



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

33 Hewitt Avenue - Bronxville, NY 10708
Office (914) 779-6580 Fax (914) 779-6581
www.nynjoca.org

ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR GREAT AND HOLY PASCHA 2024

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Beloved Members of Our Diocesan Family:
Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen!

The whole world about us is filled with the handiwork of God! Every sunset, every sunrise; every tree, every flower; every lake, every blade of grass; every twinkling star in the diamond-studded ceiling which envelops this marvelous world of ours – is a footprint of our Creator.

The Bible tells us: *“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handwork”* (Psalm 19:1, LXX). He who can see the scarlet sun sink into its pool of purple, splashing the sky with streaks of gold and crimson – and still not see the footprint of his Maker – is like a pair of eyeglasses without a pair of eyes behind them.

But God has not left us to follow the path to Him by footprints. He has revealed Himself to us – through the pages of His Holy Word. The book of nature may tell us that there is a God, but only the Book of God can tell us Who He is – and what He has done for us through Jesus Christ, His Only-Begotten Son.

The footprints of the setting and the rising sun may tell us that God *is*. But only the nail prints in the hands of our Savior can tell us that God is – *LOVE*.

Our Lord appeared to the disciples, and to St. Thomas, showing them the scars in His hands and side – scars that were proof of His love; scars that won for us the final Victory over death; scars that speak a compassionate word of understanding to our wounds; scars which, if we have reopened them through our sin, we will hopefully re-close ... through our sincere and honest repentance.

For too long we have been hard on St. Thomas. But actually, he is our spokesman. Surrounded by scars, we too say: *“Unless I see in His own hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the nail marks and my hand into His side, I will never believe”* (John 20:25).

Thomas believed when he saw the scars of Jesus. For him, the scars were the greatest proof that this was the real Jesus ... Jesus Who had suffered and died, Jesus Who had risen from the dead.

The scars of Jesus speak eloquently of His love for us. Such eloquence should evoke in every true Christian the same response it evoked in Thomas, *"My Lord and my God!"* St. Paul tells us: *"For when we were still helpless, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For one would hardly die for a righteous man; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrated His love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:6-8). Yes, having seen the scars of His love, we cannot but say with Thomas, *"My Lord and my God!"* (John 20:28).

But those scars also speak to *our* scars. The hardest part of suffering for Christians is the dark hour when we are tempted to believe that God is not with us in our suffering; when we suppose that Jesus reigns in some far-off splendor, untroubled by our woes. This is simply not true! The first thing that Jesus does when He comes to sufferers is to show them His scarred hands. What a password! When we are pouring out our passionate protests to Our Lord and asking Him why this should happen to us ... Look! He is showing us His hands!

The scars on the body of Jesus were caused by man's sin. If we were to choose a symbol for sin, perhaps the best one would be a nail. Each sin is a nail that continues to be driven into the Body of Jesus. The best definition of sin is that it is not only the breaking of God's commandments, but even more so the breaking of the Lord's heart. Those nails that we see on the Cross, those nail prints that we see in His hands, should remind us, "I cannot sin against Him; I have seen His scars."

Finally, the nail prints on the body of Christ are the ultimate signs of His victory over death. The One Who was nailed to the Cross, Whose hands bear the scars of those nail prints, is risen from the tomb, trampling down death – the final enemy – by His death! His victory, in which we share, is giving life to the dead. Those nail prints prove that love is stronger than death. They tried to nail Love to a cross; they tried to bury Love in a tomb. But the Love of God that is Christ Jesus rose from the dead, proved Himself stronger than death. And we share in that triumph!

Today we celebrate the Great and Holy Pascha, the Resurrection of Jesus. That Christ is risen is proof not only that He has overcome sin, death and the devil ... but also that He is God. His scarred hands further prove that He is the God of Love ... the God Who suffers with us in our infirmities, helps us in our weaknesses, forgives us our sins, and makes us sharers in His ultimate victory. The nail prints are "proof positive" that He is the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

Christ is Risen! – Indeed He is Risen! May the Resurrected Lord bless you and your loved ones on this great Feast of Feasts and always – with all the good things that come from His hands!

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing and my sincere love,

+ Archbishop Michael
Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey