To The Priest-Confessors of the Archdiocese of Washington, Orthodox Church in America

Beloved brothers in Christ,

As we celebrate the Great Feast of Pentecost, we take renewed inspiration from the Apostle Peter’s proclamation of the dramatic message of the Prophet Joel in the Old Testament:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”


In our own lifetimes we were blessed by such an act of prophetic witness in July 1992, when the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America issued the magnificent “Affirmations on Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life.” Two decades later we Orthodox who live in the diocese that includes our nation’s capital city need to be reminded of some of the moral verities contained in the Affirmations. It should be obvious to any attentive observer that those verities are under increasing assault by the intellectual, social, and cultural elites in this country—and even by many of our public officials, particularly in the federal government headquartered here in Washington, DC. More alarming is the erosion of those moral verities within some of our Orthodox congregations.

The dire need to preserve and protect the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception has been the focus of the annual encyclical of the OCA primate for Sanctity of Life Sunday each January for many years. During this Great Feast of
Pentecost, I wish to remind you, as ordained priests and confessors, that the Holy Mystery of Matrimony and the moral limits of human sexuality are ancient traditions of the Church not subject to whatever winds of change may be blowing through our society at the moment

The 1992 Affirmations enunciated clearly and forcefully the following principles and guidelines among others:

- God wills that men and women marry, becoming husbands and wives. He commands them to increase and multiply in the procreation of children, being joined into "one flesh" by His divine grace and love. He wills that human beings live within families (Genesis 1:27; 2:21-24; Orthodox Marriage Service).

- The Lord went even further to declare that people who look at others in order to lust after them in their hearts have "committed adultery" (cf. Matthew 5:27-30).

- Christ’s apostles repeat the teachings of their Master, likening the unique marriage between one man and one woman to the union between Christ and His Church which they experience as the Lord’s very body and His bride (Ephesians 5:21-33; 2 Corinthians 11:2).

- Marriage and family life are to be defended and protected against every open and subtle attack and ridicule.

- Sexual intercourse is to be protected as a sacred expression of love within the community of heterosexual monogamous marriage in which alone it can be that for which God has given it to human beings for their sanctification.

- Homosexuality is to be approached as the result of humanity’s rebellion against God, and so against its own nature and well-being. It is not to be taken as a way of living and acting for men and women made in God’s image and likeness.

- Men and women with homosexual feelings and emotions are to be treated with the same understanding, acceptance, love, justice and mercy due to any human being.

- People with homosexual tendencies are to be helped to admit these feelings to themselves and to others who will not reject or harm them. They are to seek assistance in discovering the specific causes of their homosexual orientation, and to work toward overcoming its harmful effects in their lives.

- Persons struggling with homosexuality who accept the Orthodox faith and strive to fulfill the Orthodox way of life may be communicants of the Church with everyone else who believes and struggles. Those instructed and counselled in Orthodox Christian doctrine and ascetical life who want to justify their behavior
may not participate in the Church’s sacramental mysteries, since to do so would not help, but harm them.

As Father Confessors, it is your responsibility, for which the Lord Himself will hold you accountable, to teach, exhort and instruct, and to discern from confessions who may receive the Holy Mysteries, and who must not for the sake of their salvation. Therefore, you are directed to exercise your pastoral leadership in the parishes of the Archdiocese of Washington through faithful, conscientious, consistent performance of these specific duties:

1. To preach and teach freely, without hesitation or equivocation, and as the circumstances warrant the mysteriological and moral principles in the 1992 Affirmations.

2. To counsel and provide spiritual direction to all parishioners, inquirers, and prospective marital couples that is fully in accord with the 1992 Affirmations.

3. To receive, encourage, nurture with mercy and Christian love, and absolve from sin through the Holy Mystery of Penance any penitent who, confessing and repenting of sins against authentic Christian chastity (such as fornication [i.e., premarital sexual relations], homosexual activity, or adultery), resolves to struggle against and overcome those sins. Penances should be administered judiciously. The bishop should be consulted if the penance is to involve exclusion from communion for over two weeks.

4. To exclude from the Holy Mysteries of the Body and Blood of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ any parishioner who refuses to acknowledge, confess, and eradicate from his or her life sins against authentic Christian marriage, including fornication, homosexual activity, or adultery.

5. Couples co-habiting without the sacrament of marriage, are excluded from the Mysteries if they are engaging in sexual behavior, and must be urged to find separate accommodations, or get married in the Church. Those who have been married outside the Church also have excluded themselves from the Mysteries, until they have worked through an appropriate penance with their spiritual father.

Please be assured, my brothers, that you will have my full, unwavering hierarchical blessing and support as you exercise your priestly ministries in accordance with the Scriptural and canonical tradition of the Church.

We are all called as Christians to live a life of chastity, pleasing to the Lord, married or single. We are all called, whatever the attractions or past habits, to the same saving discipline which will heal our souls. This has been delivered to us from the Apostles and Holy Fathers, and remains unchanged to this day. The Orthodox teaching on chastity and Christian marriage is a fundamental element in Christian life and discipline. We are called to conform our lives to the Church and its teaching, not alter the teachings of the Church to fit either a cultural fad or our own passions. Where we stand against the
prevailing cultural trends, we must stand fast, because we know that obedience to the Church’s teaching leads us to communion with God and eternal life.

These teachings are not onerous, but rather, part of the light yoke and easy burden of being a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

With love in Christ,

+ Jonah
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

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