiocesan levels, education, healthcare, and community services.

Ralph was married to Adelene for nearly 73 years. They survived COVID-19 in 2020. Ralph was also a four-time cancer survivor; Adelene has survived it twice. Together, Ralph and Adelene raised four children: Sharon, Sandra, Ralph Jr., and Mary Kathryn. Their family includes grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Fr. Minas Vasile Sarchizian, 57, on July 22, 2025. He was born in Constanta, Romania, on June 24, 1968. Fr. Minas knew from a very young age that he wanted to serve God as a priest. God guided him through a congenital heart defect, an oppressive regime, and across lands.



In March of 1982, Fr. Minas immigrated to the U.S. with his whole family. Fr. Minas served as an altar boy for many years at Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church in Los Angeles. He later attended St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary, PA

The love of Fr. Minas's life was discovered back in his homeland of Romania. He and Presbytera Stela Nicoleta wrote letters to each other that were tender and earnest. Their letters eventually brought them together in the sacrament of marriage in Romania in 1995. Presbytera Stela joined her husband in America, and in 1996, their precious daughter Mary was born.

Not long after his ordination to the priesthood, Fr. Minas opened a Romanian Orthodox mission in the San Fernando Valley. God later guided Fr. Minas to St. Michael Antiochian Orthodox Church in Van Nuys, CA, where he served alongside the pastor, Fr. Timothy Baclig, for over 10 years until the time of his repose. Fr. Minas served as interim pastor (2015–16) of Holy Cross Antiochian Orthodox Church in Palmdale, CA, and served many liturgies in various parishes across Southern California.

Fr. Minas is survived by his wife, Stela Nicoleta, and his daughter, Mary.

Memorial Held at Prophet Elias Church of Dweilaa, Damascus, Syria

Report and photos from the Patriarchate of Antioch,
Damascus, July 25, 2025



With the blessing of His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, a Hierarchal Divine Liturgy was celebrated to mark the 40th day since the massacre at Prophet Elias Church in Dweilaa, Damascus.

The Liturgy, held in the same church, was presided by Metropolitan Nicolas Baalbaki of Hama and its Dependencies, Syria, with the participation of Bishops Romanos al-Hannat, Patriarchal Vicar, and Moussa al-Khoury, Arsenius Dahdal, and Moussa al-Khasi, Patriarchal assistants, along with a group of clergy.

The Liturgy was attended by the families of the martyrs and parishioners, in addition to a large number of believers who came to honor the departed, praying for the repose of their souls, the healing of the injured and wounded, and for the comfort of their hearts.



At the end of the Liturgy, the Trisagion Service was held for the souls of the martyrs. Metropolitan Nicholas conveyed the condolences and love of Patriarch John X to the families of the martyrs and the wounded, and his prayers for peace in Syria and the entire world.

The Antiochian Archdiocese of North America continues to collect donations to support the survivors and surviving family members of the terrorist attack. Please consider making a donation.

Elections Held for Archdiocese Board of Trustees

Dn. Peter Samore, Director of Communications



On Friday, July 25, the general assembly of the 57th Biennial Archdiocese Convention in Rosemont, IL, near Chicago elected ten members to the Archdiocese Board of Trustees. There, His Eminence Metropolitan Saba, as chairman of the board, also appointed five more members plus an honorary member.

Listed alphabetically, they are: Mr. Dan Abraham, Mr. Edward Assile, Mr. Richard Ayoob, Mr. Dan Braun, Mr. Fawaz El Khoury, Mr. Walid Fakhoury, Ms. Zeina Fares, Ms. Darlene Haddad, Mr. Eli Haig, Mr. George Hanna, Dr. Ramzi Khairallah, Ms. Carol Laham, Ms. Mary Winstanley O'Connor, Mr. Mansour Rayan, Mr. Salim Sassine, Dr. George Thomas, and Mr. Dimitri Zeidan.

His Eminence thanked the following members who are stepping down, having completed their terms of service: Mr. Jim Moses, Ms. Kelli Kouri Neagle, Mr. Douglas Skaff, Sr., and Mr. Rami Younes.

