

ROMANIAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE
PASTORAL LETTER ON THE OCCASION OF
PASCHA 2013

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Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
(Philippians 4:4-7)

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,
Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

On this blessed Day of Days, the liturgy itself reminds us of that which leads to peace. In the verse introducing the Irmos of the Ninth Ode of the Easter Canon of Matins, repeated in place of the “It Is Truly Fitting” in the Divine Liturgy, we see depicted Gabriel’s Annunciation greeting to Mary:

The Angel cried out to the woman full of grace, ‘Hail [rejoice] Immaculate Virgin, and again I say, “Hail [rejoice]”, for your Son has risen from the tomb on the third day, and has raised up the dead. Exult, O people!

The brilliant rhetorical skill of the composer of this liturgical poem has connected the two great mysteries that are the cause of our joy: the Incarnation of Christ and his resurrection from the dead. At the same time, the repetition of the angelic greeting, “Hail,” (χαίρετε) which can also be translated “rejoice,” recalls St. Paul’s exhortation to the Christians of Philippi I have cited above. He encourages them to be kind to all, to remember that the Lord is near, to cease being anxious and instead present all our needs to God. In this way, God’s ineffable peace will descend upon us and “*guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*”

Anxiety seems to be the great problem of our age, both individually and collectively. Fortunes are made selling medications and providing therapies to help people overcome their fears, anxieties, phobias, and neuroses, and societies the world over grow in violence as more and more individuals and groups turn to weapons to “defend” themselves, usually against individuals or groups that are, reasonably or not, identified with some threat to self-interest and are therefore treated as scapegoats to allay society’s collective malaise.

In the *Philokalia*, St. Hesychios the Priest, in his work “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” presents the classic teaching of the Fathers on guarding the heart and the mind as a spiritual discipline: it is our thoughts that must be watched over in order

to prevent evil from entering our minds and hearts, thus leading us to sin and separation from God. Yet in the passage from the letter to the Philippians just cited, St. Paul seems to be saying the opposite: be kind and cast your cares on the Lord, and God himself will act as the guardian of your mind and heart.

In reality, St. Hesychios and St. Paul are saying the same thing. Forgetting that the Lord is near, that God is with us, that in Christ Jesus death has been conquered and evil overthrown, is what allows the unease and anxiety that lead to violence to enter our minds and hearts. Remembering the nearness of God and the forgiveness that we have received through the Cross, trusting God in every circumstance of our lives, bearing the name of Jesus on our lips—these are the things that conquer anxiety and lead to peace and allow God himself to be the guardian of our hearts.

If ours is an age of anxiety, it is because it is an age in which Jesus is either not known or not believed. He may be talked about—dozens of books may be written about him and hours upon hours of television and radio programming may be devoted to him, but in practical terms, how Jesus lived and died, and what he taught about how to live and die, have negligible impact on the course of world events. Because Christians claim to believe *in* him, but don't *believe him* or take him at his word, the living Christ has become all but invisible to the world. Because Christians continue to try to be the guardians of their own existences, instead of being the extension in time and space of the body of the Crucified One, the God who wants to protect them has become unknown to the rest of humanity, which consequently continues to look for a savior and rescuer.

“How can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” (*Romans 10:14*)

People of a certain age who grew up, as I did, in Northeast Ohio will remember a pointy-eared leprechaun by the name of Barnaby. He was our generation's “Mister Rogers,” being above all a nice guy who always reminded the children watching him, “If anybody calls, tell ‘em Barnaby said ‘hello,’ and tell them that I think you are the nicest person in the whole world.” Like Mister Rogers, Barnaby created a televised “safe space” in which to encourage children to “be good.” Unlike Mister Rogers, however, Barnaby was on commercial television, not public. This meant that, in addition to encouraging children to be good, he had to try to sell them stuff. One item that sticks out in my mind, among the things Barnaby was hawking, was a high-priced hot dog named Kahn's. Barnaby told us that Kahn's was “the wiener the world awaited.”

Mom never bought Kahn's, which was a little harder to find in Canton than in Cleveland, and way more expensive than our local Sugardale hot dogs. Once, however, I actually saw Kahn's in a grocery store and prevailed upon my mother, in the nagging, annoying way children sometimes do, to buy them because Barnaby said they were great. She did, and we ate them.

