



CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP GABRIEL OF COMANA

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble...” (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4)

Now we have reached the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. As every year, this is a moment of great grace that we are all experiencing together in joy, a special moment that I wish to share with you on this day.

Why are we all joyful? because the announcement of the angels to the shepherds is addressed to us, as it is to all people on earth: *“For unto you is born this day...a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!”*

The whole Old Testament speaks to us of this expectation of Salvation and Simeon the Elder expresses, in the name of the whole human race, the consequence of this mighty event that is the fulfilment of the promise of Salvation: *“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, ...for mine eyes have seen thy salvation...a light to lighten the Gentiles...”*

But how, today, ought we to live this *“great joy”* of which the angel speaks to the shepherds? To what does this announcement correspond and what echo does it find in our hearts?

The whole world, the universe, seems really to be sunk in deep darkness. Certainly we see in our towns and villages a great many sparkling decorations. For many the feast will be marked by festive meals and exchanges of presents, but, unfortunately, it seems that the reason for this feast, this event we are celebrating, is devoid of real meaning and most of our brethren no longer know why we are joyful.

Are we aware of the distress of people on this earth where all means are acceptable for forgetting suffering, means that are always unsatisfactory, ephemeral and artificial?

This whole description can leave us very pessimistic and lead us to say, *“What’s the good? Where is this salvation proposed by God?”*

Humanity appears to our eyes as deeply degenerate; man is disfigured. It rather seems as if we don’t know how to love!

Let’s not delude ourselves! The situation wasn’t much better, over two thousand years ago... And yet, there was a great change, an upheaval even: in Bethlehem the foolish love of God was made manifest! The only Son and Word of God, second Person of the Holy Trinity, fell in love with all the people of the earth, accepting the fruits of creation in its fragility, weakness and wounded state, just as it was then and as it still is today. Christ in the crib stretches out his arms to the humble shepherds and the great magi alike.

This infinite love, this limitless compassion, are given to us quite unconditionally and the arms stretched out to us will be all the more so when nailed to the wood of the Cross, proving to us just how much we are loved by our Lord Jesus Christ!

By accepting to come to this earth in the most fragile possible form - a little child - the Lord Jesus knows and experiences in the flesh, from his first cry, all man’s distress. So, we are all offered the benefit of Divine Love.

We are responsible for what we have received: we cannot be proud that we are Christian, because

everything has been given to us! But we should know how to give glory to God: *“Glory to God in the highest!”* We ought to incorporate into our whole life that phrase that we say at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, and associate in it all people on earth, in their joy and sorrow!

We ought not to taste God’s joy, while forgetting people’s distress.

The shepherds probably offered some lambs to Mary for her Son; the magi brought sumptuous presents. And what shall we give? Our thanks? Certainly! Joy at welcoming our Saviour? Of course! But don’t let’s forget to place at Christ’s

feet all our brothers in distress, for, as Saint Silvan the Athonite said: “Our brother is our life.”

Let us receive God’s joy which is given to us and “let us now lay aside all the cares of this life.” That is the Hope that springs forth on this Christmas night, so saving the world!

In the joy of the Nativity, I bless you all with much affection in the Lord.

Paris, Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral,
Christmas 2010

✦ Archbishop Gabriel of Comana,
Exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarch



PASTORAL VISIT OF ARCHBISHOP GABRIEL OF COMANA TO THE PARISH OF ST. PETER & ST. PAUL, CLAPHAM, LONDON 30TH-31ST OCTOBER 2010

Archbishop Gabriel joined us for the celebration of the Vigil, during which he blessed the people, on the evening of Saturday of 30th October. This came at the end of a busy day during which he had spent the morning chairing a meeting of the clergy of our Deanery, as he had the previous evening. After the vigil Archbishop Gabriel, the clergy and some members of the parish council were invited at the nearby home of Alexis Martinowsky, our parish treasurer, who prepared a most delicious meal!

On Sunday morning of the 31st October Archbishop Gabriel presided at the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. It was an immensely joyful occasion with a good-sized congregation of over 100 adults and children.

A special Episcopal Eagle mat depicting at its base historic buildings of London was used during the service. It was especially embroidered by Margaret Stevens, who during the last few years lead the team

of parishioners responsible for the production of all of our vestments and altar covers.

Amongst other things, Archbishop Gabriel spoke of the importance of fraternal relations and practical co-operation with other Christians and of the way in which we have a God given vocation to be a living icon of the ancient Apostolic Church for our all our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

After the Liturgy, Archbishop Gabriel read out an announcement which informed us that the parish had been bequeathed a house in Wimbledon, to be used in future as the parish house, together with a substantial legacy. This generous gift, received with deep gratitude from a much loved, founding member of our parish, who fell asleep in the Lord earlier this year, will enable us to continue the building up of our parish.

