

Message of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Monastic Assembly in the United States

To the Most Reverend Archbishop of America Elpidophoros, most-honorable Exarch of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, beloved brother in the Holy Spirit and co-celebrant of our modesty, grace to your eminence and peace from God.

Every attempt to promote Orthodox spiritual culture is a good and admirable work. Monasticism is a most precious component of our Orthodox tradition. It is the powerful incarnation and expression of the ascetic spirit of the Church, and of the eschatological fervor of Her life. Monastics personify limitless and boundless dedication to God, and to the observance of His salvific commandments; ceaseless prayer; self-surpassing and self-sacrifice; severance of their own will; humility and obedience; lack of possessions, and the life of purity; sacrificial service; respect towards the “very good” creation of God and the uninterrupted care for its protection; the unquenchable desire for eternity, and the certain hope of the Kingdom—of a world where God will “wipe away every tear from the eyes of men,” where “there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev. 21:4–5).

Monasticism “belongs to the heart of the Church.” It is, as has been said most appropriately, “the fruit of the ascetic ideal of the entire Church, because it is not a movement beyond or above the Church, but flesh from Her flesh and Her pride.” In Orthodoxy, asceticism is not a personal achievement, but an ecclesiastical virtue that is associated with the eucharistic identity of the Church. In the sacred monasteries there is preserved the truth of the “eucharistic fulfillment” of the Church, which is unbreakably connected with the eschatological character and orientation of ecclesiastical life. The monk is the eucharistic and “truly eschatological” believer, whose life revolves around “asceticism and the Eucharist.” The coming together of all the monastics in the *Catholicon*, the all-holy center of the monastery, is the culmination of monastic life. It is characteristic that the Divine Eucharist and monasticism served and serve as “eschatological antibodies,” on account of which the Orthodox Church avoided becoming secularized, and preserves to this day Her tradition and unique identity.

It is particularly significant that, within our secularized communities, the holy monasteries constitute a center of attraction, a place of consolation and “healing of the pains of the heart,” and a gate of heaven. Not one of the pilgrims and visitors who come to the monasteries depart without being deeply moved to their core, without having experienced an internal rebirth, without many of their worldly convictions having been shaken. It is not by chance that many of these visitors come to comprehend that the essence of monastic life and withdrawal from the world is the unadulterated witness “concerning the hope within us,” freedom in Christ and according to Christ, and the living of its eschatological dimensions. It is revealed to them that the authentic ascetic life is a fountain of internal freedom and an alternative offering of life, in opposition to the blissful self-gratification that constitutes the standard for innumerable people.

Orthodox monks and nuns knock at the gate of the Kingdom with persistence and patience, with unshakeable certainty that, according to the Lord's words, "each one who asks receives, and he who seeks shall find, and to the one who knocks it shall be opened" (Mt. 7:8). They remind us of the "one thing needed" (Lk. 10:42); to "seek the things on high, ... care for that which is above, not for the things of the world" (Col. 3:1–2); the principle of relinquishing one's "individual rights" in the name of love; and the limits of the worldly "unethical ethics," which are fed by the cold words, "what is mine and what is yours."

As the ever-memorable Metropolitan of Stavropolis and Dean of the Holy Theological School of Halki, Maximos Repanellis, stated, the monk's greatest offering to society is that he offers himself completely to God. This self-offering, which constitutes the core of monastic identity, was and continues to be an inexhaustible fountain of vigor and godly zeal, creating an exalted culture responsible for the miracles of art that gives glory to God, of iconography, of miniature carvings, of hymnography, of psalmody, and of church architecture. The genuine monk does not consider any of this to be his own personal achievement. Everything is a gift of divine philanthropy, a grace and endowment of the Triune God.

All of these God-given, blessed, modest and righteous attributes, constitute monasticism's challenge and invitation to modern civilization and societies. Orthodox monasteries express Christian authenticity, what is needed from an Orthodox concerning man and his eternal destiny, within the pluralistic, technocratic, and economically centered world of our age. Professor George Manzarides correctly emphasizes that, "a living Christian Church without monasticism is, particularly in our modern secular society, inconceivable." In this spirit, I encourage you, holy brother, to support the development of Orthodox monasticism in your large country, so it may serve as a witness for the "cultivation of the person," of the love that "seeks not its own," and of the ascetic, eucharistic, and eschatological spirit of our blessed Orthodox Faith.

Accordingly, we extend to your beloved eminence, to the most reverend and God-loving brother bishops, to the rest of the God-loving reverend clergy, to the monks and the nuns, and to the pious faithful of the Holy Archdiocese of America, wholehearted blessings upon the dawning of the new ecclesiastical year. I congratulate you once again on your inspired initiative in organizing the present monastic assembly, and we bestow upon its participants our Patriarchal blessings, invoking upon all of you the grace and mercy of the God of love.

September 12, 2019

Your beloved brother in Christ,

Bartholomew of Constantinople