

ARCHPASTORAL GREETINGS

To the Participants of My Life in Christ Youth Conference
Chicago, Illinois – July 14-20, 2014

Your Grace, dear Fr. Philip, Beloved young spiritual friends in the Lord,
Grace be unto you and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I am bound to thank God always for you and your growing faith in all your spiritual fights that you endure in your life. I also pray for you that our Lord bless your Conference and your endeavors to "shine where you are, sharing our Orthodox Faith" and the work of this faith with power. I believe and rejoice that God would count all of you worthy of this calling and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness.

You ask: "What does it mean to be lights of Christ in the world, and how are we to achieve this?"

Here is my answer:

1. The name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and you in Him, according to His grace. (2 Thessalonians 1:12)
2. Remember, God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto He called you by the gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is faithful in giving you everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work and direct you into the love of God and unto the patient waiting for Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13-17, 3:3, 5)
3. "Now we command you, brethren," St. Apostle Paul said, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walks disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you." (2 Thess. 3:6, 7)
4. "For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obeys not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet, count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (2 Thess. 3: 11-15)

Now, as your Diocesan Metropolitan I would like to ask you my questions: Are you imposing your will on others to "shine where you are"? Are you blackmailing, or cooperating, while "sharing our Orthodox faith"?

Let me explain. God has ordained that we all be one family – a traditional family as we have come to know it, with a father, mother and children – for the good of all. The family spirit must prevail everywhere and at all times.

The will of God is this: that our BOYA "My Life in Christ" Youth Conference should function and act as a family. The diocese, the parish, the village or city should do the same, along with each business, every factory, the Nation, the Government and the country. The universe must feel and be governed by the rules of a family. Because, the first people at creation were a family. Human history starts with a family.

God said, at the very beginning of humanity, that “it is not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18)

Our Lord Jesus Christ lived for 30 years in a family, and served only three years in His public ministry. So, the family as an institution is directly connected to God. But is this the way things are today? Unfortunately, they are not, and this is why we have some problems – starting with the family and going to all the other “families” described above.

In any family, love must be the abiding law. The goal is happiness and progress but only in the union of all with God. This is accomplished through love and cooperation with all. Only thus can we “shine where we are”.

It happens, however, that some members of the family forget about this law of love and cooperation. They try to impose their will on others, even reaching to the point of blackmail. This phenomena makes the work of the head of the family very difficult. The head should take care to never destroy the family member who tries to impose his or her will and who attempts to blackmail others. Those in leadership must strive to convince this family member that his own interest and the interest of the family as a whole are mutually beneficial when cooperation is achieved. In the instance where cooperation cannot be achieved, then it may be necessary to distance and shun this member of the family so that they do not upset or do damage to the entire family and its dynamics.

Our “My Life in Christ” Youth Conference is one family. Allow me to pose a question to those of you who are here: have you in something tried to impose your will, reaching to the point of blackmailing others?

The fact remains that since you a member of our family it means that even if you tried to impose your will, sometimes threatening blackmail, Fr. Philip and the administration of the Conference did not take the extreme measure of expelling you from our family. This means that they were able to help you realize the error of your ways and it corrected you, so that your participation in the Conference and your life here could continue to proceed smoothly.

Now you are already here, and we all take great pride in you and in your relationship with us. Remember, one day you will each be the head of your own family, and God willing you will be the future leaders of your Church families.

Everybody in our blessed Diocese knows Fr. Alexandros and Popadia Stephanie, Fr. Joshua and Popadia Lucia, Fr. Deacon Anthony and Deaconissa Mary, Fr. Deacon Teodor and Deaconissa Vera, Bilyan and Emily, Alexey and Mariamna, Aidan and Jessica, Nathanael and Mary, Greg and Athena, Michael and Meghan, Luke and Abigail, John and Juliana, Tim and Beth Ann and the newly engaged Michael Tishel and Catherine Furry. All of them were here as our BOYA boys and girls. Now they are leaders of their own families. And all of them remember that over every leader there exists our Eternal and Almighty Leader: God Himself, Who is full of love and compassion for everyone.

You must not simply believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, but know Him, and strive to experience His presence in your life daily. Do you know what this means in real terms? It means that you must freely accept to do His will at all times and to think and act logically in relation to His will. You should not do the work of God simply because you think you are supposed to. Because it is God's will, it is good for you and for everyone; it is the very best! You are called to do the will of God because it is to your own personal advantage and to the advantage of all. The will of God is not something we do for His benefit, but doing it is in your own best interest, and in the best interest of all people.

Now return back to consider your own experiences and your own self. Always remember to abide by what you have been taught, and by what you have learned through your own actions and behavior. All these experiences and lessons were taught to you at various times in your life: as a child in the family of your own parents; as a student in your schools; as a member of our Youth Conference and of the larger community in which you live.

Think about the following when you are preparing for sleep and at other times of rest: What did I do right? What did I do wrong? What should I have done, but did not do it when I should have? This self-reflection will assist you in developing a strong and sober character, and will make you young men and women of integrity.

Never forget that: “God wants all persons to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Do you know what this means in practice? It means that when the sinner or an erring person is on the precipice and is about to destroy themselves, it is your duty not to abandon them. You should never allow someone to self-destruct, or worse yet, push someone to self-destructive behavior by your own actions. It is your personal duty to lend them a hand, to give them assistance, to help prevent them from falling over the brink, so that they do not destroy themselves – even if this means that you yourself must suffer in the process.

In short, let me sum up what I wish to impart to you, my spiritual friends in the Lord:

Whether you are a member of the family or even its head, never forget that the only Head and True Leader of the family is Jesus Christ our God! Never try to impose your will on others in an authoritarian manner. Never attempt to blackmail anyone. Always cooperate with the will of God for yourself personally and for the extended members of your own personal family that will one day be entrusted to you. Always remember and apply the following: “Let your leniency and mercy be known to all people” (Philippians 4:5). Even if this appears to you as weakness, in reality it is not. Our people say, “You can catch many more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Of course, as the head of the family, at times you will be forced to apply disciplinary measures. When you must do so, always ask yourself: “If I was in the position of the person being disciplined, how would I want my leader to act towards me?”

These are my humble words that I wish to share with you this evening. I warmly request you to forgive my non-attendance and to accept on my behalf His Grace our Vicar Bishop Daniil and Fr. Archpriest Philip Tolbert as your leaders of our "My Life in Christ" family to be with you, and please continue to work together harmoniously. Your joy, your progress and your success will also be my own personal joy and the joy and progress of the mission of our whole Diocese.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” (2 Thessalonians 3:18)

With love in Christ our Savior,

+ Metropolitan JOSEPH