

PASTORAL MESSAGE

Father John Tomasi – Summer 2011

And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. [Acts 12:6-11]

The Book of Acts tells the story of Peter's escape from prison, wherein we see evidence of God's providence in the life of one of His children. God has a great work for the holy apostle, so He frees him from the constraints of his Roman captors in order that he will proclaim the Gospel to all nations. Christ had already admonished Peter and the other apostles to: *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* [Matthew 28:19]. It was time for St. Peter to fulfill this calling.

In Holy Baptism, God frees the soul of each person from the constraints of past sins, and within the body, heart, and mind of the newly illumined one, He seals the gift of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, we are washed clean in the waters of the Jordan and through the sacrament of Chrismation, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit becomes for us both a seal we wear and a sealing protection of soul and body.

Our human tendency in this fallen world would lead us back to the chains that tie us to this world, yet the Church provides freedom from these chains, which allows us to serve Christ freely with our heart, mind, and strength—all to prepare us for the Kingdom of Heaven. It is our soul's longing to become rooted in the things of Heaven.

Living one's life for God and the Church is not supposed to be left only to monks, nuns, bishops, and priests. Every Christian soul is required to answer this call to service. At Holy Pascha, we hear the resounding call, "Christ is Risen!" and the response from all the faithful, "Truly He is Risen!" If we *have been crucified with Christ*, as Paul states in Ephesians, Chapter 3, and *have put on Christ*, as is proclaimed of the newly baptized, then we also must *rise* with Christ.

After His resurrection, when Jesus Christ appears to the holy apostles in a room that is completely sealed, we witness Thomas thrusting his fingers into the print of the nails and his arm into the side of Christ, where He had been pierced. From this event, we see that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, and that He is not bound to the physics of this world. He is Risen, which means His body that had succumbed to death has now conquered death through the action of His own death.

To consciously live, move, and have our being embedded in the purpose of serving God is the normal state of existence for the soul. Through the life of St. George, for example, who had achieved the rank of tribune under the Emperor Diocletian, we learn that St. George could not keep himself from proclaiming to the emperor his Christian beliefs. Not only did St. George suffer at the hands of Diocletian, since Diocletian's wife had also come to Christ through Saint George, she too was martyred because of her unwillingness to renounce her faith.

St. George is an example of a person who, being filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, was not swayed by position, power, and wealth. For us, slaying the dragon of pride, greed, vanity, gluttony, lust, and in general,

attachment to the cares of this world, frees us from bondage to this world. God inspires us and nurtures us through the Sacraments of His Church, through daily scripture reading, through our act of tithing, and through participation in the cycle of services. And as we deepen our love for Him and for our neighbor, He gives us new life and hope.

In our society, adults often want to know what a child hopes to become when he or she grows up. The American culture embraces the idea that everyone should go to college, for example, to become successful and fulfill the *American dream*. I recently took a poll of my eleventh grade English class. Out of 35 students who were asked to describe their idea of the American dream, all of them responded that money is the most important so that they will be able to do what they want to do whenever they want to do it. Money and fame are ideals that most people living in the world today embrace. The American pop culture, which is largely rooted in the acquisition of things, finds its way around the globe. This is a world culture that promotes the individual first, often with little thought for others—including those in the immediate family. It is this tendency toward self-serving and shortsightedness that can lead an entire society toward the path of destruction.

The antidote for these destructive tendencies is found within the life of the Church. Christianity speaks directly to the problem by focusing on Jesus Christ and providing a way for followers to serve Him and to worship in fullness and in Truth.

When I was growing up, I constantly dreamed of becoming a priest. The only problem was that my family did not consider the priesthood a viable option for a career. In junior high school, I became particularly interested in the Church and walked on my own to participate in Mass every day before school. Unfortunately, in high school I lost interest and drifted into a typical teenage self-centered lifestyle. The pop culture of the 60s and the 70s was about *finding yourself*, but Viet Nam was in the background of everyone's mind.

When I graduated from high school in 1969, I had to decide whether to be drafted into the military, enlist, or attend college. I took the route of college, which kept me free until one day I received a high lottery number and was excused from the draft.

I decided to travel and spent almost 11 months traveling throughout Europe and even into the Holy Land. My love of God re-emerged once I was in Israel. It was there where I heard the call, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven." Had it not been for my years of worshipping God in my youth, perhaps I would not have been able to hear this call. But I responded, and in my late twenties, God led me to the Orthodox Church.

In November 2000, I was ordained a priest by Bishop Tikhon of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). It is this gift of ordination that has given me the opportunity and ability to faithfully serve God and His people. When I step back and consider how very much I have been given, it brings peace to my mind and soul. I firmly believe that God needs all of us to bear witness of Him, so that His many children in these modern times who are lost will be able to find their way to their spiritual home. The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church opens the door to the soul—and the destiny of each soul is to reside within the Eternal Mansions that Christ promises:

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. [John 14:2-6]

It is true that we all need to dedicate ourselves to Christ. The Church and the life that takes place in it is our true spiritual home; Jesus Christ *must* be our focus, and loving His children *must* be our purpose, as we seek to acquire the grace of the All Holy Spirit. Amen.