

Homily of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon on  
the 100th Anniversary of Saint John the Baptist Church, Canonsburg, PA  
Sunday October 7, 2018

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What a blessing it is to celebrate together this Divine Liturgy on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Saint John the Baptist Orthodox Church here in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. In the most fundamental ways, this Divine Liturgy is no different than the Divine Liturgy that was celebrated last week or the one that will be celebrated next week. The very same Mysteries take place every time Orthodox Christians gather to worship our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. But there is something remarkable about the faithfulness of a local community making that effort for a prolonged period of time, as this community has done for the past 100 years. And so, it is meet and right that we should rejoice in that faithfulness with your diocesan bishop and the clergy and faithful from the surrounding area that have joined you.

While you celebrate this important milestone as a parish, it is worthwhile remembering that you are not alone. Over the last two years, I have attended a number of 100th anniversaries, and this is a reminder to us that, one hundred years ago, there was a lot of activity in the Orthodox world which reflected the very strong identity of our Church as the North American Mission. In fact, we simply referred to ourselves as "The Mission." There was at that time a powerful sense of brotherhood among the clergy and the faithful, often as a result of the tumultuous times that were occurring. The traumas of being new immigrants, of war, of poverty and unemployment drew people together into the Church and they channeled their faith and common goals into the founding of churches.

We can only guess at the number of people that have been touched in some small way by this parish over the last 100 years. Some came into this church during a time of sadness or confusion, and then encountered Christ during a service; some left strengthened, comforted and ready to keep following Christ. Other people have come through the doors of the church, lit their candles, stood before the icons and prayed. Those prayers have been offered for the sick, for the departed, for newly baptized children and newly married couples. With the prayers, tears have been offered for the newly departed, for relationships and marriages that fell apart, for repentance from sins as well as heartfelt requests for guidance.

In the last 100 years, how many prayers have been offered for family members going off to war -- and many not coming back; for strength during the Depression and times of poverty; for refugees fleeing the Russian Revolution and later the Soviet Union; for peace during World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam and the many recent deployments of our soldiers. This church has been a point of reference for everyone who encountered the day-to-day stresses and joys of raising children, studying, teaching, having jobs, losing jobs, wondering what decisions to make and how to keep themselves, their families and this church going in the right direction.

In all of these moments of joy and of sorrow, we can find echoes of the Holy Apostles, including the Apostle Paul, who in today's Epistle speaks both of being caught up into the third heaven and hearing inexpressible things as well as being given a thorn in the flesh, a great temptation to keep him humble. His experience of glory was real, as was his experience of temptation, so much so that he pleaded with the Lord that it might depart from him. But in these very powerful words, the Lord reminded him: My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Looking back on the life of this parish, it is important to realize that this Church and its community have been a place in which both great blessings and great challenges have taken place, often at the same time. But this means that this parish has been a place of healing, where the realities of the struggles of life encounter the divine realities of the Kingdom of God. On the many people who have worked so hard and contributed so much over 100 years to this ministry of healing, the words of Saint Paul from the same epistle we heard today seem appropriate to honor them and call us to imitate their example of steadfastness and stewardship. He says: "Therefore, my beloved brethren,

be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

But if we look further we see that the work of these faithful people — like those in Saint Paul's day — had to overcome many difficulties, including difficulties relating to money. Saint Paul was encouraging the small community in Corinth, to which at the time he was writing, in the mid-50s of the first century AD, might have included 50-100 souls. The two letters to the Corinthians give us the most vivid picture of Christian community life in the early Church, which wasn't always pretty. They had their own internal conflicts, especially about collections for causes outside their community, like the Christian poor in Jerusalem -- one of Saint Paul's devoted causes -- both to relieve the real needs of the poor, and at the same time to draw the fledgling Christian communities closer to each other.

Paul was also a practical realist and made a good suggestion: don't wait for my arrival he says, put a little money aside each week, then when you come together on Sunday for worship and communion we won't have to make a big deal about it. And don't be anxious about the use of the funds: you can appoint your own representatives to bring the gift yourselves to Jerusalem. Again, he writes words that you and I and every hard-working community can use: "My beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." Could there be a better motto for the 100th anniversary of this parish, as we express our gratefulness for the work of the past and now look to up-building the community for the future?

The Gospel reading for today also has an important message for this anniversary and the life of the community going forward. Our Lord Jesus Christ brings back to life the son of the widow of Nain. The people were amazed by this great miracle. Unfortunately, others such as the Scribes and Pharisees, did not have such a positive response to the miracles of the Lord. They didn't see the need of the hurting person in front of them; instead, all they saw through their angry eyes was the rule violation. But our Lord always shows His mercy and deep compassion by bringing the young man back to life.

The Church is meant to be a welcoming hospital that takes anyone in regardless of disease or trauma. And each of us is a patient. We may become healers too, but there will never be a time when we don't also need healing. Our world is filled with tragedies that are caused by our human illnesses and weaknesses, that also contribute to further trauma and problems. How can we break this cycle of illness?

May our Lord grant that you continue to fulfill this prayer, this year and for many years into the future. As you rejoice in this historic event and reflect on the past 100 years, remember to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ at all times so that, through the receiving of His grace, you may grow as a Christian community and continue to offer glory to Him Who is worshiped, together with His Father without beginning and the most Holy Spirit, both now and ever and unto ages of ages.

Amen.