

# SOBORNOST

## St. Thomas the Apostle Orthodox Church

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*American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese*

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE  
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

## SERVICES

**Wednesdays in Great Lent: Liturgy of  
Presanctified Gifts 6:30 PM**

**Friday: Moleben to the Cross 6:00 AM**

**Saturday: Confession 4:30 PM**

**Great Vespers 5:00 PM**

**Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM**

**Sunday School 9:30 AM**

**Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM**

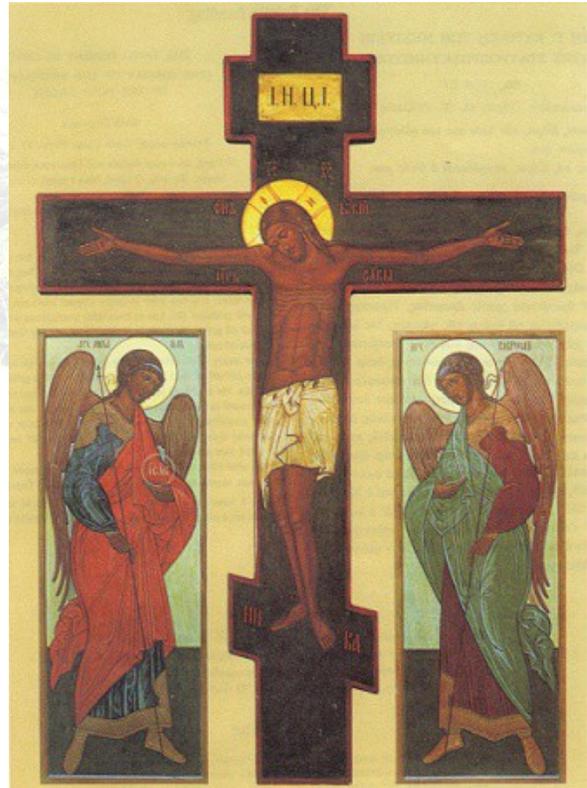
**March 27, 2022 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Great Lent**

### Veneration of the Honorable and Life-giving Cross

[Earlier] we brought out for veneration the honorable Cross of Christ. We all reverently sang the troparion: "We venerate your Cross, Master, and we glorify your Holy Resurrection," and we venerated the honorable Cross of our Lord. The veneration of the honorable Cross of Christ is very important because it testifies to our faith and the warm love we have for the Son of God who saved us from the power of the devil.

But there is another purpose for which in the middle of Great Lent we place for veneration the honorable Cross of Christ. This purpose is understood when we read the word of the Lord which says: "In your patience you will gain your souls" (Luke 21:19). If, according to this word of Christ, patience is so important that it saves man, then one of the most important goals in our lives is to learn patience. And there is no better teacher who could teach us patience than the Cross of our Christ.

If we will have the Cross of the Lord engraved in our hearts, if we will be moved by reading every day the words of the Creed: "Crucified for us under Pontius



Pilate", if in every difficulty and sorrow sent to us by God we will mentally see the Cross of Christ, then we will learn how we can gain patience.

If you have terrible pain that torments you and you can no longer endure, look at the Cross, look at the Son of God with his head bowed wearing the crown of thorns. Think how many times this head was struck, think of the pain caused by the thorns in our Savior and you will learn to endure your pain.

Your hands are weak, they can no longer do work and that is why you lost your courage? See the immaculate hands of Christ with which He performed countless miracles, with a single touch of which He brought the dead back to life and opened the eyes of the congenitally blind and for this reason now is nailed to the Cross. Imagine the pain of these immaculate hands of the Lord Jesus, wounded with nails, holding the weight of the body. Remember at the same time your own disgusting things that you did with these weak hands of yours. Think about all this and it will be easier for you to endure the pain.

Are you in prison and your feet are chained not for crimes but for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? See His immaculate feet with which He walked on the waters of Lake Gennesaret and went to Bethany to resurrect the four-day-dead Lazarus. These now the servants of the devil nailed to the Cross. When you think about it, it will be easier for you to endure your shackles.

Did you lose your sight? It was God's will. Remember that after the last word "It is finished", which our Lord Jesus Christ said on the Cross, the hand of death closed His eyes which are brighter than the sun and with gratitude you will bear the burden of blindness.

Remember that besides the terrible sufferings that the Son of God suffered on the Cross, He also bore the burden of the sins of the whole world. Remember also that one of the soldiers pierced His side with the spear and immediately blood and water came out with which your sins were washed away and which protect you from the attacks of the enemy.

Do you see, then, how with the Cross of Christ your patience increases? Do you see that you are taught from the Cross this great virtue of patience without which you will not be able to enter through the narrow gate and follow the long and crooked path of sorrows that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven?

Let us glorify and thank our Great God and Savior the Lord Jesus Christ, Who with His awesome Cross gives us the strength to endure countless sorrows in this temporary life of ours and to patiently save our souls. Let us sing once more: "We venerate your Cross, Master, and we glorify your Holy Resurrection." Amen.

- Homily of St. Luke the Surgeon, translated by John Sanidopoulos.

# **The Mystical Journey of the Christian, Through the Desert, Towards the Resurrection and Pentecost (3 of 5)**

By Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and Agiou Vlasiou

## **(continued from Part 2) 4. "The Imagination and the Ascetic Struggle Against Its Various Aspects"**

The ascetic in his struggle for the purity of his inner world and its preservation is called to struggle against the imagination, which is an energy of the soul; however, when it operates in a paradoxical way and accepts influences from the outside world and from the devil it distorts the inner state of the ascetic.

"The world of the human will and imagination is the world of mirages. It is common to man and the fallen angels, and imagination is, therefore, often a conductor of demonic energy." Thus, through imagination, demons work and distort the inner state of man.

The ascetic struggles against all forms of the imagination that distract him from God. There are especially four forms of the imagination. The first form of the imagination is "connected with the grosser passions of the flesh." The ascetic "knows that every passion has its corresponding image, since it belongs to the sphere of created being, inevitably existing in one or another image. Usually a lustful thought acquires strength in man when the image is accepted and gains the attention of the mind. If the mind spurns the image, the passion itself cannot develop and will expire." The novice monk is healed from this imagination by watchfulness, repentance, confession and guidance from a suitable spiritual guide.

The second form of the imagination "against which the ascetic has to struggle is day-dreaming. When he gives himself over to reverie, man abandons the real order of things in the world, to go and live in the domain of fantasy." To this form of the imagination also belongs the method of Christian "meditation", when man conjures up within him "scenes from the life of Christ or similar sacred studies. It is generally neophytes who adopt this course. With this sort of imaginative prayer the mind is not contained in the heart for the sake of inner vigilance. The attention stays fixed on the visual aspect of the images considered as divine. This leads to psychological (emotional) excitement, which, carried to an extreme, may result in a state of pathological ecstasy. One rejoices in what one has 'attained', clings to the state, cultivates it, considers it to be 'spiritual', charismatic (the fruits of grace) and so sublime that one thinks oneself a saint and worthy of contemplating Divine mysteries. But in fact such states end in hallucinations, and if one does not succumb to physical illness, at the least one continues 'bewitched' and living in a world of fantasy." The hesychast life, with noetic prayer and the deepest

repentance banishes all images and daydreams, when the nous and the heart are united by the Grace of God.

The third form of the imagination is as follows: "Pondering the solution of some problem, a technical one, for instance, sets the imagination working, together with the memory. This kind of intellectual activity is of immense significance in human culture, and essential to man's development. The ascetic, however, in his desire for pure prayer tends to put up a resistance to acquisition of any kind, not only material but intellectual, also, lest this kind of imagination hinder him from 'offering to God his first thought, his first energy' - that is, concentrating his whole self in God."

The fourth form of the imagination is "when the intellect attempts to penetrate the mystery of being and apprehend the Divine world." In this situation fall all those who try to theologize with their reason and imagination, as philosophy does, and for this reason many theologians have become entangled in heresy. This is what many call "theological creation". However, the ascetic who is engaged in the science of mental stillness and pure prayer is also struggling against this form of the imagination, because the "point of departure of the ascetic striving for pure prayer is the belief that God created us, not that we created God, and so he turns to Him in imageless prayer, stripped of all theological and philosophical activity." The whole analysis of this diverse struggle against the imagination shows a spiritual doctor who makes subtle diagnoses of the inner world and gives the right treatment.

### **5. "Pure Prayer and Mental Stillness"**

Mental stillness is watchfulness, the attention not to accept some intrusive thought and some imagination, and pure prayer is the prayer made by the pure nous, without any intrusive thoughts. There is a close relationship between mental stillness and pure prayer, since mental stillness is a precondition of pure prayer and vice versa.

"Prayer corresponds with the stages in the normal development of the human spirit. The first impulse of the mind is outward-bound," because it wants to observe the world that surrounds it and impresses it, and this is done by using the senses. "The second, a return into itself," when it thinks about what it saw with its senses and works them out logically. "And the third - ascent towards God through the inner man," that is, it glorifies God from the heart for all of creation.

"To accord with this progression the Holy Fathers instituted three forms of prayer. The first, because the mind is as yet incapable of attaining directly to pure vision of God, is marked by the imagination. The second, by meditation, and the third by rapt concentration." The analysis of these three ways of prayer shows the great value of pure or noetic prayer.

"The first form of prayer imprisons man in constant error, in an imaginary world, in a world of dreams and, if you like, of poetic creation. The divine, and in general all that is spiritual presents itself in various fantastical aspects, following which actual human life, too, is gradually diffused by elements from the sphere of fantasy."

"With the second form of prayer - when heart and mind are wide open to all that is extraneous - one is left continually vulnerable to the most heterogeneous influences from without, unable to discern what exactly is happening objectively. How do all these alien thoughts and conflicts arise in man, impotent, as he ought not to be, against the onslaught of the passions? Grace sometimes comes with this sort of prayer, putting him in a good frame of mind, but because his inner disposition is not right he is unable to continue in this grace. Having accumulated a measure of religious knowledge and achieved relatively decorous behavior, content with matters, he gradually takes to speculative theology, and in step with his success in this, so does his inner battle against the subtle passions - vanity and pride - in his soul decrease, and loss of grace is intensified. As it develops, this form of prayer, which is characterized by the concentration of attention in the brain, leads to rational, philosophical intuition, which, like the first form of prayer, opens the way to a contrived world of the imagination."

"The third form of prayer - when the mind is conjoined with the heart - is, generally speaking, the normal religious state for the human spirit, desired, sought after, bestowed from on high. Every believer experiences this union of mind and heart when he prays attentively, 'from the bottom of his heart'. He knows it to a still greater degree when his heart is softened and he feels a sweet sense of Divine love. Tears of compunction during prayer are a sure sign that the mind is united with the heart, and that pure prayer has found its prime place - the initial step in ascent to God. This is why ascetics rate tears so highly. But now, in our given case, in discussing the third form of prayer, I am referring to something different and more important - the mind in prayerful attention stationed in the heart." Thus he is freed from every passion.

Prayer is indeed a great spiritual science and an even greater spiritual science is knowledge of the different ways of prayer, especially when prayer is done without any form and without any image, and this prayer is done when the nous is united with the heart.

- Translated by John Sanidopoulos. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)



### **Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 4:14-5:6**

Brethren, seeing that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things *pertaining* to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer *sacrifices* for sins. And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron *was*. So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but *it was* He who said to Him: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." As *He* also *says* in another *place*: "You *are* a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

### **Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint Mark 8:34-9:1**

At that time, when Jesus had called the people to *Himself*, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." And He said to them, "Amen, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power."

