

Pastoral Letter

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Come, let us drink a new drink: not miraculously produced from a barren rock, but from the Fount of Immortality springing forth from the tomb of Christ, in which we are established. (Resurrection matins)

Beloved brothers and sisters in the risen Lord,

Perspective is everything

Most of us remember with delight one of the educational activities of our childhood: “connect-the-dots.” By drawing a single line from one numbered dot to the next in order, a picture—perhaps of a bunny, a flower, or a person—emerged from what previously had seemed to be a scattered array of points on a piece of paper. You could not see the picture until you connected the dots. In a sense, the picture was always there implicitly, but the *mind* could not perceive it until, by interacting with the array of dots and by causing the hand to map out the logical, numeric sequence that was there on the page, the mind made the relationships between the dots visible to itself.

If you lacked the skills to count, or the attention capacity to find all the numbers, or the interest and desire to cooperate with the exercise, you could, if you wanted, connect dot 1 to dot 30, dot 30 to dot 5, dot 5 to dot 14, etc., but the resulting lines would not bring out the picture the designer intended to put there. One could deny that there was anything to be gained by the exercise or be convinced there was nothing else to perceive but dots. One might then not do the activity at all, and just be satisfied with the dots themselves, never getting to see the picture in the dots.

In other words, the perspective that was required by this childhood activity in order to see the design in the dots was not given. The design was there, and the clues and instructions needed to bring it out were there, but you had to engage in the exercise if you wanted to see it and, in the process, learn something (like counting). It was something you had to choose and work at to achieve.

Life itself, for us adults, is not all that different. The data of existence are all around us in a seemingly senseless and random array. Unfortunately, the numbers are not necessarily there for us to connect the bits of experience into a coherent and meaningful pattern. In order for existence to have meaning for us, we need to find the information and the clues—the numbers, if you will—that will tell us how to

connect things. Once we have that information, we still have to choose to engage with life, to do the work of actually making the connections. Only then will some kind of pattern emerge, and out of that pattern, a sense of meaningfulness or purpose.

Where are we supposed to get our information? Where do the numbers come from? What are the clues? How we answer that question for ourselves—and all human beings must answer it for themselves—will be utterly defining in terms of our capacity to arrive at meaning and purpose, as well as what we conclude is meaningful or what our purpose is. That is why, in the matter of making meaning out of life, *perspective is everything*.

Throughout history, people have tried to get information from many different sources, principally through observation of nature and the world around them. At one level, and most recently in human history, there is science: an orderly way of observing nature and applying logic in order to discover patterns and “meaning” in what is observed. At another, more ancient level, there is, for example, astrology. The ancient astrologer looked at the sky and perceived—or thought he or she perceived—patterns among the stars. These constellations we now know to be utterly imaginary, the imposition of a pattern existing only in the mind upon what is observed in the stars. There are no lions, fish, goats, archers, crabs, scorpions, or twins in space in any literal sense. Yet, these imaginary patterns were thought (indeed, are still thought by many) to influence events in human history and to influence the character, choices, and “luck” of individual human beings.

It seems built into human nature to require that life have meaning, so we will look everywhere for the clues and the information that will enable meaning to emerge from the apparent randomness of our lives. We will relentlessly search high and low, inside and outside, in our demand that our life yield something to satisfy our heart’s need to know what it is all about.

Who is to say that the clues we use and the patterns we see are anything more than the constructions of our own very needy imaginations? There is no lack of philosophers and thinkers of all kinds in the modern and post-modern ages who answer that there is no one who can make that determination. Many go so far as to say there are no clues and no patterns: life is entirely random. A human being is no more than the result of accidental interactions of matter and energy in time, space, and history following the more or less logical laws of physics, chemistry, and neuropsychology. There is no meaning and no purpose to one’s life, and no certainty other than that it will, sooner or later, come to an end. Don’t bother connecting the dots: there is nothing to see in them.

Of course, there are others who insist that there is indeed meaning in life, and that every human being has a purpose and a destiny. The question then becomes: whose numbers does one use to connect the dots? Do the right numbers come from Plato and Aristotle? Or from Jesus or Mohammad? Einstein or

Heisenberg? George Bush or Barack Obama? Milton Friedman or John Keynes? Fox News or MSNBC?

Upon their liberation from Egyptian bondage, the ancient Israelites wandered in apparent aimlessness for an entire generation before arriving at the destination promised to their ancestors. During this time a pillar of cloud led them by day and a pillar of fire by night. As the notion grew among them that they were perhaps not heading anywhere in particular, they grew anxious for their own safety and survival. At one point, having become gravely thirsty in the parching desert, they complained to their leader, Moses, that he was taking them nowhere and that they were likely to die of thirst. God instructed Moses to strike a barren, flinty rock; Moses did this, and water gushed forth in abundance to satisfy their thirst. Along with the miraculous manna and the quail they were given to eat, they had enough sustenance to keep on their long journey.

But where were they going, really? Coming to Mount Sinai on their way, God gave them His law (*Torah*) by means of His *revelation to Moses*. The Divine Law thus began to provide the information—the numbers—by which the purpose of their wandering began to become visible to the people of Israel. Thereafter, and throughout their history, God continued to provide “numbers” through inspired prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, so that the people might never lose sight of the real meaning of their calling and choice by God to be His people.

In other words, in contrast to the peoples around them, the Israelites received the information about their purpose and meaning by means of *revelation* from God through the prophet Moses and the later prophets. Had God not chosen this means of disclosing the pattern and design of the universe God had created, they would have had no means of perceiving it and would have been left to the same guesswork as the rest of humanity. Moreover, they actually had to “connect the dots” themselves by obedience to Divine Law in order to perceive: just having the “numbers” (like the Ten Commandments) was not enough. *Living under Torah* was (and is, for the Jew of today) essential in order to engage in life as God designed it, to get a sense of meaning out of it and to discover the purpose of one’s life.

Christ is Risen (I think...isn't he?)

The selection from paschal matins I cited at the opening of my letter describes how it is that we Christians are invited to respond to what we claim to be the historical event of the raising of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. As God satisfied His thirsty people in the desert with water from a rock, now the tomb of Christ is described as the rock from which life now flows for all people. The liturgy invites us to satisfy our thirst for life, meaning, and purpose with this new drink. The empty tomb of Christ is what “establishes” us; it shows God’s design for us and provides the basis out of which we live our lives individually and communally, that is, as the Church.

The life, teaching, death, and resurrection/glorification of Jesus are, like *Torah* and the words of the prophets, *revelation*. The content of Jesus' mission and ministry is not something derived from observation of nature, and as Christians we believe that neither are they mere artifacts of the collective religious imagination of the Church. Unlike *Torah* and the prophets, however, the revelation of Jesus is God's own self-disclosure, in God's own words and with God's own face. In Jesus, the Creator enters human history directly so that humans might know who God is and what God's design for the world looks like. More to the point for us, the human life of Jesus is God's free revelation to humanity *of itself*. The life and teaching of Jesus give us the "numbers" we can choose to use to connect the dots and see the design of our own nature. God did not have to do this, but unless God had done this, we would not know what human nature truly is, since conclusions based on our experience in the human family might, depending upon our circumstances, lead us to some very negative conclusions about human nature.

Still, it is up to us to engage the life of Jesus and connect the dots if we want to see the pattern we have been molded from. It is living in communion with Jesus Christ, putting on his mind, obeying his commandments, and following his steps one by one that is the way, and the only way, that we as Christians believe we can come to see the design of God in creation and in our personal lives. If we do not believe that Jesus is the revelation of God, or that there are no numbers and no designs in the universe, that is one thing. But a severe problem arises when we claim that Jesus "gives us the numbers" to connect our dots, but then decide on our own that dot 1 should not be connected to dot 2, but to dot 15 instead, and dot 15 to dot 25, 25 to 7, and so forth. The resultant picture that emerges may be coherent and it may even be beautiful, but it is not the picture God put there. It is a distortion and a falsehood incapable of indicating our true purpose and destiny as human beings.

