

His Eminence
The Most Reverend
Metropolitan JOSEPH

The Right Reverend
Bishop THOMAS



Archbishop of New York and
Metropolitan of
All North America

Diocese of Oakland, Charleston,
and the Mid-Atlantic

ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA

New Ecclesiastical Year – 2021

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ!

“This life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits.”
-Saint Isaac the Syrian

I greet each of you in the name of our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ as we stand on the threshold of a new church year. The Lord grants us to see the dawn of another new year for our repentance, nothing else. It is not given carelessly or frivolously and because it is God’s gift to us, we will have to give an account of how we spend the gift freely given to us.

It is very easy (although spiritually dangerous) to become entangled in the daily routine of our work and home lives. In fact, the holy fathers tell us that this is a direct consequence of the Fall. After the Fall, the human nous becomes inclined to the things of the earth, to this life rather than on God for Whom we were created and meant to fix our gaze.

The consequences of the Fall are so far-reaching that we think it’s normal to place a priority on our material, earthly lives. In fact, we have adopted the worldview of the Fall. We will go to church if we have time and church services don’t interfere with our work or our children’s sports programs. When we do go to church, we start thinking we are doing God a favor. We give God a token of our gratitude, a token of our time, a token of our talent, and a token of our love.

This is not the Orthodox way. Sadly, it’s the way of the world in which we live. The Orthodox way is a deep and abiding recognition that we are broken and sick – sick unto death, eternal death. We come to God in repentance because we can’t fix ourselves or save ourselves.

Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov writes, “The beginning of conversion to Christ consists in coming to know one’s own sinfulness and fallenness. Through this view of himself, a person recognizes his need for a Redeemer, and approaches Christ through humility, faith, and repentance (4:277). He who does not recognize his sinfulness, fallenness, and peril cannot accept Christ or believe in Christ; he cannot be a Christian. Of what need is Christ to the person who himself is wise and virtuous, who is pleased with himself, and considers himself worthy of all earthly and heavenly rewards? (4:378).”

Of course, our work and our family are important. However, they must be subordinate to our relationship with God. The Lord Christ reminds us in the Gospel, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33).

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

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Yet, as a practical matter, one may ask how is this to be accomplished? Begin this new year by following closely the church calendar. Read the Scriptures appointed for that day as well as the life of the saint commemorated and anticipate the church's feast days and fasting periods. Undoubtedly, one will have to make choices – is a sporting event or a concert more important than attending Liturgy on Sunday? I know some doctors and nurses who must work on Sunday, so they have received a blessing from their priest to attend Liturgy during the week. Another indispensable aspect of the Christian life is fidelity to a rule of prayer. This rule of prayer must be daily. Inconsistency in prayer will produce no spiritual fruit. Regular confession and communion are also required elements of a spiritual life.

As the world becomes more secular and materialistic, our lives as Orthodox Christians will become more difficult. Yet, we know that we must take up our cross and follow Christ. Saint Macarius of Optina wrote, “Woe to our times: we now depart from the narrow and sorrowful path leading to eternal life and we seek a happy and peaceful path. But the merciful Lord leads many people from this path, against their will, and places them on the sorrowful one. Through unwanted sorrows and illnesses we draw closer to the Lord, for they humble us by constraint, and humility, when we acquire it, can save us even without works, according to St. Isaac the Syrian.”

As the new year dawns, let us renew our efforts to work out our salvation through the tools the holy Orthodox Church provides us. May the Most holy Theotokos protect you and may the thrice holy God bless you and give you strength.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bishop Thomas".

Rt. Rev. Bishop THOMAS (Joseph)
Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic

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