

Sermon—September 7, 2014—Ten Years in Tampa

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

The word decade is a big word. We tend to measure our lives in segments that are much less than decades—we celebrate yearly anniversaries and birthdays, quarterly seasons, feast and fast periods in the church, and daily accomplishments. Yet, the biggest birthdays and anniversaries are the ones that have a 0 behind the first number—and so ten years doing something somehow holds more weight than 9 or 11 years of doing it.

By God's grace, this week I passed ten years of service as the priest of our parish. I remember my first Sunday—I joined what is probably a small club of clergymen who didn't show up for their first service. Turns out nobody showed up that Sunday, September 5, as a hurricane ripped through Tampa. There was even a wedding scheduled and nobody showed up for that, not even the bride and groom. So, my first liturgy ended up being on September 8, the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, which was a Wednesday that year, and my first Sunday liturgy finally happened on September 12.

I remember that morning that both Aris Rogers and Charlie Hambos were serving in the altar. I am so thankful that they are still at the right and left hands up there. Nick was the chanter, Artie directed the choir and Jim played the organ. I am thankful to God that all of these people who assist me in the Divine Liturgy are still here with us. And I am thankful to these five especially for all that they have done for me and for this parish in our liturgical life in the past ten years. The most important ministry of the church is the Divine Liturgy. There is nothing more sacred, holy, or intimate in our lives than the personal encounter with Jesus Christ that occurs at the Divine Liturgy. And there is no more important moment in the life of our Community than the moments we gather for the Divine Liturgy. Thus I am especially thankful to those who have helped in the Divine Liturgy for the past ten years. I am remembering three other voices that were present on my first Sunday who have gone to their eternal rest—John Palios, Dr. Demetrios Halkias and Marilyn Neyland—all made an impact on our parish, each made an impact on my life.

Looking back ten years ago, I can honestly say that the beginning of my ministry brought me mixed feelings. I left a church community that I absolutely loved, that absolutely loved me, in other words, a good match, and I came to a world of unknowns. I didn't know anyone, no one knew me, and for anyone who has ever been the new kid in school, the new family in the neighborhood, or the new man at work, you know that it is not something that makes us leap for joy. There were so many names to learn, and things to do. I remember feeling intimidated about not knowing any names at Communion. I remember going in the office and not knowing where anything was kept, or how anything worked—who made the prosphora? Mary Nenos. Who is Mary Nenos? Who cleans the church? Engie Halkias. Who is that? And so on. And thankfully both of those women are still here, doing what they were doing ten years ago. I hope and pray you are both here ten years from now.

In the ten years I have been here, I have made innumerable missteps. I spoke a few weeks ago about forgiveness. And I mentioned that if we didn't have the concept of forgiveness, then there would be no hope for any of us. Because any human relationship, from working relationships, to friendships, to marriage, to parenting is going to be marred by missteps. And if we keep count of the missteps, especially for ten years, it will be impossible for any relationship to survive. The only way our relationships survive is if we forgive one another. I know that I have been far from the perfect husband, the perfect father, the perfect friend, the perfect co-worker and the perfect priest. Sometimes I have tried and I have failed. Sometimes I didn't try. And sometimes the human side of me led me to try to fail, to be less than what our Lord calls us to be as Christians, what He has called me to be as a priest. So, as I reflect on ten years that have passed, I pause a moment to reflect on the times when I did less than what I could have or should have done, and I humbly ask your forgiveness. No one is perfect. Only God alone is perfect.

Over the past decade, I have had innumerable joys. Ten times we have made the journey of Lent and Holy Week together, and have proclaimed that Christ is Risen on Pascha. Ten times we have decorated the church for Christmas, and gathered on Christmas night to proclaim the birth of Christ once again. The tray of flowers for Holy Cross Day has gotten heavier with each passing year—that's not just because I've gotten older, it's because there are more people in attendance. The weddings, the baptisms, the chrismations, the lighter moments, the laughs, the inside jokes (JOY), playing the drums at the festival (thank you John Demas), summer camp, the GOYA retreats and lock-ins, these have brought great joy to my life and my ministry. I have actually slept for nearly a month of the past ten years in my office because of the many lock-ins we've had with GOYA. Last night we had another lock-in, 30 GOYAns and advisors spent the night here, and I got my usual 2.5 hours of sleep on the recliner in my office. And while I feel exhausted, I feel overjoyed at these beautiful opportunities to spread the message of the Gospel in ways that are fun and also meaningful. I feel especially glad to have shared this event with my now co-worker, our pastoral assistant Charlie, of whom I could not be more proud. Charlie is going a great job making sure our team is a winning team, and I pray that we will work side by side for years to come.

There have been innumerable moments of inspiration in the past ten years. I am inspired first and foremost by everyone who I've met in this church for the sacrament of confession. After the liturgy, the most joyful moments of my ministry are spent on the solea of the church, in front of the icon of Christ, watching people grow in their faith, listening to them articulate their beliefs, and witnessing them taking away healing, direction and new beginnings. I'm so thankful that when this church was designed, they put a beautiful stained glass window right over the door—because that is the place I look at in church that brings me the most joy. When I am praying for you after confession, as you are kneeling, my eyes go to that window. I am thankful that I have had thousands of opportunities to pray and to look at it over the years. I am inspired by all those who have overcome adversity in the past ten years—there have been so many tears shed here, during times of sadness and frustration, innumerable encounters in my office, in homes, in hospitals, at funerals, times when people didn't think they had the strength to go on, and yet they did. Many of you have overcome illness, strife, stress

and life challenges. You've grieved the loss of loved ones and still found hope. A few of you have lost children—your ability to overcome what I think is the greatest of life's challenges inspires me more than you will ever know. I have also been inspired by those who have given so generously of themselves to our church—whether it is a sacrifice of time, or talent or financial resources. I can't count how many times the call has gone out for some kind of help here, and someone has always answered the call. When someone comes to me and says "I'll do it," I can't tell you how inspiring and motivating that is. And many of you, too many to thank by name, have given incalculable numbers of hours to further the work of this parish and for this I am inspired and profoundly grateful.

By God's grace and with your help, we've achieved a lot of things in the past ten years. Some involve quantity—the number of people who attend church each Sunday is awesome, even during summer. The number of people who come to weekday services has steadily increased. We'll have well over 150 kids in Sunday school this year, nearly 40 in GOYA, over 40 altar boys—these are positive signs of a very healthy parish, the participation of our youth. In the past ten years we've added a youth choir, a welcoming committee, a community outreach program to feed the hungry, a young at heart ministry for our seniors, a bookstore, we've revived the Oratorical Festival, started a young adult group, opened a food pantry, and now have 6 small group Bible studies. We've increased our stewardship and our membership. Ten years ago, we had 220 families, now it's about 350. Ten years ago our stewardship monetary contributions were \$120K, this year we'll exceed \$400K. My first month at St. John, we had a half-time secretary. Now we've got a full time Administrator, a book-keeper and a pastoral assistant to man the office. When I first got here, our offices were two small rooms in the Kourmolis Center. We've upsized that too. More important than quantity though, is quality. In the past ten years, there have been an increasing number of people who go to confession, who go to Bible study, who are going to community outreach events and an increasing number of people who are talking about our faith, who are better understanding the faith and who are living the faith! This is awesome!

Nothing here could have been achieved without two critical things—first, the blessings of God. That is why we offered the Artoklasia today, to thank God for His many blessings on us. And secondly, nothing could be achieved with the help of many people. This morning, after church, we have our annual ministry faire, where you have the opportunity to not only learn about the many ministries in our church but to sign up to participate in them. Those ministries make the church what it is—on the back of the bulletin and Messenger, we list our ministries and the ministry heads—over the years, many of those names have changed but I am thankful to everyone who has served as a ministry head, or has contributed to any of our ministries—I am thankful to everyone who has played a role, however large or small, in the life of this community. And I am thankful to everyone who has made a positive impact, large or small, on my life and the life of my family. I'm thankful to everyone who prays for us, who worships here, everyone who has showed unexpected kindnesses. I'm thankful for all of it. I thank God and I thank you.

In the past ten years, life has changed—there was no facebook when I got here, or Twitter or Instagram. Most churches didn't have a website and we didn't email the Messenger. And we weren't obsessed with text messaging. I remember one night after a parish Council meeting, Chris Kavouklis was showing me his phone and said to me "Father you gotta get one of these—you can get on the internet and send emails all kinds of neat stuff." And I thought, who needs that, I'm happy with my simple phone. Well Chris, you were right, I needed to get one of those—where would we be with out our smart phones these days? My personal life has also changed—Ten years ago we didn't have son, now he is almost 8. The clock on our marriage was at 9 years, now it is at 19. I was a young 32, now I'm a not so young 42. I had nearly a full head of hair, and now I've gotta put a lot of sunscreen on it when I go to the beach. Hopefully my life experience has made me a better priest and a more effective pastor.

Despite all of the changes that have happened in our world, there is one thing that has stayed the same—The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite our efforts to dumb down the message, and to normalize things that the Bible and our society have always viewed as immoral, the truth of the message remains the same, as does the mission of the church, which is to spread that Gospel. The Gospel doesn't promise easy living in this life, but it promises eternal life when life on earth is over. The Gospel doesn't tell us to force our beliefs on other people but it also tells us not to put the Light of Christ under a shade, but to put it on a stand so that it can give Light to people.

