

The Inaugural Address of Bishop Nektarije of Jegar

Your Holiness, Reverend Hierarchs, brother priests, venerable monastics, Christ-loving people, dearest children,

At the moment when time gives way to eternity, when that which is mute yields to that which is articulate, when a mortal man is called to behold himself in the Immortal One, the images of my life pass before me as upon a film reel.

In the episcopal ministry into which I have just been consecrated, I clearly see and discern a silent voice: *"Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting"* (Dan. 5:27). How, then, can I fail to be filled with awe at the fact that man can never deserve the gift of episcopal grace, and yet it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to the most sacred Assembly of Bishops of our Holy Church, despite the weaknesses proper to those born of the earth, to elect me to this heavenly and earthly ministry?

How am I to speak without stammering, and what am I to say without my words resounding with emptiness?

Yet the grace of the Holy Spirit, which today, as on the day of Pentecost, has been poured out upon all flesh (Acts 2:17) gathered here, cries out that, as with Saint Ignatius, living and murmuring water may spring up within me, granting me speech, giving me strength, and bestowing wisdom, so that lips of clay may become a herald of the timeless Word of God.

For this, and still more for the fact that a bishop is appointed to concelebrate with Christ and to lay down his life in service to His little brothers and sisters, I am immeasurably grateful to God, who always heals that which is infirm and completes that which is lacking, and who, through the fatherly love of Your Holiness and the saintly consent of the brother hierarchs, entrusts to me this most exalted ministry beneath the vault of heaven.

Heartfeltly grateful for this divine and man-loving trust, and strengthened by it, I stand before all of you — the fullness of the Church of Christ, my much-suffering yet beloved Serbian people — and with the psalmist's faith in God, who

loves mankind unconditionally, I confess: *“Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? And whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there; if I descend into Hades, Thou art present. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me”* (Ps. 138:7–10).

The thread of this same faith, in all its fullness, is revealed in the New Testament revelation of the Trinitarian God of love. Thus the ineffable and incomprehensible Mystery of the Holy Trinity becomes the source of the Christian faith, from which all the truth of the Church of God flows, and to which it also returns.

Therefore the prayer, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” expresses the central significance which the truth of the Holy Trinity has for man and for the existence of all creation. This also makes clear and justified the fiery striving of the God-wise men of the Church for the purity of confession and the defence of that truth. Through it, man is shown the mystery of the interpersonal relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which, through the experience of the Church gathered in the Eucharist, is offered to those born of water and the Spirit as a way of their own life. By partaking of the Body and Blood of the Lord, man becomes an heir of eternal life and one who knows by experience and bears witness: “We worship the Undivided Trinity, for He has saved us.”

This truth of the one God in three Persons, and of man in his wholeness, the Church ceaselessly confesses, above all through holy Baptism, Chrismation, and Communion, as well as through the entire sacramental life. She preserves it in the consciousness of the faithful through the preaching of the Fathers and Teachers, and through the blood of the Martyrs. It was this truth that moved Peter to confess: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68). It has also been the inspiration of the innumerable multitude of those who have felt in their hearts the call to dare to enter the clergy and to serve the Lord *“with fear, and rejoice unto Him with trembling”* (Ps. 2:11), while never forgetting the other person — our brother and sister — for whose sake the God-Man Christ becomes the High Priest of the good things to come.

Thus the mystery of Trinitarian love is the true mirror of episcopal service: to love as the Father loves, to sacrifice oneself as the Son does, and to serve zealously, like the Spirit, the Comforter.

To us human beings, the all-perfect love of the Holy Trinity is accessible only through the God-Man Christ, who, as the Firstborn among many brethren, “*came to give them eternal life*” (John 17:2), and that they might “*have it abundantly*” (John 10:10).

