

2023 Archpastoral Letter for Pascha

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!

On that first Easter morning two thousand years ago, the disciples of Jesus were huddled in an upper room filled with apprehension and confusion. They had experienced the death of one they believed was the promised Messiah. Their hopes seemed dashed by His crucifixion, and they wondered whether they too were endangered.

Mary Magdalene and some other women remembered their duty to the dead, so they proceeded to the tomb with oil and spices to anoint the body of their Lord. When they arrived at the tomb, they found – well, nothing! An angelic figure asked them why they sought the living One among the dead. He had been raised up and would go before them to Galilee.

The disciples at first had some difficulty understanding this message and even had some confusion when the risen Lord appeared before them; but their eyes and hearts were opened when Jesus spoke their name, ate with them, and breathed over them the gift of peace. They were infused with new courage and enthusiasm and, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, became powerful proclaimers of the message of new life and hope.

We must not look for our meaning and future among the dead. As we rejoice in the power of the resurrection, we realize that the victory of Christ over sin and death can also be our victory. Over all that could threaten our human dignity the power of the risen Lord has triumphed. The sanctity of all life has been affirmed, and we face our future as ones called to everlasting life. We know the message and the commandments of Christ. If with live them with faith and conviction, we share the very life of Christ forever. No wonder that Saint Paul told his listeners: “Rejoice always, again I say rejoice!”

Realizing the enormity of what transpired more than 2,000 years ago in the history of people and in the life of each person, these days have been marked by the most solemn celebrations calling believers to a time of turning to God with profound gratitude and appreciation for all that has been done for us. Thus, the Paschal greeting of “Christ is Risen!” that we give to one another for the next forty days captures the significance of the occasion, and event which changed the world forever.

We proclaim “Christ is Risen!” year after year and well we should, given what God has done and continues to do for us, and for all people. But it should never become routine or mechanical in its delivery. Nor are any two years the same as events happening around us.

Thus, the Paschal message and greeting may well be expanded. For example, when there have been wars people at Easter have included thoughts about peace with the usual Easter sentiments, which in fact Jesus spoke of that first Easter day when He greeted His disciples with "Peace be with you."

In our own Archdiocese, recent events have made this Pascha different from others. For almost two years now, we have been subjected to trials and tribulations that have tested the faith of us all. These hardships and burdens added to everything we have endured over the years, have been difficult for many of our people to shoulder. Some are saddened, others cannot believe what has happened or why, and others are angry.

Without going into the specifics of each situation, it is essential for all of us, as members of the household of faith which the Italo-Greek Orthodox Archdiocese is, to celebrate this Pascha together. It is also important for us as we celebrate this Pascha to strive to realize the intent of Jesus' prayer the night before He suffered and died--"I pray for those who believe in Me that they may all be one, as you Father, are in Me and I in you."

For just as the Apostles were given the gift of surprise on Easter morning when they did not find Christ in the tomb, so are we often surprised that the difficult situations we face often bring with them joyful outcomes of which we were not expecting.

Pascha reminds us that our suffering is not in vain - that there is life after death. Pascha is about God's love for all of us and must be about all of us united in faith, with our hurts and tears, our disappointments and hopes, striving to be the one body Jesus called us to be.

As God's People in the Italo-Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of the Americas and Canada may we all be one - one with God and one with one another this Pascha, forever united in Pascha Faith.

Cristu arrivisciutu esti! Pibbiru arrivisciutu esti!
Cristo e Risorto! E veramente Risorto!
Christos Anesti! Alithos Anesti!

Yours in the Risen Lord,
+Archbishop Stephen