The basic lesson of the Gospel is this morning's Gospel reading—that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. The reference to Moses in the Gospel lesson relates to an occurrence in the Old Testament book of Numbers where venomous snakes were attacking the Israelites who were wandering in the desert. The Israelites were complaining about the long journey. There were lots of complaints about their food being bad, a lot of "woe is me" that still finds its way into the world and into our lives today. And as the Israelites were crying out in their miserable and now very dangerous situation, God told Moses to make a bronze snake around a staff and show it to the people and those who looked upon it were saved. As a side comment, you see on many ambulances and many medical advertisements, the staff with the snake around it—I didn't realize until Charlie pointed it out to me on Friday, that this sign is from the Bible. Back to the story, God provided the means for salvation from the snakes—however, the people had to do something, they had to look at the staff. They had to work in tandem with the Lord—He provided the means but they had a part to play. Jesus was lifted up on a Cross, the way the serpent was lifted up on the staff. And when we look upon Christ, and internalize His sacrifice for us, we too can be saved from the snakes of this life so that we inherit eternal life. Again, God has provided the means for our salvation—we don't have to go out and find the means or create the means—God has created that for us, in the supreme sacrifice of His Son. There is work for us to do in tandem with this—we have to look upon Christ, to internalize what His sacrifice means for us, and to live as He has asked us to live, with the joy of the Cross in front of us, making out own sacrifices for God and preparing to be Resurrected in Christ at the end of our earthly lives.

I told the GOYAnS early this morning in church, what a great opportunity we have each Sunday when we celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Yes, we all agreed, even me, that the Liturgy can at times seem boring and tedious. Not every celebration of the Liturgy this past years has inspired me—there were plenty of them where I just showed up and gave a less than stellar effort or took away less than profound inspiration. But there have been times the liturgy has moved me to tears, where I have truly felt the presence of God on me. And so I guess it's okay that some of those liturgies were not memorable, but the contrast helps set aside many that truly were. The most profound thing we can do in our lives is come to church on Sunday morning to touch Christ and allow Christ to touch us in a physical and tangible way. You can pray outside of church and I hope you do. You can have fellowship with your friends outside of church and I hope you do. But thing we can only do here is commune with Christ in this most profound and special way. And to think that Christ, in His great love for mankind, accepts me, and all my stupidity, He accepts ME, through His love and mercy and allows ME to stand before Him, to hold Him, to receive Him, this is truly something for which I, and we, ought to be so grateful. I didn't have the best of days yesterday—it was the proverbial whatever could go wrong went wrong. And when I was speaking in church this morning to our GOYAnS, I felt foolish. How bad of a day could yesterday have been, when I wasn't even 24 hours away from touching Christ?! And how bad can today be when I have just touched Him, and He has just touched me? How bad can this week possibly be when I have liturgy tomorrow and the gift of doing this all again next Sunday?!

I wrote in the Messenger about setting some goals for this next decade—yes, there is work to do on our infrastructure. There is a festival looming around the corner. We need to increase our stewardship giving and retire a significant debt. There is the dream of getting a second priest, and perhaps we need to start the conversation about a bigger building so we can all fit in it more comfortably. But the number one goal of the community and everyone in it should be the same—a closer relationship with Christ. Because when we seek Christ first, the other things all fall into line. When we go through life without Christ, it's like building a structure without a foundation—it quickly comes down. I'll never forget the conversation I had with my Dad shortly before he died, which I have spoken about many times—When I asked my Dad if he believed in God, he said yes. When I asked what he believed about God, he said he didn't know. And so the first challenge of my second decade that I'm giving to you is to make sure that you not only you believe in God but that you know what you believe, so that as we pray in the liturgy, that you have confidence and without fear of condemnation to dare to call upon our Heavenly God, our Father, and to say, "Give us today our daily bread", provide for us the means to get through today, so that days become months, and months become years and years today become a decade, where we look back and feel progress, not just in our earthly journey but in our spiritual journey as well.

Every time we come into church, we begin our experience of worship by lighting a candle. The candle represents Christ. The Light of Christ who enlightens each person who comes into the world. We are told in John 1 that the darkness can never overtake

the Light. And Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that we have to let our Lights shine in the world. The first thing God created was Light, so Light also represents beginnings. This is why the focal point in church on Pascha is light, specifically lighting our candles, so that we may begin anew in the light of the resurrected Christ. Each time we enter the church and light a candle, we have the opportunity for a new beginning. So we don't need to wait for Pascha, or the milestone of a new decade to have a new beginning. A new beginning is possible at any time.

Today, however, is a milestone in my life and in the life of our community. It is a day to look back and be thankful. It is a day to look ahead and be hopeful. And that's why I'll start the second decade of my ministry by reminding you about the light. That light of Christ is often the difference between joy and despair, between seeing the bad in something and seeing the good in it, it is the Light of Christ that inspires courage when we are afraid. And it is Christ who makes the difference not only in this life, but in everlasting life.

In the past year and a half, there is one verse from which I have taken much inspiration and direction, and I close with this verse from Philippians 4:13—I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I am thankful to Christ who has brought me safely through ten years of service at St. John. I am praying for His guidance, His wisdom and His protection to guide me through the next ten.

I am thankful to you for sharing ten mostly wonderful years. I pray that we will share many, many more together. Amen!