My Beloved Ones,

With Pascha weeks away, it is easy for our weariness to become first, a distraction, and then, a temptation. For this very reason, the Church dedicates this Sunday to a saint who gave us a guide. St. John Climacus was an ascetic in the Sinai Desert who wrote a book for the Raithu Monastery. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* takes the form of thirty “steps”, beginning with a renunciation of the world, continuing with discussions on sins like slander & greed, before nearing the top of the ladder, learning how to acquire, ἡ συχία, or peace of the soul. While the *Ladder* is a guide for monks, there is much that we can learn, even from its icon. The power of the demons, even against these holy men, is frightening.

In this Sunday’s Gospel we see a man whose child is also under demonic power, which has tried to make the boy fall into fire and water. When Jesus’s disciples are unable to exorcize the spirit, the father approaches Jesus: “I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able... if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us And Jesus said to him, ‘If you can! All things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:18; 22-24). Seeing this man in all his weakness, our Lord rebuked the evil spirit. Later, in conversation with His disciples, they asked, “Why could we not cast it out?” And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:28-29).

This is the lesson we are meant to take from this Gospel: “I believe; help my unbelief!” To help us take control of our thoughts and actions, St. John of the Ladder reminds us that we must constantly watch ourselves, cultivating good thoughts rather than evil. Those who cultivate good thoughts transform their hearts into a welcoming place, with a mind that weighs actions according to their respective fruits. Like the father, we are suffering, with pain in our hearts. God has given us free will, but the Devil seeks to keep us apart. And today there are so many ways to do something that is wrong; something that is evil; something that is a sin. If we wish to have our burden lifted, we must strength our own unbelief through both fasting and prayer.

This is what I pray that we strive for, living on this earth, with one true goal: to be closer to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to love Him as He loved us. For by His love, we have been freed, and can forever be freed from the Evil One.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta