

THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

*Homily Delivered by Metropolitan Tikhon
Saint Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral
Brooklyn, New York
March 5, 2017*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We gather this evening to celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy and to pray together at this peaceful yet glorious Pan-Orthodox Vespers service with the wonderful antiphonal singing by the Spirit of Orthodoxy choir and the Cathedral cantors. Especially in North America, this day has become a day for Orthodox Christians to come together with thanksgiving to Almighty God in order to celebrate our unity and our common joy at the restoration of the holy icons. I am grateful to His Eminence, Metropolitan Joseph, the Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of All North America for the Antiochian Archdiocese, and a dear friend in Christ, for his great kindness in inviting me to be with you this evening.

The friendship and brotherhood between the Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese is long-standing and deep, and it is wonderful to be here this evening, along with His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, from the Orthodox Church in America's diocese of New York and New Jersey, and His Grace, Bishop John, from the Antiochian Diocese of Worcester, in this beautiful Cathedral, dedicated to Saint Nicholas, the Wonderworker. I am sure I speak for all of us in expressing thanks to the Dean, Fr. Thomas Zain, and the clergy, leadership and faithful of this community, for their wonderful hospitality this evening.

It was a great honor for me to accept Sayidna Joseph's invitation to offer some words to you this evening, and it is by his prayers, and those of all of you who have gathered from the local Orthodox Churches in this area, that I offer these humble reflections on this first Sunday of the Great Fast. On the very first day of Great Lent, the Holy Orthodox Church prayed the following hymn at Vespers: "Let us set out with joy upon the season

of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit may we persevere with love, and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Pascha.”¹

Today, we are given a foretaste of these sights; we are given a glimpse of the Resurrection even as we enter into the second week of the Fast, even as we complete one of the most intense weeks of our liturgical and spiritual lives. All Orthodox Christians throughout the world can tell that the First Week of Great Lent is upon them because we all begin to fast a little more, to pray a little more attentively and to attend a few more services such as the Great Canon of Saint Andrew and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. But this is more than an external change in our behavior and habits. It is an inner transformation that has the potential to affect the culture around us, as it did during the time of St Gregory Palamas. In one of his homilies, offered during the First Week of Lent, he says:

*For the last two weeks our city was given over to gluttony and lack of self-restraint, and straight away we had troubles, shouting, fights, disturbances, shameless songs and obscene laughter. But this week when the fast came it made everything more honourable. It took us away from frivolity's expensive cares, stopped us toiling for the sake of our useless stomachs, set us instead to works of repentance and persuaded us not to labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life.*²

Saint Gregory then describes the atmosphere that now covers the city of Thessalonica, when the shouting, yelling and worldly singing have stopped, when the smell of roasting meat is no longer filling the air, and instead people are fasting, spending their time in Church, and tearfully praying and singing psalms. Although this salutary change may not take place in cities such as New York, nevertheless, we, as Orthodox Christians, have gone through one week of purification and prayer, not as ends in themselves, but as means to attain the resurrection, which awaits us at the end of the forty days.

¹ Forgiveness Sunday Vespers, *Lord I have cried...* Tone 2 Sticheron.

² Saint Gregory Palamas, *Homilies*, Mount Tabor Publishing, 2009, page 47.

But even after one week, the Church offers us a taste of that Paschal joy. Today's commemoration, the restoration of the veneration of the holy icons, is truly a resurrectional feast, a paschal celebration and a source of encouragement for us in our Lenten struggles. The Sunday of Orthodoxy, as many of us know, refers specifically to the historical events of the year 843, at which time the veneration of icons was restored in the Holy Church. The great event that we celebrate today was not a political victory; it was not simply the victory of one party, the iconophiles (or icon-lovers) over another party, the iconoclasts (or icon-smashers). Rather, it was a re-affirmation of the eternal victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over death and corruption. Hence, today's feast is a proclamation of the victory of Pascha and of the reality of the resurrection in our lives and this is an important message for us to remember and to share with the world around us.

One of the clearest and most effective ways in which this victory is revealed is through the icons of the saints, of the Mother of God and, above all, through the icon of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is so, not simply because the icons offer us images of the resurrection and depictions of Christ and His miracles, but because those images and those depictions introduce us, in the most direct way, into the reality and the meaning of the Incarnation, that is, the reality and the meaning of Christ's economy of salvation. This means nothing less than the possibility for human beings to participate by grace in the Divine Life of the Holy Trinity. Through the holy icons of the saints, wherein we see the ancient glory and divine beauty of man restored, just as we see the divine glory of the Incarnate Word of God in the icons of our Savior.

The holy icons, and the theology they convey to us, are truly a gift of the Incarnation. As the Kontakion for today's feast states (which we sang this morning at the Divine Liturgy), it is our very salvation that is depicted in the holy icons: "The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed, taking flesh from thee, O Theotokos, and He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory, filling it with the divine beauty. This our salvation we confess in deed and word, and we depict it in the holy icons." So we are not simply celebrating the ability of humans to iconographically portray Christ and the

saints, we are celebrating our very salvation, which is the possibility for each of us to have our sullied image restored to its ancient glory.

Today, I would like to illustrate this by sharing an account of two particular saints who can help us, in our own particular context, to receive this great gift of salvation into our own lives. When I speak of our own context, I am speaking in general about our presence here as Orthodox Christians in North America; but I am also speaking about this particular cathedral of Saint Nicholas, in which we are gathered for prayer this evening; and the two saints I would like to speak about this evening are directly and historically connected to this place. Their names are well-known to you: Saint Raphael, Bishop of Brooklyn and founder of this Cathedral and Saint Tikhon, the Patriarch of Moscow and Enlightener of North America; but the particular close relationship that they had with each other and their importance for the life of Orthodox Christianity in North America may not be so well known. When we speak about people in the past, we often lose sight of their close connection to us. But since we are gathered here in the Cathedral of St Nicholas, I thought it would be helpful for us to reflect on some history that this place shares with both of these great North American saints.

Although this present building was not acquired until 1920, the community of St Nicholas began to take shape in 1895, when, at the time, Archimandrite Raphael (Hawaweeny) arrived to care for the Syro-Arab (Antiochian) clergy and faithful. A few years later, in 1898, the bishop Tikhon (Bellavin) arrived to serve the North American Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church. This year, 2017, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of St Tikhon's election as Patriarch of Moscow. But before his service as Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, St Tikhon served as Archbishop of the North American Mission from 1898 to 1907, which was a time of explosive growth for Orthodoxy. In the early 1890's, St Alexis (Toth) had started a movement among Eastern Catholics (the so-called Uniates) that eventually brought a hundred parishes and thousands of faithful from Austro-Hungary back into the fold of the Orthodox Church. At the same time thousands of new immigrants poured into the United States, many of them Orthodox from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. As they set up communities

many of them turned to Archbishop Tikhon (and his predecessors) for episcopal oversight.

So when St Tikhon arrived in the United States on December 12, 1898 he found a vibrant and ethnically mixed community of Orthodox that came to greet him as he got off the boat in Manhattan, and it was Russian and Arabic that dominated his first days in New York. The senior Orthodox priest in New York at the time was Archimandrite Raphael Hawaweeny, who therefore had a leading role in greeting the new bishop, leading him from place to place and from service to service. During the next few days, Archbishop Tikhon encountered two other leading clergy, who in addition to Fr Raphael, would in later years be canonized as saints: Fr. Alexis (Toth), whom I mentioned earlier, and Fr Alexander Hotovitzky—who built the Russian Orthodox St Nicholas Cathedral on 97th Street and was later martyred in the Soviet *Gulag* under Stalin.

I would like to offer you some of the flavor of those days when St Tikhon and St Raphael first encountered each other in New York, because they give us some sense even then of the unity Orthodoxy shared at that tumultuous time. Many of the details of those days in 1898 were reported in *The American Orthodox Messenger* of January 13th, 1899. The *Messenger*, much like *The Word* magazine, which was started by St Raphael in those years, was intended to provide theological instruction and news to the Orthodox faithful. At that time, *The American Orthodox Messenger* was edited by St. Alexander Hotovitzky, and he reported in detail on St *Tikhon's* arrival on December 12, 1898. There had been some disappointment because the ship “Champagne” crossing the Atlantic from France had been kept in quarantine overnight. Organizers of the welcome had forgotten about this detail so some of the faithful who had come from afar had to return home without seeing Archbishop Tikhon. But this was by God’s providence — though unremarked by those there at the time — since the Archbishop’s arrival on American soil was the morning of December 13th, 1898, the day that St Herman of Alaska is celebrated as the first saint of North America, his traditional day of repose in 1836.

The welcome at the dock in Manhattan included crowds of Russian and Arabic speaking faithful, the Russian General Consul, Fr Raphael and the assistant priest of the Antiochian parish, Fr Ephrem, as well as many others. One Antiochian parishioner recited a welcoming poem in Arabic, while St Raphael acted as interpreter. He was fluent in Russian, having lived in Russia and taught there for a number of years at the Kazan Academy.

Fr Raphael accompanied St Tikhon to St Nicholas church (which was then located at 323 Second Avenue in Manhattan, between 18th and 19th Street) where Fr Alexander Hotovitzky greeted him with joyful but also sobering words about the challenges the new archbishop would face in America, including pressure on the faithful in Alaska and hatred from the Uniates: *O Vladyka, your Eminence, there are many wild branches in this vineyard. Insincerity, stubbornness, capricious children unused to a father's affectionate oversight...unbelief lurks in the hearts of people, and many of our brothers have fallen away under the weight of need and the seductions of surrounding non-Orthodox society.*

Archbishop Tikhon thanked everyone for their kindness and said that his sincere and most heartfelt prayer at this moment is the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come!" He went on:

What better missionary goal is there than this? And God has already shown his great mercy to America in no small measure. The Kingdom of God has already arrived here: the building of Orthodox work has already begun and is gradually strengthening and expanding. A good feeling is taking root among the widely dispersed members of the church here. And the surroundings to which divine Providence has brought us to carry out our life and work are not hostile to our high goal.

Americans are reputed to be a religious people; America is a country of religious tolerance; the very first pioneers came here to protect their treasure—their abiding religious convictions for which they had been persecuted in the old world; and even now our own brothers by blood and faith have fled here from the old world where they are oppressed under the yoke of submission to the pope and to Rome...

May God's Kingdom come! May it settle also in our own hearts: may the inner forces of our spirit go out to meet the mercy of God. When we are at peace with God, at peace with ourselves and our conscience, and at peace with our neighbors it is easy to overcome whatever troubles the enemy of the Christian puts in front of us in this missionary arena, on the way to fulfilling our high calling.

Although the particular challenges are different, Saint Tikhon's words about both the difficulties and the opportunities facing the Church are an encouragement to us today. Archimandrite Raphael then greeted Archbishop Tikhon on behalf of his Syro-Arab flock with the following words:

All twenty-thousand of the Antiochian [Syro-Arab] colony both in New York and throughout North America together with me congratulate your Eminence, our new spiritual father and Archpastor on your successful arrival and dare to ask your Eminence one request only, that you would continue to show all of us Orthodox Antiochians [Syro-Arabs] who live within your God-protected diocese the same motherly love, the same fatherly care, the same archpastoral attentiveness that your Eminence's predecessor showed us [this was Archbishop Nicholas (Ziorov), 1891-98.]

And we, from our side, recalling the words of the Apostle, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls" (Heb 13:17) not only promise to the Holy Synod and Your Eminence complete submission and filial obedience to all your fatherly instructions and archpastoral commands, but will wholeheartedly devote ourselves from now on to your archpastoral care and blessing. May our Lord Jesus Christ, through the prayers of his saints, Nicholas of Myra in Lycia the Wonderworker and St Tikhon of Zadonsk, help your Eminence in your new archpastoral service for the benefit of the Orthodox Church and the flowering of the Orthodox faith in this is new world. Amen.

The *Messenger* goes on to speak of the pan-Orthodox environment that existed in those days:

Thanking Fr Raphael for these kind words, Archbishop Tikhon replied that all the members of his Orthodox flock are dear to him, and that he will be equally good-willed towards all Orthodox, whatever their national background. Orthodoxy is catholic. If one is in Russia, he said, one doesn't experience this Orthodox catholicity, since all the Orthodox there are Russians. But here, outside the borders of Russia, where under the one roof of an Orthodox church are gathered together Russians, and Greeks and Arabs and others, the understanding of the catholicity of Orthodoxy is completely tangible. And

therefore, Vladyka promised to do everything possible to assist the Antiochians [Syro-Arabs.]

Two days later, Saint Tikhon went to celebrate the divine liturgy at the little Antiochian church of St Nicholas that Fr Raphael organized when he first arrived in 1895, a loft at 77 Washington Street in lower Manhattan, the predecessor of this cathedral to which Fr Raphael and his flock moved in 1902, and which became his episcopal cathedral when St Tikhon made him his vicar bishop in 1904.

The loft-church on Washington Street was packed not only with Antiochians but with Russians and many Americans. In his welcoming words, Fr Raphael noted the small size of the church and the struggling condition of the immigrant parish, so seemingly out of place hosting such an exalted guest as the new Archbishop from Russia. *Nevertheless, said Fr Raphael, the children of this poor church have such a heart, which thanks to their sincere love as sons and thanks to their genuine devotion and gratitude to their benefactors, can boldly welcome into their midst your Eminence, our loving father and all-merciful Archpastor.*

Archbishop Tikhon in reply said that a generous inner disposition and warm feelings are always higher and more valuable, no matter how rich the external conditions. And I think that we can genuinely say that today, almost 120 years after the events that I am recounting, we have the same experience. Even though our external and even our ecclesiastical circumstances may have changed since 1898, nevertheless, our existence as Orthodox Christians of many different backgrounds, our shared apostolic work and our participation in the catholicity of the Church, remain strong and the spirit of mutual support and love among the clergy and faithful is the same as that which must have been experienced in those days.

At the end of the Liturgy Fr Raphael spoke to his community in Arabic (the *Messenger* printed his full remarks in Russian translation) and expressed gratitude to the Russian Church for providing pastors to care for all the Orthodox in America of all backgrounds who have been scattered across North America —Russians, Slavs, Syro-Arabs and

Greeks. And in the spirit of the Apostle Paul who exhorted his communities to pray for those in authority he asked them to pray for Tsar Nicholas II. He also asked them to pray for the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamida, under whose rule most of the Orthodox Arabs had lived, asking God to place his kingdom on a foundation of wisdom, mercy and justice, so that all his subjects might live quiet and peaceful lives in all piety and purity. Finally, he said, *“so that our prayers may be complete, we Syro-Arabs, living within the borders of the United States must always pray for the highest governing authority of this country, the honorable President of the United States, Mr McKinley and all his cabinet ministers and counselors, proclaiming with all our heart: Many years!*

We live in a different civic and cultural context, but perhaps these are not so different after all. We continue to pray for the highest governing authorities of this country; we also sorrowfully bear witness to great sufferings throughout a world that is ravaged by war, persecution and terrorism, and continue to pray to God that we might live quiet and peaceful lives in our families, communities and country. And we continue to gather as bishops, clergy and faithful on a pan-Orthodox level, including at the very same locations, as we find ourselves tonight at St. Nicholas Cathedral.

As we celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and reflect upon the blessings and struggles of the past, let us be inspired by the true icons of the Kingdom, St Tikhon and St Raphael, who remind us to be grateful to our merciful God for the gift of one another and for the freedom to witness to the Orthodox Faith, which has been proclaimed in North America for more than two hundred years. When the Russian Orthodox missionary monks arrived in Alaska from Valaam Monastery in 1794, the seeds of Orthodox witness were planted on this continent. These seeds have grown over the decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Descendants of the Alaskan native peoples are today faithful Orthodox Christians. The immigrant communities of Orthodox people from the Middle East, the Balkans and Eastern Europe are now Americans. The numerous converts to Orthodoxy are a major presence in our Churches, with many serving as bishops, priests and deacons. We see Orthodox dioceses and parishes, monasteries and theological schools, organizations and agencies for education and charity, media ministries, prison

ministries and campus ministries, as well as the publication of books and journals for the edification of Orthodox Christians and for outreach to all Americans.

By God's grace, all of these accomplishments have been achieved through the various Orthodox Churches in North America and by the dedication and initiative of Orthodox Christian men and women of vision. We are grateful for what has been accomplished and are also mindful of the task still before us, with all its challenges and obstacles.

Our proclamation of the Orthodox Faith must give priority to the proclamation of the Good News of Christ. What we are given in the treasury of the Orthodox Faith is not intended to be an end in itself, but rather as a witness to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This is true about the holy icons, which are not ends in themselves but windows into the Kingdom of God. This is true about Orthodox theology, which is not an end in itself but rather a guide to communion with God. Our faith, our icons, our theology, all the gifts we have been given as a great treasury, are means for us to acquire a new and iconic way of seeing and of living.

Christianity is about movement and vision ("come and see" as we heard in today's Gospel), movement and vision that are not limited to the physical realm or in the confines of the mind, but rather take our hearts, which have been overshadowed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, on the journey that introduces us into the heavenly kingdom. We make this journey in the place that we have been planted and in the community we are a part of, but our goal should be to persevere and support one another on our common journey towards the heavenly kingdom, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.