



ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΓΗΝΙΩΝ ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΩΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΩΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΟΣ
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THE MOST REVEREND ALEXENTIOS
RULING BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE

November 7, 2020 (Old Style)
Thirty-Three Holy Martyrs of Melitene

A Directive to the Ordained, Tonsured, or Appointed Clergy, Readers, Chanters, and Servers of the Holy Diocese of Etna and Portland

Dear Clergy,

Εὐλογεῖτε! Εὐλογία Κυρίου!

It has come to my attention that some of you have been circulating materials relating to the various political, social, medical, and cultural debates that trouble and divide our society and, increasingly, our Church. I have in mind content and links to websites engaged in passionate debate on, but not limited to, politics, historical trends, science, medicine, and religion, in which opposing personalities, or even anonymous adherents of contrary views, are characterized in uncivil, derogatory language as “criminals,” “illegitimate,” “delusional,” “degenerates,” “conspirers,” “satanists,” “usurpers,” etc.

I view these materials as nothing less than accelerants for contentious debates, demonization, and polarization which threaten our hallowed and hard-earned reserves of trust, sincerity, respect, decency, truthfulness, prudence, modesty, restraint, meekness, personal sacrifice, and nobility.

Back in May, when the current pandemic was likewise raging and, unfortunately, prompting similarly contentious debates, I circulated a letter of guidance, “[COVID-19 and Information Wars](#).” In that letter, which I would ask you to review, I pointed out that a confluence of evolving technological, cultural, and political factors have changed the context of public discourse (“The Forum for the Debate”), and that, to our shame, public discourse itself is increasingly passionate, speculative, and judgmental (“The Shape of the Debate”).

In my conclusion, I offered eight “precautionary” guidelines for how Orthodox are to meet these challenges (“The Responsibility of the Orthodox”): (1) Immunization to the ills of our society; (2) Recognizing the true causes of social ills; (3) Identification of our [actual] opponents; (4) Focus on the [primary] aim of Christian life; (5) [Upright] Public Discourse; (6) Render unto Cæsar; (7) [The] clergy must lead by example; and (8) The House of God and [the inappropriateness of] partisanship.

Once again, I ask you, as clergy and servants of this Holy Diocese, to read my admonitions, so you will understand my directions and the guiding principles that I *expect* you to embrace and model.

I am fully aware that, from many sources, including websites and publications sponsored by Orthodox clergy and faithful, you can find contrary arguments, disputing major or minor premises in my own policy. To the extent that such counterarguments have been brought to my attention, I have found them to be unproductive or irrelevant to my overarching concerns. For example:

- To the argument that the current pandemic may have been manufactured, plot-driven, artificially inflated, or exaggerated, I retort that we have a moral pandemic of faithlessness, sinfulness, and indifference to suffering that surely tests the longsuffering of our Creator and risks judgement and spiritual death. This spiritual illness alone demands our sobriety and concern. Regardless, however, of the unproductive debates about the severity of the medical pandemic, people are suffering and dying on account of a contagion. Moreover, the Church has always interpreted plagues as Providential warnings from our Lord, Who instructs us that, in the extreme suffering we observe around us, the lesson should be that “except[...we] repent, [...we] shall all likewise perish” (St. Luke 13:5).
- Similarly, to the argument that the universal and perennial Christian mandate for repentance somehow justifies a turning of our attention away from the human heart and towards an engaged study and critique of societal evils, supposedly to liberate oneself therefrom, I note that the universal witness of the Church directs the penitent solidly to an examination of his own conscience, where there is no shortage of material and no risk of error, slander, or judgmentalism. As Saint Gregory Palamas explains the aims of repentance:

Repentance means hating sin and loving virtue, turning away from evil and doing good (*cf.* Psalm 33:15 [LXX]; I St. Peter 3:11). These acts are preceded, however, by condemning ourselves for our faults, being penitent before God, fleeing to Him for refuge with a contrite heart, and casting ourselves into the ocean of His mercy, considering ourselves unworthy to be counted among His sons (*Homily LIX.9*).

There is no room, here, for the examination of the sins and errors of others. One can argue as one likes about the benefits or, I would argue, *the risks* of such an undertaking. But we should not be so careless as to justify this as the supposed “repentance” which our Lord asks of us and which, Saint Gregory notes in this same homily, is “the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian way of life” (*Homily LIX.1*).

