

THE HOPE TO WHICH THE LORD CALLS US

Pastoral Letter of the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church To the Clergy, Religious, and all the Faithful of the UGCC

*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,
that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,
having the eyes of your heart enlightened,
that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you
(Eph 1:16-18).*

Beloved in Christ!

In listening together to the Word of God and discerning the beating of the heart of our Church on the various continents of the world in the midst of a pandemic, we, the members of the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, united in our synodal deliberations in the 2021st year of our Lord with you, beloved sons and daughters of our Mother Church, through this letter wish to reflect on *how we are to be a vibrant and authentic Church of Christ, a community of the Lord's disciples, in the midst of the challenges of the present world – in peace and joy!* The answer to this question must be sought with profound faith in Jesus Christ, with the hope that is given us, with an awareness of the parental love of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit who acts in us. Looking towards the decade that lies before us, we wish to reflect on our common future together with you.

1. Ongoing Implementation of the Pastoral Plan “The Vibrant Parish – a Place to Encounter the Living Christ.” First of all, we would like to remind you of the foundations of our common program, “The Vibrant Parish – a Place to Encounter the Living Christ.” The implementation of this pastoral plan, which we launched in 2011, helped us keep focus on three questions: How are we to grow in faith? How are we to grow in holiness? How are we to grow in service and love? In particular, we focused on the first three elements of the “Vibrant Parish” program, which are: The Word of God and Catechesis, The Holy Mysteries and Prayer, Serving One’s Neighbour (Diakonia). These are points which express the internal nature of the Church, characterized her life from apostolic times, and remain

fundamental to this day for every generation of Christ's disciples. In these elements, we encounter Christ the Teacher, Christ the High Priest, Christ the Good Shepherd and Physician of soul and body.

In implementing the churchwide "Vibrant Parish" pastoral plan, we directed our attention primarily on the parish community as the place where the faithful most frequently encounter Christ through Christian teaching, common prayer, and service to neighbour. By fostering and invigorating our parishes, we hoped to renew our entire Church.

We should mention that the "Vibrant Parish" included other important elements: Leadership-Stewardship, Communion-Unity and a Missionary Spirit (see Pastoral Letter of His Beatitude Sviatoslav to the Faithful of the UGCC, "The Vibrant Parish - a Place to Encounter the Living Christ, December 2, 2011). And so, this program continues, and we must work on its implementation and development in every parish community.

At the same time, the "Vibrant Parish" elements should be applied not only to parishes, but also to every Christian community, both great and small, especially to the family. After all, the Christian family is called to be a place of teaching the faith, a school for personal and community prayer, as well as a centre for sacrificial service to one's neighbour. Indeed, this vocation applies to every Christian—deacon, priest and bishop, man and woman, the child and young person, religious, and layperson.

2. Pastoral Conversion. Any initiative requires a certain awareness of one's weaknesses. This should surprise no one. At the beginning of our Christian life, before we were brought to the cleansing waters of Baptism, it was necessary that we (as expressed for most of us as through our godparents) renounce Satan and all his works. The symbolism of the Baptismal service reminds us that we cannot follow Christ if we do not purify ourselves from all that leads us away from Him. This renunciation of the world of evil is not a one-time act, but continuous, and lasts throughout our life. There is no Christian in this world who does not need conversion and repentance: bishops, clergy, religious, the faithful, from the youngest to the oldest... We are all created in the image and likeness of our Lord. The image of God is always present in us, but the restoration of divine likeness requires our effort because the restoration of our fallen human nature involves persistent spiritual struggle, a regular examination of conscience, a continual openness to restorative divine grace. It is for this reason that in our liturgical tradition we constantly beseech the Lord: "That we may spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance."

At the heart of spiritual warfare is the constant effort to overcome our tendency to egoism through self-denial, following Christ's example. The Apostle to the Gentiles in his Epistle to the Philippians writes: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:5-7).

