

VIRTUE RAISES UP A NATION

—An appeal to the Greek nation by Elder Philotheos Zervakos—

We are in great danger! Is there any solution? All of us, except for certain people who are completely insensitive, sense the danger at hand. We ask ourselves and others: How and with what way can we avoid the impending danger? How can we be saved? In face of the danger, the [Greek] government turned to the powerful rulers of the earth, i.e. our allies, hoping for salvation. However, difficulties, adversities, sorrows, and distress are increasing, and up until today there is no hope of deliverance by the rulers of the earth. The prophet and king David very correctly states in his 145th psalm, **"Do not hope in rulers and in the sons of men, in whom there is no salvation."** (Ps. 145:3).

If the government and we the Greek citizens desire our salvation, we will find it only through repentance and our return to God, from Whom we have distanced ourselves. The venerable and holy Synod of the Church of Greece, also sensing the danger, has appointed through an encyclical for supplications and petitions to be sent up toward God and His most-pure Mother, the unfailing protectress of Christians, and the hope and salvation of sinners, within our sacred churches. But is this enough to save us? Does it suffice for a small number of women—and even fewer men—to attend these supplicatory services, while tens of thousands of Greek Orthodox Christians blaspheme the name of God and His All-Holy Mother, hasten with inexhaustible desire and great eagerness to shows, movie-theaters, bars, pubs, and stay up all night in prodigality and debauchery, gambling, drinking, dancing, and partying? No! Not at all! My beloved Greek Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters: The difficulties we are experiencing today have resulted because of us. We alone have brought these hardships upon ourselves and our nation. Our many sins have evoked our good, compassionate, and merciful God to wrath, anger, and indignation, as the Apostle Paul attests: **"Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, [will come] upon every soul of man that doeth evil ..."** (Rom. 2:9).

The Apostle Paul, the mouth of Christ, when writing to the Colossians exhorts them in the following manner: **"Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. For through such things the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience"** (Col. 3:5-6). Passion and evil desire refers to every sin:

pride, jealousy, resentment, slander, criticism, condemnation, lie, oaths, etc. Christians must avoid all these evils as well as greed, because on account of such sins the wrath of God comes upon people who do not conform, that is, who do not obey God's orders, law, and commandments. In his Epistle to the Hebrews, the same Apostle writes the following: **"Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense. How then shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Heb. 2:2-3).**

But is it possible for God, Who is compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and plenteous in mercy, to punish us? **"Not according to our iniquities hath He dealt with us, neither according to our sins hath He rewarded us" (Ps. 102:9).** **"God is a judge who is righteous, strong, and patient, and He does not inflict wrath every day" (Ps. 7:12),** states the prophet and king David. Yes, He is compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and plenteous in mercy; however, He is also just. As a compassionate and merciful God, He puts up with us and does not punish us, awaiting for our repentance and return [to Him]. As a just God, however, He punishes us when we do not repent. The same prophet David declares, **"If you do not return, He shall polish His sword. He has stretched His bow and made it ready. He has prepared the instruments of death; He has prepared his arrows for them who are being burned" (Ps. 7:12),** that is, for insubordinate, sinful people [who have evil desires burning inside themselves]. **"Behold, they who distance themselves from Thee (i.e., from God) will perish" (Ps. 72:27).**

Swords, arrows, instruments of death, and darts are the various forms of discipline that God uses to punish and discipline sinful people, in order to help them repent and return. However, when they do not repent and return—but on the contrary scorn Him—then He disciplines them with greater (sometimes even eternal) punishments, as the Apostle Paul testifies: **"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance to your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:4-5).** Our Lord Jesus Christ similarly says the following in His Gospel: **"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3).**

Sin darkens man's mind and gradually hardens his heart to the point where he no longer hears, even though he can hear. Thus he considers what is sweet as bitter, and that which is bitter as sweet. He regards the

light as darkness, and darkness as light. He calls the truth a lie, and falsehood the truth. He labels virtue as an evil, and evil as virtue. This is why I am reluctant to speak about repentance, fearing that my words may fall on deaf ears. However, I hear God instructing the Prophet Ezekiel in the following manner, when the Jewish nation deviated from the straight path: **“If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, that person was taken away on account of his transgressions; however, his blood I shall require at the watchman’s hand” (Ezk. 33:6).** God spoke similarly to the Prophet Isaiah: **“Cry aloud with strength, and spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet and declare to My people their sins, and to the house of Jacob their lawlessness” (Is. 58:1).**

