

Protocol Number 3

To the Beloved and Pious Priests, Deacons, Monastics, and Faithful Flock of our North American Parishes
Praise, glory, and thanksgiving be unto God for all things.

My beloved brethren and children in the Lord,

In this my first encyclical letter to you as your shepherd, as suffragan bishop under our ruling hierarch, Archbishop Auxentios of Athens and All Greece, I wish to convey to you my heartfelt blessings and prayers and also to share with you some thoughts that are of relevance to all of us.

By the grace of God, we have been brought together as Orthodox Christians here in the Western Hemisphere. Whether we be native-born in this part of the world or foreign-born, whether we be proselytes or born of Orthodox parents, for the duration of our lives this continent will, in all probability, be the temporal homeland and place of repose for most of us.

My beloved fellow Orthodox Christians, in many ways we are truly blessed to be found on this continent. We are especially blessed because we are free to exercise our religious convictions without any fear of persecutions from atheist oppression or from repression by state religions, but we are also blessed because, due to our having come together from different ethnic backgrounds, we are free to a great degree from those phyletic sentiments that have so often overshadowed or even supplanted the message of Christ. These sentiments, as we have ascertained from our own experience, all too often turn into a form of ethnic messianism, or some sort of "national Christianity." The Church, however, knows no such ethnic messiah; there is no Greek, or Syrian, or Russian Christ. There is only one Lord, one Christ, one Messiah.

That which was accomplished at Holy Pentecost and which unites us into one as fellow-citizens of the Heavenly Jerusalem is the holy Baptism we received in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. As Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

(Gal. 3:26-29)

We must give thanks unto God that, because we have striven to uphold an apostolic understanding of our temporal sojourn here on earth, we have not allowed our parishes to lapse into phyletic enclaves or ethnic ghettos, which exclude or alienate or esteem as second-class citizens those who do not belong to or adopt some particular culture or ethnic practices.

My own parents came from Greece and they were believing Orthodox Christians. Before the end of their lives, both were counted worthy to receive the Great and Angelic Schema in monasticism. I am and shall eternally be grateful to them that they imparted to me the Orthodox Faith, not only in word, but more so by their example. I am also grateful that they encouraged me to learn the Greek language, for it is through their efforts and encouragement that I came to learn not only the modern Greek language, but later also the Greek of the Old and New Testaments and of the Church Fathers. Yet the primary lesson which they taught me—and which helped me especially when I chose the monastic vocation—was that the Orthodox Faith stands above all that is earthly and temporal.

For a thousand years, this was also the criterion for the Byzantine Empire. The ethnic background of the emperor was of no significance. It did not matter if he were of Spanish, Roman, Greek, Scythian, Syrian, or of any other origin; the only thing that mattered was that he be an Orthodox Christian.

We Orthodox Christians do not hold the mistaken belief held by many Jews in the time of our Saviour, that the Messiah was to establish an earthly kingdom. Our Saviour told them clearly, "My Kingdom is not of this world." But, alas, the leaders of the Jews would not hear of this. Behold what were the disastrous consequences of this Jewish heresy: For the sake of an earthly kingdom, the leaders of the Jewish people went so far as to demand the crucifixion of the King of Glory. As the holy Apostle John writes in his Gospel:

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said: If we let this man alone, all men will believe in Him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them: Ye know nothing at all, nor do ye consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die. . . and that the nation perish not.

(John 11:47-50)

Yet, as our Saviour foretold, the earthly nation of the Jews was indeed destroyed at that time, and their own historians have recorded for posterity the grievous nature of that terrible fall.

Unfortunately, however, these warnings and lessons addressed to the Old Israel were often disregarded by the New Israel. Hence, we see how the first Rome, becoming puffed up with its false notions of primacy and infallibility, and vaunting itself as the "Eternal City," fell away from the Body of Christ through pride and heresy.

Regarding also the second Rome, Constantinople, we observe how the Byzantines began to esteem the glory of men above the glory of God, and to pride themselves on the renown and glitter of their empire and capital city, and hence, to grow lax in the things that pertain to God, as may be seen in the betrayals of the Holy Faith that took place at Lyons and Florence. Therefore, whatever earthly glory they had was taken away from them, so that they might be chastened and humbled, and that they might learn not to seek to uphold the existence of any temporal city or country here below at the cost of losing the Eternal City on high.

In our own days, is not the calamity that befell our Orthodox brethren with the fall of the Russian Empire a repetition of these histories? Again and again, did not such luminous Saints as Saint John of Kronstadt warn the Russian people that a terrible cataclysm would come upon their nation if they did not correct their ways? Yet, except for the believing sovereign himself and his family, the hearts of most of those who were in authority grew faithless. Despite the admonitions of Saints and many holy men and women, the nation grew lax in its faith, and many began to listen to the strident voices of those who promised them an earthly paradise, a "worker's paradise." Many also fell into the mistaken Jewish belief of the superiority of their own particular nation, as well as the phyletic notion of their nation's "messianic destiny" and the uniqueness of its own spirituality — as though any Orthodox nation or people could have a spirituality distinct from or superior to that of the universal Orthodox Church. Therefore, even as so many Saints had already forewarned, our loving God, as a true and benevolent Father, Who had chastened Israel of old so many times because of its apostasy and pride, chastened the Russian people in our own days even as He chastened Orthodox Christians in times past by taking away this cause of their stumbling and allowing the nation to fall into the hands of cruel taskmasters who warred against the God of the Christians. This snare was not the only one into which many who belonged to the New Israel fell. Indeed, even as occurred with the Jewish people of old, so also did it come to pass with some who bear the name "Orthodox Christian," who fell into yet another pitfall as a consequence of their prior fall.

The Jews insisted that God was to be worshipped only in Jerusalem. The Samaritans, on their part, said that He was to be worshipped only on Mount Gerizim. But our Saviour rejected these carnal notions of both the Jews and the Samaritans when He told the Samaritan Woman:

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. . . . But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.

(John 4:21, 23)

Yet, many who called themselves Christians paid no heed to these words. Hence, we see how the first Rome, falling headlong into the same error, went so far as to declare that one could not be saved unless one were in communion with the See of Rome. Similarly, the "new Rome," Constantinople, in imitation of the Old Rome, has in recent times begun to teach that one cannot be a canonical Orthodox Christian if he is not in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Since not one passage of the Holy Scriptures nor one holy canon or Saint of the Church has ever taught such a doctrine, the pronouncement of this teaching by the mentors of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is evidence of how far their own "Orthodoxy" has departed from the "spirit" and "truth" of Christ. In view of the fact that their disdain of the holy canons is totally unabashed, their advancement of this doctrine is certainly most incongruous.

What do we learn from these political, spiritual, and doctrinal falls? We learn, first of all, that our fleshly lineage is of little consequence if we are unfaithful in the things that pertain to God. Since we are born into a nation without any exercise of our own will or choice, there can be neither blame nor reward. It is our free will, in cooperation with divine grace, which will save us or condemn us. Of itself, our race or nationality is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. At the Second Coming, our Saviour will not ask us if we struggled to preserve our Greek or Russian customs; He will ask us if we struggled against our passions and the sins, and if we strove for virtue. Secondly, we learn that a worldly and topographic notion of communion with some particular see or patriarchate—be it Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, or whatever—is of no avail if we are not in communion with the Church of the holy Apostles, the Confessors, Martyrs, and God-bearing Fathers and Saints from all ages past. At the Last Judgment, our Saviour will not ask us if we were in communion with Rome, or Constantinople, or Jerusalem, or Mount Gerizim, but rather if we kept the good confession of the holy Orthodox Faith, in communion with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of the Saints and Confessors. *This* is the historic Orthodox Christian Church. This is not the first time that the faithful have broken communion with the See of Constantinople in order to remain Orthodox and not be led into heresy. Macedonius and Nestorius, the authors of heresies, the first denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the other the divinity of the Lord Jesus, were both archbishops of Constantinople. There were also bishops of Constantinople that were Arians, Monothelites, Iconoclasts, and even Uniates during the short-lived false unions of Lyons and Florence. In all these instances, the faithful walled themselves off from communion with Constantinople precisely in order to remain in communion with the Church. Although they were persecuted and put to death, the faithful refused under any circumstances to commune with Constantinople during these times. Here is how one great champion of the Faith, Saint Maximus the Confessor, answered his adversaries, who taunted him for not being in communion with Constantinople:

Let these offences, introduced by the aforementioned men into the Church, be removed; let those who have introduced them be deposed; and then the path to salvation will be cleared of all barriers, and you will walk on the smooth path of the Gospel, cleansed of all heresy! When I see the Church of Constantinople as she was formerly, then I will enter into communion with her without any exhortation on the part of men. But while there are heretical temptations in her, and while heretics are her bishops, no word or deed will convince me ever to enter into communion with her.

Indeed, the very reason our Saviour permitted all these doctrinal, spiritual, and political falls to come upon those who bear the name "Orthodox Christian" is so that we all may learn not to allow our hearts to become attached to earthly kingdoms and the nations of men "in whom there is no salvation" (Psalm 145:2). And this, too, is the very

reason why the Church has condemned phyletism (the undue devotion to and glorification of one's country; a prejudiced belief in the superiority of one's own race) as a heresy. The only problem is that Constantinople, the very Church which condemned phyletism in the last century when it was dealing with the "Bulgarian Schism," is guilty of the same chauvinism it has condemned in others. This, too, is a lesson for us, for we must take care that, while rejecting an "undue devotion to or glorification of" some other country, we ourselves do not fall prey to the disease and heresy of American or Canadian chauvinism.

As baptized Orthodox Christians, we understand and know well that, as Saint Paul wrote to the Hebrews, "here we have no abiding city, but we seek the one to come" (Heb. 13:14).

The *Letter to Diognetus*, written in the second century, conveys the same sentiments for Christians throughout the world, when it proclaims: "Every land is a fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign land." We know, indeed, that every land can serve as one's homeland, but in the final analysis, we are here as sojourners and strangers. Rightly, therefore, does the holy Apostle Peter in his *First Catholic Epistle* address the Christians as "the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." Further down in the same Epistle, he tells the Christians to "pass the time of your sojourning here in fear, forasmuch as ye know that ye were. . . redeemed with the precious blood of Christ" (I Pet. 1:17-19); and again in the same Epistle, he writes, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from carnal lusts which war against the soul" (I Pet. 2:11). And in his *Letter to the Corinthians*, Pope Saint Clement of Rome underscores this conviction by beginning his epistle with the words: "From the Church which sojourns in Rome to the Church which sojourns in Corinth."

As Orthodox Christians, we know indeed that every land is a foreign land, for one alone is our longed-for homeland—the new Jerusalem on high, which is free, and which is the mother of us all who are born free through holy Baptism, even as the holy Scriptures and the hymnology of the Church proclaim (cf. Gal. 4:26).

This is the true homeland of Christians, the celestial city not made by the hands of men.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see how on the day of Pentecost all the nations were called into oneness in Christ by the Holy Spirit. For through the holy Apostles, the Spirit of God spoke unto all mankind, and as the sacred history recounts:

All were amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, "Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.

(Acts 2:7-11)

Can it not be said that, in a special sense, we, too, who live in this hemisphere find ourselves in a similar state?

Have we not come together from the distant parts of the world, we who are natives of this land and immigrants to this land, and we who are the sons and daughters of those who came to this land? Are we not, to paraphrase the Acts of the Apostles,

Africans, Albanians, Assyrians, Bulgarians, Chinese, and Czechs, English, and French, and dwellers from the lands of the Cherokees and the Dakotas, and Germany, and Greece, Japan and Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Mexico, Norway, and Palestine, Poland, and the parts of Romania, and Russia, and strangers from Scotland, Serbia, and Spain, Jews and proselytes, Swedes, Syrians, and Ukrainians—we do all hear our Saviour and the Apostles speak to us of the wonderful works of God.

Thus, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the one true Baptism that was imparted unto us in the one true Faith, there is accomplished in us that which was promised and manifested at Holy Pentecost and which is expressed in the Kontakion of that feast:

Once when He descended and confounded the tongues, The Most High divided the nations; And when He divided the tongues of fire, He called all men into unity.

How grateful we should be to our Saviour, Who in His wisdom has provided that *all* of us here in this hemisphere are, in actuality, immigrants, either from pre-historic times or recent times. From a spiritual point of view, this is of great assistance to us, for we have no nostalgia for earthbound civilizations, such as "the glory that was Greece," nor do we dream of resurrecting fallen kingdoms, such as those of Byzantium or Russia. Our only hope is the Heavenly Fatherland, our only abiding city is the Jerusalem on high, our only true ancestral heritage is the Orthodox Christian Faith, our only true and abiding nation is the New Israel, our true anthems are the psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs of the spiritual Sion, the "royal Priesthood," the "holy Nation" (I Pet. 2:9).

We love and respect this our temporary homeland, and we thank God for it. Furthermore, we feel gratitude toward the Orthodox Christian homelands of our parents and teachers, especially because of the priceless heritage that they have imparted unto us by means of so many marvellous saints, wonderworkers, and confessors of the holy Orthodox Faith who arose there. Indeed, herein lies the true value of the various national cultures of our Orthodox Christian peoples: insofar as these civilizations were "pattern of things in the Heavens" and were purified by the sacred rites of the Church of God (cf. Heb. 9:23), they expressed a human order that was dominated by the spiritual values of the Holy Orthodox Faith, imbued with a sense of the sacredness of the purpose of life here, and dedicated to realities that transcend our human commonwealth. But, for our sins, these civilizations have passed from the face of the earth. Hence, therefore, it is with this sobering realization and precisely for this reason that we do not and can never exchange the eternal glory of the Kingdom that has no end for the fleeting glory of a temporal kingdom or

domain or political entity here below, for as Christians we are, as Christ our Saviour enjoined us, in but not of the world.

Therefore, my beloved Christians, let us give thanks for all the blessings that our loving Saviour has bestowed upon us. Let us strive to increase the precious talents that have been given to us in the Holy Faith. Let the heavenly light of our true country, the Kingdom of God, so shine within us by our faith and works, that others also may be inspired and prompted to lay aside all earthly cares and thus receive the King of all, Christ our true God, unto Whom is due all honor, dominion, and glory, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

With love in our Saviour,
Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠ Ephraim, Bishop of Boston

Saint Matthew the Evangelist
November 16/29, 1988