



Address of His Beatitude Ieronymos at the Graduation Ceremony of Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

May 18, 2013



Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece

I would like to thank the All-Good God and His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America from the bottom of my heart for the highly honourable opportunity to partake of the joy of the celebration of these young theologians' graduation from the School of Theology of Boston and I am deeply moved indeed to be here in your midst.

My dear children in the Lord,

Today's event undoubtedly marks a significant milestone in your lives. Today a circle of your course so far is closing and as of tomorrow you are called to minister to the people of God either as teachers of the Divine Word and torch bearers of the sacred traditions bequeathed to us by our Holy Fathers or as priests by fully anchoring your lives and your ministration in the altar. When I put myself in your place, what comes back to memory to stir my emotions is the preparatory prayer of St. John Damascene, which we read out in awe during the Divine Liturgy before Holy Communion: "*I stand before the doors of Thy sanctuary, yet I do not put away my terrible thoughts. But O Christ our God, Who didst justify the Publican, and have mercy on the Canaanite woman, and didst open the gates of Paradise to the Thief, open to me the depths of Thy love for men, and as I approach and touch Thee...*" [1].

Today, with this prayerful supplication deep in your hearts, you are asked to formalize your answer to Christ's calling: "*Lovest thou me?*", then "*feed my sheep*".

With today's celebration, an important chapter of your lives is completed and another one, even more important, greater and more demanding, opens up. I am certain that, over these last days, and particularly



at this hour, you must have been reminiscing about the moments, the events, the persons and the experiences which bore and nourished inside you the wish to enter priesthood and the fervor for knowledge and for ministering to the holy discipline of Theology in response to the calling of Christ the Great High Priest.

On this day you must be reminiscing about all that, small or great, which made your hearts leap and led your steps hither; which directed the course of your lives to this blessed place, the Holy Cross School of Theology. This School is indeed a jewel of our Church; a lighthouse of Orthodoxy in the vast Western Christian and multicultural world. Your School constitutes a point of reference for theological studies, a safe haven for priestly vocations and a truthful witness to the greatness of Orthodoxy within a world increasingly thirsting and seeking for sources of living water of faith, of the authentic *kerygma* of the Gospel, as preserved by the Orthodox Church through the centuries.

I have no doubt that your passage here has left indelible marks on you: *Erlebnisse*, experiences and emotions have been deeply engraved, essential interpersonal relationships and strong ties of friendship and love have been surely forged.

Your School offers you the possibility of constituting not merely a cohort of students but a particular Orthodox community. And this possibility is of great importance because, apart from high-level academic studies, you also share the experience of jointly partaking of worship and you combine studies with the development of interpersonal relationships and spiritual experiences, by cultivating Orthodox spirituality in practice. In this manner, relationships and bonds are promoted; relationships and bonds which may prove decisive for your future and your ministration, wherever God may call you to serve tomorrow, and this is something that all Schools of Theology should imitate.

So this blessed and fruitful phase of your lives ends today. And amidst the joyous and feastful atmosphere of the ceremony of your graduation, some challenging questions and crucial problematics are emerging.

Behind the emotional load of the feast and the intense and mixed feelings of bitter joy (*harmolýpi*)—since the enthusiasm for the obtention of the degree is combined with partings and with an exit from the security and the comfort of the School—the issues raised by tomorrow's challenge make their appearance with intensity and almost with poignancy.

What does it mean to be an Orthodox clergyman or an engaged theologian in our times? What does it entail and what does it take to serve the Church and Theology in modern America? And even if you choose a way other than that of priesthood or of ministration to theology, what does that choice mean? How is it binding on you and what does being a graduate of this blessed and thriving Theology School entail?

These are crucial and essential questions, no longer mere ideas or theoretical problematics, and are indeed such that directly concern your very lives. They are challenges not confined to the limits of personal concerns but primarily pertaining to the shared responsibility and to the personal participation in the developments and the shaping of tomorrow's Ecumenical Orthodox Church and, also, of the future of the Diaspora Hellenism.

We come from afar and may not be the most competent to speak to you of the affairs of the land where



you live and work.

I hope, nonetheless, that you will allow me to share with you some thoughts and preoccupations which transcend national or local frontiers.

So what does it mean to be a priest or a theologian today?

At this point of transition in your lives, where the calling to take up an active and responsible part in the life of the Church and of the world in which you live peals joyously and dynamically, you are invited to respond to God's precept that it may no longer be *you* who live but *Christ* who lives in you [2]. You are invited to serve the Church in the awareness that we, its members, exist and fare in the world and in history but we are not of this world [3]. Even so, we have the duty and the responsibility to receive this world and to transform it; to overthrow it creatively and with our love so that the world may be Church [4].

In this struggle the danger has cut both ways through the centuries. At times, taking sides with an ideological or political choice against another would lead to secularization. At other times, obsessing or getting engaged in individual truths at the expense of the whole would be the danger; in other terms, deviation from the agreement of the Fathers (*consensus patrum*), a fact which would lead to schisms and heretical departures from the wholeness of the truth, which we are constantly invited to revisit [5]. We should not forget that the truth we are called to witness to and the way we ought to indicate to people is not some abstract religious or ideological proposal but Christ himself, because He is "*the way, the truth, and the life*" [6].

In the course of the centuries unity of mankind has been threatened or even destroyed in the name of ideological or selfish interests giving rise to rivalries, enmity and intolerance. Against this trend of the world towards destruction, which is expressed in various ways, we must oppose ourselves in word and in deed, strengthened by Christ; strengthened by the Son and Word of God, who, in every Divine Liturgy, is *broken* on the Altar *but not divided*. And in this manner, He offers man the possibility, in deed and in essence, of recovering the unity lost because of the Fall.

He, Christ "*broken and distributed; broken but not divided [...] forever eaten yet [...] never consumed, but [...] sanctifying those who partake of Him*" [7] offers all communicants partaking of His Body and Blood the possibility of becoming one Body [8]. In this manner, partaking of one chalice, "*we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another*" [9]. All of us who receive the Holy Eucharist, where "*the sacramental rite is not a mere representation but a reality of sacrifice*" [10] and the Risen Christ is "*invisibly present among us*" [11], realize the truth and the significance of the fact that He stretched out His hands on the Cross and united what had previously been divided [12]. He descended "*into the nethermost parts of the earth*" and shattered the gates of Hades [13], "*having resurrected the fallen Adam along with the whole of the human race, as the lover of mankind*" [14].

Our duty as clergy and laity is to witness, in word and in deed, to the fact that the Church exists by uniting mankind, even at the price of our own sweat too becoming "*like great drops of blood*" [15], if need be; and to the fact that Christ came to His Passion voluntarily so that all men "*may be one*" [16]. It is this unity that we are called to promote, not with grandiloquence or theorizing but with sacrifices of an ethos worthy of the Cross, illuminated by the unsetting light of Resurrection.



Those therefore who have accepted or will accept the call to priesthood are invited to live up to the requirements of the ministration entrusted to us by the Great High Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ, “*who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire*” [17].

We are called to minister to the Altar in the awareness that the Lord is always “*the Offerer and the Offered, the One who receives and is distributed*” [18]. It is not our task to put forward just another religion among many or to become a religious organization of social welfare. Our task is the sanctification and the salvation of man, the offer of the possibility of constantly defeating death through the Sacraments. Our social part consists in being first and foremost, by Grace and by obligation, bearers and advocates of the prophetic charism of priesthood, in other terms in the Holy Spirit to reveal all that which hurts and obscures truth at the present time and undermines the future and the quality of people’s lives, thus obstructing their salvation in the end.

Against the roar of the religious and ideological confrontations of all kinds the Orthodox clergyman extends an austere invitation. He invites everyone to meet around the Altar and to take part in the greatest of sacraments; so that people *may be one*, there; so that they may join their forces in order for love and unity in Christ to become a way of life; so that, from then on, the Divine Liturgy may be extended over our everyday lives and become a source of consolation through priesthood and through our sacrificial succour to the sufferings of each and every one of our ailing brethren.

This means that we, clergy and laity together, should live the developments of the Church. However, the people’s essential participation in the life of the Church presupposes living parishes. Amidst the confusion of our times what needs to be made clear is that parishes are not like branches for delivering religious services but the centres and the points of reference of our lives. This is where life begins. This is where it finds its meaning, is sanctified, brightened and distinguished. This is where life finds its way to eternity.

The parish is the place, and parish life is the way where, through Holy Communion, worship and partaking of the mystical Body of Christ, survival is transformed into life and death is defeated.

Wherever each faithful lives, the parish is his or her greater family and the priest is the father. And what parent who wishes a holy and virtuous life for his or her child will ever remain indifferent if he or she sees that child sick or starving or taking the wrong way?

Similarly, in our ministration too we should never lose the balance between the sanctifying work and charity. Personally, I do not know of a single saint of our Church who was not charitable or who remained indifferent to human suffering.

Worship is the driving force which cultivates and nourishes love; which makes us turn to our fellow human being and generates charity. It is therefore of vital importance that the life of worship, our charitable and, more widely, cultural and social works should exude an ecclesiastical ethos and Orthodox spirituality. Let me insist on this point, because some of you have been born and grown up within environments of other religious traditions and must now, as Orthodox clergymen and theologians, constantly cultivate the awareness of the Orthodox identity and self-consciousness and of the uniqueness of the Orthodox theological tradition.

