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***Archpastoral Letter of His Eminence, Archbishop Michael,
For the Feast of Holy Pentecost 2017***

Prot. No. 01-004/2017
Sunday, June 4, 2017

Beloved Concelebrants at the Holy Altar
and Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

*My hope is God the Father; My refuge is God the Son;
My protection is God the Holy Spirit; O Holy Trinity, glory to Thee.*

Today, Pentecost Sunday, is the holyday on which we commemorate the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Holy Apostles in the form of fiery tongues. It also marks the Birthday of our Holy Orthodox Church. And it also commemorates the feast that enables us to understand the One True God as the Holy Trinity.

The proclamation of the Trinity, the One God in Three Persons, is based primarily on the experience of the early Christians. When they met Christ, they met God. St. Thomas proclaimed Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” St. Peter’s great profession of faith in our Lord was, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And our Savior Himself said, “Whoever sees Me, sees the Father ... I and the Father are one.” Saint Paul wrote: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.” And on Pentecost the Apostles experienced the overwhelming sense of the Divine Presence in their lives, and they remembered that this was the Spirit of God promised by the prophet Joel in the Old Testament.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not dropped from Heaven by God. In fact, the word “Trinity” is never even mentioned in the Scriptures. It came from the way the first followers of Christ experienced God. It was an experience before it ever became a doctrine. The doctrine was an intellectual expression of what the early Christians found to be compellingly real in their own lives.

Peter, for example, knew God in three ways: He knew God as “Father.” He knew God as “Son” in the person of Jesus Christ. And on Pentecost he experienced God as “Holy Spirit,” as a Presence and Power within his own heart and within the Church.

How clearly we see the Trinity in God’s plan of salvation. “God (the Father) so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son (Jesus) that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to abide with us forever.

This teaching of the Trinity is anchored in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus said in His great commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matthew 28:19). The Three Persons are mentioned specifically, yet their unity is strikingly shown in the use of the word “name”, not “names.” Our

Lord taught that no one can be a Christian unless he believes in the Trinity. This is the great gate, the only entrance into the Church, into Christianity.

The Trinity was present at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Christ stood there as the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father was heard saying, "This is My beloved Son." The Three Persons appeared together.

Saint Paul speaks of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit" in II Corinthians 13:14. And St. Peter mentions the Trinity in his first letter: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ ... chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ ..." (I Peter 1:2).

There are also glimpses of the Trinity in the Old Testament. We read in the first chapter of Genesis, "Let us make man in our image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26). In the next verse it says: "And God made man in His image and likeness." The plural words, "us" and "our," seem to suggest several persons. The singular word "His," however, suggests that the several persons are somehow one. The Hebrew word for God in the Old Testament, "Elohim", is plural, yet it takes a verb in the singular, and if an adjective goes with it, that too is in the singular. Three Persons – one God!

Our belief in the Trinity, although firmly anchored as it is in the Scripture, remains a mystery. It reveals the fullness of God to us and yet at the same time it hides Him from us. We can realize that the all-knowing and all-powerful God has to be more complex a being than we humans are. But no one can understand how God can be three distinct Persons and yet one God.

When we say that the Trinity is a mystery, we should define what we mean by "mystery." An excellent definition of "mystery" is found in the book, *What Is Faith?* by Eugene Joly: "A mystery is not a wall against which you run your head, but an ocean into which you plunge. A mystery is not night; it is the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it, but so luminous that everything in it is illuminated by it."

This is what the mystery of the Trinity is to us, like "the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it; but so luminous that everything is illuminated by it."

Augustine was walking across the seashore one day. His thoughts were centered on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. How could God be Three – and yet be One? He passed by a little girl filling a hole in the sand with water. He asked her what she was doing. Her reply was, "I'm going to empty the sea into this little hole I've dug." The wise theologian smiled and said to himself, "I am trying to do exactly what that little girl is doing. I am trying to crowd the infinite God into this finite mind of mine."

It is not that we cannot understand God at all. The very purpose of the Trinity is to help reveal God to us. The water in the sand hole is part of the ocean, yet not the whole of it. Out there, there is more – infinitely more. So it is with our knowledge of God. Though we can never understand Him completely, it is enough to know that He is a Father who loves me, a Son who saves me, a Holy Spirit who lives in me.

Throughout history, many analogies have been used to try to help us understand how God can be three Persons, yet one God. None of these analogies is perfect, yet each helps to cast some light on

the mystery. For example, a soul has three capacities – will, understanding, and memory; yet it is but one soul. Fire is a burning flame, an illumining light and a warming heat. In Ireland, St. Patrick compared the Holy Trinity to the shamrock – one clover with three leaves. In our church services, the bishop blesses with the triple candle – one candle with three flames. All these analogies are but weak human efforts to try to understand the Infinite God. It is good that God is so great, so high above our understanding. That is the kind of God we need – a God who cannot be captured with words, a God who stretches our thoughts so that we have to use symbols and sacraments to express Him.

Nonetheless, the word “mystery” never means sheer mystery in the New Testament. It means a divine secret which God has been pleased to reveal to us; a secret so mysterious that we could never begin to discover it for ourselves by human searching, if God had not taken the initiative and given us the clue. But He has done this in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

So then what does the Holy Trinity mean? What does the proclamation of God in Trinity say to us? It says, first of all, not only how mysterious God is but how accessible. He becomes one of us in Christ. He becomes man – sharing our sorrows, our weaknesses, our temptations, our suffering, our death. The ancient pagan gods were depicted high on Mt. Olympus – aloof, cold, unfeeling, and uninvolved. The Son of God comes to stand beside us as “Immanuel” – God with us. How near, how approachable, how available, how inescapable, every day, everywhere, with ordinary people in this ordinary world – this is the God Who became man in Jesus; the God Who at Pentecost came as the Holy Spirit to abide within each one of us, filling us with the Presence and Power of God – God above us, God beside us, God within us. This is what the teaching of the Trinity tells us. Without the Trinity, God would be unknowable as well as inaccessible to us.

The doctrine of the Trinity preserves God in His fullness. To the Christian, the word “God” by itself is incomplete, too vague. The Trinity amplifies and describes God more fully. To us, “God” means the Father Who loves us, the Son Who saves us, and the Holy Spirit Who abides within us. Anything else would not be the God of the New Testament. The meaning of the Holy Trinity sums up the whole Gospel, presenting us with the fullness of God’s presence, power and love: God above me. God beside me. God inside me.

As we celebrate this glorious Feast of Pentecost, the revelation to us of God as the Holy Trinity, let us recall the words of the French author, Francois Mauriac, who said that no one who is created by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and born anew by the Holy Spirit can count himself as unimportant. That is why the Orthodox Church never tires of singing in gratitude: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

May all the blessings that come from the Holy Trinity, the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves, be yours today and always.

With my humble prayers, archpastoral blessing, and sincere love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey