

## 9-15-2019 Happy New Year!

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy New Year! All right. It's turning into a local tradition to do that today. Yesterday was the Ecclesiastical New Year, which we celebrate to a degree today as well. You listened to the choir during the Matins and Divine Liturgy, we are working in themes, songs about the coming of the new year or that the action of the arrival at the Ecclesiastical New Year.

In The Grapevine, I put in an article that I wrote in the past that covers the history of that new year, Saint Constantine freeing the Christians and establishing a tax actually at the beginning, September 1st, in order to maintain his troops. The church seeing in that liberation of the Christians and this founding of a Christian empire, that it was completely compatible with their understanding of the cycle of the year, that the harvest was in.

In the old days, you have to remember that their summers were just as crazy as ours, except they weren't running around trying to squeeze in one more vacation or doing more in order to be rested, but they had the harvest to bring in. All of that work through the year, particularly if you are in a place that snowed and you're planting what is called winter wheat and the seed goes into the ground in the fall and sits dormant under the snow for the whole winter and then comes up in the spring.

Or you're trying to keep all of your seed dry and ready for the spring. If you're going to plant in the spring, it's growing to the spring and the beginning of the summer and when the time comes to harvest it is consuming. For a long time, the farmers have waited, they've gone out into those wheat fields or the corn fields they're testing the fruit. They're looking wondering what the moisture content was. Does it need to rain a little bit more? Does it need to dry a little bit more?

And when the moment came it was really chaos. You are working as much as you can in a day. Literally, literally dawn to darkness probably starting before dawn eating your breakfast. I've been on a farm before that grew wheat and one of the hardest things I ever had to do is eat like eggs and sausage at 4:30 in the morning. You know, I'm not a breakfast person. You had to be at that early in the morning. You had to be stuffed with calories because you are going to work until it was dark.

And so when all of that season is done, this is the of most of human history since the invention of growing wheat and other grains intentionally. When you got done with the chaos being completely consumed by the harvest and all of the wheat or the grain was stored away and the job was done. And the tractor was parked back in the barn. You finally had time to stop and reevaluate how the year had gone. From planting the seed all the way to getting it in the barn, making sure all the little doors were closed so the rats and the birds don't get in there.

And there was this natural law that occurred where you had time to rest and to relax. Actually, this was a time when the family would spend time together and with their neighbors having picnics, there was some free time there because the harvest was in. But also it was a time when you had to stop and look back and evaluate how the year had gone, and make plans for doing better in the coming year.

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I remember talking on this day in a different church and there was a lot of businessmen in the room and I looked out and the wives, God bless them, were all paying attention and the husbands were kind of spacing out during the homily and I realized I needed to connect with them and I said to them, "How many of you are businessmen in this room?" And you know, all of a sudden all the eyes popped open and they looked up, they realized how I was talking to them.

And I said, "How many of you, how many of you are planning this year to make less money than you made last year?" They all kind of chuckle and look at each other, right? Only a fool would do that and yet spiritually, because what we are coming to in this routine and in this liturgy of the year is spiritual growth, spiritual harvest, spiritual planting, spiritual planning ahead. How many of us are planning on doing worse spiritually next year than we did this year? Hopefully no one, hopefully no one, but at the same time as the old saying goes, "To fail to plan is to plan to fail." If we don't make a plan, we have made a plan and it's a bad one.

So we come to this time of the year, this time of the year particularly there for families who have kids who are in school or college students or at the end of summer, our routine was really usually broken up even by the joys of vacation, and doing random things or fun things. Our routine usually gets broken up. The family has been dominated by the kids being at home. We started summer break, so excited that school is over and end summer, so glad that school's starting again.

Some of us are older or retired. We're not really in that swing of things again or maybe we're younger and we're employed, but we're not going to school or we're not married yet or we don't have kids that are in school. But for a lot of us that school year still affects a lot of the way that our routine is going or the way that our routine has been disturbed during the summer. And so this is a very important time that we stop and we reflect on the year that we just completed, that we just completed. Our year does not end on December 31st and start on January 1st. Our year ended now and it begins now.

The great feast of the end of the year was the Dormition, the death of the Theotokos and her miraculous being taken up bodily into heaven after her death and our first feast of the new year, this coming Saturday is her birth, because just as the womb of the Theotokos encapsulated, that which could not be contained, God. Our experience of the salvation of God coming, his birth, his death and resurrection is encapsulated within her life even. So, we remember her birth even before Christ, and we remember her death after Christ.

So come this Saturday with that attitude, really, we got to dig deep and get back down to our love for Christ, where it's not just another service that we have to go to. You don't have to go, that's actually the problem. We're free not to. That's the problem, but we have to get past obligation. We have to get past social pressure. We have to get past it just being something that we did all the time, particularly for our kids.

It doesn't work for our kids to grow up going to church just because that's what the family does. It's not enough. They have to see the love for Christ himself in their parents. They have to see us wanting to go to church because God and our relationship with God is the most important thing in our life. Everything else is secondary. I tell them, my kids, I've told you this before, but when my kids particularly were young, I would tell them all the time, "You know, I love you. I love you so much. I

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would kill for you. I would die for you, but I love your mom a little bit more and I kept things straight in the house."

They always knew that they were on the losing team. If there is a division in the household, right? There wasn't any going to dad and getting me to think one thing, going to mom, getting, you know, creating that division between mom and dad, we were done. We already won that war and as they had got older, that turned into that, I love you. I love you more than anyone else in the world. I love you. I would die for you, I would kill for you, but I love your mom a little bit more than you.

And then when they get older you add, and I love God a little bit more even than I love her. And that is what brings peace and order into our life and we have to live by those words. We have to dig down in our heart again and get past the busyness of this world, kill off the things in our life that are not essential. We're just keeping up with the Jones' if we're just doing what everyone else does. Don't do that. We have to be a peculiar people. We have to be a strange people. We're not doing what everyone else is doing because our priorities are different.

There are times in our life we get to the end of the year, the church year maybe, and maybe we're just really worn out. Some of us I know we're still tired from Lent. Haven't been really recovered from Lent and Pascha yet and the year's starting over again, but we have to get past that part of us that is weak, that part of us that doesn't want to be tough. It wants to be comfortable. That part of us that is very, very, very familiar with Christ and his church, but we're not really in love with him anymore.

It's an older relationship, just like an old marriage. The time comes when especially when the kids leave the house, right? Those of you who have gone through that phase again and all sudden you realize, "Wow, I don't have a legitimate excuse to be ignoring my spouse anymore." And we realized, Wow, they're like they're my help mate. They're there. They're my partner in everything that I am doing, but we've grown apart over the years.

Mom's running the kids off to sports and doing her thing and shopping and everything. Dad's off at work, working, trying to pay all the bills, and all of a sudden everybody in the house, the kids are gone and mom and dad go to the dinner table and it's just them. And a lot of times it's very, very common, it's not a big crisis or anything. They realize we have to get to know each other again. We have to find that thing that we love in each other. We have to maybe break some bad habits that we formed while our life was absorbed and distracted by being a family and raising all of these children. We have to rediscover each other. It's very common, very natural. Just rediscover each other.

In our relationship with God, it can be very much the same where I'm used to this place. I love coming here. It's pretty, I have peace when I walk in. I like candles. I like the singing. It's very familiar to me. It's a place of security for me, but I can like the home, I can get used to being in the presence of God and kind of ignoring his presence at the same time. Our relationship can become overly familiar and so this is a time of the year to check that, to check that. And look at the past year and say, "Was I devoted?" Okay. Yeah. You know, check that box. Yes I did a lot of things. Did I enter into the fasting seasons? If not, I've got to double down on that this year. If I did good, check that box.

Am I going to church regularly? Am I saying my prayers? Am I coming to church more than just Sunday to Sunday? Because if it's Sunday to Sunday, you're not growing I promise you. Once a week

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is not enough. We got to come on Saturday night and Sunday morning or like a Wednesday night and Sunday morning, Sunday to Sunday will not feed the soul. It will nourish it enough for it to die slowly, but it won't feed it enough to grow. We just have to admit these things.

If you go to the gym once a week, all you ever accomplish is getting sore, right? You can't work out once a week. You hurt yourself and then you barely recover and then you hurt yourself again. There's no gain. You've got to go more regularly than not, so we'd have to look again at our church life and say, "Am I exercising in a way that is building my strength as a Christian?" But when we get down to the end of the list that on the end of that list, the last question we have to ask ourselves, because everything else can be routine.

I can say my prayers morning and evening out of sheer routine. I just don't like breaking the routine, especially if I'm a routine person. That last question on the list is am I madly in love with Jesus Christ? Do I want to be with him more than anything else? Is everything else secondary in life even my family, even my work, even my hobbies? Do I want to be with him? Because if the answer to that is no, we have to go after that one before everything else on that list is going to be sanctified and made whole.

Don't feel bad if you recognize that the answer to that question right now is no. It's no for most of us at this time of the year. That is why the church gives us an opportunity to renew our faith, to recommit to that growth that we're going to make. To look on the inside and just say, "You know, I'm doing okay, but what's the thing in there that's really holding me back? What is the thing that I'm just hanging onto still and it's competing in my relationship with the Christ?"

Now I've got this triangular relationship going. I always like to talk about that. It's not just me and Jesus who are in relationship with each other. I've got this passion on the side that's influencing our relationship and sometimes my opinion about Christ, my relationship with Christ, my thoughts about Christ are heavily influenced by this passion. He's going to make you give me up, right? There's not room in your life for Christ and me, and it's true.

The devil and demons always tell the truth, they just twist the truth. Eve wasn't going to fall over dead when she ate the fruit. You're not going to die physically, right? That's a part he didn't point out. What is the thing in us? What is that little voice that we're hanging on to that is keeping us from that crazy love for Jesus Christ? We're not emotionalistic. It's not about being emotionally moved all of the time. It means that like our favorite friends or our children or our house, we are ready to die and to kill for him.

We're ready to die to ourselves and our own will and we are ready to kill the sins and the passions and the demons in our life they are keeping us from him. You've been doing a good job. It was a good year last year. A lot of great things happened. People giving their lives to each other, to their families, to Christ more and more. The fasting periods being very intense. People going for it in a way that maybe they never have before and experiencing something new. We're doing a good job by the grace of God, we are doing it.

But you know when you become an athlete for Christ, you are never satisfied with getting just second or third place. You're actually not even satisfied with getting first place because the minute you get first place, you're right. You have your eyes set on getting first place in the next race as well,

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the next competition, the next match. And as athletes of God who are doing a good job, we continue to train and to look for the next victory in Jesus Christ in his church.

Father John Takahashi last week gave us a wonderful example, another wonderful metaphor, right? After the burger we've got chess and in chess I played a little bit of chess, not much, but this wonderful idea that there is a beginning game and a middle game and an end game. And in each of us, in our personal life, we're in the beginning or the middle or the end. All of this is just basically based on age.

When we're young, we're in the beginning game we're making the simple moves. We're doing the thing, the easy things and it all seems sort of fair in the beginning. In the middle, we hit that middle time and that is really ultimately where you are going to really lose most often is in the middle phase. Do you start playing well? Do you submit to the realities of the game? The rules of the game and the way that it works in the spiritual life in in the middle game it's when we realize we're going to church because we choose to go to church. We're not going just because mom and dad goes.

And for then for maybe thirty years after that, it's the reality is are we submitting to the rules that make us victorious in the end? Not rules that are there that we have to keep and it makes us grumpy when we keep them, but the strategy for success, the plan for victory. At the end game of life, we hit that phase usually after about 50-years-old. I think father John said 60. I think I'm feeling like it's 50. I'm 51 now. It's the end game. You don't have any more time to waste at all, nothing. You don't want to do anything that isn't meaningful anymore.

There's no fluff in life anymore. You've got your eyes on the victory line, the finish line, and you're not going to let anything get in your way because if you fall at this point that someone is going to pass you up, you're going to lose the race. When you're without old, if you fall down, you usually just don't get up anyways. So we have that end game.

In the liturgical year, no matter what our age is, we've got to begin in game again, right now. In the beginning game is to take a look at what is coming and prepare for it and make our strategy, get our strategy to get it going now. It may just be some little moves. We're just moving the pawns around a little bit on the table, but we have an awareness that we're going to soon be in the middle game again with Christmas and Theophany. And then the end game is going to come with Lent and then we're going to have this chance again next year to look back and see how we have done.

So, may the Lord bless you all. You're doing a good job. Don't listen to any voice in your head saying that you're not. Christ is on your side. You are already victorious. You just have to recognize that you're on his side. You're on the winning side of this spiritual battle. Start rejoicing in that. Be glad. Be surprised that you're on the victorious side. Wow, I'm not actually in a battle. I'm on the winning side. Get excited about it. Pick up the tools. Put on the armor of Christ again.

Be ready to wield the sword of spiritual grace in our prayer, in our fasting, in our love for others, in our denial of our self, and our desire to take on the will of God. Fall in love with Jesus Christ in his church again this year. Become empowered that the beginning game of this year would be even better than last year. That the middle game would be even better, and the victory that we had last year would be an even better victory again this year.

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