



# ***Fear or Faith?***

## **Pastoral Message—Easter 2024**

**Bishop John Michael Botean**

*“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”*

*Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil.*

Ephesians 5:14-17 (NABre).

It was October of 1962. I was seven years old, in the second grade, and just tall enough to look out of our dining room window into the backyard. President Kennedy had said something on the television. I didn’t completely understand what it was, but I knew there was trouble. I had seen films of the mushroom clouds that atomic explosions produced, and I understood that somehow this was what the President was talking about. In my little mind’s eye, I saw tiny mushroom clouds erupting all over the backyard. As much as my parents tried to protect me from such bad news, there was tension in the air, and I could feel it.

Fortunately for the human race at that time, the so-called “Cuban Missile Crisis” ended without nuclear war. The “Doomsday Clock,” an image on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* since 1947, stood at seven minutes to midnight as a symbol of the threat posed by nuclear war and other catastrophes caused by unrestrained technological advances.

The Doomsday Clock now stands at 90 seconds to midnight, set to that time in January, 2023. According to Wikipedia, “This adjustment was largely attributed to the risk of nuclear escalation that arose from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Other reasons cited

included climate change, biological threats such as COVID-19, and risks associated with disinformation and disruptive technologies.”<sup>1</sup>

I write you now from the perspective of one whose sleep is being progressively destroyed by anxiety, by the unknown, unremembered dream that wakes one up shaking. The verse from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians at the beginning of this letter holds special significance for me these days.

We live in fearful times. I do not mean to say that we live in the most dangerous time in human history, although that may be the case. I mean that we live in fear-filled times, when events and circumstances combine with our little comprehension and information to fill us with anxiety and dread. Political instability, wars throughout the earth, climate change, pandemic—all this contributes to a kind of global unease, out of which we can see increasing levels of violence and hate everywhere, including in our own hearts. Fear is ruling the day, darkening our minds and choking our relationships with one another.

Fear easily combines with mistrust, lies, and envy to create a potent and toxic feeling of resentment that poisons not only the soul of the one feeling it, but also the environment, relationships, and all the other elements of a person’s social context. As I share my resentment with others, I create a community of resentment that turns readily to hatred, enmity, and violence. Reinforcing each other’s perceptions of reality, this community of resentment expands to engulf ever larger groups of people until entire societies and nations become caught up in a kind of mass psychosis, convinced that anyone outside the group is an enemy that must be conquered or a criminal who must be punished.

No one is immune to this. As creatures, as animals, we humans are hard-wired to fear whenever a threat to life is perceived. The limbic system, that portion of the brain involved in the “fight-or-flight response,” can activate and leave us alternatively paralyzed or prone to violent action or escape. It is important to bear in mind that this is a reaction to *perceived* threat, which may or may not be real.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomsday\\_Clock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomsday_Clock), retrieved 3/2/2024

In this way, our tendency to violence may be said to be “natural.” But we are not only animals. We have been created in God’s image and likeness, endowed with freedom and the capacity to love. We may not be able to command what emotions we experience, but we are capable of choosing our reaction to them. This capacity is not automatic, however. A myriad of factors, including nurturing, culture, and belief systems all have a part to play in whether we will respond to a given situation with fear and violence or with equanimity and love.

What does all this have to do with Pascha (Easter)?

It is my intention in this message to share my hope, not my anxiety. I am convinced, first of all, that there is hope, and that this hope is real. Second, I believe this hope is not to be found in what we rather inaccurately call “human nature,” still less in what is often referred to as “common sense.”

Hope cannot to be found in what we assume is our human nature. We forget that what we think of as human nature is the distorted, weakened, and broken reality that is the result of the disobedience of Adam. This brokenness is not what Christ assumed in becoming human; it is what He healed. In this life we live the consequences of the Fall, even as we hope in the healing offered by Christ, both in this life and in the life to come.

By “common sense” I mean socially constructed reality, what we uncritically think of as “truth.” What we name “reality” is in truth merely a glimpse of a larger reality that is difficult to fathom, a truth so vast and so difficult to integrate into our awareness that we avert the eyes of our mind, focusing instead on a thin sliver of reality so as not to be overwhelmed by the bigger picture. It is the psychological safety net that allows us to get on with our lives and not be overcome by despair at our insignificance. Common sense allows us to find our place in the universe using concepts such as “up and down,” “north and south,” even though such concepts fade to meaninglessness in a universe of roughly 200 billion *galaxies*. Yet we speak and act as if we have the universe all figured out, not to mention ourselves and even God. This is utter nonsense.

And it is compounded, of course, by the deliberate lies and distortions presented to us by influencers and the powerful as truth in order to enlist (or enforce) our collaboration with their corrupt projects.

Where, then, can hope be found?

We can choose to sleep the sleep that leads to death or we can awaken to the new reality offered by Jesus Christ through His resurrection. How does this work?

Our reaction to a crisis situation is not all that different from the way we live day-to-day. If we are nurtured in an atmosphere of fear and violence, and if we continue to nurture fear and violence within ourselves and with those around us, we will respond to a crisis fearfully and violently. Likewise, if we cultivate a spirit of courage and love, we will respond bravely and lovingly to whatever crisis confronts us. Our choice of response is thus not made at the time the crisis hits, but moment by moment and day by day in the little choices we make throughout the minor details of life. In other words, it is *habit*, not reflection, that rules us in a crisis.

This is well known to the military, which, by means of incessant drills and repetition, inculcates habits of response to the various scenarios a soldier may face in performing his or her duty. It is the same with airline pilots and other functions that require precise and swift action with very little time for thinking.

This is also known to the Church. When we greet one another with “Christ is risen!—*Hristos a înviat!*”—we reinforce the fundamental belief that underlies all Christian response to evil. In the first place, it is the direct, verbal acknowledgment that the twin problems at the very heart of existence—evil and death—are real, are serious, and must be confronted by the individual Christian as well as by the Christian community. But it is also an affirmation of the *means* by which Christians are to confront evil and death. In other words, it is precisely at the critical moment of confrontation with evil, at those very moments when it seems that our survival is threatened, that we need the *habit of belief* in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave to “kick in” and guide our responses. Faith is the weapon God, through the Church, puts in our hand as we undertake this battle.

Far from being a mere slogan, “Christ is risen” conveys the entire, dynamic meaning of the Paschal Mystery.<sup>2</sup> Its constant repetition in the course of the Easter liturgy and in the customs and conduct of Byzantine Christians throughout the Paschal season is intended to strengthen and reinforce the *habit of belief* so that the Christian may be able to call upon it at those moments in life when a robust expression of that faith is most needed.

Because we have been nurtured in a false understanding of human nature and “common sense,” we live in a day-to-day reality that is utterly unconscious of the Resurrection, with the consequence that fear and violence are somehow justified as the “normal” Christian response to a threat. We have relegated this cornerstone of Christian life to a happy holiday that we enjoy once a year and that otherwise has no bearing on us in any practical way. Our politics, or economics, or philosophy form, or rather distort, our faith, rather than the other way around. Critically, we experience the fear we carry in our DNA, the fear that causes us to lash out at anyone or anything that we believe threatens our survival, as more powerful and determinative of our response than the truth that our faith proposes to us.

Consequently, we really need to work to make our faith an operational value in our lives. Each of us has years of nurturing in “common sense” to overcome in order to let the Word and promise of God take shape in us. This work of overcoming, which we call our spiritual life, takes many forms, all of which may be understood within the meaning of the word “conversion.” The dimensions of conversion include asceticism or self-discipline, personal prayer, Holy Scripture, and the sacraments, among others.

In our Church, it is the liturgy that teaches us our faith and how we are to live it. For Byzantine Christians, our liturgy is an indispensable element of our conversion. At the conclusion of Paschal Matins, just before the reading of the “Resurrection Homily of St. John Chrysostom,” we sing:

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<sup>2</sup> “The Paschal Mystery of Jesus, which comprises his passion, death, resurrection, and glorification, stands at the center of the Christian faith because God's saving plan was accomplished once for all by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ.” *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 112.

*Today is the Day of the Resurrection! Let us rejoice and glory in this feast! Let us embrace one another. O brethren, let us say: "Because of the resurrection, we forgive all things to those who hate us." Let us all sing together: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and bestowing life to those in the tombs!*

It is that last phrase that is our particular emphasis here: "those who hate us" is the very definition of "the enemy," i.e., the one Jesus commands us to love. We who were destined to the tomb have now been given life in the resurrection of Christ. This new reality means we can live a new life, one that forgets fear, violence, hatred, and revenge and instead is able to forgive, to love, and to confront evil and death with the firm conviction that *our survival is guaranteed*.

Myth, poetry, and philosophy cannot do this. Our contemporary tendency to try to explain away the resurrection absolutely empties our faith of its power. The late Presbyterian pastor and preacher, Frederick Buechner, puts it this way:

[T]here are at least as many ways [of explaining away the resurrection] as there are sermons preached on Easter Sunday. We can say that the story of the resurrection means simply that the teachings of Jesus are immortal like the plays of Shakespeare...Or we can say that the resurrection means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he lives on among us, the way Socrates does, for instance, in the good that he left behind him, in the lives of all who follow his great example...So what do I believe actually happened that morning on the third day after he died?...he somehow got up, with life in him again, and the glory upon him. And I speak very plainly here, very unfancifully. *He got up. He said, "Don't be afraid."* (emphasis added)<sup>3</sup>

*"The one thing we owe absolutely to God is never to be afraid of anything."*

— St. Charles de Foucauld

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, "The End Is Life," in *The Magnificent Defeat*, cited in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2003), pp. 289-291.

If faith is our greatest weapon in our battle against evil and death, fear is Satan's. Please understand that I am not speaking of faith as an intellectual exercise, an agreement with certain propositions or theories. And I am not speaking of fear as emotion. Fear as an emotion is, as I wrote above, something outside our control. But we can choose to remain in the state the emotion has brought us to, or we can put our faith—meaning trust and confidence in something or someone much, much larger—someone like Jesus Christ, something like His resurrection.

I speak of both faith and fear as *choices*, as the stand we take in our lives, as the truth we stake our lives upon. They are incompatible. To choose one is to reject the other. Once more, the choice we make in the instance of a crisis will be dependent on the choices we have made again and again throughout our lives.

It may surprise some of you that I consider the Christian life to be a matter of training for war—God's war, the nonviolent war against evil and death. It is why early Christians called their faith "the Way" and referred to the martyrs (their friends and neighbors) as warriors and athletes. We are called to spend a lifetime training for combat, equipping ourselves with all that we will need for battle, all that God provides for our victory.

It is at this point that we turn to the "source and summit" of our faith, the Divine and Holy Eucharist. Through this mystery, our savior has left us the means to accomplish in Him all that He has accomplished for us. Through the Eucharist, Christ fulfills His promise to be with us "always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NABre) in a very real, very physical, very human way. He who is alive gives us life in Himself. As He allows us to share in His life, He shares with us His resurrection.

There is now no reason to fear. Because of the resurrection, now there is the possibility, with the liturgy, to say "we forgive all things to those who hate us." There are now no more enemies, nothing to lose. All has already been given. This is the testimony of the martyrs, men and women whose faith conquered fear and enabled them to offer their lives as a demonstration of that faith. A martyr, of course, is not simply someone who dies, for we all die. Still less can we call a martyr (in the Christian sense) someone who is killed in the act of killing other human beings. We do not honor the martyrs for their deaths, but for their

witness, which is what “martyrdom” means. And what they witness to is the fact that death has been conquered, once for all, in them and therefore also in us.

So let us offer the gift of faith to one another this Pascha, our Passover from death to life, from common sense to faith-inspired action. Let each “Christ is risen!” come from our eager desire to believe, even when we find belief difficult. And let each “Indeed He is risen!” echo from the depths of our hearts, hearts burning with desire for all that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, for ourselves and for everyone who shares, who has shared and who will share, this wonderful world that God so loved, “that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16, NABre).

To Him whose life-giving death on the cross and whose death-trampling resurrection from the tomb has won for us the victory over evil and death be glory and praise and honor, now and always and forever and ever!

Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

+john michael  
a sinner, bishop