My Beloved Ones,

Having celebrated the last of the Twelve Great Feasts with the Dormition, we now look ahead to the renewal of our liturgical cycle, with the start of a New Ecclesiastical Year on September 1. This week’s Gospel can be read as a call for us to strengthen our faith for the Church’s New Year. A man fell at Christ’s feet, saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” (Matthew 17:15-16).

Christ is visibly upset with the lack of faith. He perceives not only from the boy’s father, but also the Disciples.

When we know His disappointment, it is less surprising to read Him say, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.” (Matthew 17:17) In every step He takes, our Lord is aware of His coming Passion. Truly, it is not accidental that in the conclusion of this passage He once more reveals His salvific mission to the Disciples: “As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.’” (Matthew 17:22-23) However, even in His Human anguish, He is still God: He successfully expels the demon and intends to teach His Disciples the importance of strengthening our faith.

After He heals the boy, Jesus is privately approached by the Disciples who ask, “Why could we not cast it out? (Matthew 17:19). Jesus is very clear with them: “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.”’ (Matthew 17:20-21) The images of the tiny mustard seed, against a large mountain are so great, that many read this passage, secure that they understand we are to pray and fast more, in order to strengthen our faith. All these things are true: faith, as with any other aspect of our lives, requires exercise and strengthening; and both prayer and fasting are kinds of spiritual “exercising”. Now I ask you: why did our Lord choose a mustard seed for His example?

We know from the Parable earlier in St. Matthew’s Gospel how the mustard seed is used to illustrate that the smallest of things can become great: “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed... it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the
greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32) However, the choice of a mustard seed is not simply because of its size. For such a terribly small seed, mustard is incredibly hot; to use even a little in food changes the taste entirely. Our Lord knows that it is not the “size” of our faith that matters, but the warmth that dwells within our souls. In their doubt both the Disciples and the father of the affected child show that doubt quenches the zeal, the heat of faith.

My children, as we prepare to renew our Ecclesiastical Year, the Fathers of our Church have given us this passage to remind us that we should also resolve to pray more, fast with greater discernment, study the scriptures, and receive the appropriate sacraments—so that in this New Year we might demonstrate to all how great is our faith in our God, and how our hearts burn for His righteousness.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta