

**PASTORAL LETTER
OF HIS BEATITUDE SVIATOSLAV
TO THE CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND ALL THE FAITHFUL
OF THE UKRAINIAN GREEK-CATHOLIC CHURCH**

“The Vibrant Parish – a place to encounter the living Christ”

Dearly Beloved in Christ!

Introduction

Our Lord Jesus Christ before his ascension into heaven instructed his disciples, saying: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mat 28:18-29). This commission of Christ to proclaim the Good News was given not only to the first disciples, the apostles, it is directed to the Church in all times, even to the end of the ages. The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, in fulfilling this commission of our Divine Savior, speaking through the Bishops of its Holy Synod five years ago, defined “Holiness of a united people of God” as the goal of her ministry. Holiness is God’s gift, and the vocation of every Christian. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification,” St. Paul reminds us in the letter to the Thessalonians (1 Th 4:2-3).

The parish is the place where Christian holiness most often germinates, grows, and matures. For this reason the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in 2011, in its concern for the spiritual renewal of our entire Church, focused its particular attention on the parish, that foundational portion of the People of God, which strives for holiness under the guidance of its bishop as father and teacher of the faith. The program, which the Holy Synod approved, is called, “The Vibrant Parish – a place to encounter the living Christ.” The goal of this pastoral program is to help all the faithful of our Church to learn “to live in order to please God” (1 Th 4:1), and thus to grow in holiness and unity in Christ Jesus.

In this Pastoral Letter, I would like to reflect on the key components of a vibrant parish.

The Word of God

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,” St. Paul teaches us in the Epistle to the Colossians (Col 3:16). Through the Word of God we come to know Christ, we encounter Him, and enter into a living relationship with Him. “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,” said St. Jerome. In our parishes we want to follow the example of the first Christians so that the Word of God might become the foundation of our ecclesial, parochial, family, social, and personal life. I strongly urge pastors to diligently prepare their homilies based on the proclaimed Word of God in such a way that this Word might become “living and active” in the life of our parishioners, capable of nourishing them, giving them answers to real issues of the day, and inspiring them to service.

The Word of God should bear visible fruit in our everyday lives because only those who keep this Word, that is, obey it, will be called blessed in the Lord (see Lk 11:28). In our parishes there should not be a single family which does not own a Bible. I encourage all our faithful to read the Sacred Scriptures on a daily basis; this is done ideally through participation in parish bible-study groups or through prayerful reading at home. The newly published Catechism of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, “Christ our Pascha,” is another essential volume which should become a handbook of faith for all the members of our Church – children, youth, and adults. The Catechism, according to Metropolitan Andrey (Sheptytsky), is the foundation of Christian life.

On this occasion I wish to emphasize that all the members of our Church have a personal responsibility throughout their whole lives to acquire an ever deeper knowledge of the truth of the Holy Faith, while the clergy must not neglect their responsibility of teaching the faith to their parishioners, not only through

preaching, but also through catechetical instruction. When we speak of catechesis, we understand this to be a continuous process of entering into the mystery of the Church, to be applied not only to children who are preparing to receive the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). Permanent and continuous formation for various age groups – children, youth, adults, and the elderly – is an essential component of the vibrant parish. Finally, I would to emphasize that just as it is with the Bible, so too the Catechism of our Church should be a handbook for each member of our community as it is a most valuable aid for a proper understanding and reading of the Word of God.

Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) and Prayer

The Word of God is the foundation of Christian life, while the Holy Eucharist is its source and at the same time its culmination. Gathered at the Divine Liturgy, the parish community unites with its invisible head, Christ, and with all the saints and angels, thus enacting a mystical union between heaven and earth, between time and eternity. The Divine Liturgy, which a duly appointed priest celebrates in unity with and on behalf of his bishop, is also a time of building up the Church, the body of Christ, which has our Lord as its Head. There is no moment more precious in our earthly life than the Divine Liturgy. That is why Sunday, the holy Day of our Lord, should be honored by every Christian, and participation in the Divine Liturgy should be considered not as an obligation imposed by the Church, which requires our obedience, but it should be received as a gift from our Lord, who longs to encounter us, in order to fill us with His grace and love. “We cannot live without Sunday!” was the motto of the early Christians of the first centuries, and they preferred a martyr’s death to agreeing under pressure from the pagans to work on Sunday. This motto we Christians of the 21st century must make our own, and we should persistently guard the holiness and inviolability of the Lord’s Day.

