

“FANNING THE FLAME OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND SERVICE”
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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Let us pray, beloved.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

O Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of Your Eternal Father, You have said with Your most pure lips, “Without Me you can do nothing.” O Lord, my Lord, with faith we embrace in our hearts, the words spoken by You. Help us to put this faith into action, fanning the flame of witness and service in the Orthodox Church in America for the upbuilding of Your Holy Church, for the glory of Your Holy Name.

Of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory be to Jesus Christ!

“Faith in Action” goes hand in hand with “Fanning the flame.” Fanning the flame of Christian witness and service. You can’t have one without the other. Faith in action.

As Metropolitan HERMAN so forcefully pointed out in the season of Pentecost, that what is needed for clergy and laity alike is a New Pentecost, a New Pentecost, that personal Pentecost that we received through the Chrismation, each and every one of us, remember, the Chrismation of our members. It is this Holy Spirit’s seal and gift that enables us, each and every one of us, we might even say not only enables us but ordains us in a special way to live Christ’s presence on earth.

Dr. Albert Rossi so beautifully declares that this Christ-filled Spirit-empowered vocation of witness and service is bestowed upon each and every one of us to consciously accept and to faithfully live that life to which Christ calls us to complete His Church on earth, His precious body on earth.

Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. The Apostles with the other disciples, and with the Blessed Virgin Mary also assembled together with them, in one accord in one place being seated together as the house is filled with a sound from heaven, as a rushing mighty wind, the breath of the Holy Spirit. And there appeared upon each and every one of them tongues of fire, TONGUES OF FIRE, sitting upon each and every one. May that same Holy Spirit, beloved ones, renew in us that flame and fan that flame with the Spirit’s breath, in our hearts for Christian witness and service.

There is a marvelous Orthodox prayer for the increase of love of God and our neighbor as ourselves and, indeed, where there is love there is faith in action. The prayer goes like this:

Set our hearts on fire with the love of Thee, O Christ our God, so that in it’s flame we may love Thee with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength, with all our soul, and liken to this, love our neighbors as ourselves; so that in thus keeping Thy commandment, O Lord, we may glorify Thee, the Giver of every good gift.

Isn’t that a marvelous prayer, beloved ones? That should be our prayer this morning and with every effort in Christian witness and service. Believe me, my friends, believe me that our missionary outreach, our parish ministries of witness and service are a heralding of the Gospel in word and deed, in seeking the lost, in seeking out the seeking, in seeking the spiritually thirsty, the needy, the suffering. The inspiration of these ministries begins with this prayer -Matthew 22:36-40: “This is the Great Commandment. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The truly Christian life is that simple. St Andrew of Crete proclaims that holiness is simple. It is sin that is complicated, beloved ones. Holiness is simple. What complicates our lives is sin.

But to put our faith in action, faith with works is faith in action. And to inspire and equip the ministry of those who would serve with us in witness and service, we must fan the flame, beloved. We must fan the flame!

The Holy Spirit first descended in the form of tongues of fire. And Holy Scripture depicts God repeatedly as being revealed by fire. God is the Lord and has given us light. That is, He has revealed Himself to us. Psalm 118:20-27, we heard these words this morning. "Glory be to Thee who has given us light. Glory be to Thee who has shown us the light. And in Thy light we shall see light." We heard these words this morning. These are the words of Orthodox Matins. In the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church takes on the form of the burning bush that revealed God to Moses. In its flame, God reveals Himself.

In the Orthodox Church, the Holy Eucharist is repeatedly image as Holy Fire. My gracious, we could spend half an hour just quoting the Prayers of Preparation for Holy Communion and in the Thanksgiving Prayers how often we refer to the Eucharist as "fire" and "flame!" Of course you're familiar with these prayers, aren't you? Of course you are. "Approach with fear lest you be burned for these holy things are fire." In another place, "But let the fiery coal of Thy most pure body and blood, O Lord, bring me sanctification." In still another place, "Emboldened by Thy generosity, O Lord, I who am grass partake of fire, O strange wonder."

Isaiah 6 prophetically foretells this strange wonder. At the heavenly throne, a Seraphim picks up a flaming live coal. He takes it from the holy altar, and he touches the mouth of the prophet! And in the same words that the communicants receive from him who offers Holy Communion, in the Holy Eucharist the celebrant says the words that the Seraphim said to Isaiah, "Behold, these holy things have touched your lips. Your iniquities are healed, your infirmities are healed, your iniquities are purged, your sins are forgiven!" Isaiah 6:7.

But wait! In the next verse, in verse 8, God Himself speaks. Isaiah hears the voice of God who says, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah, emboldened now by the reception of the prophetic icon of Holy Eucharist, what does Isaiah say? He says, "Lord, here I am. Send me!"

My beloved, to receive the Holy Communion is to receive the grace to put our faith in action. Receiving the flame of parish ministries and outreach, hearing the call of the Lord, to you and to me, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" It is for us now boldly to reply to the Lord! "Lord, here we are! Here we are! Send us! Send us!"

You want to inspire our faithful to become stewards of our parish outreach ministries? Fan the flame! Be doers of the Word, not just hearers only deceiving yourselves. Witness that the true religion, the true religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this, "To visit the orphans and the widows in their affliction and to keep yourself unstained from this world" (St. James 1:22, 27).

In Luke 4:18-21, our Lord Jesus Christ identifies Isaiah's proclamation to the poor and needy, identifies this proclamation of Isaiah in quiet desperation as being fulfilled in the ministry of Himself. Teaching, preaching and healing. Thus witnessing His presence among us. Thus revealing His Kingdom.

In ascending into heaven, our Lord has entrusted us with His Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). He has entrusted us with His Great Commission to continue this outreach to everyone, everywhere, that in this healing flame of witness and service and love, your light shines in darkness and those who see your good works glorify God, our heavenly Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Who are the needy today? Who are the needy living in quiet desperation? Let us open our eyes, beloved ones, and fan the flame to see in the darkness lives wounded and broken, by divorce, lives enslaved by alcoholism and addiction, lives darkened by loneliness and chilled by depression

and despair. See the elderly who cannot count their “many years” as a particular joy or as a blessing. See the powerlessness, the frustration and violence of poverty.

Look even at the near well-to-do neighbors of ours, living superficial lives in abstract suburbs that can recover neither the loss of any sense of community ethos, not the loss of identity, of belonging. You see these neighborhoods and they only get worse, only become more and more abstract. Lonely people, lonely people. I remember Fr. Balach (?) years ago, back in the 1950s, driving through Beverly Hills. Up in the hills we see these huge mansions and they’re all separated by huge lawns. He was shaking his head saying, “Lonely people, lonely people. That’s not a neighborhood. And my gracious, they’re not only lonely, they’re probably hungry.” I said, “How can you say that, Father?” He said, “Look, no cows...no chickens. Lonely poor people.” Yes, you know he was right. With the eyes of faith he could see how desperate these people were, with all their money.

As the Orthodox Church in America, beloved, we Christians have our work cut out for us. Just this last Sunday the Gospel of the Feeding of the Five Thousand was heralded (Matthew 14:14-22). The Disciples were now all set to send everybody home. It was late already. First thing they want to do. The job was done, Jesus preached to them. He preached. He heralded the Good News. He healed the sick. Alright, so now the Disciples say, Lord, you’d better send them home. It’s getting dark, let them get back to the village so they can eat. “What does our Lord say? This is the beginning of the miracle. He said, “Don’t say that. Don’t ask Me to send them away. I’m not going to send them away. You feed them. You feed them!” It’s going to take some kind of miracle. The Apostles don’t have that kind of money. Where are they going to get enough food for 5000 plus, because the 5000 is just the men, not counting women and children.

Well the miracle begins as it always does in the Orthodox Church. It begins with a collection. So they pass the basket. Seriously, I’m dead serious about this. Where does the miracle begin? You pass the basket. How are you going to feed these people?

According to legend, it was a twelve-year old boy who had this one basket for his family alone. It had five breads and two fish. This is the beginning of the miracle. You take a collection and bring it to the Lord. He takes what you offer and He multiplies it so that there’s plenty for everybody. Everyone is blessed from the miracle of this gathering.

This is the true foundation of the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. Listen to the Lord saying to you and me, “You’re not going to send them anywhere. You take care of them. They belong here. You take care of them. You provide for what they need.”

We have said that the burning bush is an icon of the Holy Church. Well so is the Ever Virgin Mary, full of grace, an icon of the Holy Church, filled with the Light of Christ Who illumines all. The blessed Theotokos is also the icon of every truly Christian person. What she does and what she is, we also are called to do and to be. And what we praise her for in her Paraklesis, her service of praise, is a “to do list” for our faith in action. This is what we say in one of the ikos of the Theotokos:

Rejoice, full of grace, for you are in sorrow, a joy. You are in oppression, a protection. For the hungry, their food. You are comfort for the estranged, the lonely, the isolated, the elderly. You are a staff to the blind, and visitation of the sick. You are shelter and comfort for those in pain, an aid to the widow and orphan, hastening to help those who are fallen. Rejoice, O Lady.”

Because the Panagia, the all-holy Theotokos, in herself continues the salvific outreach of her Son, we can add to the guideposts of the Great Commandment, “Love God, love your neighbor as yourself,” and the Great Commission, “Whatsoever I have taught you, you teach the others now, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. And lo. I am with you forever,

until the end of this age.” The Great Commandment, the Great Commission, we can add to this now the commandment that the Holy Theotokos has entrusted to us. John, chapter 2, verse 5, in Christ’s first miracle, first sign at the marriage at Cana of Galilee, the servants approached the Blessed Theotokos when they realized their wedding banquet was in trouble. And believe me, if you’re Orthodox you can understand how awful this trouble is. Run out of wine? She intercedes for them on their behalf. Then she turns to the servants and says to them, “Look, whatever He says to you, you do it.” That simple commandment, beloved ones, keep it in your hearts. “Whatever He says to you, you do it.” You do it. This is the saving grace, you see, to hear Him and to obey.

In Holy Eucharist, the celebrant preparing to commune the Holy Gifts to the faithful blesses a cup of hot water and then he pours it crosswise into the sacred chalice saying, “The zeal of faith, full of the Holy Spirit.” *Kresis pisteos* – the zeal; *zestos, crestos* – hot. In the original Greek, not simply warm, but full of fervor and zeal, full of zest, intensity, vigor! One of the Greek translations I have for this phrase reads, “The ardor of faith, full of the Holy Spirit.” I like this, ardor, because ardor comes from *ardere* – to be on fire! To be on fire with the faith! Set our hearts on fire with the love of Thee, O Christ our God.

May I suggest an assignment? During the course of this conference, in your meditations, read or re-read Romans chapter 12 in its entirety. I know you already heard, we talked about it yesterday. We’ll be talking about it throughout the course of the few days we’re spending together. Re-read Romans chapter 12.

Chapter 12 outlines the gifts and the graces of the Holy Spirit. Among some thirty gifts of grace that Saint Paul describes in chapter 12, the *charismata*, these gifts of grace, the implied grace of fervor of spirit unites them all empowering us to practice these graces, inspiring us and those who would work with us to do the works that both please God and give us joy. As each of us has received a gift, use it for one another as good stewards of God’s manifold grace (1Peter 4:10).

Let me end this keynote, beloved ones, with a conclusion of our beloved Metropolitan HERMAN’s address to the Seminar on Missions and Evangelism that he gave in Tblisi this last Spring. He said,

Can you imagine how the world might be transformed by the saving love and truth of Jesus Christ if every Orthodox Christian asked him or herself, “What is it that God is calling me to do right now, right now, right here in this place. (And I might add, right here at this conference into which God has planted us together. What is God calling us to do now, here?) I dare say, a New Pentecost would take place. And the real triumph of Orthodoxy would happen in the proclamation to all humankind everywhere of the faith which upholds the universe.

Let’s put this faith into action, beloved ones. Let’s fan the flame! AMEN.