



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF NEW JERSEY

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΝΕΑΣ ΙΕΡΣΕΗΣ

Feast of the Annunciation 2019

The Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy

Honorable Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Esteemed Members of the Metropolitan Council, Esteemed Members of the Parish Councils, Philoptochos Sisterhood, Faculty and Students of the Catechetical and Greek Afternoon Schools, Directors and Participants of all Youth Organizations, and all devout Orthodox Christians of the Greek Orthodox Communities of our Holy Metropolis of New Jersey

My Beloved in the Lord,

Today the Church celebrates something that we often take for granted. In the Feast of the Annunciation we not only see the initiation of our salvation through the response that the Mother of God gave the Archangel Gabriel, but we see an important element which is highlighted in this feast – freedom. We celebrate this freedom for a variety of reasons since it is an integral part of our Orthodox and cultural identity. Freedom cannot be reduced to a merely political expression. In reality, the idea of freedom is, first and foremost, a theological expression.

We first experienced this freedom in the Garden of Eden when God created humanity with a body and a soul. This gift of our being as humans contains a special element that was granted to no other creature in all of creation except the human and this is the gift of free will. Every other creature in creation functions by means of a desire to survive and instinct, but none of them have been given the gift of free will which we were specially granted by God. With free will, however, comes tremendous responsibility. God gives us the freedom to do as we wish. He respects our freedom so much that He allows us to disobey Him and to even hate Him. As the omnipotent and all-powerful God that He is, He also is surpassing in love so much so that He would allow His creation to defy Him. He does not force us to obey Him nor does He compel us to love Him, but He only asks for us to these things out of our own free will. When humanity fell in the Garden of Eden, God sought to allow our return to Paradise using the same freedom that we ourselves had used to distance us from Him. It would end up being a young woman by the name of Mary who would freely give her word to God so that she could be the Theotokos, the one who bore God in the flesh.

Mary's trust in the Lord was so great that she willingly undertook the tremendous responsibility of bearing Christ when she freely exclaimed, "*Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38). Though she knew that by saying yes she would endure great emotional anguish in seeing her son put to death in such a brutal manner, she also

knew that this was a calling from God who was asking her to fulfill this noble task. Such is the example we must take from the Theotokos for ourselves in our lives. We must be open to God's call for each of us and freely say yes. For by using our freedom not for ourselves, but for God and our neighbor, we store up riches in heaven.

Freedom also takes on an additional significance today as we celebrate the 198th anniversary of Greek Independence. It is not by happenstance that those of us of Greek heritage celebrate Greek Independence Day on the same day as the feast of the Annunciation. In the Annunciation we were freed from the ancient curse. In Greek Independence we were freed from the cruel oppression of the Ottoman Turks. In the Annunciation we sought freedom so that we could return to God. In Greek Independence, we sought freedom so that we could freely practice our faith. It is of the utmost importance to remember, however, that this gift of freedom is not a freedom *from* another, but a freedom *towards* love especially as we hear in Scripture, "*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love*" (Gal. 5:13). In celebrating and commemorating the heroic struggle of our Greek ancestors, we acknowledge that the freedom they sought was not just for themselves, but for the generations thereafter who would reclaim their homeland and pass down their Orthodox faith and traditions to the following generations.

My Beloved in the Lord, do not look at freedom as something abstract or only to be understood in a contemporary context. Instead, recognize that freedom is a gift from God which, when not used selfishly, is the epitome of love. Use your freedom to help others instead of helping just yourself. Use your freedom to follow God's commandments since He gave you such a magnificent gift. Use your freedom to live your Orthodoxy at all times and at every hour. Use your freedom in love because we are a reflection of our Creator and in doing so "*we might acknowledge that our individuality, which we so revere, is not entirely our own*".

It is my hope that you will reflect on the meaning of freedom principally as a Christian concept and then in a contemporary context. Furthermore, I pray that the Theotokos continues to be an inspiration for each and every one of you as the model of using freedom to the glory of God. Praying you have a blessed remainder to Holy and Great Lent, I remain

With Paternal Love and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Metropolitan Evagelos". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'M'.

† E V A N G E L O S
Metropolitan of New Jersey