This applies, first, to labourers in Christ's vineyard—to us, bishops, and to our immediate co-workers, the priests, who today are called to a genuine pastoral conversion. What does this involve? At this time, we must speak seriously about our readiness to change

for the better, to utilize new means of communication between individuals, between the Church and a society that is rapidly transforming, and to constantly search for the most effective methods of being together and serving one another. We must reflect on reforming church structures, on a new dynamism and creativity in ministry, on introducing the kind of pastoral approaches that grant our laity the possibility to apply their talents in fulfilling the mission of the Church, on the ability to provide answers to real spiritual needs of the People of God, on being able to read “the signs of the times,” on the way we engage with others with a sense of shared responsibility (*sobornist*) and a spirit of cooperation, on overcoming the fear that stands in the way of establishing a renewed evangelical manner to be a shepherd of souls according to the heart of Christ in the 21st century.

Renunciation of evil, understanding historical errors and self-denial are not goals in and of themselves. These efforts should lead us to openness and accountability, to authentic spiritual accompaniment and Christian closeness. Therefore, we must constantly purify our intentions so that our actions reflect not our will but God’s will. In this way, we will follow the example of our Lord, the Christ, who said of Himself: “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38).

Conversion is not a simple denial of something, but a joining to someone—Jesus Christ, as St. Paul wrote: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Conversion makes us free to become, in Christ, a vibrant community of children of God. It brings a person closer to God, the Only Holy One. And this divine closeness—with us and to us—makes us fruitful in our spiritual life and pastoral ministry and makes the mission of the Church successful in all times and among all peoples.

3. Developing networks of communion. In those moments, when we are confronted with complicated choices and challenges, let us seek to find an answer to the question: What would Jesus do in this situation? How would He behave in my place? This approach can be adopted not only by individual persons, but also by institutions, our Church in particular, as she asks herself today: How are we to move forward? How do we preach the Kingdom of God in this fragmented, deeply divided and wounded 21st century world? How are we to be a light to today’s world?

We can find many answers when we examine the life and ministry of our Lord. First of all, Christ often retreated into solitude in order to pray. Having become man, the Son of God was constantly watchful that the will of the Father be fulfilled in Him. He described the fulfilment of God’s will as daily nourishment: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4:34). By maintaining a spiritual “vertical connection”—obedience to the Father in incessant prayer and in fulfilling His salvific will, our Lord built His relations with others in light of divine will—something that contemporary culture expects from us, His disciples.

Jesus was a master when it came to creating interpersonal relations and communion: through encounters, healings, sermons He built and developed a circle of disciples, followers, and witnesses—which became of foundation for building up the Church. Let us remind ourselves that the basis of the Church is not a *thing*—a code of rules and practices,

ideology, a branchlike structure or a pyramid, but *Someone*—Christ Himself: “In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21). Christ constantly called unto Himself different people, laid foundations for a common listening to the Word of God, community prayer, and common ministry.

This manner of working and style of mission was adopted by St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. Through tireless preaching and multiple journeys, letters, and epistles, he develops, strengthens, and brings together networks, communities of recognizable, concrete persons—not nameless masses—gathered in the Lord’s name. Modelling themselves on their Teacher, the apostles, who became missionary disciples, remained close to individual persons and communities. They hastened from one community to another, fostering unity in faith and solidarity in love. Their successors acted in the same manner throughout history.

This network of fraternal community in faith and solidarity in love is so important that even in times of communist persecution on our maternal lands, members of our Church under the leadership of its pastors, in spite of great restrictions and danger, continued to maintain it, and did so, with God’s grace, rather successfully: in the underground monasteries operated in secret, seminaries educated new priests, the faithful gathered in private homes for prayer and liturgical services.

Even more today we are called to such personal and ecclesial relationships at different levels: in the family, school, workplace, in the parish and eparchy and between eparchies, religious communities and monasteries.

Love is at the core of communion among Christ’s disciples (see 1 Cor 13:13).

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). The community of Christ is, in essence, a network of love and service. Witness to this is wonderfully borne in the Acts of the Apostles: “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (Act 4:32). How good when there is cooperation and solidarity! This network of souls through the millennia embraced the destitute, healed wounds, overcame divisions among people, raised those who found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, and continues to do so to this day.

The development of media technologies—from the discovery of writing and printing to the internet—expresses this same communication network, which is natural, indeed, essential for a human being. Human life in its many facets is a network of intricate relationships. The famous Catholic writer of the 20th century, Thomas Merton, noted “No man is an island.” We are rediscovering this in contemporary culture with its tendency towards individualism and polarization and are experiencing this deeply in a time of pandemic. The quarantines demonstrated that the network of human relations can both destroy and be life-giving. We need contact with other people, like we need air. However, such relationships must be healthy, whole, marked by an ability to listen and hear one another, and not poisonous or toxic. We must become a Church of healthy relationships, a friendship of communities of Christ’s disciples, who think in common and act synodally, experiencing together the common pilgrimage of the created world towards its Creator,

with Christ at his head. Let us beseech the Holy Spirit that in all our relationships His fruit be brought forth: love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (see Gal 5:22-23).

4. The Path to Curing Wounds and Healing Traumas. Journeying through the cities, towns, and villages of the Holy Land, Jesus gathered disciples and preached the Kingdom. At the same time, He demonstrated the essence of the Kingdom in a manner understood by all—listening, showing mercy, and healing: “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction” (Mt 9:35). He healed haemorrhage and blindness, demonic possession and leprosy, paralysis, and the ultimate human illness—death. Healing is an expression of God’s love and a sign of the presence of His Kingdom: “He welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing” (Lk 9:11). The Lord provides us an example of how we are to act and preach—to heal the wounds and illnesses of others, especially in the context of the lived experience of genocidal totalitarian regimes, intent on destroying the human being and crushing its dignity.

We cannot dream about the future of our Church if we do not reflect on the need for a healing of traumas—personal, familial, societal, ecclesial, national, historical, and global. Contemporary understanding of how the human psyche works, the dynamics of consciousness, will, and feelings of a person, the experience of pastoral ministry and relationships demonstrate how all of us need healing. Entire generations of our Church’s faithful experienced great upheavals, which, unfortunately, have not ceased, but take on new forms. The terror of genocidal regimes and world wars, colonialism and violence, imprisonment and forced emigration, the new war and the pandemic—all leave profound wounds on human souls, on families, and on all of society.

These wounds require the healing of God’s mysterious, tender, and personal touch. Otherwise, pain, fear, and mistrust lead to aggression, destructive passions, and addictions. Where there is no genuine love among God’s sons and daughters, there seductive, populist ideologies take root. Cheap promises, simplistic and deceptive answers to the profound needs of the human soul cripple and deform the psyche and thinking of entire societies. The power that heals, the grace of the Holy Spirit, capable of healing the wounds of the past and present—these come from an encounter with the living Christ, the Physician of soul and body, Who makes Himself present in the mutual love of His followers. And the vehicle for this Source of healing is and must be our Church, all its communities and institutions.

The pandemic, which every one of us is experiencing, has given us the opportunity to see even more clearly the face of a crippled humanity and the needs of the wounded person, who suffers from loneliness, fear, anxiety, addictions, disquiet, and injustice. We need a Healer and we ourselves must be instruments of healing in order to reveal the Kingdom that we preach. It is the road of healing, which intertwines with the paths of repentance, that opens up the way towards an authentic mission. The children of the Church, who have experienced her life-giving love, and have understood their Baptismal vocation to divine

sonship and daughterhood, become missionaries who preach a Gospel of redemption and healing.

5. Closeness and Practical Attention to the Poor and Marginalized. Paradoxically, we reach healing not when we focus on ourselves, on our difficulties, needs and problems, but when we open up in compassionate and merciful love towards our fellow human beings, seeking to grant them the experience of God's healing presence and life-giving love through our human presence and closeness. Our Lord spoke of this Gospel paradox: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). To love one's life for Christ's sake means dedicating it to serving our neighbour, especially the most destitute, poor, marginalized, those whom the Lord calls "the least of these my brothers" and says that everything that we do for one of these, we have done for Him (Mt 25:40). Thus, in serving one's neighbour out of love, a person "finds their own life," that is, rediscovers the greatest truth about themselves as a beloved child of God, created out of love and called to love.

One of our contemporaries, Carlo Maria Martini, rightly noted: "God is present in each act of love, in all signs of forgiveness, in the commitment of those who fight against violence, hate, want and suffering." That which characterizes Christian love is its concreteness. As our neighbour with his unique daily needs and miseries is concrete, so must God's presence in our works of mercy be concrete: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, receive the sojourner into our home, visit the sick and imprisoned, etc. (see Mt 25:35-36; Is 58:6-7; Pastoral Letter of the Synod of Bishops of the UGCC of 2020: "Only One Thing Will Remain Yours - That Which You Have Given to the Poor!", 1)

Our service to neighbour frequently finds expression in meeting their immediate and basic needs and necessities. However, Divine love compels us to reach towards the root of human suffering and misfortune, which is often found hidden behind human sin, and appears in community relations, poisoned by injustice. Thus, our Christian efforts will bear even greater fruit, if we, along with meeting the needs of a specific person, our neighbour, also strive for the healing of social sinfulness and so establish the common good, from which every member of the human community will be able to draw hope.

His Holiness, Pope Francis, calls on us to become increasingly a Church that reaches out beyond herself to serve. And in this insight is found the call to each of us to leave our own comfort zones, to move beyond ourselves and increasingly open ourselves up to our fellow human beings. In practice, this means to direct our attention and steps towards concrete people who live "on the periphery" of today's world, filled with fear, sadness and hopelessness; towards those whose cry for help does not reach the ears of their surroundings, hardened by indifference and egoism, but should find resonance in the heart of a person of genuine faith, giving rise in his or her life to streams of solidarity, compassionate listening and merciful love. Thus, in our contemporary world, immersed in the fear of death and anxiety before the coming day, we will be able to bring a sign of hope that "does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Indeed, our treatment of neighbour,

our readiness to service will become a sign of new hope and a testament to the authenticity and depth of our faith.

6. The Christian Family – A Domestic Church. Speaking and preaching about the Christian family, the venerable Metropolitan Andrey was convinced that it provides “teaching, on which depends and is supported the future of the entire people” (*On the Christian Family*, 1900). In the same spirit of his great predecessor, Patriarch Josyf, in the twilight of his life, wrote: “Parents, the Christian Family – that is the foundation for a healthy society, a people, a nation. It is the pledge of their growth and strength! And thus, I beseech you: preserve it, and where it has been shaken, restore the authentic Christian family among the Ukrainian people, as the undying hearth of life and health for the Church and People” (*Testament of His Beatitude Patriarch Josyf*). And so, our Church, continuing the work of these illustrious righteous leaders, gives special attention to the spiritual care and spiritual accompaniment of families.

The past year of 2020 brought suffering to millions of people across the globe because of the pandemic. This time of unprecedented challenges demonstrated, with particular clarity, what a great gift it is for us, Christians, to be able to gather together in prayer “in the same place,” as the first disciples of Christ did (see Acts 2:1), breaking the Eucharistic Bread and calling upon the Holy Spirit, who transfigures the community of God’s children, making it the living Body of the Risen Saviour. All of us experienced with great pain, and, in part, still continue to experience a “Eucharistic hunger,” a longing for live participation in the Liturgy. Quarantine restrictions, established by the governments of many countries, forced us for a certain time to leave our churches and worship from our homes. Some have seen in this movement of the People of God the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by” (Is 26:20).

With gratitude we can attest today that our households and Christian families in this difficult time became a place of great and convincing faith witness. Parents were given an opportunity to read the Holy Scriptures with their children, to pray and take part in online-streaming of services from parish or cathedral churches. The experience of our underground Church, so fresh in the memory of the older generation, was put to use once again, showing the unique and irreplaceable role of the family in fostering and transmitting the faith. Nothing can replace the good example of practicing Christian parents. Society today needs the witness of the healthy Christian family, possibly more than at any other time in human history.

However, many a family became painfully aware of its limitations and weaknesses, which became apparent in those long weeks and months of quarantine restrictions. Many a family experienced the loss of loved ones, crisis, and tension. More than a few persons realized how they are unable to show patient and merciful love towards their closest. Many a parent sensed that they weren’t prepared to guide their children with wisdom and in a God-like manner, to support one another on the faith journey in the midst of the turbulent sea of the pandemic and the difficulties associated with it. To these human, spiritual, and

psychological limitations were added external factors such as the loss of employment, reduction of salary, which became a source of additional suffering and anxiety in families. To all our families we wish to express reassurances of our closeness and prayers.