Members of a vibrant parish also actively participate in the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). Regularly, if possible even daily, they gather for the services in praise of our Heavenly Father. They frequently go to Confession and receive Holy Communion. In a vibrant parish church organizations combine their activities with common prayer, finding in it their strength and inspiration. No less important is our private prayer – personal and family prayer – which extends and continues our liturgical prayer in the Church. Our parishes, and in them our families, must again become a school of prayer for all of our faithful.

Serving One’s Neighbour

Another important element, which expresses the inner nature of the Church and reveals the vibrancy of a parish is diakonia, which means serving in love or performing “charitable activity.” This service to our neighbor flows from our rootedness in Christ. Active love of neighbor is the vocation and task of each Christian without exception. It is only faith, acting in love, which leads us to salvation (see Gal. 5:6). Faith without works is dead (see James 2:26). “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mat. 25:40), – says the Lord Jesus.

Let us look around us – in this world there is so much tragedy and poverty, so much loneliness and sorrow, pain and suffering! All the challenging circumstances of our life on earth – these are for us an invitation to active love, which is an expression of living faith. The Lord wants to open our eyes to the suffering world so that we might learn to truly love and to express God’s love to our neighbor – by our attention to them, by our sincere sympathy, support, by our words of encouragement and good cheer, but mainly, through acts of mercy. It is only then that we can consider ourselves vibrant Christians and our parishes can become places where care is given to the orphan, protection for the widow, help for the poor, and where the suffering of the sick is shared. Thus we will reveal to the world the maternal face of the Church and will become the living sign of the presence of God among humankind, according to the words of St. Augustine: “If you see charity, you see the Trinity.”

Leadership

The parish is a community of faithful who, under the leadership of the bishop and their pastors, fulfill their calling to unity with God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus constantly acts in our communities through the Holy Spirit sending down His gifts for the development and growth of His Body. The Apostle Paul thus explains: “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” (Eph 4:11-13). The leadership of the parish community is exercised under the leadership of the bishop as head and father. Each parish should be an organized community in which, under the care of their pastor and in cooperation with him, members serve one another according to the gifts which they received from the Lord.

Therefore, church leadership is not the fulfillment of a particular administrative office, but first of all service to God and neighbor. In practice this means that for a parish to be vibrant, it must have active parish and pastoral councils. In addition, a parish must have well-formed and mature co-workers who assist the priest in leading catechetical schools, church brotherhoods, charitable works, youth organizations and prayer groups. One of the most important responsibilities of leadership in the parish community is discerning God’s will and searching for the best ways of implementing it in the life of the parish.

Fostering and Serving Unity

The Acts of the Apostles convey a sense of profound unity which existed among the members of the first community of Christ’s disciples: “The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common”.(Act 4:32). This spiritual state of being of the first Christian community can be expressed with the term *koinonia* (communion) which conveys unity, harmony and common life. To be Church is to abide in the communion of the Holy Spirit, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God the Father. Thus, the unity of the church is an icon of the unity of Persons of the Holy Trinity. This unity can be seen on different levels: on the level of the Universal and Particular Church, the eparchy, and the individual parish. It may happen that through our weakness and sinfulness we do not reflect this unity. Ever aware of this, we all must cherish and foster unity, preserving full communion with the successor of the apostle Peter, the Holy Father, with the hierarchy of our Church, with the local bishops and pastors who act in their name.

The parish is a community of communities. In a parish there will be various prayer groups, brotherhoods, and youth organizations. All of these are called to strengthen unity and love among the members of the parish community. By supporting one another through prayer, by sharing God’s gifts and working together in a Christ-like spirit of service, we will be able to bring to life our synodal program: “Holiness of a united people of God.” We cannot be indifferent to the fact that the descendants of the Baptism under St. Volodymyr today are divided and estranged from one another. At the Last Supper, Christ prayed to His Heavenly Father for His disciples, “that all may be one” (John 17:21). Bearing in mind these words of Christ, I sincerely ask you all today – let us pray for the unity of the Church, let us pray for the restoration of unity of all the churches of the Kyivan tradition. And above all, in the spirit of the love of Christ, let us make every effort to avoid any words or actions which could damage our brothers and sisters in Christ or offend them. Even though at times we may be subjected to mockery and pressure, let us not give in to the temptation to respond to evil with evil. May Christ’s prayer for his wrong-doers and the teaching of the Apostle of the Nations become a testament for us: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21).

Missionary Spirit of the Parish Community

Jesus Christ said to His disciples: “You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14), and by this He calls us to reach outside our church communities to carry Christ’s teaching into the

world, to transform the world with the Spirit of Christ. A church community, renewed in the Holy Spirit, by its very life becomes a living sermon of Christ and His presence. Here it is worth mentioning one of the favorite phrases of Blessed John XXIII, that “the parish is the fountain at the center of the village, to which all come to quench their thirst.” It is our wish that our parishes become such spiritual well-springs so that people would be drawn to them, and be able to find support and strength, love and grace – in one word, salvation.

Returning to the Lord’s commission with which we began this letter, we will note: Jesus Christ teaches us that we are to be ready to bear witness to Him not only with our life, but also in word. Frequently it is the case today that Christians are ashamed to acknowledge their faith, hiding it by their silence and passivity, instead of defending the Church of Christ and standing in the defense of the rights and dignity of the human person. Our pastoral initiatives, catechesis, Divine services, the reading of God’s word, etc. should make us strong and unwavering in our faith, as well as always ready “to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1Pt 3:15).

With particular recognition and thanks, I would like to mention today those priests and religious, who, guided by a missionary spirit, provide spiritual care to our faithful outside of the territory of our homeland – in particular, to our emigrants. I also acknowledge those who preach the word of God in prisons, in the military, and to all who have yet to know and encounter Christ in their lives. Our Church as a whole must support them and pray that they may be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in this most important ministry.

Dearly beloved in Christ! In listening or reading these words, many of you may ask: who will implement these important and much needed initiatives? Who will ensure that our parishes are truly vibrant? The bishop, perhaps? Maybe our pastor together with other members of the clergy? Perhaps this is partially the work of catechists or consecrated religious if their monastery is located on the territory of the parish? The answer to this question is simple: each and every one of us is responsible for the renewal of our parish communities. Christ’s commandments apply to all faithful Christians without exception. Together, we all form the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. That is why all of us need to be “living stones” as we build our parish community, through which the Church is present where we live.

Therefore, I encourage all of you: open the doors of your hearts and your homes to Christ, allow His Holy Spirit to transform you, purify and strengthen you in God’s love! And I invite all – laity, religious, and clergy – to the renewal of our church life on our native lands and abroad. Let us move forward, strengthened in God’s grace, and trusting in His Holy Providence, which guides our Church through the ages!

I entrust all of you, dearly beloved in Christ, to the motherly protection of the Most Holy Theotokos. May our heavenly Mother lead us to her Son! May the holy protectors of the Ukrainian lands, in particular, the blessed martyrs of the last century, intercede for us. Through their suffering, often with the greatest sacrifice of their very lives, our persecuted Church, which found itself in the catacombs for decades, was truly vibrant and life-giving. By their example and their intercession may they be a sign of hope for us and a promise of the Lord’s blessing in our ministry.

The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

+ SVIATOSLAV

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