



Homily of His Beatitude
Metropolitan TIKHON
Sunday, September 24, 2017
St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
Feast of the Synaxis of All Saints of Alaska

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of today's Epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul offers these words:

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation." Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor 6:1-2)

It often happens that the readings from the lectionary fit the occasion perfectly. And so today the Orthodox Vision Foundation has brought many of you together for the first time, Orthodox leaders in your fields of business, science, medicine, the arts, education and social service to get to know each other, to learn about the possibilities and challenges for philanthropy, for new projects, and to experience a taste of a seminary's life. It is good that you see for yourselves the students and families and faculty and staff who have set aside other careers and potentials in order to sacrifice and serve the mission of the Church. It is remarkable that every year a new crop of men and women make this decision to set upon the uncertain path of service in the Church.

They are needed and *you* are needed to carry this mission forward.

I know that Father John Behr began the conference with a talk on martyrdom, on the martyr as the image of a human being fully alive. Today we celebrate the feast of the Protomartyr and Equal to the Apostles, Thekla, a disciple of Saint Paul and a great image of martyrdom. The second epistle for today, for the martyrs, was from Romans, chapter 8. And here we have one of the most moving passages in Saint Paul's letters speaking personally and precisely about this life of witness.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35-39)

Metropolitan Tikhon, Primate

The Gospel for the martyrs makes this an exhortation for our witness today: ¹³ *This will be a time for you to bear testimony. ... You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; ¹⁷ you will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives. (Lk: 21: 12-19)*

As you all know, this picture is a reality today. Millions and millions of Christians, from all churches, Orthodox and non-Orthodox—face serious pressure and outright persecution in many parts of the world. We here are called to help share their burden, but also to share their witness for Christ where we are, here in North America. Perhaps we often get discouraged at the prospects as we look around at the meager fruit from years of labor. But once again, the readings are perfectly fitted for today. The Sunday Gospel recounts the great and unexpected catch of fish:

“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking.... But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” ⁹ For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken.... And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. (Lk. 5:5-11)

With realistic statistics there are about 1,000,000 Orthodox in the United States, which is a very small fraction of the 325,000,000 people in our country. In North America the population is 500,000,000. It is time for us, as the Orthodox on this continent, to expand the mission of the Church. In the Orthodox Church in America, since the arrival of the first missionaries in Alaska in 1794, over 700 parishes and missions have been established, by God's grace. In the last ten years, we have provided over \$1,000,000 in planting grants to new missions. But this is a drop in the bucket. In the United States, 90% of the counties in this country do not have a single accessible Orthodox parish, where the services and the life of the community are open to all and conducted in the language understood by the local population, either English or Spanish. And, of course, there are thousands and perhaps millions of new immigrants and refugees who are looking for the life of the Church in their own languages.

But all of those languages become intelligible not through the development of better translating programs or through countless hours spent with Rosetta Stone. As practical and helpful as these tools are, the languages that separate us become intelligible through our love for one another, but not the emotional or saccharine love that is presented to us in social and entertainment media, but the sacrificial love of martyrdom. Another great saint that we commemorate today is Saint Silouan the Athonite, who gives us some guidance in this when he writes:

*The greater the love, the greater the suffering of the soul.
The fuller the love, the fuller the knowledge of God
The more ardent the love, the more fervent the prayer
The more perfect the love, the holier the life.*

The Orthodox missionary task in North America sets before us a huge challenge worthy of a lifetime of work. But this will mean not only plans and projects and funding and measurements of success. It will call on us to deepen our spiritual life. It will call on us to keep attending to healing what is broken in our own lives. It will call on us to share in humility the healing that we have received in Christ.

Metropolitan Tikhon, Primate

There can be no missionary effort, no way to reach those who question Christ and the Church, those who doubt, the 25% of the population who have given up on faith, those who suffer, those who are broken, without our having first entered the arena to become a genuine person in the image of Christ. It is here that we begin to fulfill our apostolic ministry.

I close with the words of a fiery preacher of the 20th Century, Saint Nikolai Velimirovic, himself having given a martyric example in the concentration camps of Dachau. He offers this prayer:

You are the only event of my life, O lamp of my soul.

When a child scurries to the arms of his mother, events do not exist for him.

When a bride races to meet her bridegroom, she does not see the flowers in the meadows, nor does she hear the rumbling of the storm, nor does she smell the fragrance of the cypress or sense the mood of the wild animals – she sees only the face of her bridegroom; she hears only the music from his lips; she smells only his soul.

When love goes to meet love, no events befall it. Time and space make way for love.

Aimless wanderers and loveless people have events and have history. Love has no history and history has no love.

Brothers and sisters. You who are gathered here have so many gifts. You are accustomed to working hard, overcoming failures, persisting and enduring. By God's grace, may this time together this week enable you to apply all that you have received and experienced to recommit yourselves—or perhaps commit yourself for the first time—to serve Christ and the mission of His Church for the life of the world. There are so many ways to serve this mission. May our Lord inspire you to find those ways that most set your soul on fire for the glory of the Kingdom and to the glory of God.

Amen!