I was disappointed. I could not see what all the fuss was about. Was this what the world was really waiting for—a hot dog? That episode, along with countless toys that broke or failed to maintain my interest, eventually taught me to be a little more skeptical as an adult about what people told me, especially when what they told me promised to be the long-awaited answer to this or that world-historical problem. Whatever solution they proposed was guaranteed, sooner or later, to disappoint. I also learned in time that, despite what Barnaby may have told me, I was *not* the nicest person in the whole world. No matter how hard I struggled, I found that I, too, continued to disappoint—other people, God, myself.

And still the world awaits—what? Another wiener? Another cleaning product or wonder drug? Another technology? Another political ideology or economic theory? Another political leader or commercial whiz-kid billionaire?

Another messiah?

Life is full of problems of all sorts. Big problems and little problems are our minds' continuous preoccupation. Finding solutions to them tends to consume all our time, mind, and money. Likewise, the world has never lacked scores of people making all kinds of promises about things they want us to buy, or buy into, to solve these problems. Communism was to be the salvation of the working class and the end result of the natural processes of historical development (dialectical materialism), culminating in a utopia for all. Capitalism was to raise the tide of global wealth, and this rising tide was to "lift all boats," while the wealth created would, through the natural processes of historical development (the "invisible hand of the market"), come up with the technologies and the products to solve all our problems, culminating in a utopia for all.

To Aristotle, it was just natural for some people to be owners of other people, and for other people to need, by their nature, to be owned and cared for as one cares for a pet or a garden. It was nature's way. To Byzantine emperors, their pious autocracy was to reflect God's dominion and righteousness, and thus bring about happiness and the Kingdom of God on earth. To Chinese emperors, their rule was to reflect the order of the universe, and thus bring about happiness and Divine Order for high and low alike. In Europe, the feudal system guaranteed the good life to those whose blood was "nobler" than others, and to the rest, their obedient serfs, the Church guaranteed eternal life. To latter-day industrial and post-industrial titans, kingmakers and masters of the universe, nature has simply given some people the endowments needed to be "makers," while the rest of us moral inferiors are consigned to be "takers" (see Aristotle, above).

All of these examples are meant to illustrate that "the world," in the biblical sense, is utterly incapable of delivering on its utopian promises and, instead, tends toward the destruction of the human person, seen not as God sees him or her, as someone of infinite worth and created in God's own image and likeness, but rather in categories of king and subject, master and slave, owner and owned, producer and

consumer, maker and taker. It is the world that, regardless of its political, cultural, and economic systems, is *totalizing*. In other words, all human institutions tend toward totalitarianism, whether of the state, or of culture, or of enterprise. None of them is able to deliver ultimate human fulfillment or ultimate security against death.

And so, we human beings who live in a “world” which, again in the biblical sense, is under the dominion of the Evil One and completely subject to corruption, have always longed for a savior, a messiah to deliver us from subjection and convince us once and for all that our existence is not “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V).

It is against this backdrop that, while he was Supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the “Year of Faith” that we are now observing. In his *motu proprio* establishing this observance, *Porta Fidei (The Door of Faith)*, the then-Pope observed:

Having reached the end of his life, Saint Paul asks his disciple Timothy to “aim at faith” (2 Timothy 2:22) with the same constancy as when he was a boy (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15). We hear this invitation directed to each of us, that none of us grow lazy in the faith. It is the lifelong companion that makes it possible to perceive, ever anew, the marvels that God works for us. Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world. What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end.

“That the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph” (2 Thessalonians 3:1): may this Year of Faith make our relationship with Christ the Lord increasingly firm, since only in him is there the certitude for looking to the future and the guarantee of an authentic and lasting love (Porta Fidei, 15).

Pope Benedict’s document is well named, for it is indeed faith that is the doorway through which human beings enter into life in all its God-given fullness. It is when human beings are able to say, indeed to cry out, “*Credo!* I believe!” that they are able to rise above the corruption and death to which the world and its ruler, Satan, would consign them.

“We walk by faith, not by sight,” (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The act of faith is unlike any other in human experience. It is unlike, but in a way connected to, the act of sensing by which we perceive the world around us. It is a “seeing” of that which is invisible, yet faith still begins in the senses, by hearing the testimony of another who has heard God’s word. As St. Paul reminds us, “But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in

him of whom they have not heard?” and, “Thus faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ,” (*Romans* 10:14,17).

Similarly, as a human faculty, faith is unlike, but in a way connected to, the act of reasoning, by which we make sense of the world around us. It is an “understanding” of that which is beyond understanding. Just because something is beyond understanding does not make it unreasonable. Like music and art, faith is not opposed to human intellect, but rather makes use of that faculty in order to understand and experience more fully its object.

And faith, indeed, requires an object. When one cries out “I believe,” one is embarking upon a path of resistance to the world’s enslavement, but it is only a first step. For the Christian as well for others, faith needs to go somewhere beyond the stance of mere openness to truth that faith implies. It is not just an attitude or philosophic position; faith has an object; it has content. It is always “faith *in*” something or someone: the one God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, faith in the many gods of Hinduism and of other religions, faith in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, in the scientific method, in the “human spirit,” in democracy, and so forth.

The Christian Symbol of Faith, known among other names as the “Nicene Creed,” is a summarizing of the Christian’s faith *in* something. It is far more than a collection of intellectual propositions; it is an act of worship, which is why something that was originally drawn up as a document to settle a dispute has become fundamentally a liturgical text.

“I believe in one God...” Thus far, this *credo* is not much different from the other two great statements of faith of monotheism, the Jewish *shema* (“Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one,” (or “the LORD alone”), and the Islamic *shahada* or “witness:” “There is no god but The God”. For all three of these great religions, the second step after “I believe” is “in one God.” It is faith *in*: one God alone, faith in the uniqueness and singularity of God.

But of course our Christian *credo* goes a step further: “...and in one Lord, Jesus Christ...” Part of the content of Christian faith is that the man Jesus is also Messiah, Lord, the unique (“only-begotten”) Son of God, indeed God. This third step sets Christianity apart from all other religions, including the other monotheistic religions, because this step asserts that the One the world awaited from the beginning has indeed arrived. His parents named him Jesus. He has taken part in our reality, has taken a place in our history, has inaugurated his rule over against the dominions of this world, “and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”

It is all about this Jesus: first of all, *that* he is, then *who* he is, and perhaps most importantly *what he has done for us*: he rose from the dead, and with his rising, he raises up every human being. Christian faith, therefore, is not just faith *in*, but also faith *that*. It takes a fourth step, confessing that Jesus the Messiah rose from the

dead, demonstrating God's purpose and plan for us individually and for the entire human race.

“What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race,” (*John 1:3-4*)

The Gospel reading for the Divine Liturgy today helps us focus in on what this great feast is all about. “Life,” as it is meant in the Gospel of John, is not what we mean when we talk about survival and the things that provide for survival: food, clothing, shelter, protection from assault, etc. When we sing our great paschal anthem, “Christ is risen,” we note that Jesus “has given *life*,” not *survival*, “to those *in the tombs*.” Those in the tombs, to our natural eyes, are dead! It is the eyes of faith alone that allow us to see the life that is in them through Christ.

It is *life*, not survival, that Jesus teaches us about in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5-7*), especially in the passages about not worrying about what we are to eat, drink, or wear, in the passages about giving to the person who asks something from without our expecting to receive anything in return, in the passages about loving one's enemies and forgiving those who harm us. It is life, real life, true life, life that only God can give, that enables us to live in joy and to experience the “peace that surpasses all understanding.” Nothing can substitute for it, and it can only be accessed by faith.

However, the world is not interested in giving, or forgiving, or joy, or peace. It is interested in *survival*, in making a buck, in comfort and convenience and “security,” and it is above all interested in making sure that *you* are bound to these same interests, because then the world has got you. You are its slave, mired in the very same futility to which the world itself has been given over ever since the Fall (*Romans 8:20*).

But *you*, my beloved brothers and sisters, you have been baptized into Christ. You have put on Christ (*Galatians 3:27*). Death has died to you, and you have died to the world, because you have been raised to life in Christ Jesus (*Romans 6:3-6*). You are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of the Most High God: “*As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, Abba, Father! So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God,*” (*Galatians 4:6-7*).

Still you, child of God, have to choose to keep your eyes wide open. You also have the choice from moment to moment to close the eyes of faith. Like a frightened child, you can choose not to see the light shining in the darkness that the darkness, nevertheless, has not overcome (*John 1:5*). The coziness of slavery can sometimes seem more attractive than the call to freedom, and comfort is much more appealing to our senses than the Cross. We may be tempted to think Aristotle was right; true freedom is hard, too hard for some of us who are just meant to be slaves.

But what this is is merely sin, the sin that so clings to us (*Hebrews 12:1*) and keeps us from advancing toward life as our goal. God, however, knows exactly what to do with sin: he forgives it, he conquers it and in the blood of Jesus he washes it away. We would do well to recall these words of encouragement from our new Holy Father, Pope Francis:

It is not easy to entrust oneself to God's mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must! "Oh, Father, if you knew my life, you would not say that to me!" "Why, what have you done?" "Oh, I am a great sinner!" "All the better! Go to Jesus: he likes you to tell him these things!" He forgets, he has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, he kisses you, he embraces you and he simply says to you: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more" (John 8:11). That is the only advice he gives you. After a month, if we are in the same situation...Let us go back to the Lord. The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving (Pope Francis, Homily at the Parish of St. Anna in the Vatican, March 17, 2013).

"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25)

When Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, Martha remonstrated with him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," (*John 11:21*). She was looking for a cure, for Lazarus' survival, as was her sister Mary. They were disappointed: Jesus had not come in time, Lazarus had died, and he was already lying several days in the tomb. But this time Jesus had something different in mind than healing. Turning to Martha, he not only calls himself "the resurrection and the life" (Martha, you may recall, already believed in the resurrection on the last day—v. 24), *he asks if she believes what he telling her*. Martha's answer is revealing: "Yes, Lord. I have *come to believe* that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world," (*John 11:27*).

"I have come to believe!" This *credo* uttered by Martha was what unleashed the power of resurrection for her brother Lazarus. The Greek original text, and the English translation given here, imply that she did not arrive at faith in Jesus in that very moment, but that she had been thinking about these things and had come to a decision about who Jesus was. Note that she did not say that she had come to believe he was the resurrection and the life, but that he was the Messiah, the Anointed One of God "who is coming into the world," the One awaited from the very foundation of human history. All that she had hoped for, indeed, all that all of humanity was hoping for, found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who *is* the resurrection and the life. In other words, Jesus did not come just to *bring* life; *he is life itself*.

Martha models for all Christians the fifth step of faith: beyond the historic fact of Jesus' rising from the dead, he is resurrection and life itself for those who believe and thus "will never die," (*John 11:26*). After the first step: to cry "I believe," and the second step: "in one God," and after the third step: "and in one Lord, Jesus Christ," and the fourth step: "On the third day, he rose again from the dead," we arrive at the fifth step: like Martha, our personal meeting with Jesus himself, the resurrection and the life, the One the world awaited to rescue it from itself and its twin Masters, evil and death.

With what joy, then, do we encounter the Lord! We have indeed encountered him; we have met him and have clothed ourselves with him, died with him and risen with him in Baptism, and with his Holy Spirit in Chrismation we have been given a down payment, a pledge of our future life that has no bounds. With what happiness do we receive him in the Holy Eucharist! With what consolation do we accept his divine forgiveness in the mystery of Confession! How happy to have our human love crowned with the love that Christ himself has for his spouse, the Church, in the sacrament of marriage! What comfort to be fed and nourished by the Word of God and guided toward the fulfillment of our destiny through the mystery of Holy Orders! What peace to have our souls massaged and our bodies healed through the mystery of mercy in Holy Anointing! What a grace it is to know, even as we are being laid to rest at the end of our earthly toil, that "whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live," (*John 11:25*), that Christ *has already given life to those in the tombs*.

It is faith that is the gateway to this peace, this ability to rejoice, and rejoice again, no matter what the world may throw at us in order to ensnare us in its vanities, no matter what wounds try to keep us from forgiving. In our poverty, we give, and in being despised, still we love. Our divine obedience to Christ's commandments is what gives us the strength to keep on fighting, keep on resisting, keep on overcoming the world, and finally to know that peace which surpasses all understanding.

The Anthem of our Resistance Movement

I have run into several stories about faith that are fairly similar. Here is one by Dick Innes, founder of ACTS International and author of an inspirational email service, "Daily Encounter:"

As everybody knows, religion in Russia was forbidden during the years of Communism. To atheistic Communists there was no God and they replaced Christian Easter Sunrise Services with Sunrise Communist Rallies, to which all people of the community were requested to attend.

I read about one such meeting where, as the sunrise rally was drawing to a close, the Communist leader asked the large gathering of some ten thousand people if there was anything anybody wanted to say. A long silence followed. Nobody moved. Finally a teenage boy came forward. As he approached the

podium, the leader warned the boy saying, “You must tell only the truth,” meaning Communist “truth.” “If you don’t, you will be shot.”

All eyes were fixed on this lad as he stood at the podium about to speak. He was flanked by soldiers, rifles pointed at his head. For several brief moments he remained silent. Then standing tall and taking a deep breath, he called into the microphone:

“Christ is risen!”

As the story goes, the exploding rifles shattered the silence of the early morning. Only one sound drowned out the crack of the rifles as the teenage boy collapsed to the floor in death. It was the resounding response of ten thousand voices shouting:

“Indeed he is risen!”

It may not be communism we are called to resist, but make no mistake: the forces of atheistic materialism are alive and well and working mightily in the United States of America, in Canada, and all around the globe. Our call is to resist all that is anti-God, anti-life, and anti-human in a world—and in a nation—that would reduce us to producers and consumers, makers and takers, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. All of these false divisions and dichotomies are engineered to keep people competing with one another in an artificially contrived state of scarcity designed by the principalities and powers of this world to keep the powerless under their control and out of God’s hands.

How many of us will be at our own version of a “sunrise rally” instead of “sunrise services?” For how many of us will work or play, alienation or depression, heedlessness or antipathy toward God or neighbor succeed in keeping from being where God wants us to be on Easter morning, namely, together with one another and with him? How many of us, enslaved in debt, dismembered by broken relationships, driven by greed, or paralyzed by fear and anxiety, will close the eyes of our faith and allow the darkness, which cannot overcome the Light, overcome us and swallow us alive?

For every *credo* there is the possibility of a *non credo*. For every cry of “I believe” there is the possibility of another cry of “I do not believe,” which, often as not, is really “I cannot believe” or “I dare not hope,” or “I will not love.” This is so because faith is always a choice—it is always a gift from God as well, but we must choose to accept it. Having accepted it, we must choose it again and again until faith itself becomes unnecessary, because it has been replaced by the certainty of seeing God face to face.

But the possibility of non-faith also exists because of the impoverished witness of the Church. When the Christian community ceases to be a movement and instead

becomes an institution, it runs the risk of losing its voice. When the Church itself is not faithful, it loses the capacity to attract believers.

How many of our parishes are attracting new believers? How many are even interested in doing so? This ought to concern us deeply, because the one and only mandate the Church has received from its Founder is to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,” (*Matthew 28:19-20a*). Worshiping, even while doubting, their vision of the risen Christ, the disciples who received this commission were able nonetheless to carry it out, because they recognized the truth that Jesus was with them “until the end of the age,” (*Matthew 28:20b*). Too many of us, on the other hand, respond to Christ’s mandate may be little more than watching idly as our parish buries our friends and family members, while never lifting a finger to draw into Christ’s fold those who are still awaiting a savior. Our response to the vision of the risen Christ may be little more than a resounding “maybe.”

I have said before and will repeat: it is useful for us to think of the Church more as a movement than as an institution. Every movement has an anthem, a song to sing to inspire its followers and keep their hearts afloat in difficult times. Our movement, too, has an anthem, the anthem of our resistance to evil and death. It is an anthem so short, but so powerful, that it can be, and indeed is, repeated many, many times as we observe what Christ has done for us:

*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death,
And bestowing life to those who are in the tombs!*

As we sing our anthem again and again this Easter season, let us be renewed in faith and in resistance to evil and death. As the forty days of Lent have begun, through repentance, our return to God, so may the forty days of Pascha complete our conversion, our turning to God in trust, in confidence, and in deep, sincere belief.

Indeed, Christ is risen, we shall nevermore be victims of corruption or slaves of death, and *this is the truth*. Beginning today, may you receive this truth with conviction and hold it gratefully in your heart. May God himself guard our hearts and minds and preserve our souls and bodies in Christ Jesus, our Liberator, our Conqueror, the One the world awaited. So let us rejoice. Again I say *rejoice!*

Yours in our beloved Redeemer,

+john michael
a sinner, bishop