

Shield of Faith
Keynote Address
My Life in Christ Youth Conference
July 14, 2013

*Brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might...
Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able
to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. (Eph. 6:10, 16)*

Your Reverence, Dear Archbishop Philip,
Dear young brothers and sisters in the Lord,

It is a great joy and excitement for me to be again with you at our Annual Diocesan Youth Conference "My Life In Christ" and greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a great joy and honor for me being sent here by our Most Reverend Metropolitan Joseph to give you his paternal blessing, his love, support and encouragement in our Christian life. We will be joining the Diocesan Convention on Saturday evening and meeting His Eminence there. He will preside at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday.

The theme this year of our Conference – "Shield of Faith: Being Orthodox in a Hostile World" – reflects the environment in which, more and more, we Orthodox Christians live today. We will view it in light of the metaphysical reality in which the Church exists on earth, and relate it to our present day life as Orthodox Christians. At the same time we will focus on the role of our Orthodox faith for our survival and salvation.

The Church, since Her very foundation, has always thought of Herself as something unique, something new, something unheard and unseen in the world ever before. She thought of Herself as God's Kingdom already come, living in the world but not from the world. In the spirit of the Lord's words: "*you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world*" (John 15:19), St. Apostle Peter writes: "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;*" (1Peter 2:9). And in the Acts of the Apostles we read that the people among whom the church in Jerusalem lived also saw the church as something essentially different, so "*none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.*" (Acts 5:13)

"You are not of the world" – these words show the distinctiveness between Christians and everything which is not the Church. First of all, not of this world is Her Founder, the Son of God, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and Virgin Mary and became man" (Section 3 of the Creed). Afterwards come all who accept Him and to whom "*He gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the lust of the flesh, nor of the lust of man, but of God.*" (John 1:12, 13)

The Lord explained to His disciples: "*If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet*

because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me." (John 15:19-21)

The Lord called His disciples His witnesses – witnesses of His life among them, of His death and resurrection on the third day, His ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, witnesses of the grace and the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Church and among the gentiles. Since the day of Pentecost, the Apostles knew the Lord not by flesh but by Spirit. St John the Theologian writes: *"Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us."* (1John 3:24).

This is the unique way in which the Orthodox Church knows the Lord, and it is for this reason that She keeps His teaching unchanged: *"Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father."* (1John 2:24)

From our own experience we realize that it is not easy to stay in what *"we have heard from the beginning"* – to stay in the Lord commandments, to know Him through acting in His manner. Thus, as long as the passion of our selfish love dominates in us, our interior state cannot remain in the Lord's commandment to love our neighbor. If, for example, a greater preference is shown to him or her than to us. If we have faith in the Lord and love Him and want to stay in His love and not in our selfishness, then our faith teaches us to struggle against our passion, to confess our bitterness or other sinful attitudes, to oppose thoughts or deeds coming from envy and to strive not to give ourselves to the passion, but to overcome them through humbling ourselves and doing our tasks with greater love.

Doing this with faith and hope in the Lord, we will receive help from Him – the grace of the Holy Spirit – Who will teach us that God has a plan for us also, that He is a source of good gifts and distributes these gifts according to His will, and that if we stay in our position and do our work He will provide for us better things than we can provide for ourselves, first among them His coming and living in us. If we stay firmly in our struggle, the Victor over death and over passions will deliver us from our passion and will give us more grace. He will increase in us the love with which to serve Him and to express love towards our neighbor. In this way we become witnesses of the new life which Lord Jesus Christ brought to the world, because *"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."* (1 John 4:16)

But if we stay with our envy and give ourselves to it, we already keep the hostility of the passion within us. Being Christians in name only, we become part of the world because we do not know the Lord in the way He has revealed Himself to us, His words do not abide in us (see John 8:37-44). Our communion is not with Him, but with the evil spirits. And this is true for all passions – pride, selfish love, love of pleasure, love of possessions.... By the strength of their intrusion,

their insisting to make us follow them, we may judge the enmity of the passions and their hostility against us. This is not something strange, as the producer of all passions (the Devil) is a *“murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth.”* (John 8:44). If they find a place in us, the passions spread their hostility through us to all around us. That is why St. Apostle Paul says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but *“against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the high places”* (Eph 6:12).

Thus, the hostility of the world in which we live is in fact the hostility of the evil spirits and one way they assault us is through our passions. While living in the world, which *“lies in evil,”* no one can escape the affliction, the enmity of passions. The outcome of their assault upon us is either we fight against them with faith and hope in the Lord that one day He will thoroughly cleanse us from them, or knowingly or unknowingly, we submit to them and serve them. The first is life with Christ, the second spiritual death. In this sense we can lead a successful struggle with passions which leads to deliverance from them, only if we compete according to the rules. (Timothy 2:5).

Here is the uniqueness of the Orthodox Church – She keeps the exhortation of the Lord and the Holy Apostles unchanged and in full agreement with the interpretation of the Fathers of the Church from the Apostles’ time to the present day. There is no Christian group, including the Roman Catholic Church, which remains in the tradition of the Apostles in this most important matter. The teaching of all other Christian groups differs from the teaching of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church on what passions are, what is their interaction with us, the methods of the spiritual struggle against them, the goal of this struggle and the fruits we achieve with successful struggle. Consequently, outside of the Holy Orthodox Church we do not meet with the simple explanation of the aim of our Christian life, which as many Orthodox Fathers have said is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Respectively, we cannot find examples of the achievement of this aim outside of the Orthodox Church: people who through self denial and carrying their cross to follow the Lord are crowned with passionlessness and are adorned with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. A most conspicuous example of such a holy man in the Orthodox Church we have just nearby – St. John of San Francisco, whom you will visit and venerate during these days.

A lesson for us is to study and to know our faith, to become more firm in our calling, and in unity of the faith with all the saints to come to *“the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;”* (Ephesians 4:13), so that as servants of God we *“may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* (2 Timothy 3:17)

We have this legacy from the Lord: *“In the world you will have tribulation;”* and at the same time His encouragement: *“but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33). For our perfection in the virtues it was pleasing to the Lord that we pass through many tribulations. He showed the way how to meet these tribulations: *“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on*

the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:44-45). St. Apostle Peter exhorts us with the Lord’s example in doing this: “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (1 Peter 2:21-23)

From the first days of His birth according to the flesh, Lord Jesus Christ, suffered the hostility of the world. St. Joseph, the Betrothed had to take the Child and His Mother into a voluntary exile to save their lives. Until the very crucifixion, the Son of Man, Who had come among His own people, had *“nowhere to lay His head”* (Matthew 8:20), but at the same time *“having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”* (John 13:2) and gave Himself for us. The Church Herself was born in a hostile environment - until the day of Pentecost, the disciples of the Lord did not dare to speak in open and because of their fear of the Jewish authorities locked the doors of the house where they gathered. Soon after Her foundation, we have the first martyrs – St. Stephen and St. Apostle James – murdered for the sake of their witness about our Lord. But the apostles remembered the Lord’s words: *“do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!”* (Luke 12:4-5). They left for us an example of God’s will towards us and *“by doing good put to silence the ignorance of foolish men”* (1 Peter 2:15).

Throughout the history of the Church there are hardly any periods in which the doors of hell have not fought the Church to prevail against it – the first three hundred years of martyrdom; the fourth century dominated by the afflictions caused by Arians and followers of Macedonios. The fifth century started with the heresy of Nestorius which led to the first great split in the Church and the creation of the so called non-Chalcedonian churches. To the heresies which never stopped fighting the Church even until today, were added invasions of non-Christian tribes devastating Christian lands. Centuries of Muslim dominion over Christian people – in the lands of the Byzantine Empire, in the Balkans, in Russia – with thousands of martyrs and millions of innocent victims. Christians, until the present day, are in danger of their life in Muslim countries. The Great Schism troubled the Church: enmity instead of love thrived; Crusaders devastated Christian lands and holy places, putting many Christians to death; political intrigues and wars to conquer Orthodox countries; the torture of Orthodox in Alaska; violence against and murder of Orthodox people during the Second World War in Poland, Croatia, Ukraine and Baltic republics. The Communistic regimes in twentieth century tried physically to exterminate the Church. In all these contests, the Church gained a great victory: love triumphed over the hostility of the world.

It is amazing to see how weak human flesh overcame the iron with which it was tortured, overcame the fire, overcame the freezing weather and a thousand other deaths. In these trials, martyrs withstood the tools of their tortures, having nothing else to rely on than God’s grace. Only their love towards God, their experience that God’s words are true words – that He will abide in those who keep His commandments – only the living God abiding in them, was their

hope and reliance. Many of them survived horrible trials, others gave their lives readily to serve as the foundation of our faith in the resurrection. Fr. Arseny Streltsov from Moscow, together with another prisoner in 1942, was thrown into an iron cell exposed to weather conditions at -30C (-22F) for 48 hours. Both men survived, warmed by prayer and the grace of God. Fr. Arseny passed in the Lord in 1975. Thousand of Orthodox priests and lay people were shot at Butovo near Moscow in 1937, after a short arrest and a firm confession of their faith. All of them had the courage to face their physical death and preferred it to the denial of Christ, only because, before these tribulations, they were already dead to sin and lived not for themselves but for Christ.

Even in comparatively peaceful times for the Church, between the periods of major disturbances and in quiet places, the hostility of the world has hardly stopped pouring over the faithful. Abba Dorothei narrates how he suffered many wicked things from some brothers in the monastery of Abba Serid. Acacios, from the Ladder of St. John Climacus, everyday suffered outrageous beatings from his elder, but finally lead his elder to salvation by his humility. The hostility of the demons is such that, when they cannot trouble the faithful through passions and cannot use other people for their plans, by God's allowance pour their outrage upon people themselves. We read in the life story of St. Anthony the Great, that when he closed himself in a tomb/cave, demons would come to frighten him saying that he had come into their territory and should leave it. The elder several times was beaten nearly to death by them. It was something common for many hermits. For example, St. John of Rila was thrown by the demons from the rock on which he prayed.

What can we say about our present time here in America? Now we do not have open persecutions of Christians, and we can freely profess our faith. At the same time, the pressure exerted on Christians, is enormous. One of the basic institutions of society, the family, is being attacked very aggressively. It is common for public opinion to consider normal that so called “partners” live together without lawful marriage. Such partners take “responsibility” towards one another based on nothing else but their own will – stable links with society are cut. This destruction of true family life cannot help but bring alienation among persons in society, which in turn gives free exercise to the outrage of passions. This phenomenon of partnership, of sexual relations outside marriage, together with so the promotion of contraception (falsely called family planning) are promoted in public schools. From their most vulnerable age, children are taught that vices are values in modern society. The problem is that Christian life is impossible with these vices, and this is already aggressiveness and the hostility of the world openly poured over Christian children in school.

We are witnesses of an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of mankind – legalizing of same-sex marriages – which, according to God’s Law is lawlessness. In this way, not only through modern culture, which is characterized as post-Christian and is in fact anti-Christian, not only through education, but also through legislation, the modern state turns in an anti-Christian direction. Recently, there was an attempt with the new legislation on medical insurance to oblige employers to insure for abortions of their female employees, which is an open pressure against the religious freedom of Christian citizens.

Whether the world persecutes us or not, we can judge from our own experience. Being witnesses of so many promotions and advertisements of sins and vices – on the street, through mass media, the entertainment industry, and by being involved in so called virtual space through modern means of communications – it takes quite an effort on our behalf to stand in the hidden room of our heart before the presence of God. It takes quite an effort to keep our attention undistracted during our prayer. At the same time prayer is an essential part of our spiritual life. Without prayer or with only superficial prayer – prayer with words, but not with mind and heart – our spiritual life is void in essence; it is empty of the Spirit of God.

It is an illusion to think that we can live our Christian life without keeping the elementary ascetic rules of this life – guarding our senses: keeping the eyes from looking and the ears from hearing sinful things; the mind from being scattered in despondent curiosity. The Lord Himself pointed to the means of spiritual struggle, without which we cannot resist, cannot cast away from us the evil spirits: prayer and fasting. On the other hand, our prayer and fasting cannot be fruitful without obedience to the rest of the Lord commandments – keeping our conscience towards the Lord and our neighbor pure through regular confession and repentance. Here comes our obedience to the Church through participation in church life, regular attendance at the services, especially on Sunday, and participation in the sacraments. Having in mind all these, St. Apostle Paul writes: *“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* (Ephesians 6:10:13)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise and mighty to preserve you from the evil, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17)

May you have a fruitful Conference!

+ Bishop Daniil