

ROMANIAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE

Eparchy of St. George in Canton



Office of the Bishop

March 24, 2021

Bulletin Message
Pascha 2021

Dear Faithful of the Eparchy of St. George for Romanians in Canton,

How are we to celebrate Pascha in a pandemic? It has been a year now, and nearly all this time, out of love for our people and the desire to keep us all safe, the obligation we undertake as Christians to gather together around the Lord's table on Sundays and holy days has been loosened for many in the Catholic Church, including in our own Eparchy. In order to make the best of a bad situation, some of our parishes and missions have live-streamed their liturgical celebrations over the internet, and some of our parishioners have watched it from their own homes.

This is all well and good, but you still have to ask: is prayer really happening? Is Church really happening? Apart from one's personal prayer, aren't *people* necessary to make it the Church's prayer? Since Pentecost, our Eparchy has allowed celebrations in our churches and communities, provided the number of people attending is limited and necessary safety protocols, such as the wearing of masks and maintaining social distance, are observed.

But I shudder to contemplate what might have happened to the Church (that is, you and I) in the meantime. In many areas of life, the almost unendurable hardship of the pandemic has been rendered so much more unbearable by the fact that it has brought out the worst in us in so many ways and has made manifest the sin at the root of our society—indeed, every human society—that had lain hidden, or ignored, for eons.

From the hamstrung, impaired liturgy in our churches to the severely diminished “participation” in them by so many who have been left with nothing more than the flickering images on a screen in place of the all-enveloping mystery that is our liturgy, all we have come to recognize in our lives as “church” seems now a fading and distant memory. I cannot help but wonder what damage has been done to us by a year's worth of this experience. Even more, I wonder what will become of us when life returns to something like what we knew before the pandemic hit, if it ever does.

(It will.)

It seems to me that sometimes it takes the worst kind of situation to bring out the best as well, and I have great faith that this is what awaits us. So it is that it took the death of Jesus to bring about our redemption and our reconciliation with God. Why did it have to be this way? Couldn't God have just “sent a memo,” as it were, to let us know that all is forgiven, that we are his beloved children once again? It may appear to us rather bizarre that the logic of a God who is love would decree that it would take the death of his son to give us life. But it only looks that way to us because human logic, lacking real love, can be very, very faulty.

For God *did* send a memo—many memos, in fact—through the prophets who spoke in his name and declared his will. But the complete revelation of Divine Love and mercy was not accomplished by the delivery of a document but by the death of the very Deliverer the prophets themselves foretold, Jesus Christ. For Christians, the definitive revelation of God is a person, the living Word of God, and not a text containing words from God. Still, was his death really a necessary part of the plan?

Yes, it was, because death is a necessary part of our life for all of us, no matter how much we hedge and deny it. Unless God in Jesus entered into the very depth of our despair, we would have a much harder time proclaiming that death itself has been destroyed. Not only that, to live life in defiance of death, as Christians are called to do, would be very nearly impossible to all but the most heroic and enlightened among us. Because of the very sacrifice of Christ, we are able to say that we ourselves are conquerors over death in him.

Perhaps an illustration will help clarify my meaning. Before his own passion, Jesus went to Bethany and raised Lazarus, his friend, calling him to come forth out of his tomb of death. Likewise, in our liturgy we commemorate this event on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, as we must. Lazarus Saturday, as it is known, *must* be observed so that the meaning of the mystery we will celebrate in another week—the Resurrection of the Lord—can be understood properly.

You see, the question remains: if Jesus raised Lazarus, where is Lazarus now? He did not remain alive as we commonly understand that. It is as if this took place in order to indicate that the raising of Lazarus and the rising of Jesus are two different realities. “Resurrection” is not “resuscitation.” To rise with Christ is not to remain in some kind of zombie existence, but to be alive, really alive, alive as we have never known life before, as if to taste real life for the first time and to enjoy it for all eternity.

So it is that I find we need not wonder what will happen to the Church after the pandemic is over, because *Christ is risen*. The Church will have the opportunity once again to manifest a post-pandemic life that will be as different from its life in the “before times” as resurrection is different from resuscitation, more awesome in its day than the present times have been devastating:

The day of Resurrection! Let us be illumined, O people! It is the Passover of the Lord, the Passover! For from death to life and from earth to heaven has Christ our God led us, as we sing the song of victory: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and bestowing life to those in the tombs! (Irmos of the first Ode of the Paschal Canon)

When we are able to come together once more as God’s family and share the thanksgiving meal that is the Eucharist as one body, we will not be doing this out of obligation and fear but out of hunger for the experience that our exile from each other has brought about, discovering God in one another as if for the first time. And whether we are alive or whether we are already asleep in the Lord, we will be together, at last, once more and forever.

For Christ is risen indeed. He has trampled death by death and has granted life to those in the tombs—the tombs of earth and stone or the tombs of fear and hopelessness, of mistrust and woundedness wherein we find ourselves today. Brothers and sisters, this life is yours for the taking, and I urge you to seize it, to revel in it, to share it with those you love and with those you may not love in this season of our new life. A blessed Easter to all!

Fraternally in Christ-God,



(Most Reverend) John Michael Botean, D.D.
Bishop of the Eparchy of St. George in Canton