Following the general assembly, the Board of Trustees convened and re-elected its officers: Mr. Fawaz El Khoury, vice chairman; Mr. Salim Abboud, treasurer and CFO; and Ms. Mary Winstanley-O'Connor, secretary.

Sayidna Saba and Mr. El Khoury thanked the Board of Trustees for their dedication and charity to help the ministries of the Archdiocese. The clergy and faithful pray that Almighty God blesses their work and leadership.

Working Hand in Hand to Serve Those in Need

By Dr. Ramzi Khairallah, The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch



Long before I moved to the United States, I was blessed to grow up in a sprawling church in Mount Lebanon. Maybe the civil war there was a blessing in disguise for some of us, as it kept us close to our families and churches in difficult times. I was always taught that “the more you give, God will give back to you in multiples.”

There is this peculiar thing about faith. It may not be strongest when it is seeded, but if well-nurtured, it grows like a grapevine in the spring, and blooms with glorious fruits.

27 years after moving to America, I realize more and more how true it is that the more you give, the more you get in return. This isn't only true on the personal level, but also at a church level. The parable of the barren fig tree (Matthew 21:18–22) becomes a reality that strikes our hearts.

The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch serves a great purpose. Besides taking care of our clergy and our youth, it also donates benevolently to programs that benefit a wide array of people in need. However, members of The Order are used to passively paying their annual dues in support of the good cause and know that it is handled nicely by our governing council. As someone who joined The Order 13 years ago, I felt like I could do more.

It led me to think of ways to reinvigorate our local chapter at St. Elias Church in Syracuse, NY, and our church community. An idea that had been growing in my head came to life in the form of a charity event that we would organize during Great Lent; an experience that would bind us so close as brothers and sisters at our church and make us feel as one in the body of Jesus Christ.

The idea was well received by members of The Order at our church. It is something that we were thirsty for and wanted to accomplish. The winning formula was a combination of hard work and generosity, and we are not short of any of these components at our church.

We set up a budget of \$6,000 to assemble and distribute Easter food baskets to families in need. We wanted to make them feel loved and put warmth in their hearts no matter what hardships they are facing.

I came across an article in The WORD Magazine about the Food for Hungry People's Grant Program to help fight hunger and strengthen ties with the local community. Seeing that our target lined up perfectly with that of the program, I applied for a grant requesting \$2,000. That grant was approved!

Our Teen SOYO wished to participate with us, so they applied for and received a \$1,000 grant from Teens Responsibly Undertaking Service Together (TRUST) via the Archdiocese's Dept. of Youth Ministries. Collaborating with our teens and feeding off their energy and altruism is always a win-win situation for us adults.

Moreover, our parishioners and local businesses donated \$7,800, bringing the grand total raised to \$10,800. It's not like I did not have faith in their generosity, but this still boosted my faith and confidence in our church community.

I contacted the Syracuse City School District asking for help identifying families in need. Officials there agreed to connect us and were quite appreciative of our effort.

Next step: Buying the pantry items. After shopping around, Andrew Kane, our treasurer for our parish's chapter of The Order, did a tremendous job organizing the list of items and making purchases with the help of many of our younger volunteers.

Then came the big day, packaging day, on Saturday, April 5. 14 members of our church's chapter of The Order, plus six teens from our Teen SOYO chapter and seven more parishioners met in the church hall and efficiently packaged the items, making sure that all the packages were

identical. We were even joined by Mr. Ed Assile, the North American Treasurer of The Order, who came all the way from New Jersey to help us and be part of this glorious day!

We filled 70 beautiful, large bright blue duffel bags with \$150 worth of pantry items, weighing 50 pounds each, including spiral ham. We also made sure that each package had four chocolate Kinder eggs to put smiles on the faces of the kids who received them!

It was quite fulfilling to work hand in hand for this project with an amazing group of people. We felt joy and gratitude in belonging to our church community and being able to impact so many lives.

On Monday, April 7, about 30 staff members from the school district came to our church with smiles on their faces to pick up the packages. They know best the impact these baskets will have on those families in need. I have no doubt that these packages were well received, but I feel that they had more impact on us than the recipients.

We are incomplete as a church if we do not strive for charitable action and outreach. God blessed us with many talents, and the talent of giving that comes from true love and compassion is the greatest. It transforms us from within to be closer than ever to the kingdom of God. This is what Jesus wanted for us and from us. This is why he came and died and rose for us. May his glorious resurrection bring us abundant blessings to share with others!

Dr. Ramzi Khairallah is a parishioner at St. Elias Church of Syracuse, N.Y., as well as a Knight Commander and a member of the governing council of The Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch.

Metropolitan Saba Asks for Prayers for Texas Flood Victims

Following the floods that swarmed Central Texas and took the lives of at least 118 people—including children at a campground—His Eminence Metropolitan Saba urges parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese to join him in prayers for their repose.

Parishes and families of the Antiochian Archdiocese in the area are safe, but they are grieving because they knew individuals who were killed or impacted by the floods.

His Eminence also asks for prayers for the survivors, the surviving family members, the missing (approximately 173 people) and the first responders who are trying to find them and bring relief to the devastated area.

Photos: *INFOPETITENATION*, 2025



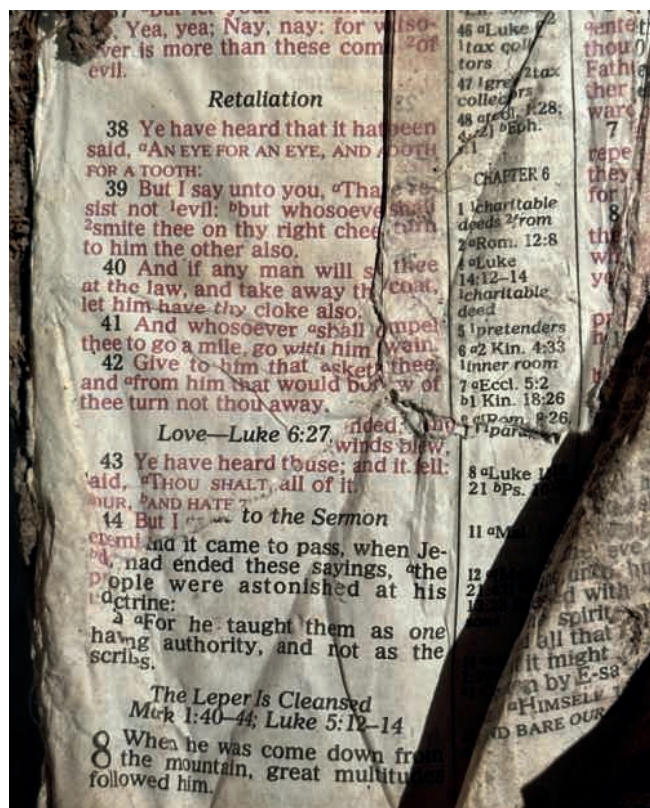
THE GOSPEL in the Ashes

A Divine Message from the Rubble of 9/11 and the Church of the Redeemer

By Fr. Samer Youssef

On October 24, 2024, my wife and I visited the 9/11 Memorial for the first time. After praying for the victims of 9/11, we hoped to see St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, destroyed in the attacks. A young man pointed us toward the 9/11 Museum and, upon learning I was an Orthodox priest, urged us to go inside to see a Gospel preserved from the rubble.

