



"FAITH. FAMILY. COMMUNITY."

HOLY TRINITY GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH



Our Mission: "To proclaim and live the Orthodox Christian Faith in its fullness as faithful members of the Body of Christ."

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Bear One Another's Burdens

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"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6.2). In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Unless you are totally off the grid and haven't spoken to anyone else in Pittsburgh over the last few days, I will make the assumption today that you are aware of current events in the local Orthodox community. One of our beloved local clergy and a son of this blessed parish has been arrested and charged with theft. We are all wounded. We are all hurting. And we are all bearing a great burden.

I say "we" in the larger sense because this has affected so many: the parish where the events occurred; this parish where he grew up and was ordained; the families and the faithful who have walked together for so long trusting and believing that their church and their clergy are worthy of that trust. Him. His family, so faithful in the life of the Church. We are all wounded. We are all hurting. And we are all bearing a great burden.

It's so tempting to just listen, presume, judge and talk. However, Elder Thaddeus of Serbia, a great spiritual guide of the last century, challenges us to be careful when facing such burdens. Though he reposed in 2003, way before the era of social media, tweeting and click-baiting, he warned people facing such issues that they need to use compassion when listening and restraint when commenting. "We are oppressed by our own cares, worries and weaknesses," he says. This, I believe, was his way of lovingly cautioning us to check our attitude, our pride and blindness toward our own faults, just as Jesus did when he warned those were about to stone the adulteress woman, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8.7).

So where can we turn? Certainly not to the news as it sacrifices souls for ratings. Not to Internet blogs and YouTube cheap shots seeking to profit from the suffering of others. Nor to the gossip corners we would like to say we don't take part in but sometimes cannot resist. Again, Elder Thaddeus sheds spiritual light to lead us out of that darkness. "If we have a burden beyond our bearing, we must turn to the Lord immediately, like this: 'O Lord, I cannot even bear my own infirmities, yet now I must bear the burden of another. I cannot cope with all this responsibility.'"

But it is a responsibility we cannot as a Christian community escape, for the opening quote from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians clearly lays out our charge: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6.2). And the law of Christ is love. So we must bear that burden, but Elder Thaddeus says we cannot do it alone. Where do we start?

Saint John Chrysostom, a fourth century Patriarch who was no stranger to suffering, being exiled three times, calls us back to home base as Christians and reminds us. "Of all the afflictions that burden the human race, there is not one, whether spiritual or bodily, that cannot be healed by the Holy Scriptures." And what do those holy scriptures say about one of us being wounded? The Epistle of Saint James makes it clear: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Having now had his sins confessed publicly and even broadcast on TV, have we paid heed to the rest of that command, to pray for one another? We must, because the path to the healing we all need is paved with prayer. So I ask us all, in the last few days we may have been shocked, hurt, angry, disappointed, confused or weighed down by many burdens...but have we prayed? Have we asked for prayers over this? If any of us have had a

conversation about the events of the past few days without saying, "Please pray for him. Please pray for his family. Please pray for the Church. Please pray for our priests." That is what a Christian family does. We know our priests are on the front lines of spiritual warfare and some get taken down by the evil one. We are not immune. He has plenty of weapons in his toolkit: divorce, addiction, moral lapses and more. Do we walk by them as they lay bleeding or are we the Good Samaritans who bind their wounds?

Allow me to approach this from another direction you may not have considered, one that vests you with genuine power in the best sense. What if you are the one whose faith, forgiveness and compassion is the model that someone else needs to see to know that true Christians do not respond like others and that there is something genuinely deep and faithful in them that reflects a beauty the world cannot even mimic? What if trading gossip for grace leads someone else to Christ? Perhaps this story from the Desert Fathers might illustrate it well.

Once some thieves came to an old hermit in the sixth century and said, "We are taking everything in your cell." He answered, "Take whatever you need, my children." They took almost everything in the cell and left. But they missed a little bag of money that was hidden. The elder picked it up and went after them, crying, "Children! You forgot something!" The thieves were amazed. Not only did they not take the money, but they returned everything that they had taken. "Truly," they said, "this is a man of God." That moment of grace brought the thieves to repentance and they became Christians. The old monk did not read sermons to them. He did not rebuke them or threaten them, nor even converse with them. What caused the thieves to change their mind and correct their deeds and their lives? They found in this simple monk something that touched their hearts: a man of God who showed them the transformative power of Christian love.

This could not have happened if the monk's faith had been confined to rituals, collections of rules, and pretty words about God, without real experience of life in Christ. Here is my challenge to you today: What if we are that monk to others in this situation, called by God to have a love and faith that can transform others? You have that power, because it is a gift of God, resting in the "Agape" that loves without judgement. He is calling us all to that greater response.

My dear Holy Trinity family, this is so difficult. We live in a world full of choices, and we all make bad ones. It's hard when those choices affect those we love so painfully. I know that has pierced Father George's heart. Imagine how heavy the burden is on his family. They have always been there for us. It is time to be there for them.

The days ahead are challenging indeed. The legal system will do its work, which we must respect. Of course there will be consequences and accountability. And true change. But he needs love, not shame; help, not hate; compassion, not condemnation. Like you would offer your own son. Or a member of your own family. Because he is.

The spiritual, emotional and relational healing must be given time, freedom and our prayers and love to do its work. In the words of His Eminence Metropolitan Savas to the affected community, "This news is deeply distressing for all of us; 'If one member suffers,' as St. Paul reminds us, 'all suffer together' (1 Cor 12:26). Fr. George is a beloved member of our families, and we must pray for him and for all those affected by this situation. May God guide us all in the difficult days to come, as we work together for the healing and advancement of our beloved All Saints community."

In closing, I must add that it is not just our sister parish that is wounded, but Holy Trinity and the entire Church. The world is watching for our response. We cannot proudly proclaim a man a son of this parish one day when things are good, have him ordained at this very altar, and then in time of deep personal crisis disown him for having fallen into sin. Jesus asks, "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" (Matt. 7.9). May we all drop the stone and reach out with the bread of mercy, love, kindness and forgiveness. Leave the rest to God. He will heal our wounds; He will soothe our hurt; He will make our burden light with the power of His love. Amen.