At the same time, we renew our appeal to the clergy to give central attention to family ministry, catechesis of the family, which is called to be an image of the community of the Most Holy Trinity in the world, and a sign of hope for all humanity. A believing family, that “community of life and love which God himself wanted for man and woman” (St. John Paul II, General Audience, October 8, 1997), and which church tradition call a “domestic church,” is to be “the path of the Church” for all times. In the same address, St. John Paul II spoke of this: “Yes, the family is eminently the ‘path of the Church’ which recognizes in it an essential and irreplaceable element of God’s plan for humanity. The family is ‘the privileged place for personal and social development.’ Whoever fosters the family, fosters the human person; whoever attacks it, attacks the human person. Today the family and life are confronted by a fundamental challenge which affects human dignity itself.”

7. Sense of Mission and Going forth into the World. The mission of the Church is expressed in ministry of the word and healing through being present to the human person in his or her joys and sorrows, successes and challenges, through listening to the voice of our neighbour and preaching the Gospel of mercy to the destitute of all times. The Church is called to go forth in order to preach the Gospel, baptize all nations (see Mt 28:18-20), and she does so by overcoming barriers—linguistic, ethnic, cultural, racial, and social. The words of Jesus, spoken to the apostles after the Resurrection, indicate to us the dynamics that God expects from us: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Pope Francis teaches: “In our day Jesus’ command to ‘go and make disciples’ echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church’s mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary ‘going forth.’ Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.” (Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 20). Sainly pastors have recognized the call of the Holy Spirit and been able to reach out beyond the usual spheres of ministry in order to spread the light of Christ’s Gospel in their contemporary societies. Our blessed priest-martyr, Omelyan Kovch, pre-empted by decades today’s movement of “the Church going forth” when in his renowned booklet, “Why are our people fleeing from us?”, which he wrote while imprisoned in Berezhany in the late 30s of the last century, he stated: “Already the great pope Leo XIII uttered a profound thought: ‘Fuori di sacristia!’ (Out of the sacristy!). Yes, in our time a priest must truly cultivate his activity outside the sacristy. Therefore, if a priest wishes to keep his flock in faith, in church and rite, he must ‘go forth from the sacristy’ and actively participate in the community life of his parish... Should he fail to do this, the ground will disappear under his feet, as has already happened to more than one.”

We should not limit ourselves to preaching the Word of God only to “our own,” but must go and preach to diverse nations in their own language. Let every one of us – bishop, priest, deacon, seminarian, monk, sister, boy, girl, father, mother – respond to this appeal of the Successor of St. Peter to “go forth in mission” where we live, work, rest.

This “going forth” will be fruitful and blessed only if every one of us will do it with Christ and in unity with the Church: “In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded. That is what the angel proclaimed to the shepherds in Bethlehem: ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people’ (Lk 2:10).” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 23). Let us move forward, going forth with courage to search for those who are distant, and invite those, who remain at the bottom of society. Let us show initiative! (see *idem*, 24).

Beloved in Christ! If the proposals and priorities given here are to become the program of our Church for the next years, it is necessary that each of us, you and we, understand our vocation and our responsibility before God for the spiritual gifts we have received from Him. Let us cast aside all that keeps us from Christ! Let us open ourselves to the gift of the Holy Spirit who descends on each of us and bears His fruit through us! Let us be living icons of God’s goodness in the world! Let us be bearers of peace and gentle evangelists of Christ’s love, a love that does not impose, but invites to a life of communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Let us constantly keep before our eyes the example of our zealous predecessors in faith, from apostolic times to the new martyrs and confessors of faith of the 20th century, who in the face of all the challenges of their time were able to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Rom 12:12).

Let the prayer of the chief apostle Peter, a living witness to our hope, be on the mouth and in the heart of each of us: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1Pt 1:3-4).

The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

On behalf of the Synod of Bishops of the
Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

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Given in Kyiv,
at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ,
on the day of the Holy Martyr Longinus the Centurion
October 29 (16), 2021 A.D.