Special thanks and prayers were offered for the 25 years of priestly service of Father Alexander, our parish rector, and to celebrate the first anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of Father Ian.

The Divine Liturgy was followed by an excellent parish lunch in the church hall, consisting of food prepared by our parishioners, during which good use was made of the opportunity to talk with and get to know the Archbishop.

One impression of the two days that has remained with all of us with great clarity is that Archbishop Gabriel seemed to be totally ‘at home’ in our parish and, to an equal degree, the parish was ‘at home’ with him. It was a time of great joy in which the parish was able to be ‘The Church’ to the fullest extent – the people gathered around the Bishop in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

ORDINATIONS

► Archbishop Gabriel :

- Before the holy liturgy celebrated on Sunday, 21st November, the servant of God Alban (Stephen) Coombs was tonsured reader and subdeacon. During the holy liturgy he was ordained Deacon. He is attached to the parish of the Dormition of the Mother of God in London, Holborn.
- During the holy Liturgy, celebrated on Sunday, 21st November, I ordained the Hierodeacon Alexander (Willis) Priest. Hieromonk Alexander is attached to the Parish of the Dormition of the Mother of God in London, Holborn

EUCCHARISTIC COMMUNION IN OUR PARISHES

CHRISTOPHE D'ALOISIO AT THE ANNUAL PASTORAL ASSEMBLY

Fr Christophe D'Aloisio (Brussels, Parish of the Holy Trinity and of Saints Cosmas and Damien, the theological institute Saint John the theologian) developed the theme of the "Eucharistic communion in our parishes" reflecting on the legitimacy of the practice, frequent in the orthodox Church, to refuse to give Communion to some faithful with the motive that they are insufficiently prepared.

We could sum up the first talk in the following way:

To talk about the Eucharist it is necessary to rid ourselves of the common opinion that there exists 7 sacraments, amongst which is the Eucharist, and that these sacraments are operated by a priest or a bishop. These affirmations are not founded in the scriptures or in the orthodox theological tradition. This erroneous belief, but very present in the life of the parishes, has direct consequences on the life of the faithful.

It is of primary importance to understand that the Church knows only one sacrament. This sacrament is not a unique act, it is not the object of a human action. It is a subject, in the person of Christ himself. The Eucharist, communion of the body of Christ, is not a sacrament amongst others; it is the sacrament *par excellence*.

This unique sacrament is celebrated by the whole Church, the assembly of the people of God and not exclusively by a priest (or a bishop). (To note, obviously, this does not negate the necessity of the structure of ministries ordained in the Church, but this is a different question).

Succinctly, the function of the people of God, united in the Church, is to be the body of Christ, meaning to perform together the eucharist: it is this function that we end up calling liturgy. The moment of offering which is the eucharist is not an act separated in time or in space; and does not include spectators. There is no designated place, in the eucharist, for passive witnesses, non celebrants. A service where a minority will be admitted to the eucharistic communion should seem to be nonsense.

We have been able to observe, in the history of the Church, a loss of eucharistic and priestly conscience which has brought about an hierarchical conception of the ministry and of the sacraments. In this understanding the priest has become "superior" to the other faithful, a sort of "professional of the sacrament", and it therefore seemed natural that he restricted the access of the faithful to the sacraments which seemed to be operated by him. If the eucharist is considered to be a sacramental act amongst others, accomplished at the moment of each liturgy, then there is nothing exceptional about sometimes being excluded to be readmitted later. This conception, which is actually quite common, exists also in our archdiocese.

A renewal of the eucharistic conscience however came about in the twentieth century, and our archdiocese (by the Institute of Saint Serge, notably) was an actor in this renewal before becoming an inheritor of it. Since we know that the eucharist is the way of being of the Church-body of Christ. The eucharistic communion is not a pastoral option amongst others. It cannot be a question of giving or of refusing, except in serious cases: one is or one is not in communion. That which is advised by eucharistic ecclesiology cannot be described by the term of "frequent communion", because eucharistic communion, like life, is not measured in a quantitative manner. One cannot "live frequently", any more than one can "receive communion frequently". One lives or one does not live, just as one receives communion or one does not receive communion. As a member of the Church, we do not have any other choice than to receive communion. Going on from there, in practical pastoral terms of the communion, the big question is: "how to get all the faithful to receive communion?" and not: "which are the faithful that are authorised to receive communion?". If we cannot, in practice, go as far as to envisage forbidding to forbid the communion to the faithful, it must be nevertheless necessary to envisage to strongly stress within the parish that all the faithful become conscious of the profound unity that exists between, Church and the Eucharist. The practical consequence of this unity is: communion as a unique manner to live in the Church.

The discussion then turned to the responsibility that the priests feel with regard to the distribution of communion, responsibility which seems to be conferred on them by their ordination. At this we were reminded that when a priest refuses communion to someone, it is not just a harmless practice but an excommunication, of an exclusion of the body of the Church, and that it brings with it as much responsibility as the communion which he gives. We often put forward, as a reason to refuse communion, a certain unworthiness of the faithful or their lack of preparation or ignorance. But if we go along that path, it is necessary to admit that obviously nobody, not even the saints or the priests (the latter receive communion at every liturgy) cannot consider themselves worthy to receive communion, to demand the sacrifice of the son of God. Inversely none of the baptised can legitimately refuse the invitation of Christ who says: "Drink all of you, this is my blood". In practical terms, it was indicated that it is counterproductive to base a pastoral teaching on psychological trauma: refusing communion in front of the chalice is a practice to avoid, apart from in exceptional cases. Archbishop Gabriel has furthermore explicitly asked the clergy of the archdiocese not to refuse communion to orthodox visitors in the parishes. The fact that the priest does not know them, he insisted, does not justify excommunication.

APPROACHES OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN OUR PARISHES

CYRILLE SOLLOGOUB AT THE ANNUAL PASTORAL ASSEMBLY

It can still appear unfitting to some people to link the term “mission” to notions such as the Church or the parish. It must be said straightaway that the missionary dimension of the Church and the missionary vocation of the parish have been largely rediscovered during the twentieth century. A rapid look at the history of this rediscovery (missions and missionary figures of the Russian Church of the nineteenth century, the process before the council and the Council of Moscow of 1917-1918, birth of “missionary” movements like ACER or Syndesmos, research led by the theological Institute of Saint-Serge) shows us that our archdiocese is a depository of a rich and fertile tradition both in missionary experiences and in thought about the sense of the Church and of its mission. This observation must not awaken in any of us feelings of pride but rather must be a source of responsibility. It is our duty to become aware and to make others aware, especially at a parish level, of the missionary vocation of the Church.

To understand the close link which exists between the Church and mission, we must approach the mystery of the Church from two aspects, or rather two dynamics, or movements. We have on one hand the Church – convening, which unites and assembles those who are called into one place to celebrate the Eucharist. On the other hand, there are is the Church dispersed throughout the world, sent into the world, which by its presence transforms and sanctifies all men and the cosmos. Fr Cyrille Argenti, who in the context of dialogue with the Protestants has thought a lot about an Orthodox approach to mission, has said of the Church that it is “the laboratory where the Holy Spirit transforms the world into the Kingdom. This transformation is the exact aim of mission”. From then on, it is obvious that the mission of the Church is not an optional characteristic of the Church, neither is it secondary, in the sense where the Church existed without mission and then mission appeared later. Mission is part of the nature of the Church, of its essence, and the reason for being of the Church, and as such it directly concerns the parishes and all the faithful.

How can the mission of the Church be firmly incarnated in our parishes? Our parishes are called to live, and to grow at the perpetual rhythm of the double movement described above. It is important to maintain an equilibrium between these two movements so as not to fall into one of the

two extreme cases: turning inwards, which would transform our communities into real “liturgical ghettos” (Metropolitan Antony (Bloom)) or the opposite, disintegration, which would cause us to forget that the Church is the “heart of the world” and that Christians are in the world but not of the world.

First of all, there is the centripetal movement towards Christ: the faithful come together to nourish themselves with the bread of Life and brotherly communion. A pastoral work must be conducted to rediscover that which Fr Alexander Schmemmann has called the Sacrament of the Assembly. When we come to Church, it is to make up the Church and to become the Body of the Church. From which follows an active presence and a living participation of all the community at the liturgy. The movement towards the centre is then followed by a centrifugal movement, orientated towards the exterior, towards the world. It is fundamental to understand that we have been united to be dispersed or rather disseminated, that is to say spread like seed. It is in this encounter with the world that the life of the Church is tested, constantly renewed and given life. Deprived of this encounter the Church withers and ceases to be that for which it was created and sent into the world.

No place should be spared and we should, following Christ who descended into Hell for our salvation, go to where there is suffering, evil, violence, solitude, poverty. Mission, being the Church, concerns all the baptised without exception. It is important that in our parishes the liturgical and pastoral life should be considered as shared work and that the priests should not be burdened with all of it. Furthermore, the parish community and its bishop have the duty of discovering and encouraging charismas and ministers for the service of the community in general and of its mission in particular.

Finally, if the mission manages to take root in the Eucharistic community, its catholic dimension must not be forgotten; in this case the fact that the Gospel must be preached to the whole world. It is the task of each parish to awaken this missionary conscience by integrating missionary obligations into catechism and theological teaching, learning about different missions which exist throughout the world, or better still supporting these missions spiritually, materially, and humanly by sending missionaries.