For a number of years, the letters I have written at Easter have attempted to encourage lives that demonstrate that the Resurrection of Christ makes all the difference. However, this year I have been thinking a bit of what it means for us as individual Christians and for our Church if the resurrection makes *no* difference. Consider the following teaching of St. Paul to the Church of his day in Corinth:

*But if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. Then we are also false witnesses to God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. **If for this life only we have hoped in***

Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all. (1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NAB-my emphasis)

Here Paul teaches that the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, i.e., our own resurrection, are inextricably interconnected. Christ did not rise for himself only, or only on his own behalf. But if Christ did not rise at all, as we believe and say he did, then neither are we raised from death and our survival is not guaranteed. Death still has the final say; it still has power over us in the everyday circumstances of our lives, moment in and moment out. The words and works of Jesus are the words and works of a human person only, and do not qualify as revelation in any way distinct from the revelation given by God to Moses and the prophets, if they are even that.

If death is not conquered, the teachings of Christ are no more than another volume in the same body of useless guesswork that constitutes the purely human philosophies of our culture and history. They do not constitute a reliable set of numbers by which we can connect the dots, if what we are looking for is the Creator's design.

Here is the "bottom line," if you will: if Christ is not risen, and if our survival is not guaranteed, then his New Commandment ("Love one another as I have loved you," (John 13:34) is nothing better than foolish utopianism or dreamy sentiment. It is impossible to put into practice. *A fortiori*, Christ's commandment to "love your enemies" (Luke 6:27) is merely an exercise in massive self-deception likely only to get you killed if you take it too seriously. Therefore the Christians of whom Paul speaks are "the most pitiable people of all" for trying to put into practice obedience to a commandment of love that may be inspirational, indeed, but which will gain them nothing in the end. If the entire horizon of human existence is this cramped and transient flicker of biology we call life, then it only makes sense to get the most you can out of it, and "the devil take the hindmost" in the brutal, competitive jungle that the philosophers of the Enlightenment called the "state of nature" and "a war of each against all." Human life is then nothing more than what Thomas Hobbes famously characterized in his *Leviathan* as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

The Enlightenment's antidote to the so-called "state of nature" is modern liberal¹ democracy and the free market. We turn to the doctrines of these systems and their incarnation in what is called "civil society" for the clues and information we desire in order to make sense of life. But what if these human systems are flawed and wrong in some places? Certainly they are both, for they are only human.

¹ I use the word "liberal" correctly, but with unfortunately with caution. The philosophical sense of the word "liberal" is "free," and "liberal democracy" is the term used to describe the origins of our own political and economic system. The word has quite unfairly been given a negative connotation by some conservatives, just as the word "conservative" has been given a negative connotation by some liberals. Suffice it to say that Thomas Hobbes is considered a liberal in this philosophical sense, though Hobbesians might well be considered conservatives in our current political context.

This is not to denigrate all that is positive and good in them. One has to wonder, however, if what post-Enlightenment civil society calls “nature” and “life” are neither natural nor life-giving, at least in terms of the Creator’s design for both the universe and the human person.

The Christian—at least the Eastern Christian—understanding of human nature is that it is fallen as a result of original sin and thus subject to a death that was not originally in the Creator’s blueprint. It is fallen, but it is not depraved. It retains a natural capacity for good as well as an inclination toward evil. The image of God in which everyone was created has been distorted, but it has not been destroyed. Christ, true God and true man, came to restore the image of God in human nature and make it capable of perfection (i.e., completion, realization). Hence, the Christian understanding of human nature looks to the words and works of Jesus in order to see what true human nature is like. It gets its information from Jesus of Nazareth in order to connect the dots necessary to render discernible the pattern in which we have been created and, indeed, redeemed, so that we too, from the greatest to the least of us, might have the chance ourselves, through our cooperation (*synergeia*) with God’s free gift of grace, to realize our true, divinely intended nature.

This restoration of our nature, which Christ brought about once for all by his incarnation, we personally make our own by means of our baptism into his life, death, and resurrection. As Christians, we are incorporated into his sacred body, and can no longer take what has become part of him and make it, for instance, part of the body of a harlot (1 Corinthians 6:1-20). Still less can we take what belongs to him and attempt to make it part of the body of a Hitler, of a Stalin, or for that matter of a Churchill or a Roosevelt.

Christ’s mission took him further than the restoration of our fallen nature and led him directly into a confrontation with human as well as cosmic evil. He voluntarily accepted the torture and murder that were the consequences civil society in his day had in store for him (and anyone like him) for having the loving audacity to confront what was not of God in it, whatever in it that used the myriad forms of violence in order to keep God’s holy icon, human beings, in ongoing bondage to death. By his cross and three days’ burial, Christ overthrew this bondage for himself and for all humankind, forever.

Christians of Paul’s day were perhaps better known than those of our own for their new kind of life of loving, non-retaliatory service to friend and enemy alike, and this warning by the Apostle would have rung more sharply in their ears than perhaps it does in ours. Christians of our day have somehow made peace with a Christian ethic that gets what it can in this world while still planning on, to misuse Joe Hill’s famous song, “pie in the sky when you die.” It is the operational gospel of our era and about as far from the “new drink” of which the liturgy sings as one can get. We hesitate to go anywhere near the tomb of Christ, let alone take in all the consequences of the fountain in which we are reborn that flows from it. No longer is

the Christian community operationally “established” in this fountain. For the purposes of this world only, it is simply unnecessary and dangerous to be thus.

The reason for this is very simple. Let me illustrate it by an example from my own life.

I get almost no fun at all out of gambling. I am making no judgments here (that would be another letter); it simply does nothing for me and is not how I choose to spend money. However, I once belonged to a parish in Sacramento, California, that from time to time sponsored bus trips to nearby Lake Tahoe. The casinos provided a free meal and some money to get you hooked on their games. I was expected to go on this parish outing and so I did: I enjoyed the free meal, gave my gambling voucher to someone who would use it, and spent the day enjoying the breathtaking beauty of the lake and its nearby mountains.

For many Christians, church is just like that. We are expected to go; we enjoy the food and friendship—not to mention the entertainment—we may find there, but we have no interest at all in the real action going on inside. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not something we feel really comfortable betting our lives and our futures on—and why should we? We live in what some consider a Christian nation that guarantees our right to go to any religious show we like. Yet our laws and our culture sanction everything from the legal thievery of the marketplace to abortion, torture, and war (and everything in between). That some laws that are enacted are unjust may be inevitable in a free, democratic, but pluralistic society. While the Church should—indeed must—do everything possible consistent with the means of Christ to prevent the enactment of unjust laws, it will still have to confront them and resist them whenever they come into existence. But who wants to do that?

In civil society, the dots and the lines that connect them are all spelled out by political, economic, religious, and cultural elites. The democratic ideal means that one is free to pick the principles and the elites representing them according to one’s own preferences and beliefs, and to support and follow these leaders. For Christians, the range of choices is limited, because it is not civil society, its principles or its leaders that are the source of our information about how to live our lives—it is the Gospel that teaches us the principles that lead to salvation and provide us with a leader and Lord in our savior, Jesus Christ. According to him, we can only “render to Caesar” after we have rendered to God the full measure of the obedience due Him (Matthew 22:21).

Problems and crises will arise personally and communally, as they inevitably must, and we typically turn to these same political, social, economic, intellectual and religious elites for the solutions to them. We expect laws, policies, and enterprise to solve our problems. Public “discourse” (surely a euphemism nowadays!) is only about what the laws should and should not be, what policies to apply, which policies to avoid, as well as who is going to pay for civil society and who will reap its profits. Problem solving is reduced to nothing more than the pursuit of whatever power it takes to win, particularly elections, in order to have

the ability to impose one's own will upon the loser and everyone else. This is how democracy works, and as long as we believe that civil society is the key to the ordering of our lives, it will literally never occur to us that the solutions to the problems of this life come from another Life, i.e., the one that flows from the Cross of Jesus Christ and, through his empty tomb, to us.