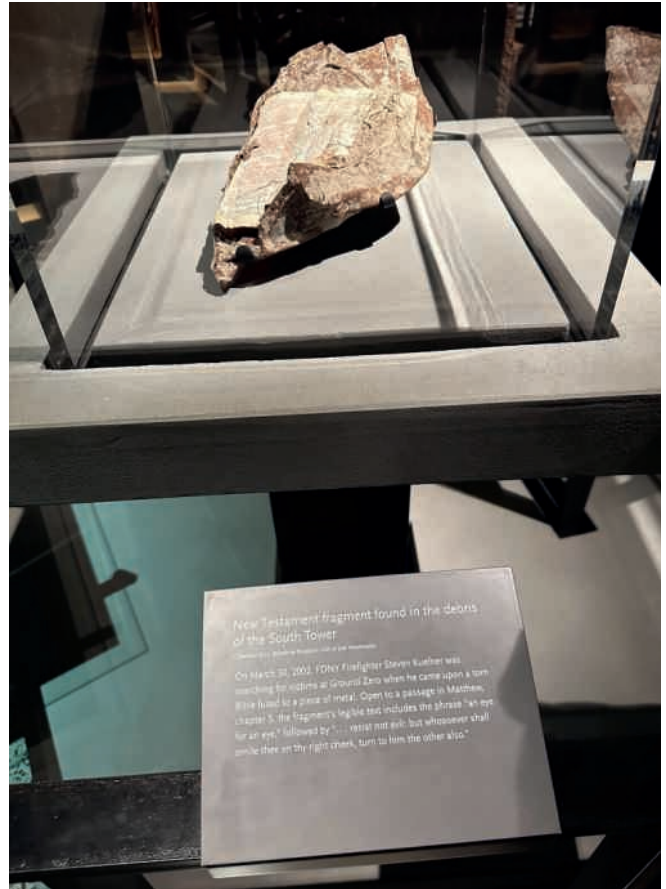
Despite being short on time, we went in—and were taken directly to the encased Gospel. To my astonishment, the legible passage under the glass was from Matthew 5:38–39: “An eye for an eye ... but I say unto you, turn the other cheek.” These were the exact verses we had found in the burned Gospel at our own Church of the Redeemer, Los Altos Hills, CA, which was destroyed by arson on April 7, 2002, just months after 9/11.



The same passage, uncovered at Ground Zero by firefighter Steven Kuefner, had appeared in both places of destruction—our church and the Twin Towers—reminding us that Christ’s message of love and forgiveness rises from the ashes.

After the arson, all our efforts shifted from growth to rebuilding. It was a painful time, but those verses became our foundation. I even included them in my opening prayer to the U.S. House of Representatives in July 2002, calling on our leaders to overcome evil with good.

Now, 23 years later, that divine message remains our guide: “Love your enemies ... pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Though hatred tried to silence us, Christ’s words gave us strength to continue. The Gospel, preserved in both tragedy and trial, challenges us to respond not with vengeance but with love—and to be a light in a broken world.



Oratorical Festival Judges' Choice 2025

Sophia Griffith, Age 18

All Saints, Raleigh, North Carolina
The Diocese of Miami and the Southeast

Raise your hand if you remember where you were at 14 years old? Some of us may have blocked that awkward age from our memories. But it wasn't too long ago that I was 14 years old and in middle school, making plenty of mistakes as I struggled to figure out who I was. When Mary was 14 years old, she had to make the greatest decision of her life. A decision that would not only change Mary's world forever, but would impact the lives of people for every generation to come. A decision greater, I'm sure, than any of us will ever have to face in our lifetimes.

When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and announced that she would bear a son, Mary didn't hesitate. She didn't demand explanations. Well . . . sort of. She did ask, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34). But her question wasn't one of doubt; it was one of wonder. She wasn't resisting—she was marveling. What she was really asking was: "How could something so extraordinary be happening to me?" And without hesitation, she answered the angel with one of the most powerful sentences in scripture: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

In a single sentence, Mary gave herself entirely to God. She accepted the calling to bear His only begotten Son, the King of all creation, who died and rose from the dead, trampling down death by death for the remission of sins. To anyone else, this would sound like unimaginable



pressure. How could a 14-year-old girl be expected to carry such a responsibility all by herself? But at such a young age, Mary had unwavering faith. She knew that, however great the responsibility seemed, God's love for her was even greater. She was handpicked by God to bear His precious son, the Savior of the universe.

The first words the angel speaks to Mary when he appears to her are: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28). Likewise, when Mary visits Elizabeth in Judah, Elizabeth exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42). Mary is venerated by angels and humans alike, as she was chosen and found favor with God through her humility and devotion to Him. This is why the Virgin Mary is the perfect example of who we are called to be as Orthodox Christians.

In offering herself to God, Mary became the first person to receive Him as her Savior. That is why she is known as "the first of the redeemed." The icon chosen to represent this year's theme is the Platytera ton Ouranon, which translates from Greek to "Wider than the Heavens." In this icon, the Virgin Mary is depicted with her arms outstretched, and an icon of Christ is placed over her heart. In the booklet, "Facing Up to Mary," Fr. Peter Gillquist recalls the words told to him by a Christian scholar when he saw this icon for the first time. He writes: "What you see is the Christ living as Lord in Mary's life, and her outstretched arms are an

invitation to you and me to let Him live in our lives as He has in hers.”

In my Sunday school class, we discussed the verse that is this year’s theme: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). We learned that when Mary refers to herself as the “handmaiden of the Lord,” what she really means is that she is the slave of God and that He is her master. She humbles herself completely before God, allowing Him to fully rule over her heart, just as we see depicted in this image of the Virgin.

In the Magnificat, Mary continues to magnify this humility and devotion. She sings: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly estate of his maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:46–48).

Mary’s strong faith is displayed throughout scripture. At the wedding in Cana, when the wine had run out, Mary turned to the servants and said, “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5). She did not doubt that Jesus would act—and indeed, He did, performing His first miracle by turning the water into wine.

At the crucifixion, Mary does not protest. She mourns her Son silently, with a heart full of pain and yet full of faith. Even in the face of His death, she trusted completely in the promise of His Resurrection. So much so that she did not go to the tomb with the Myrrh-Bearing Women. She knew—without a shadow of a doubt—that He had already risen. This unwavering faith in the Lord is what we are called to emulate as Orthodox Christians.

Mary is also our role model in Christian service. At the Annunciation, she faced a choice—one that would change the course of her life forever. And yes, it was a choice. Like all of us, Mary had free will. She may not have understood how she could be with child before being married, or that years later she would witness her only Son suffer the cruelest of deaths. What mother could ever be prepared for that kind of pain? But she did know this: she trusted God completely. She believed the words of the angel, “For with God, nothing

will be impossible” (Luke 1:37). And so, she accepted Jesus—not only as her Son, but as her Savior and her God.

For nine months, Mary carried Christ in her womb. Hey! All the moms out there! I am sure you can relate. Carrying a child takes immense strength—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And yet, Mary bore Him with love, obedience, and faith.

Just like Mary, we are called to be God-bearers. To carry Him in our hearts. To humble ourselves before Him and bring His presence, His love, and His light into the world around us.

My grandfather’s favorite theologian, St. Gregory Palamas, writes: “If a tree is known by its fruit, and a good tree bears good fruit, then is not the mother of goodness itself, she who bore the eternal beauty, incomparably more excellent than very good, whether in this world or in the world above?” Mary bore the eternal beauty of Christ, and we are invited to do the same.

Jesus tells us in John 15:5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” If we allow Christ to take root in us—if we live with the same humility, faith, and courage as Mary—then we, too, can bear good fruit. My parents frequently quote their spiritual father, Fr. George Rados of memory eternal, who once reminded them that Christ not only lives in our hearts, but we live in His. His love is so immense that it fully engulfs and embraces us. We are each a single branch in His endless vine, a mere speck in His infinite heart.

I am now 18 years old, and I still do not possess the depth of faith, humility, grace, or wisdom that the Theotokos had at 14 when she carried Jesus in her womb. Though I’ve grown since middle school, I continue to stumble and fall as I navigate life. But the example of the Virgin Mary—the greatest woman who ever lived—inspires me to rise each time, striving to love more deeply, trust more fully, and surrender more completely to God’s will.

Through the prayers and intercessions of the Most Holy Theotokos, O Lord, have mercy on us and save us. Amen.

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