This last remark directly brings us to the importance of the virtue of discernment in the Orthodox



tradition. Indeed, the Fathers of the Church emphasize that discernment is a virtue of the highest value. Of course, its cultivation presupposes constant and intense spiritual struggle. However, nowadays, and particularly for those of us who are called to work for the Church within alien environments and in times of uncritical and untempered syncretism and cultural confusion, the virtue of discernment should be one of the *sine qua non* structural elements of our ministration. During the difficult transitional period of world history which we are currently going through, the precept “*stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught*” [19] is one of grave and fundamental importance. Unfortunately, the effort to observe this precept without the filter of the virtue of discernment sometimes leads to fundamentalist mindsets, to behaviors characteristic of religious authoritarianism or fanaticism, which, in turn, breed untested critique and foment a spirit of division. This is why our pastoral presence is primarily in need of discernment, love and a spirit of sacrifice and understanding.

Modern reality is highly demanding and divisive, and extreme phenomena of this kind are a superfluous luxury, to say the least. In the spiritual desert of modern life it is a fundamental priority that there should be genuine, living Orthodox parishes, so that the young, in particular, may enjoy a small oasis; that young couples may find a refuge; that today’s afflicted family may find a quiet corner; that “*all ye that labour and are heavy laden*” may have a warm nest; a hearth, where the fire of spiritual quest will be burning ceaselessly; an altar whence all will begin and where all will end.

The greatest offer of the Church to the modern world is its constant care so that there may be living parishes and monasteries everywhere, where it may be manifest in every way that Christ has risen; that death has been defeated. And this is why we can still bring our lives to the Eucharist and there to find joy, hope, consolation, meaning, and lead our fallen everyday lives in the certainty that, beyond and above any pain and any grief, life will in the end defeat death; because “*Christ is risen, and life reigns*” [20].

May I emphasize that what I have said thus far does not solely regard the clergy but also the *pleroma* of the Church. It is obvious that those who will not become clergymen are also called to labor in the Lord’s vineyard as lay theologians. Nothing of what I mentioned earlier can be put into practice by the bishop or the priests without the sacrificial presence of the lay staff of pastoral work, where theologians should have a leading part. Today, maybe more than ever before, activities such as catechism, the study of theological literature, the staffing of pastoral activities and the presence of the Church in every aspect of social life, at school, in hospitals, in charitable works, but also in arts and culture more broadly, create high requirements and the adequately trained representatives and laborers of the Church are not only more than valuable but absolutely indispensable.

This is also true of the graduates who may take paths other than those of priesthood or theology. Even then, they too are still equally invaluable to the life and the pastoral work of the Church and their contribution to the common spiritual struggle will always be important and essential.

In the end, no matter what rampart one fights from, the responsibility remains shared. Besides, in the Orthodox Church there is no separation of powers but of charismata and ministrations [21] and, consequently, when it comes to the life and the work of the Church, no one is redundant.

Certainly, the Orthodox people respects and honors its clergy very highly. Not because the latter hold some kind of administrative power but because the people recognizes them as having accepted God’s and their brethren’s calling to minister to the Altar and to the people of God *in place and as a type of Christ*. The



bishop is in charge of a local Church not as a religious monarch or a secular governor but as president of the Eucharistic Synaxis *in place and as a type of Christ*. By extension, Presbyters preside over the parochial Eucharistic Synaxis *in place and as a type of their bishop*. In this manner, the Orthodox clergyman does not stand for a power as a representative of God on Earth but serves the Church as a representative of his flock to God.

The Orthodox clergyman is a leading figure and the first in the consciousness of the faithful because, as minister to the Church, he is *“last of all”*. He is glorified by ministering to and by manifesting the ethos of the sacrifice on the Cross and is respected not solely as a man *per se* but as man’s sacrifice in the service of his brethren. It is such clergymen, it is theologians of this kind of ethos that the Church needs urgently today, so that these may be living models of life and holiness and authentic examples of ecclesiastic mentality.

I am deeply conscious of the fact that the task of ministration to the Church and to our brethren and the devotion of our lives to such holy and admirable causes is no easy path. Those who choose the way of ministration and sacrifice consciously take *the narrow and difficult way*. Of course they rejoice with those who rejoice but more often they weep with those who weep. They choose to become the Cyreneans of every man around them who carries a cross, no matter how small or heavy. They decide to answer the question *“lovest thou me?”*, addressed to each one of them personally by the Lord, with Peter’s words: *“Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee”* [22], to receive the same summon: *“Feed my sheep”* [23].

Here is how a modern-day theologian comments on this dialogue:

“Feed my sheep: In other terms, place your whole life within the Divine Liturgy and make it a way of life for your brethren’s lives too.

