



DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA AND EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

The Most Rev. Mark, Archbishop of Philadelphia • Orthodox Church in America

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I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1ff)

Dear to God,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever! In the above verses, St. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. One of the most powerful and accessible ways for us to obey His teaching is to read the Holy Scriptures. St. Jerome teaches us that *Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ*, since He is their author and subject, revealing Himself in them and showing us the Way, the Truth and the Life we can and should follow for our salvation. The Church offers us a yearly cycle of daily readings through which we can read, study, digest and be transformed in the process. These readings are not especially long, but all of them are rich in life and wisdom and powerful in bringing about what they teach. So we should read them daily, with attention. Read them once and be attentive to what captures your attention. Read them again in the light of that word or phrase and then reflect on what you see and hear and turn that into a prayer, as the Holy Spirit directs you. Before doing so read the Prayer before Reading Scripture. It is found in most Orthodox prayerbooks and is prayed by the priest before the reading of the Gospel in every Divine Liturgy:

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge. Open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings. Implant also in us the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto Thee. For Thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto Thee we ascribe glory, together with Thy Father, Who is from everlasting, and Thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

We can also read the entire Scripture in the course of the year, and I offer to all of you such a plan for using the Orthodox Study Bible, and strongly encourage you to use it. In doing so, we will have the Divine Services opened to us as well, since the texts of all of them are echoes, direct quotes and meditations on Holy Scripture. I often question how many of our clergy and faithful do not fully benefit from the Canon of St. Andrew of Crete read during the first week of Great Lent and again later. Perhaps, in many parishes it is simply dropped as the clergy and faithful are completely ignorant of the biblical references there for their salvation. I am concerned that allusions to Holy Scripture in many homilies are completely lost because of Biblical Illiteracy on some of our faithful. I am scandalized by comments by some of our faithful who say they disagree with the very words of Christ Himself! As Orthodox Christians, especially living in a multicultural setting amongst those with heterodox beliefs, we must know what we believe and why we

believe it! As we begin the New Liturgical Year, let us commit ourselves to the reading of Scripture. Here is a beautiful quote about the need and benefit of reading as we begin the New Year the Holy Scripture.

Just as bees fly about the fields, gathering from every plant and flower things most excellent and useful, so also do they who in the love of God are like bees I industriousness and orderliness sweeten their soul with the sweetness of divine words, gathering from them all things appropriate and useful. From some they gather flowers of chastity; from others, justice; from some, flowers of wisdom; from others, courage; from some, flowers of kindness and philanthropy toward neighbor, meekness and calmness; from others, they gather patience and forbearance in adversities. Simply put, from all they gather as from flowers all things suitable for the soul's salvation, and, placing them in the storehouses of the heart, they make the sweet honey of virtue, which is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Ps. 18:10), and store up everlasting fruits. Let us be like them, brethren: when we come to this divine and beautiful refuge of the church, let us not gather for conversation, to talk with one another, but rather to look into the divine words g read for our salvation; let us carefully seek spiritual profit in them with a concerned heart and searching disposition. By abiding in such a state , we are sometimes taught about one virtue, and at other times instructed in another, and yet again we speak about still another. From frequent instruction in these things we benefit, and become able to practice the virtues ourselves: the sweetness and light engendered by them in our souls we shall offer to God as honey and the honeycomb. The Divine Scriptures ever propose and teach things which are pleasing to God and conducive to our salvation; there is nothing more spiritually profitable than them. Since these things are so, let us understand today from the words of the Gospel what a great evil sin is, and that it does great harm to the soul, and that therefore it often becomes a cause of bodily infirmities (Matt. 9:1-8) Excerpt from the Commentary on the Sunday Gospels by Hieromonk Hermon Ciuba).

Hopefully, as we abstain from worldly distractions and devote ourselves more fully to God, we will see real transformation in our thoughts, mind, heart and actions.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

+ MARK, Archbishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania