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To the Church of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, gathered at the Eucharist within the Holy Spirit, spread around the ecumene, and yet emerging as one Body, celebrated in the Kingdom that is to come and resurrected for eternal life,

We, the humble and imprisoned for the sake of Christ, Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje Jovan send this

ENCYCLICAL EPISTLE

For the love to glitter, for the hatred to disappear, for the hope to shine forward, for desperation to be obliterated, for the faith to be celebrated, for the heresy to be overcome and for Christ to rule as God and Lord.

The moans of your grief called upon us to embrace you fatherly and brotherly and with shared tears to change the sadness into joy, and the suffering into hope. You are distressed because of our chains, which because of Christ we deem as a kind blessing of God, and we are upset because of the pressure upon you which should not last for it can harm the faith and stifle the hope. Those more experienced in the spiritual run need not be reminded, but the others should know that God does not allow more temptation than the one we can bear, and those which he lets happen are not to our perdition but to strengthen us and prepare us for the wreath which we will be dignified for by our Heavenly Father in the reward time.

You write to us that you are distressed and sad for you cannot see our face hidden behind the thick prison walls, but we suffer the same pain for we cannot rejoice in the mildness of your gentle face and eyes full of tears, your bleeding heart, but we believe hopefully.

If you find painful the fact that you do not hear our voice, as you say, with which the Joyful news were being proclaimed to you, you can imagine how painful we find the fact that we cannot hear your “Amen”.

Thus, if there is so much grief within you because we are temporarily absent from your presence, if there is any inconvenience in you because those who you love are not there among you, then what can we say when, besides the angels, there is no man around us to wipe off the sweat from our forehead, to give us a glass of water, to hold us in a brotherly embrace.

And after all, is it a sin to be torn by this pain, that this affliction lies heavy upon us? Not only is it not a sin, but it is completely natural to miss and long for those who are physically distanced from us. The one you love does not have to be too far for the pain of not seeing him/her to be great. It suffices that s/he is behind the wall. If the wall has been built of bricks or any other contemporary construction material, such as is the one of the prison wall which prevents us from meeting, you should not fear. It is decayable, it can be penetrated and easily jumped over, regardless of its height. Your faith gradually eats it away, your hope shakes it up, and your love will eventually tear it down, for in the end only these three will remain, as the Apostle says (1 Cor. 13:13).

A different wall is impenetrable, the one that sin erects between us. With this material, transparent at appearance, the thickness or specific mass of which cannot be measured, the thickest wall between us is built. Each sin we carry in our thoughts is a material for this impenetrable wall, and each sin committed is already a material built into the wall. Love finds it difficult to penetrate these walls, and joy strives to leap over them. These walls detain us within the kingdom of misery and despair.

So, grief is not alien to us, the fallen from paradise. We grieve for the paradise lost, but we grieve also for the presence of the one we love. Still, the greater the grief for the separation from the ones we love the bigger the benefit from the grief, if we endure it with gratitude. Because, not only the bodily wounds, but also the grievances of the soul, and even more, the pain of the soul, bring a great reward, if they are endured with gratitude.

If you suffer because we have not been released from prison, you should stop, for you did all that was in your power – even more than that. When you realized it was not possible for the time being, you did not spare yourselves in the demand to share our prison cell with us. After this proved to be impossible, you should not worry thinking that you had not done all that you could. God will finish the rest.

But, we will not remain quiet about how soothing was your care for us. “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.” (Philip. 4:11-14), says the Apostle to the Philippians, and we have nothing to add.

In a letter referring to persecution, St. John Chrysostom writes that not only virtues bring reward, but so do the sufferings. And the latter do so even more. The example for this is Job, a sufferer and an image of patience, in whom virtues and suffering fused, so one cannot determine at which Job excels, is it his glow like a diamond at virtues, or is it because through suffering he became firmer than a diamond.

We also know of his virtues: hospitality, compassion, mercy, philanthropy, righteousness, but hard-working, meekness, wisdom, self-control and many others as

well. Yet, which made him shine more, the virtues, or the suffering? If Job is great because he accumulated so many virtues during his life, how greater is he then for proving to be patient in the sufferings he endured?

So, when was Job brighter, when his house was open for everyone, or when it collapsed, and he endured it with not one word of anger, on the contraire, he praised God? One was a virtue, the other was grief. When did he prove greater, when he gave a sacrifice for the success of his children and thus he united them, or when they were covered under the ruins of the house and died, and he endured it silently?

What is more important, that he dressed the poor from the wool of his sheep, or that he remained calm when he learned that all his flocks were destroyed? Or what made him more renown, when he stood in defense of the maltreated and broke the teeth of those who did injustice, or when he watched that old body be eaten by worms?

And in spite the fact that Job's virtues are undeniable and suffice for a wreath before God, the sufferings make him brighter, greater, and more dignified. Because the sufferings are the more difficult part of the strife, and ask for great manliness, spiritual stability, wisdom and great love of God. So, if the grief brought by suffering is accepted with gratitude it becomes greater than the virtues accomplished through many efforts.

When the Apostle Paul self-praises, regardless of the fact that he says that he does this in madness, he does not self-praise his virtues. He is aware that according to this criterion he is just one of the many righteous people according to God's Law.

But, he is the great Apostle because he proved his love for Christ through suffering. He was imprisoned many times, he was whipped, beaten with sticks, stones, and he faced death, as he says, on several occasions. He survived a shipwreck, and not only one, but three, and not to even mention the number of times he remained hungry, and thirsty, insufficiently dressed, passing long and dangerous roads to announce the Gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-28). All of this would be unbearable if man does not accept it with gratitude and if the love for God is not a motive enough to endure every suffering.

The one who loves - suffers, and the more he loves, the more he suffers. There is a deep connection between love and suffering in this fallen world. In the next world, the one we eagerly await, love will lose the "quality" of suffering.

Yet, all those sufferings the Church endures turn into strength of its experience. Bearing sufferings for Christ add to the progress in the Gospel. Or, don't you remember what the Apostle says, that everything that happened to him is for the royal court and all the others to know that he is in chains for Christ (Philip. 1:13).

You see how the malice of the enemies of the Church, and in our case of the heretics, does a favor to the body of the Church? God turned their malice into a compassion for us. The entire world found out and stood up to our wrongful imprisonment. And there is something else. Those who were doubtful and hesitant before our testifying are now firmly attached to the Church. And this is completely natural, for faith is attested through martyrdom, not through empty sermons and wishing-well with no deeds. Only those who have experienced this on their skin can say with the Apostle: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (Philip. 1:14). So, regardless of some people's bad intentions, and their goal to inflict grief to our chains, God, by transforming their malice, awards the Church. And again, the entire body has benefit of it, although our enemies' wish was to harm us.

There is no act that brings such a reward as the wrongful suffering, certainly, if it is accepted with gratitude. However, sometimes, one suffering is overtaken by another,

and then, before this is over a third comes, then a fourth... You never know if they will end. Applying police force, they expelled us from the Metropolis in Veles, and shortly afterwards, they expelled us from the monastery in Negotino, into which we were expelled in the first place with an even greater oppression. Then, they sent masked and armed bandits to scare us. First they robbed the monastery we had started building, then they set fire to it and harmed the nuns who lived there. The monks from the other monasteries were expelled by the police from their homes, in the middle of the night, in the month of January. Before our eyes, the cruel authorities demolished the built monastery church in a barbaric way. They spoke against us on all the media with unseen malice. And, finally, they put us in prison.

Of course, we do not find joy in the death of the judge who convicted us, and he died young, neither in the death of the man who demolished our church, and the Lord took them before he saw old age. The Lord taught us to love even our enemies, even to pray for those who insult and persecute us (Matt. 5:44). After the example of Christ we say: "Lord forgive them for they know not what they are doing", and yet, for the sake of the truth, the justice, and the pedagogy of the future generations, we should not omit saying that they deserved God's punishment.

Our brothers, you know that the Bishop is an icon of Christ Himself. By ordering his dishonoring, imprisonment and tormenting, one accepts the role of Pilate, accepts to convict Christ Himself; even wants to be the judge of God. This is why the end of those people is infamous. This is not because they convicted a Bishop, who by his human weakness may have flaws, but because they convicted the icon of Christ, which is the Bishop himself, it is as if they had put in prison Christ the Lord.

Ordering demolishing of a church is practically the same as if one had ordered tearing down of the body of Christ, which is the Church. The temple has its name according to the body of Christ which is called a Church, and this is where it gathers. Thus, by demolishing the temple made by human hands, one harms the temple not being made by human hands, i.e., the Church of God, which gathers at this temple.

This is why the punishment was so severe in both cases. The Lord decided to take these people's lives away soon after their crimes against the Church. He gave them a period to repent, but since they did not use it for the benefit of their salvation, He put them before His righteous court. There will be no privileges for the judges of this world before this court for they will be convicted just as those they had convicted in this world.

You remember what his own brothers did to Joseph. If we are to be comforted, we were betrayed by our false brothers. However, it is basically the same. One persecution was replaced by another, and then a third. One suffering was added to another, and the second was added to a third. By betraying him they made him a slave in a strange country, a country with a foreign tongue, with foreign people. Is there a prison greater than that one? But he also entered an actual prison, he had tasted of the chains and whips, and all the forced prison restrictions. He left it in greatness because the sufferings he endured made him worthy of praise. Just as the Apostle Paul was made worthy of praise by the sufferings for which, he says, experienced begetting. With this confirmed experience he wrote the Philippians: "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me." (Phil. 1:29-30). Suffering gives birth to humbleness, and humbleness is greater than non-cupidity or virginity. Humbleness is actually the prayer of the heart.

Thus, suffering brings three benefits. First, the one who suffers becomes humble and firmer than a diamond; second, his suffering gives will and courage to those who still have not had their turn to suffer; and the third and most important, is that it prepares wreaths of praise before the Lord.