## **A Word From the Holy Fathers**

Brethren and fathers, in the present instruction I want to urge you to consolation from a certain story. The story is this: In Bulgaria, as those who were accurately informed have reported, an evil decree went out from the ruler there that the Christians in captivity and our brothers were to eat meat during the period of the holy Forty Days; those who obeyed would live, those who disobeyed would be killed. The word of the godless was exceedingly strong and the people assembled and there was weeping and groans and much lamentation with women and children, on the one side of those clinging to the Christian law, on the other of those quailing before the death of the flesh. Finally — ah, the pitiable announcement — they were defeated and submitted to the godless order. Fourteen

of them though broke away and stood apart saying it was not possible either to obey or to eat meat in violation of the Christian law. At this, appeals and exhortations by the people: Let them yield to constraint, not die foolishly, and through repentance they can be restored again. But nothing could persuade them or weaken them from keeping their gaze fixed on God and on the blessedness that was laid up in his promises.

The Scythian then, when he saw the implacable determination of the men, thought to subdue the rest by means of one, and having slain him he at once distributed his children and his wife among the Scythians as slaves, so that the others weakened by this would be brought over. But they rather remained unbowed and shouted out, 'We are Christians, and our lot is that of our dead brother'. At this confession they were crucified on planks and died in the Lord.

You see, therefore, brethren, that even now too the Gospel of the kingdom of God is active. *One who loves father or mother, it says, more than me is not worthy of me; and one who loves son or daughter or wife more than me is not worthy of me; and one who does not take up his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me* [Matt. 10,37-38]. And again, *Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather fear one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna* [Matt. 10,28.]. They were obedient then to the commands of the Gospel, they obeyed the authority of the Lord and were wreathed with the crown of martyrdom, imitating the holy Maccabees and doubling their number, for the Maccabees were seven, but they were fourteen; the former so as not to taste swine's meat in violation of the law, the latter so as not to partake of any meat in violation of the Christian rule; this latter seems stricter, because for the Maccabees partaking of pork was utterly forbidden, but for these men it was permissible to partake of any meat under necessity, as St Basil says. But since the order from the Scythians was aimed at the rejection of the faith, they refused; but they considered all things as secondary for the love of Christ.

O blessed men! O blessed action! in a single instant to have received in exchange eternal rest! What will they say to this, those who deny that heretical communion is a breach of faith? For if there there was a breach of faith by the people over eating meat, how much more here over the heretically sacrificed communion. Where too are those who say that there is no ground for martyrdom in the image of Christ? [St. Theodore was under persecution from the iconoclasts and in exile for his veneration of icons – Ed.] For if there there was ground for martyrdom for those who did not eat meat, how much more here is the ground for martyrdom resplendent for those who have not denied. But the heretics, because they are dark themselves, also speak things that are dark as they try to embroil others in their own falls.

But let us, brethren, glorify our good God, who glorifies those who have glorified him, who reveals martyrs in this generation too, as we reflect on the fact that if men who were apparently lowly, uneducated, married and with children gave everything up for the love of Christ, how much more should we, who are unmarried and outside the world, when the moment calls, become as zealous as the saints. But this is for a day when Christ calls us; now though, let us stand firm for the uninterrupted martyrdom according to the conscience.

Let us not bow the knee to Baal, brethren, and let us not give in when struck by the thoughts [*i.e.*, logismoi, *demonic thoughts* – *Ed.*]; let us rather quench the fiery arrows of the evil one with tears, with supplications, with compunction, with the other batterings of the body, so that we too may be able to say with the Apostle, *Every day I die, that is as certain as the boast in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord* [1 Cor. 15:31]; and with the holy David, *Because for you we die all the day, we were reckoned as sheep for the slaughter* [Ps. 43:23]. With them may we be found worthy to become heirs of the kingdom of heaven, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and might, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

– St. Theodore the Studite, Catechesis 63, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

## **An Interpretation of the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian**

By St. Luke the Surgeon, Archbishop of Simferopol and All Crimea

*O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, lust for power, and vain talking.*

*But give to me, Your servant, the spirit of purity, humility, patience, and love.*

*Yes, Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not judge my brother. For blessed are You, forever and ever. Amen.*

This is the Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian, about whom I have already told you, and some of whose great works I have read. Why does the Holy Church give this prayer such an unusually prominent place in the Divine Services, why is it repeated so many times during all Lenten Divine Services? Not without a special reason - you yourself feel with your heart what the reason is - this prayer penetrates the heart like no other, you feel its special, exceptional, divine power.

Why is this? Because it poured out from a completely cleansed, perfect, holy heart, from a mind enlightened by God's grace, which became a partaker of the mind of Christ. Hence, such power, such a mysterious effect on the Christian heart by this amazing prayer.

To begin with, I will say that the very fact that Saint Ephraim asks God to deliver him from everything wicked that is contrary to God, so that the Lord vouchsafes him virtues, the most important great virtues, is extremely important. Why is he asking for them? There are people, and especially in the old pagan times, who relied on themselves in everything, thought that everything was achievable by the powers of their mind, their feelings. Even now there are people who do not understand that much, and moreover, the most important, the most precious, the most secret, is inaccessible to our mind and feeling.

People who understand this remember what the Holy Apostle Paul said: “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Rom. 7:15). This is what the greatest foremost apostle says, recognizing his impotence to follow the path of goodness, deeply understanding that his flesh, which pulls down and does not let the heart rise towards God, has tremendous power over it. He yearned, tormented in soul, that he did not do that good that his soul longed for, but did that evil that he did not want.

Saint Ephraim, deeply aware of this, prayed to God to deliver him from vices, to give him the strength to do good. We get the power to do good deeds only from God, we get the power to get rid of vices only from God. The soul of every Christian is vaguely aware of this, and therefore the prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian is so touching.

Go deeper into this prayer, think about why he does not simply ask God to deliver from such and such vices and give such and such virtues. Why does he say: “Take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, lust for power, and vain talking?” Why does he speak of the spirit of vices and the spirit of virtues? - this is important to understand.

You know that things have their own smell, peculiar to them. If your things remain in your room, and the room remains locked, your smell, the spirit of these things, will remain in it. You know that if you pour a fragrant substance into a vessel, then empty the vessel and wash it, the aroma will remain for a long time; and vice versa, if something that stinks is poured in, then the stinking spirit will remain for a long, long time. This is what happens in the human soul. In the soul of a person, all the vices that a person sins leave their spirit, their mark, on the other hand, all the good that he creates leaves their light. If a person has always done evil deeds, if his soul is saturated with vices, the spirit of these vices will remain in the soul forever. If a person lives a good life, does a lot of good, if he constantly sanctifies his soul with prayer, he is imbued with the spirit of prayer.

We know from everyday experience that we can already with a brief acquaintance, sometimes at the very first meeting, we can catch what kind of spirit a person is. If

we meet a person who is mired in sins, you will catch what kind of spirit this person is. It is similar to how a dog searches for a smell, which remains even on the tracks of a person, and leads to this person.

Every person has his own spirit, and so Saint Ephraim the Syrian asks God not only to deliver him from vices and give virtues, he asks that the Lord give him the spirit of these virtues, to deliver him from the spirit of vice - so that there is no trace of the smell of vice, so that it smells with the sweet fragrance of Christ.

One must know that it is much easier to get rid of individual vices than to get rid of the spirit of these vices. This spirit clings extremely tenaciously to our hearts, and it is possible to completely get rid of the wicked spirit only gradually, praying to God for help, so that God will deliver us from this evil spirit. This is how the words of Ephraim the Syrian should be understood. Perhaps they can be understood more directly.

We always live and act under the spiritual influence of two things: on the one hand, the grace-filled holy influence of God Himself, the Angels and the Saints, and, in particular, our Guardian Angel; on the other hand, the spirit of Satan, the demonic spirit, always pours out on us in a dark stream. And just as among the Angels of Light there are Angels who carry individual holy virtues, so among demons there are carriers of individual sins that always affect us. Therefore Saint Ephraim asks God that by the grace of God the dark, crafty demonic spirits that lead us to sin be driven away.

You see what these deep words of Ephraim the Syrian mean? Asking consciously to free us from the very spirit of wickedness, malice, all vices, is extremely difficult, since the power of demons over us is extremely strong. Remember that by your own efforts you cannot avoid the dark, disastrous influence of these spirits, so humbly pray to God, as Ephraim the Syrian teaches to pray:

*O Lord and Master of my life! Take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, lust for power, and vain talking.*

*But give to me, Your servant, the spirit of purity, humility, patience, and love.*

*Yes, Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not judge my brother. For blessed are You, forever and ever. Amen. (from johnsanidopoulos.com)*

## **Also Commemorated Today: Martyr Matrona of Thessalonika**

The Holy Martyr Matrona of Thessalonika suffered in the third or fourth century. She was a slave of the Jewish woman Pautila (or Pantilla), wife of one of the military commanders of Thessalonika. Pautila constantly mocked her slave for her

faith in Christ, and tried to convert her to Judaism. Saint Matrona, who believed in Christ from her youth, still prayed to the Savior Christ, and secretly went to church unbeknownst to her vengeful mistress.

Pautila, learning that Saint Matrona had been to church, asked, “Why won’t you come to our synagogue, instead of attending the Christian church?” Saint Matrona boldly answered, “Because God is present in the Christian church, but He has departed from the Jewish synagogue.” Pautila went into a rage and mercilessly beat Saint Matrona, tied her up, and shut her in a dark closet. In the morning, Pautila discovered that Saint Matrona had been freed of her bonds by an unknown Power.

In a rage Pautila beat the martyr almost to death, then bound her even more tightly and locked her in the closet. The door was sealed so that no one could help the sufferer. The holy martyr remained there for four days without food or water, and when Pautila opened the door, she again found Saint Matrona free of her bonds, and standing at prayer.

Pautila flogged the holy martyr and left the skin hanging in strips from her body. The fierce woman locked her in the closet again, where Saint Matrona gave up her spirit to God.

Pautila had the holy martyr’s body thrown from the roof of her house. Christians took up the much-suffered body of the holy martyr and buried it. Later, Bishop Alexander of Thessalonica built a church dedicated to the holy martyr. Her holy relics, glorified by many miracles, were placed in this church.

The judgment of God soon overtook the evil Pautila. Standing on the roof at that very place where the body of Saint Matrona had been thrown, she stumbled and fell to the pavement. Her body was smashed, and so she received her just reward for her sin. (*from oca.org*)

### **Social Team for April 3**

Team 4 is up next week - Samouris, Kopan, Connell. Thank you!

## **Help People in Need**

As things in Ukraine have been changing rapidly, all of us at IOCC have been fervently praying for everyone affected.

The core of IOCC’s work has always been responsibly and effectively offering humanitarian aid. As of today, I can share with you that we’ve been in touch with partners in Ukraine and across the region. Our immediate response will consist of:

- Supporting basic needs, like supplying fuel and generators

- Providing flashlights, batteries, and candles

I invite you to do three things to help today:

- First and foremost, pray for everyone affected.
- Share this update with friends and loved ones so they know how the Orthodox community in the US is responding.
- Support IOCC's efforts with a gift to our [International Emergency Response Fund](#), which allows us to respond quickly and effectively to help those in need.

Thank you for your prayers and your faithful support of IOCC's mission.

Yours in Christ,



Constantine M. Triantafilou

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**Diocesan Website:** <http://www.acrod.org>

**Camp Nazareth:** <http://www.campnazareth.org>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/acroddiocese>

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***In Your Prayers – Please Remember...*** His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Joseph & Family, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Nyeri & Mt. Kenya, Tatyana & Slava Chumak & family, Luke & Marlena Cooper, Roberta Corson, Jon Church, Tina Crull, Mary Diane David, Howl family, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Valentina Makowelski, Susan Matula, Anna Meinhold, David & Kathryn Newman, John Reece, Mary Reed, Rose Song, Dcn. Nectarios & Ia, Mother Virginia Marie & the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, the suffering peopl of Ukraine, and those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)