

# OCA

## ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

Work of the Church / Reflections in Christ / January 2021

### Remarks during the Zoe For Life Zoom Event

By Metropolitan Tikhon

Good evening, Very Reverend Fathers and Beloved Faithful in Christ,

Christ is in our midst!

I am honored to be with you this evening and to have an opportunity to address you on the important subject of the sanctity of life. Let me begin by offering my sincere thanks to Paula Kappos, Kathy Kovalak, and all the staff of Zoe for Life for their invitation, as well as for their strong and effective witness to the sanctity of life in very tangible and helpful ways. They are truly a pan-Orthodox organization that deserves our prayers and our encouragement, as they seek to concretely support and help women and families dealing with crisis pregnancies.

I am also grateful to Father Stephen Callos and the community of Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Cleveland Heights for hosting this Zoom event and for providing a venue for Father Stephen and Father Alexander Garklavs to lead us in the prayer service we just participated in. It is always good to remember the importance of turning to prayer when dealing with crucial matters, such as the senseless and irrational ending of life in the womb.

It is our task as Orthodox Christians, and as Orthodox parishes, to be witnesses to the sanctity of life throughout North America. I would like to speak with you this evening about two ways in which you and I can be such witnesses.

## **Prayer**

The first we have already accomplished this evening, and that is prayer. Although the pandemic has restricted much of our activity in society, it has not prevented our ability to pray. In many ways, perhaps our challenging times have helped us to pray more in our homes and in the secret chambers of our hearts. Technology has also made possible opportunities such as this evening, enabling us to gather and to pray together, even when we are physically separated.

The pandemic has been difficult for all of us, perhaps in different ways and for different reasons. But one of the common ways it has affected us all is that it has been difficult to do things. We live in a world that compels us to do things, and with very few opportunities to do things, we have felt even more helpless.

Usually, around this time of the year, Orthodox Christians would gather in Washington, DC, to march with thousands of others in the Annual March for Life. The goals of the March are to bring an end to the legalization of abortion, and to educate our nation about the reality that what is in the womb is truly a human person.

The March itself will be virtual this year, but this should not make us feel like we are not doing anything, or that we are unable to contribute and witness to life in a real and productive way. This brings us back to the action of prayer. We should remember the words of our Lord who says: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Lk 11:9–10).

If we truly want to do something about abortion, we, as the Church and individually, ought to turn to Christ again and again in prayer. By this action of prayer, we can ask our Lord to bring reason to all those who support abortions, and repentance and divine mercy to all those who have been involved in abortions.

The world often denies the power of prayer and claims that “thoughts and prayers” are not sufficient in the face of social injustice. But we must never lose hope in the efficacy of the fervent and effectual prayer that arises from our hearts.

In the Old Testament, we find several examples of the power of such prayers of supplication. In Genesis, Abraham, the father of all those of faith, supplicates God to spare the city of Sodom for the sake of the few righteous who live there (Gen 18:16–33).

Begging for God’s mercy on the sinful city, Abraham prays to God that he save the entire city, if only 50 righteous men are found living there. He then bargains with God, lowering the necessary amount of righteous to save the city, first to 45 righteous, then to 40 righteous, to 30 righteous, and to 20 righteous. In the end, Abraham intercedes with enough fervor that God promises that He will not destroy Sodom if but 10 righteous men are found there.

By this example, we see that Abraham, through fervent and honest prayer, was able to ask for God’s mercy. In kind, when we offer our prayers with such fervor, we can obtain the Lord’s great mercy for the sake of others.

This kind of powerful prayer does not just belong to ancient times, but is also accessible to us today. One of our modern saints, the Saint and Elder Porphyrios of Athens, who died in 1991, would often speak of the power of fervent prayer. His well-known biography, *Wounded by Love*, records Saint Porphyrios’ teaching that in prayer it is not length that matters as much as intensity. He relates the following example:

A monk was walking in the wilderness one day and there he met another monk. He greeted him and asked how things were going in the village nearby. The local monk replied: “We’re suffering a dreadful drought, and we’re at our wit’s end.” The first monk asked: “Have you prayed?” The second monk answered: “We have, but it did not rain a drop.” The first monk said: “It seems then that you haven’t been praying intensely enough. Let’s pray to God here and now to ask for His help.”

And so, the two monks prayed together, more intensely, and in but a few minutes a cloud appeared. It quickly grew bigger and bigger, and darker and darker. Soon after, Saint Porphyrios says, it began to release buckets of rain.

It is likely, knowing the humility of Saint Porphyrios, that he himself was the first monk in this story. But either way, the saint explains that this miracle happened because the prayer was earnest and intense. The two monks truly cared about the people of the village, and they did not want them to become desperate

or starve, so they prayed fervently, sincerely, and with faith—and God quickly brought the rain.

We find many examples of such prayer and the miraculous effects of prayer in the Old Testament, as we see for example when God brought miraculous rain in the time of Noah, and also in the time of Elijah. The cycle of the prophet Elijah, in particular, is relevant to our discussion this evening because it speaks not only of prayer but of the way prayer works.

In Elijah's case, we know that, like the story of Saint Porphyrios, his prayer brought an end to the drought. But we should also point out that it was Elijah's prayer that also began the drought: "And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word' (1 Kg [3 Kg] 17:1).

He prophesied this drought because of the sins of the nation and as a means of bringing them to repentance. However, the fathers of the Church point out several things. First, Elijah was not being mean-spirited by this action, but he himself suffered with the people during the drought. Others fathers, such as Saint Romanos the Melodist, point out that, much like Abraham bargaining with God, Elijah also enters into a battle of sorts with God.

In a paradoxical way, it is God, in this case, who is trying to convince Elijah to be merciful. As presented in one of Saint Romanos' *Kontakia*, God feels that it is Elijah who is being too strict with the people, and he tries to get Elijah to be more merciful. At the same time, God respects the word of the prophet and will not force him to change his mind. This is why, for example, he sends a raven to feed Elijah during the drought. Ravens are known to be cruel to their own children and so, by sending the ravens to feed the prophet, God is trying to get Elijah to understand that he should show mercy on the people by bringing an end to the drought.

I point this out simply to remind us that our own prayers, our own attitude, our own actions are significant. Certainly, we know that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-seeing. But we also know that He respects our freedom. So, in our present-day society, when we find ourselves in the midst of a spiritual drought and in circumstances where we might feel powerless in the face of the

world, we should remember that, in many significant ways, God is waiting for us to take action.

Prayer is not simply a pious action that religious folk do, hoping for a miracle from God. The kind of prayer we engage in is not a retreat from social action, but is, in fact, the strongest expression of social action. This is what the prophets, like Elijah, remind us, and it is a good reminder when dealing with the ignorance and confusion of our own day.

For example, many people today who are pro-abortion believe that they are also pro-scientific; we who hold strongly to our faith are by default assumed to be anti-scientific, illogical, and irrational. But as Christians we follow our Lord Jesus Christ, who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” as recorded in the Gospel of John (Jn 14:6). In the same Gospel of John, our Lord is given the title “the Word”; in Greek, the Logos. Logos means Word, and it also means reason. It is the root word of our word “logical.”

So to follow Christ is true, reasonable, and logical. And therefore, when we pray, we are concretely following the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Because of this, we should not be afraid to engage with society rationally, logically, and reasonably. At the same time, we should know that prayer is one of the most visible and effective means of doing this.

As it is explained in the First Epistle of John: “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 Jn 5:14–15).

But again, such prayer is not to be taken as a magical formula by which we try to change God’s mind, or change the minds and hearts of other people. Rather, we pray for repentance, humility, and love—for ourselves, and for all of mankind. The true miracle and the real societal change is the transfiguration that takes place in our own hearts.

In other words, even if we pray as intensely as we should, even if all Orthodox Christians throughout the world prayed together for the transformation of society, such transformation still requires a voluntary change in the hearts of human beings.

## Deeds

And this brings me to my second point. In addition to being bold in prayer, and in being bold in the Truth, we must be bold in doing good Christian deeds. Our deeds cannot be separated from our prayers. In fact, it is precisely through our deeds that we show that our prayer is working—not on other people, but on ourselves. Our prayers have an impact on other people when they see our prayer lived out in a good, kind, humble, and loving Christian way of life.

From the most ancient days of Israel, God's repeated command, throughout the Scriptures, was for His people to do good. He told Israel and us, again and again, to defend the defenseless and to protect the most vulnerable. He told us, again and again, to care for widows, orphans, and all others in need of mercy and help.

All of this can only be accomplished through our deeds; not deeds done in isolation, but rather deeds inspired by fervent prayer. So our fervent prayers lead us to care for widows, to care for orphans, to care for children in the womb, and to care for those who have undergone abortions.

This is why the work that goes on at pregnancy crisis centers, women's shelters, and other centers of social work is so crucial. These are the places in our own local community where we can put our prayers into concrete action for the benefit of society.

To give two brief examples from our local region, the center that has organized this event, Zoe for Life, does the laudable work of working with women both during and after crisis pregnancies. Also, the Martha and Mary Maternity Ministry in Chicago helps women find housing and other material needs during pregnancy. There are other excellent ministries such as these, all throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico, in which we can engage in doing the good work of helping at-risk women.

When we take time out of our lives to do such good deeds, and to give of our own funds to support such works, we do the will of God and we extend the reach of our prayers. It requires an effort on our part, but life in the Church always requires some kind of effort.

As the Holy Apostle John the Theologian says in his First Epistle: "Whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him,

how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:17–18).

So, as faithful followers of Christ, we should pray, we should make the truth known, and we should do good deeds. We do this for the sake of the unborn, for the sake of all mothers, and especially for those who have been wounded by abortions.

May our Lord Jesus Christ give us the courage, the boldness, and the wisdom to accomplish all this for His glory and for the salvation of all mankind.