- To the argument that the times are particularly perilous, that Antichrist may be at the door, that the end may be near, and that, correspondingly, we need to adapt and arm ourselves by a study and critique of our “visible and invisible enemies,” I remind you that the Church has always recognized that there are many antichrists in our midst (*cf.* I St. John 2:18), that even in the best of times we all live under a “terminal” diagnosis (mortality), and that the genuine protective measures against every evil have always been readily available to those Christians faithful to the Hesychastic and Eucharistic ethos of the Church:

May we preserve indwelling in our soul the Communion of the Holy Spirit and the Seal of Holy Chrism, which we received when we were baptized and became the Lord’s anointed. For if we guard this through the observance of the life-giving commandments, it will protect us in return from all harm of visible and invisible enemies. And just as the sheep that are sealed are not easily ensnared by perceptible wolves, so also if we Christians, the sheep of Christ the Chief Shepherd, preserve safe and whole in our soul the Seal of Grace that we received through Holy Chrism at our Baptism, we will not be ensnared by those noetic wolves, the demons—as

Saint Gregory the Theologian says, “a sheep that is sealed is not easily ensnared”—but will be encompassed by the almighty right hand of the Most High and protected by the Holy Angels (Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Ἐορτοδρόμιον*, pp. 177–178).

- To the argument that governments and authorities are illegitimate, usurpers, or even demonic collaborators, I remind you that, as Christians, “here have we no continuing city” (Hebrews 13:14), being “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). Our mandate to obey and submit to “king[s]” (I St. Peter 2:13, 17), “governors” (I St. Peter 2:14), “all that are in authority” (I St. Timothy 2:2), “higher powers” (Romans 13:1), “rulers” (Romans 13:3), and “every ordinance of man” (I St. Peter 2:13)—save in the most egregious circumstance where they compel us to violate the law of God (cf. Acts 5:29)—has nothing to do with the Faith or legitimacy of those same authorities. It is “for the Lord’s sake” (I St. Peter 2:13), and is meant, as Saint Peter notes, for the sake of our witness to others, that we conduct ourselves as “strangers and pilgrims, abstain[ing] from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having[...our] conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against[...us] as evildoers, they may by[...our] good works, which they shall behold, glorify God” (I St. Peter 2:11–12).

You are called to be a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (I St. Peter 2:9). In this time of excessive suffering, whether caused by poverty, homelessness, neglect, or illness, you should seize every opportunity to show compassion and mercy to your neighbor, rejoicing for the opportunity to minister unto our Lord Himself, as He promised (cf. St. Matthew 25:40). And for the sake of the increasing numbers who are alienated from Christ, “having no hope, and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12), strive to “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (I St. Peter 3:15). Thereby, you will offer your brother the “bread” of Life and the “fish” Who is our Savior, and not the heartless “stone” of politics and worldly kingdoms or the “scorpion” of contentious, ensnaring, and divisive debate (cf. St. Luke 11:11–12).

As for how you should repurpose time that, possibly, was previously spent studying the issues of public debate, we have volumes and volumes full of edifying and hallowed content that can instruct you and others on how to cultivate the “fruits worthy of repentance” (St. Luke 3:8) that our Savior asks of us. If you have a shortage, we can make these treasures available. Better yet, we have a comprehensive and inspired order of Divine Services that encompasses the entire day, in which you, as clergy, are particularly expected to be fluent. This is not a dry or fruitless routine:

Daily converse with God through prayer and psalmody calms and transforms all attacks, repulses fleshly desires, blunts covetous thoughts, purges away conceit, destroys envy, educates anger, banishes remembrance of wrongs and, setting aside bitterness and contention, bestows every kind of peace, good order and comfort on towns, homes, souls and bodies, for married people as well as those who have embarked on the monastic life. Put simply, this is the foundation and assurance of everything good, driving away every evil and misfortune and redeeming us from it (Saint Gregory Palamas, *Homily LI.12*).

By our behavior and the focus of our heart, let us show both the Lord Himself and the faithful who look to us for an example where our treasure lies (cf. St. Matthew 6:21) and where they, too, should place their hopes.

As a final incentive, and as a help for you should you suffer from passionate and addictive attraction to

this material, I caution you. If, in the future, I should again learn that any of you have promoted incendiary content or references, through email, social media (*e.g.*, Facebook), a website which you maintain, or any other public venue, I will suspend you from clerical service and Communion for a month. Persistence in violation of my directive will result in a proportionately augmented disciplinary measure.

I leave it between your conscience and our Lord what you should do in the privacy of your study. But take my instruction to heart. I will not suffer you to be agents of these harmful and inflammatory trends.

With every good wish, I remain

Your Humble Servant,

† Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland
Servant of Metropolitan Chrysostomos

P.S.: Should there be any confusion or uncertainty about the applicability of this directive to a given communication, you are welcome, as always, to contact me. The burden is on you, however, to take this directive to heart and to abide by it.