Operationally we prefer, for purposes of "this world only," that the dead not be raised and, hence, we proclaim operationally that Christ is *not* risen. This is so that we may remain "still in our sins:" unrestored in nature, unredeemed in our purpose and final destiny. For purposes of "this world only," the dead might as well have perished, for this is a much more useful state of affairs to those who are willing to use the threat of death or harm to accomplish their aims, however good they may be.

Please do not misunderstand: there is much good that can and does come from civil society, and if we think we can bring about the Kingdom of God in this world by dint of the purity of our lives, we are very much mistaken. But there is a world of difference between struggling to live within the agonizing rhythms of sinning and repenting, sinning and repenting again, while we live in time and space, on the one hand, and on the other hand calling what is evil good and refusing to name sin in ourselves and in the very structures of the society we live in.

There are Christians who call themselves "realists" who, very aware of the fallenness of the world, are willing to bless and call "righteous" (or at least legal and necessary) those structures of violence and coercion that result in every kind of inequality and damage to the image of God simply because the Kingdom of God is not yet realized in its fullness. These Christian "realists" deserve respect for their sensitivity to the ongoing existence of evil and the need to protect the vulnerable and innocent from harm. But if it is true that civil society is the antidote to the "law of the jungle," then precisely what is it that Christ accomplished by his resurrection? Of what use is it? Jesus may as well not have been raised. If armies are necessary because of our fallen human nature, then what purpose did the Incarnation serve? If Christ is the Savior, but Christians must still justify the kind of dog-eat-dog existence we call this life, just what is it that we are being saved from? The converse of what St. Paul says seems to me also to be true: if *for the next life only* we have hoped in Christ, we are still quite pitiable people.

This is more than the problem of a lack of piety. It is a problem of what happens when the Church lives operationally as if Christ had not been raised and allows itself to be co-opted and its leaders hijacked for political or economic purposes.

Most pitiable people of all

Consider this: however Dr. George Tiller and his murderer, Scott Roeder, may have differed in the matter of abortion (and they surely did!), they both agreed that homicide was an acceptable solution to certain kinds of problems. One may

quibble as much as one wants about whether Dr. Tiller regarded what he did for a living as homicide, or that it was legal, or whether Roeder's pulling the trigger was an act of justified defense of innocent life. Each of them has taken human life, and may God have mercy on them both.

But the point at which the killing of another human being becomes an acceptable means of following Jesus (and both men were Christians), at that point the Christian community becomes "the most pitiable of people." Why? Because, by definition, homicide concerns "this life only." It constitutes the end of it, to be sure, but it has no effect whatsoever on eternity, except insofar as one's choices in "this life only" are what one carries with one into the next. If there is no such thing as eternity, then we are indeed at war in the savage competition for survival. But if there is such a thing as eternity: in other words, if Christ *is* risen *and* the dead are indeed raised *and* our survival, if you will, is guaranteed for all ages, then what do you imagine the encounter between Tiller and Roeder will be like in and for all eternity?

(Though I should not have to mention it, if anyone reading this letter takes actual comfort at the thought of either one of them in a situation of eternal negativity, or hell, then he or she has a more serious personal and spiritual issue than can be dealt with in this letter.)

Make no mistake: to those who have or wish to have power in our society it is a far more significant matter that you be a Republican or a Democrat than that you be a Christian. This is totally understandable in a world in which Christians are indistinguishable from everyone else, in a society that has baptized and continues to baptize every kind of atrocity in the name of the Holy One. In this life and in our day, to voice criticism of the kind of Christianity that focuses on the temporal and impermanent rather than on the permanent and eternal is to risk ridicule as a pious anachronism, at best. At the very least, anyone who does so arouses the scorn of conservatives and liberals alike, and subjects oneself to vicious attack from both right and left).²

Laws do not save one from death. Systems for the production and distribution of goods and services do not save anyone from death. Both systems leave the impression that they are promising something like life, but it is a promise they are unable to deliver on. Moreover, neither the State nor the Corporation is a real person, and neither is the object of God's eternal salvific interest and activity. On the contrary: both the State and the Corporation are the very definition of impermanence and temporality. It is of the essence of them to be ephemeral, transitory, and passing.

² We have even arrived at the point at which a famous and very well paid political commentator urged Christians to run quickly away from any church or any clergy person who preaches the Gospel if the words "social justice" come up in a sermon. Such patent absurdity, not to mention brazen anti-Christianity, can only make sense when the Gospel is rendered null and void, when, operationally, "Christ has not been raised," and "empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). It bears mentioning that "Social Justice" is the title of Part Three, Section Two, Article Three of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* promulgated by Pope John Paul II.

The State and the Corporation are no more than the ultimately fictitious patterns imposed by human imagination upon the apparently random data of existence, the “dots” we must connect in order to find meaning and purpose. However—and this is vitally important—they are made up of *people*, real human beings, created in God’s image and likeness. God’s eternal salvific interest and activity are very much directed at them, which is to say, at *us*. It is we who are the dots that above all need to be connected to one another. And we are thus connected, according to the purpose and design of the One who created us in order to spend eternity with one another in the Creator’s loving embrace.

There is a sense then (though it must be very carefully understood) in which one can say that both Corporation and State, together with their rules and their activities, are utterly irrelevant in terms of the choices a Christian is called upon to make in following his or her Savior in confronting human or cosmic evil. This, in truth, is where martyrs come from. Christians have no problem with just laws and practices; or, rather, laws that are just should have no problems with Christians. The Kingdom of God is not opposed to the human good.

Unjust laws, no matter how well intended, do not oblige in conscience (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1903). Indeed, they must, on the other hand, be resisted. No one is permitted to commit an evil so that a good may come of it. And no law is *ipso facto* a good or just law merely because it is duly, legally, and democratically enacted. However, the extent of an individual Christian’s capacity to resist evil is a function of that Christian’s faith, fidelity, and courage. It is also a function of the extent to which the pastoral activity of the Church is oriented toward building up the Christian community and individual Christians for this struggle, not the extent to which such activity is able to organize the Christian community to achieve political, still less partisan, objectives. Society may be split into camps of every political stripe, and our fellows may try to label us as liberals or conservatives, but the fact is that the Christian can afford to be neither. We have our hands full following the Master, who leads us neither right, nor left, but straight up.

States and Corporations may be able to make life in this world more livable for some (though nearly always, if not universally, at the expense of others). At their best, they can seek to provide justice of a very human and limited sort. By means of force and fear, they can provide—more or less—something of the tranquility of order that St. Augustine says is constitutive of peace: at least whatever peace this world is capable of knowing and bringing about. They are certainly capable of egregious injustice and of being the cause of unspeakable suffering on a global scale, though they are by no means the only causes of human suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, diseases, and tsunamis come to mind as elements of the enormous power of evil in its non-human forms, even when human activity is implicated in them at some level).

He is risen indeed!

It is precisely in the encounter with the most extreme forms of cosmic and human evil that the power of the world is exposed in its weakness. There are no worldly utopias, liberal or conservative. Even a perfect society is powerless to raise anyone from the dead. Jesus Christ is the only “leader and reviver of those who have fallen asleep” (*Resurrection Homily of St. John Chrysostom*). Only he has conquered death and hell, and only he has the power to grant resurrection to us “poor, banished children of Eve” (*Salve Regina*). If he alone can do this for you, how “realistic” is it to follow anyone or anything that would separate you one inch from him and his teachings?

Christ’s promise of the resurrection is not at all “pie in the sky when you die,” but it does invite us to evaluate ourselves, the world, and everything in it *sub specie æternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity. This is the angle from which we can see more clearly who we are and what God’s design for us is.

Our country has become embittered by fractious political battle that can now be characterized by the enormity of the lies that have been generated on all sides of it, and the pathetic posturing of many in whom statecraft has shrunk to the level of winning at all costs. We seem unable to bring an end to two unjust wars that, despite their economic cost and the exorbitant amount of suffering and death they cause with ever-increasing efficiency, barely make it to the evening news. Hatred and the groups that have been established to foster it are on the rise in the land, while terrorism continues to grow in boldness and bloodiness worldwide. Children—those who manage to escape being aborted—have their innocence stolen from them at an earlier and earlier age, while they are at the same time becoming commoditized, regarded increasingly as the object of someone else’s “rights.”

I could prolong this catalogue, but I believe you can understand my meaning without my proving to you what a curmudgeon I have become. Is this the society one ought to trust to teach us how to connect the dots of existence?

It is beyond the scope of this letter and my authority to author prescriptions about what the Church worldwide needs to do. My hope in writing you this letter is to inspire hope in you, my brothers and sisters of the Eparchy of St. George, not despair. I am writing so that you may find your own way out of the decay and corruption of a world that knows nothing of resurrection. I feel that I can say to you, with our Lord, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).

I feel I can say these things because, even as I write them, my heart is filled with joy, and I dearly would love you to know some of this joy. My joy is so intense because we have such a God as has traveled the path of our life with us, the dark path we all must walk, the path that leads each of us to the grave. But because he has done this, he has killed death and debunked the lies with which that which would enslave us continually attempts to deceive us.

I invite you to share my joy by making every effort to engage your life with the life of Jesus. If you cannot find him anywhere, I suggest you go to his tomb. You will not find him there either—and that is exactly the point. Christ is risen indeed, and that means the dead are raised and have not perished. It means that your faith and our preaching are not in vain. It means that, far from pitiable, we who know and live the light of the resurrection are the most enviable people of all, for the risen Christ still lives in time and space through us, his Mystical Body.

People of God, I want with all my heart for you to know this and be utterly convinced of the purpose and design of God in your lives as you wander in your deserts. Follow the Good Shepherd with every step, and see for what joy you have been created. All that you have done, all the sacrifices you have made for your churches, have one aim: that you may know that Christ is risen, and so are you. Monks and nuns, I ask for your tears and prayers for God's people of this Eparchy, so that they may see in your lives how love transforms loneliness into holy solitude and penance into joy. Deacons, I invite you to sing your prayers with enthusiasm and beauty so that the people may know that their Father hears them. Priests, I invite you to see to it that nothing in your care take pride of place over the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its incarnation in love at your Eucharistic gatherings.

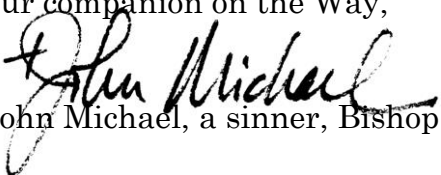
It is no anachronistic piety that advises you to seek the imperishable instead of the perishable, the eternal instead of the temporal, the permanent instead of the ephemeral. You have been designed for eternity, so begin to live that eternity now! See the beauty that God has put in you forever and rejoice! Drink deeply of the new drink flowing from the empty tomb and be refreshed for the wearisomeness of the journey still ahead of you.

Stop trying to win converts to your politics and instead win converts to Jesus Christ. Do not be ashamed or embarrassed to do this because you think you are not holy enough to witness on his behalf. Do not worry that you do not deserve eternal life, because it is the free gift of God, and God wants your friends to know eternal life, too. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Do you see the grandeur of this gift? But now, my dear friend, preserve the grandeur of this gift. You cannot live in indifference. Inscribe the law well in your mind. This life is a battle: those who fight on the battlefield can defend themselves well from anything that might thwart victory" (*On the Resurrection*).

The war against humanity is already won; be brave in your daily battles. Have no fear, for Christ is risen!

With my archpastoral blessing and the pledge of my prayers for you always, I remain

Your companion on the Way,


+John Michael, a sinner, Bishop