When I, the sinful and unworthy one, read these verses, I decided to declare the sins of the Greek nation and the clergy, urging everyone—and above all, myself (because I am more sinful than anyone else)—to repent and return to God, lest the Lord holds me accountable if, as a spiritual father and priest of the Most-High, I remain silent now that I see the sword coming. If we want to escape the impending danger that threatens to destroy us, if we want to save ourselves, then we all have to repent—everyone! From the king to the very last citizen, from the sergeant to the lowest ranking soldier, from the patriarch down to the last monk; because all of us are sinful, insubordinate, and transgressors. The leaders of our nation must repent first: ministers, congressmen, sergeants, officers, and everyone who holds a high-ranking position. Because, with the exception of a few, most of these people are impious, unbelievers, and blasphemers. They are embarrassed to make the sign of the venerable cross, but they are not ashamed to bear other symbols on their apparel. Some of them are embarrassed to pray; I doubt if they know the Nicene Creed or even the Lord’s Prayer. Some of them are embarrassed to attend church on Sundays and other feast days. They show up in church only when there is a function or a funeral of their friend, relative, or other official; however, they frequently turn up at theatres, cinemas, dances, parties, and they are not embarrassed to stay awake all night in casinos. Moreover, some of them, who have left their lawful spouses, are not embarrassed to live unlawfully with other women outside of wedlock.

It is to all these people whom I beseech, admonish, exhort, and advise to recognize their sins, to despise their sins, to repent and to return to God from Whom they have distanced themselves; to desist from the hatred and the differences that exists between them, and to love God; to acquire

brotherly love, a spirit of co-operation and understanding, humility, love, peace, and unity; to collaborate for the well being and prosperity of our sweet nation, once they themselves become models and good examples for the people, because according to the philosophical maxim: “the citizens love to become like their rulers.”

It is necessary for all of the Church leaders who transgress the commandments of God to repent. Because some of them, instead of being a light as they have been directed by the first Archpriest and Great Shepherd Christ, the leader and founder of our faith, have become the cause of divisions amongst the Christian faithful. In this manner, once unity is restored, the Church must turn her attention to the urgent and serious matters that she is called to remedy during this difficult time that the world and especially our nation is facing. Specifically, she should help reconcile and restore peace, unity, and love amongst the Greek people, whom the political leaders have divided into many parties. Additionally, she should undertake a struggle against blasphemy, atheism, the enemies of the Church, against the immodest manner in which women dress, against immorality and licentiousness, against depravity, greed, avarice, dishonesty, slander, and the many other evils that exist.

Moreover, all the clergy as well as the laypeople, both men and women, both old and young, must repent. They must cease from their pride, jealousy, animosity, hatred, greed, avarice, stealing, injustice, lies, slander, criticism, condemnation, drunkenness, lewdness, and prodigality.

Women must stop smoking, gambling, painting their faces, their nails, and their lips, and living extravagantly. Married couples must stop avoiding to have children, stop having abortions and murdering babies, which they throw on the streets, to the dogs, in the ocean, or even bury in the ground. They must avoid excessive spending, in order to offer their extra money to people who are suffering, in order to give to orphans, widows, and the needy.

The majority of priests and monks must put an end to negligence, laziness, and their other omissions, and henceforth live worthily of their calling, and in accordance to God's law. Men must put an end to the divisions, enmity, and quarreling.

All of us, I repeat, must sincerely repent. We must ask for forgiveness from our Most-High God and Heavenly Father. We must become united with the bonds of love, peace, and harmony. Only then will we and our nation be saved from the danger.

Let us return to our merciful God and Father with true repentance, with sighs and tears. “Thus says the Lord your God, ‘Turn to Me with all your

heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils” (Joel 2:12-13). “Let the ungodly man abandon his ways, and the lawless man his counsels; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; for He shall forgive your sins abundantly” (Is. 55:7). “As I live, thus says the Lord: I do not will the death of the ungodly man, so he may return and live” (Ezk. 33:11).