And as you can see for yourselves, our enemies, even without wishing to do so, have put us into a position where they are no longer able to harm us. They spent all their arrows and they managed nothing, except to embarrass themselves before everyone. Now the entire ecumene knows them as malicious heretics, who know of nothing else except for malice and fight against the body of Christ. Unaware and, again, against their will they helped us amend our passions faster and more successfully, something which would have taken us a lot of time and many efforts without their malice. Still, although their evil will was turned by the Lord in favor of the Church, they cannot be justified, for they did not do good at their free will, but quite the opposite, they used their free will to smear and slander the Church, it's the Bishops and clergymen thereof. They build a house on sand and it is expected that it will fall down. But, bless those who pursue you, bless them and do not curse them (Rom. 12:14), says the Apostle.

Our slanderers are no different in their wicked methods than those used by the slanderers in the time of St. Athanasius the Great, or those used by the slanderers in the time of St. John the Chrysostom. Mainly, all the enemies of the Church use the same methods. After they see that the truth has defeated them, that they have remained without theological arguments and that they need to be convicted for heresy, then they accuse God's men that they have done financial embezzlement, or other lowly sins which not even a Christian weak of faith would do. Did not the Arians accuse St. Athanasius of cupidity? Was not he to come out before the royal court to prove that he loves God and not money? Did not they do the same with St. John the Chrysostom? Was not he prosecuted for misuse of the money from the money-chest for the poor?

The petty souls, and in general all the enemies of the Church are like that, they will never understand that money are not a goal but means to great people. Starting from their own lowliness, they think all people are bribable, greedy and in love with the passions.

Pilate would not have crucified Christ without the council of the Judean priests, and the government would not have imprisoned us by itself without the insisting of the heretics. But it is good that their hypocrisy is revealed, their deception is uncovered, and their lie is proven. There is no corner in the ecumene that has not heard of their spiteful fight against the Church, for their heretic falsehood. They revealed their real face, the one they have hidden for decades behind their cassock. They spat on heaven, but their spit fell on their faces. And if after all of this someone asks: Why does God allow the righteous ones and the Church to suffer, and the sinners to spend the earthly life in wellbeing? I will say what St. Maxim the Confessor once said.

We hold within our free will the power to do good or evil. The Lord knows this from eternity, but He does not predetermine it. God holds in his power the punishments that meet us, but also the rewards. We have no power over illnesses, or one over health, but we have power over the causes of illness, or those which preserve the health. Just as unrestraint is cause of illness, so is restraint a reason for good health. The holding of God's commandments is a reason for acquiring the Kingdom of God, and defying God's commandments leads to hell. Still, sometimes it happens that those who hold God's commandments and fulfill His will suffer in this world, and the impious ones, the selfish and arrogant see a calm old age.

As for the first ones who suffer although just have been recognized by God from eternity, He has their logoses since before the world was created and sees them through the end, through His last judgment as saved, as parts of the body of His beloved Son. These are the saints. They fulfill God's will, they succumb their own will to His will, and thus, their will, which is free and is not predetermined by God, becomes the same with God's will. Through the temptations and sufferings they are tested if they have firmly decided to succumb God their own will, just as it happened with Job and Joseph.

Job was tempted so that his valor will be renown, unseen until then, and Joseph, so that his purity and restraint will be shown, those that make a man holy. And every other saint that suffered misfortunes at God's permission, not necessarily voluntarily, suffered those to be victorious, to crush the head of the enemy of man – the devil.

The sinners, who apparently have a nice life, are like the five unreasonable girls who went to wait for the groom empty-handed, with no virtues. They waited for the day of the wedding, but they did not come in and they heard the terrible words: "I do not know you" (Mat. 25:12). These are the most terrible words a man can hear from God. God knows us people as logoses within the Logos, as beings gathered within His Son. If we are not within the Logos, if we are not part of His body, then God does not know us. We exist, but as if we are gone, we have temporarily risen from the dust which we are made of in order to return to it. So, regardless if some will live long and comfortable in sin, although this is rare and almost impossible, what is their benefit if after they die their trace is wiped out and their memory will disappear? If God does not know them they have no part in eternity, and certainly he does not know them because they covered themselves in sin so that God will not see them. They do not fall from eternity because God has predetermined them for this. God loves all that he has created, but they fall from eternity because they chose to do so, to enter hell through comfortable life in sin, and not in heaven, where you enter through temptations, misfortunes and suffering which purify from sin.

My brothers, beloved children in the Lord, this is why "If someone has Him (Christ) within, let him understand what I want, let him feel with me, knowing what I am enwrapped in" says St. Ignatius the God-bearer to the Romans shortly before he is torn apart by lions (Rom. 6:2). And then he resumes: "My love was crucified and there is no fire within me that wants anything material, but I have living sparkling water within which speaks to me: Come to the Father! (Rom. 7:1)

Come beloved in the Lord, let us all go towards Father where there is place prepared for us ages ago, so that we will be kings together with the Son of God as members of His Body, connected through the bond of the Holy Spirit.

Before Christmas 2005
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