

October 20, 2022

Beloved in Christ,

“Christ is in our Midst!” “He is and always will be!”

By God’s mercy, the Holy Synod of Antioch at their regular meeting which concluded on October 17, 2022, agreed to accept my retirement from the position as Metropolitan of All North America. I now greet you publicly for the last time. Recognizing that this is not a spiritual retirement, we continue to train spiritually throughout our lives for God’s pleasure comforted in the knowledge that He never wastes His creation.

The period from August 13<sup>th</sup> to the present has taken us through several significant feast days of the church. It’s not by chance that while the days were dark, full of uncertainty and confusion, simultaneously, our comfort, direction and light came from the celebration of the feasts of the Dormition, Beheading of St. John the Baptist, the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos, Elevation of the Holy Cross, and finally last Sunday, the Fathers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council coinciding with the meeting of the Holy Synod. Each of these feasts and assigned cycle of prayers offered us answers and solace. Feeling the very tangible presence of the Mother of God, our Most Holy Theotokos, these past weeks I was assured once again that she has not abandoned me having raised me from my youth and being my protection and guide throughout my life.

***“Beneath thy compassion we take refuge, O Theotokos.  
Despise not our supplications in our necessity, but deliver us from harm,  
O only pure, only blessed one.” (From Vespers of Great Lent)***

In reflecting on the past ten weeks, an overwhelming amount of information, or misinformation, had to be processed, prayerfully considered and deciphered. When evil strikes, it’s fast and furious with the goal of eliminating its target as quickly and swiftly as possible.

I have lived among you for almost 30 years. Those that know me know that I lead a busy but quiet life rarely sharing problems or burdens and carry my cross quietly. This is my way. Today as I contemplate how a father can possibly leave his children, when the need to comfort and console you is at the forefront of my mind, I find that my words are inadequate. There is only One Word for all of us, it is the Word of God.

At my enthronement as Metropolitan to the see of North America eight years ago, my address was themed *“I Shall Use This Staff”*. It was sincere, deliberate, and full of hope.

I've reflected on those promises as a means of self-examination and now wish to share them with you once again.

*I shall use this staff* entrusted today to me to promote the life of the Gospel in this American land...

*I shall use this staff* to proclaim the Gospel and to defend the sacred Canons of the Church...

*I shall use this staff* to work with the trustees of this Archdiocese with full transparency and administrative integrity in all spiritual, financial, and business matters...

*I shall use this staff* to guide our Archdiocesan organizations into a fuller achievement of our goals in Christ's service for raising up of the human person-in-community in every way...

*I shall use this staff* to continue the legacy and to widen the scope of our mission to yet other sheep who are not yet of this field...

*I shall use this staff* to proclaim the Gospel to every listening ear of the leaders of our country...

*I shall use this staff* to "quell the schisms" which afflict the church and to rid the church of any factionalism...

*I shall use this staff* to bring comfort to our suffering brothers and sisters in our Mother Countries where for 2,000 years we Antiochians lived side by side with other Christians and God-loving people of other faiths...

*I shall use this staff* to bring the spiritual, ethical, and moral authority of the church of Ss. Peter and Paul, "the first to be called Christians", to restore American society and culture through the diversity of North America...

Beloved in Christ, I firmly believe that by God's hand and your prayers, I have fulfilled my promises and more.

The sole purpose of my life and ministry are two things. First, to proclaim God's word through the Holy Sacraments, to worship, and to teach the Gospel. Second, to protect and guide the flock entrusted to me by protecting the sacred canons of the Church and its Holy Tradition. If I have failed anyone in this, know that I failed Christ first. If I have succeeded in keeping any promise, know that it was only through God's mercy and grace. Now, more worthy elders will be appointed to preach sound doctrine and to exemplify in their own lives the virtues that are expected of all Christians.

I thank God for my ministry and my time serving Him in any capacity. I have discovered beauty beyond my imagination, the creativity of our people, hospitality which is only known to the Orthodox, and a devoted faith, perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice to achieving goals which will please God. Our ministries are blossoming, our church is

progressing, the spiritual infrastructure is strong. We are feeding, we are clothing, we are comforting, and the future looks promising.

I thank God also for the temptations which have come to me these past weeks that I might gain a closeness to Him. The world of men will fall, and all will come to darkness, but we will never lose hope as our life is steeped in the Holy Resurrection and our salvation comes from God who *“chastens the ones He loves”* (Hebrews 12:6), which we accept with joy. While I have been judged, mine is not to judge lest I anger the God without whom I cannot live.

To my beloved clergy, know that I have loved you dearly and have sacrificed everything within my power for your spiritual edification and growth in liturgical life. I beseech you to not rush to any judgement. We speak of justice, yet we accuse. We speak of kindness, yet we hurt others. We speak of freedom, yet we impose ourselves. We speak of rights but not of sacrifice. We preach of change, but we ourselves don't change. We speak our mind freely, but don't contemplate the word of God sufficiently. We're quick to condemn but fail to condemn ourselves. *“Do not judge any mortal being lest the Lord should dismiss your prayers.”* (St. Anthony the Great). Not judging will bring salvation with no effort. Protect the sanctity of your priesthood with your life and protect the church which has given you that life. *“Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness and let thy saints shout for joy.”* (Psalm 132:9)

Beloved in Christ, every parent rejoices to see their children prosper, to know God's word and to trust Him first in all things. To the youth and young adults of this Archdiocese, know that you are loved, that you belong and that you matter. I do not consider you just the future of the church, I consider you the present. You are my heart and you have brought me nothing but pure joy. Serving you and watching you mature in the faith through various ministries has been the crown of my ministry. As we have shared during our many retreats, talks, and pilgrimages, remember that the world doesn't seek God's truth, it seeks its own truth. The world chooses darkness over light, chaos over order, and self-will over God's will. My prayer for you will never stop and I urge you to keep God's commandments, guard your virtue, unite yourselves to Christ through the Holy Sacraments and serve His Holy church all the days of your life.

Now the time has come for greater reflection and solitude although the center of my life has always been in serving. While our hearts will take time to settle, we know there is healing ahead through love and forgiveness in Christ without Whom our lives are empty.

My hope is that you will show yourselves to be faithful servants of Christ and His holy church and grateful for all our blessings. Let us never stop living the life we've been

gifted, renewing ourselves, examining ourselves, fasting, praying, repenting, confessing, partaking of the sacraments. and when we fall, beginning again.

I will rejoice in the good news I hear of your continued support of the church as well as of your personal growth in our beloved faith. I will be comforted in knowing that our time together was spent honoring the Holy Tradition of the church which we have inherited and that you will endeavor to preserve it safe, clean and without blemish. Work hard in your ministries and grow, show yourselves to be worthy of our faith, prove yourselves to be soldiers of Christ ready to conquer any adversity which comes your way.

I beseech you to extend the same love, devotion, and hospitality to the next Metropolitan as you did to me. Pray that the church hears God's will for us and makes sober decisions not tainted by any influence. Keep our Holy Church, His Beatitude, Patriarch John X, the Holy Synod, our Hierarchs, the Board of Trustees and all our ministries in your prayers. We will never be apart if we remember each other in our prayers. We are one church, one cup and one family in Christ.

Through the prayers of our Most Holy Theotokos, our intercessor before her Son and our God, and of all the saints, may God have mercy on us and save us.

**+JOSEPH**

Retired Archbishop of New York and  
Metropolitan of All North America