Feed my sheep: In other terms, learn to *weep with those who weep* and to rejoice with those who rejoice. Love the uniqueness of each and every man. Love the meaning and the contents of his freedom. Place the specific, the individual, the locally and temporally determined events of his life within the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist so that everyone’s work and creative activities may become a vital function of the body of the Church.

Feed my sheep: In other terms, become perfectly transparent so that it may be evident where *“all ye that labour and are heavy laden”* can find rest [24]. Eucharistically offer on the Altar everything true that each one offers to the other, so that all those partaking of one chalice may share it, meaningful and enhanced.

Feed my sheep: In other terms, serve them in my way and with my authority: the authority of the one who *“took upon him the form of a servant”* and utterly *“humbled himself”*. Be *servant of all as last of all* [25].

And the answer remains unchanged through the centuries: *“Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee”*, *“thy will be done”*.

However, I should stress one further point. No matter how tough and sometimes even painful the life of a clergyman may occasionally become, he nevertheless preserves a unique prerogative: namely, the priest always has the occasion and the possibility of depositing all his torments and temptations on the Altar. This is his consolation, his support and the source of his joy, because it is there that he always meets with the



invisibly present Lord.

All this may seem difficult and it is only natural that we should wonder how we shall succeed. Nonetheless, there is no reason for us not to be optimistic. “*Divine grace, which always heals what is infirm and completes what is lacking*” [26] will see to it.

My dear children in the Lord,

On this day let us celebrate the joyful event of your graduation and wish to all and to each one of you personally that *the seed sown* in you during the years of your studies at the blessed Holy Cross School of Theology may bear fruit one hundred fold.

I wish and pray that the way which is opened up today, after your graduation, may be a course of life in Christ, illuminated by the unsetting light of Resurrection and enriched by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What you should humbly and earnestly ask of the Lord is this: “*cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee*” [27] and He will show you the way.

Use what your eminent professors offered you and what you were taught by them and by your spiritual fathers and proceed with courage to the materialization of your visions. Have confidence in the sense of security ensured by the inspired steering of the Church of America by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America and by the love, ceaseless care and fatherly supervision of His All-Holiness Bartholomew, our Ecumenical Patriarch.

We can only be proud of you and pray to God to cover you *with His feathers and under His wings*, to bless you, to support you and to direct your steps “*unto all good works*”.

May you have a great career and a brilliant ministrations.

God be with you.

[1] Holy Communion Service, Prayer IX, by John Damascene.

[2] Cf. *Gal. 2,20*: “*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me*”.

[3] Cf. John 15,18-19: “*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you*”.

[4] Cf. *Ad Diognetum (Epistle to Diognetus)*, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 33, H. I. Marrou (ed.), Paris 1965, pp. 52-84: “*Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world*”, p. 66.



[5] Cf. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration XXX*, PG 36, 125: “*our best Theologian is he who has, not indeed discovered the whole, for our present chain does not allow of our seeing the whole, but conceived of Him to a greater extent than another, and gathered in himself more of the Likeness or adumbration of the Truth, or whatever we may call it*”.

[6] Cf. John 14,5-6: “*Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*”.

[7] Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

[8] Cf. *1 Cor.* 10,16-17: “*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread*”.

[9] Cf. *Rom.* 12,5.

[10] Nicholas Cabasilas, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, 32, PG 150, 440.

[11] Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

[12] *Triodion*, Holy Saturday, Orthros, Ode 3 of the Canon: “*Thou hast stretched out Thy hands and united what before had been divided*”.

[13] Cf. The Paschal Canon: “*Thou did descend into the nether regions of earth, O Christ, and did shatter the eternal bars which held the prisoners captive; and like Jonah from the sea-monster, after three days Thou did rise from the grave*”.

[14] Apostichon at Vespers of the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

[15] Cf. Luke 22,44: “*and being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground*”.

[16] John 17,11.

[17] Psalm 103 (104 KJV),4.

[18] Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

[19] *2 Thess.* 2,15.

[20] Catechetical Sermon of St. John Chrysostom.

[21] Protopr. G. Metallinos, *Parish: Christ in our midst*, Apostolic Diakonia, Athens 1990, pp. 21-23.

[22] John 21,15-17: “*So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my*



lamb. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep”.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Cf. Matth. 11,28: “*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*”.

[25] Protopr. A. Avgoustidis, *Theology of Consolation*, Domi, Athens 2008, pp.101-102.

[26] “Order for the Ordination of a Presbyter”, in P. Trebelas, *Small Prayerbook*, “The Saviour” Fraternity of Theologians, Athens 1988, p. 231 (=Archieratikon, Apostolic Diakonia, Athens, s.d., p. 84).

[27] Psalm 142 (143 KJV),8: “*cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee*”.

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