Let us repent genuinely, and let us return to our compassionate Father like the prodigal son, and let us exclaim as he did: “Father, we have sinned against Heaven and before You” (Lk. 15:18). Let us admit, like the three youths who were thrown into the furnace but preserved by God’s divine power: “Blessed are You and praiseworthy, O Lord, the God of our fathers. And praised and glorified is Your name unto the ages. For You are righteous in all that You did to us ... Because in truth and judgment You did all these things on account of our sins. For we sinned and acted lawlessly to depart from You. We sinned in every way and did not obey Your commandments. Neither did we listen, or keep [Your commandments] or do as You commanded, so that things may be good for us” (Dan. 3:26-27).

Let us repent as the Ninevites. After hearing from the prophet Jonah that they were about to be destroyed, they repented, and their king proclaimed repentance to his people: “Let not the men, cattle, oxen, or sheep taste anything, eat or drink water.’ So the men and the cattle were clothed with sackcloth, and they cried out fervently to God; and they each turned back from their evil ways and from the wrongdoings of their hands, saying, ‘Who knows if God shall have a change of heart and turn from His fierce anger, that we should not perish?’ And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil ways, and God had a change of heart about the evil which He said He would do to them, and He did not do it” (Jon. 3:7-10). The citizens of Nineveh repented and they were saved. If we likewise sincerely repent, we will also be saved. If, however, we do not repent, we will perish. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3)—thus has spoken the mouth of the Lord.

My dear Christian brothers and fellow Greeks: May our sufferings become lessons for us. Let us correctly consider what Greece once was, and what it is today. It used to be a great and powerful empire, and today it has ended up a small, poor, weak nation that can barely subsist.

If the Greeks have been diminished and humbled, if they are enduring hardships, this happened to them an account of their many sins,

as the Holy Spirit states through the wise Solomon: **“sins diminish peoples; righteousness exalts a nation” (Pr. 14:34)**. They have suffered because they have distanced themselves from God. They have suffered on account of their pride, jealousy, hatred, divisions, and their other sins. **“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation” (Mat. 12:25)**.

As soon as divisions and jealousy emerged within the Byzantine Empire, the beginning of its downfall commenced. The Christians were segregated into two different armies that despised and persecuted each other, especially during the iconoclastic period. The heretical iconoclasts would imprison, exile, and execute the Orthodox Christians. Jealousy and hatred similarly infiltrated into the political rulers. In order to rise to power or to secure their safety in the royal palace, many emperors would assassinate their rivals, gouge out their eyes, cut their nose and ears, castrate them, confine them by force in monasteries and tonsure them monks, so that they would no longer have the right to seize the kingdom. These and other innumerable evils and improprieties committed by the civil and ecclesiastical leaders, as well as the people and the clergy, induced God to wrath, and He handed them over to foreign nations. Consequently, on account of their sins, the formerly vast and powerful Byzantine Empire came to an end.

My fellow Greeks: May our sufferings become lessons for us. **“Virtue raises up a nation!” (Pr. 14:34)**. When Byzantine emperors such as Constantine the Great, Theodosius, Leo, Justinian, Heraclius, and more importantly the people and the clergy lived with piety, and were united with God and one another through sincere and genuine love, their kingdom flourished, they became firmly established, and they would defeat their enemies; because they had help from God, Who aids and protects them who love Him, and Who destroys all the sinners. Even during recent historical times, during the Greek Revolution, the Balkan War, and World War II against Italy, when all the Greeks were united with God, they achieved miracles. When, however, they would distance themselves from God and alienated themselves from one another, they were vanquished. **“Sins diminish peoples!” (Pr. 14:34)**.

Fellow Greeks: let us stand well; let us stand with fear! Let us be careful; otherwise we will be utterly destroyed—not so much by our enemies, but more so by our own selves. If we continue to fight with each other, we will unavoidably devour each other. God has also become angry with us because we do not listen to Him; instead we curse Him, blaspheme Him, and disregard Him.

When we repent and return to God, when we become united, then we will be saved, and our nation will not only live, but it will also prosper, be honored, glorified, strengthened, exalted, and magnified. I promise and guarantee this. I believe it and hope for it. I confess and proclaim it, because I know such is the case from the aforementioned examples and many other examples witnessed by history. Truly, **“Virtue raises up a nation!”**