Upon the bitter rock of Golgotha, He becomes the Great High Priest and the witness of a love stronger than death. This is the pledge that He “*came not to be served, but to serve*” (Mark 10:45); that through His complete service He might “*fulfil the Scriptures and all righteousness*” (cf. Matt. 3:15). For His kenosis is the Liturgy which He celebrates, and in which He offers Himself as a living and all-embracing sacrifice for the life of the world. This is Christ the Saviour, and His living icon on earth is the bishop, who stands in the place of God, as Saint Ignatius the God-bearer teaches.

If Christ is Hope to the hopeless, Saviour to those tossed by the storm, Friend to the poor, Companion in suffering to those who suffer, and Servant to all — and He is — then the bishop too is obliged to teach, to comfort, to restore true hope through love, to suffer with those who suffer, to grieve with those who grieve and rejoice with those who rejoice, and always, to all, to be a servant.

“I am,” says the Lord, “*the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). Does not the archpastoral staff, which the bishop receives at his consecration, remind him that he is obliged, through a virtuous life, to keep sleepless watch over the flock entrusted to him by God; to feed it with truth, faith, and love; and, if need be, to be ready even to die for the inheritance of Christ?

It is therefore no wonder that we are seized by trembling and that the question imposes itself upon us: shall we, “*as men who have weaknesses*” (Heb. 7:28), be able to respond to the call of God and to the expectations of His Church?

On this day, by which everything in my life henceforth will be measured, I recall the words of the Holy Apostle Paul and pray that I may live — no longer I,

but Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20) — and that, despite all my infirmities, I may nevertheless be able to do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13). Submitting myself to the will of the Lord, I cry out with zeal: I am Thine, O Saviour; save me! Help me to carry out Thy work on earth without shame.

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” cried the Most Pure One as she accepted to become a co-worker in the economy of the salvation of the world. Taught by her example that in obedience lies the mystery of salvation, and that God loves those who humbly perform His work, I bow my head before the will of God and, with love, stammer: Behold the servant of the Lord! Through the prayers of the Mother of God, may that which Thou desirest, O Lord, be fulfilled in me.

Nemanja’s renunciation of the vanity of this world and his transformation in the Holy Spirit into Simeon’s complete surrender to Christian asceticism are my guiding lights in life and my hope of salvation.

The archpastoral ministry of Saint Sava of Serbia and Saint Nektarios of Aegina teaches me how God is to be loved wholly, how one sacrifices oneself for one’s neighbour and loves one’s enemy; how a man of Christ’s faith must temper his episcopal ministry in the forge-fire of patience and humility. The life’s work of Saint Father Sava, in the very place where we now stand, was transformed by the bonfire of Vračar into an indestructible ether of love for all mankind, which touched my heart in earliest childhood and irresistibly inclined me to serve God, my people, and every other human being. As for the fruitfulness of Nektarios’ ascetic labour, it is most eloquently proclaimed by the works of God’s love which are daily poured forth from his incorrupt relics upon all who approach him with faith and love — among whom I myself strive to be counted.

How can I, at this hour, fail to cry out for the most powerful support a Christian can receive: the innumerable choirs of holy martyrs, men and women, children and elders, of our people? Yes, I call upon them to give me strength, to fortify my will, to strengthen my faith, and to show me how “to remain faithful to Christ unto death”.

In the time in which I take up the episcopal ministry, the global order is burdened by a pandemic of hatred among brothers, infected by the powerful management of crises, by planetary migrations, bloodthirsty wars with the

constant threat of the use of nuclear weapons and hybrid viruses. These are reflected at the regional, local, and internal levels through the public persecution of everything that is an object of faith, everything that belongs to Christ and, in our case, to Saint Sava: everything traditional and blessed; where love has been sacrificed to equality, and freedom abolished by verbal and visual aggressive anarchy.

In this crucible which devours everything that the bishop embodies and protects, man's hope — like that of the Apostles of old in the boat threatened by the waves — is called into question. Yet then, as if waking us from sleep, the blood of our ancestors who survived the Battle of Kosovo speaks to us and says: even if we have lost the kingdom, let us not lose our souls! Thus it bears witness that with Christ and in the Church there is always hope.

Then we see that our hope, having passed through the fire of suffering, has penetrated into the very spiritual genetics of the people of Saint Sava and Saint Lazar, and that it is not a slave, but a source of optimism. Therefore, following today the very best of our people — Metropolitan Petar of Sarajevo, Vukašin of Klepci, the martyrs of Glina, Jadovno, Prebilovci, and Garavice; the children of Kragujevac; the newly revealed martyrs of Bačka; those from the island of Pag, from Gradiška and Jasenovac, from Banjica and Varna; little Milica from Batajnica and those from the Surdulica train — I pray to the Lord, the greatest Martyr beneath the sun, that He may also grant me a heart which will make me His child and their brother in forgiveness and love.

I know with certainty that they will strengthen my spirit to be a guardian of the unity of the Church, which for eight centuries Saint Sava has steered, expecting us to be his successors and defenders of the universal conciliarity of the Orthodox, and friends of every human being.

By their prayers, put me not to shame, O Lord.

I thank God for all the good things done to me, known and unknown, for without Him nothing has ever happened in my life.

Driven from my native Sarajevo by the fiery tempest of war, we found peace for a short time in Vršac, from where our family boat, tossed by the storm of life, set out for Sweden and there found a home.

This forced and painful journey helped me, while still a boy, to understand the severe seriousness of the truth that *"I am a stranger upon the earth"* (Ps. 118:19) and *"a sojourner, as all my fathers were"* (Ps. 38:13), and that *"our days are as a shadow, and there is no abiding"* (1 Chron. 29:15). Thus the Lord turned my sorrow into joy, for I understood and came to love the truth that *"here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come"* (Heb. 13:14): the Jerusalem above, the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Rev. 21–22).

Glory and thanks be to the Lord, who gave me wonderful parents. My path towards Christ was paved by their labour and blessings. May God forgive my father, of blessed memory, Nemanja, who was not only a support to my decision to serve God in monasticism, but also an exceptional example of what a servant of God should be, for he served Him *"in Spirit and in Truth"* with all his heart and with his whole soul.

I unmistakably feel how his peaceful joy from the heavenly dwellings is today being poured into my trembling soul. From the depths of my heart I express my never sufficient gratitude to my dear mother, Nada, a steadfast Christian woman, who from the time she bore me in her womb bound me to Christ by her fervent prayers, and by her life according to the Gospel directed me to walk fearlessly in the path of our noble ancestors — and who is here beside me today. I thank my closest family: my sister Nataša and my brothers, Father Aleksandar and Đorđe, together with their families, for loving me and for being my support, consolation, and joy.

I offer profound gratitude to an indispensable builder of my spiritual formation, His Grace Bishop Dositej of Britain and Scandinavia. Thank you for the trust and patience you have always shown me, for your blessings and care that I should study at the Seminary in Foča, and then theology in Moscow, Athens, and Thessaloniki; that I should be clothed in the angelic habit and consecrated to all the sacred ranks of the Church. Thank you, Vladyka, for the goodness of your heart, the gentleness of your soul, and the mercy with which you enlightened my

darkness and kindled the unfading light in the lamp of my faith, in the hope that you will continue to remain my support.

To my dear professor, His Grace Bishop Antonije of Moravica, I give thanks for the monastic tonsure and diaconal ordination which the Lord granted me through his hands, praying that God may repay him with health and salvation.

With respect and gratitude I remember my teachers, who preached to me the Word of God (cf. Heb. 13:7), as well as all those who, by example, counsel, prayer, and love, contributed to my "*growth in Christ*". May the Lord comfort and enrich with His imperishable blessings Mr Georgios Fousteris and all who belong to this number.

On bended knee I thank the Mother of God for deeming me worthy to spend the most beautiful part of my life in her garden — the Holy Mountain of Athos — and to receive there a pledge of faith and love for future labour in the Church of her Son.

I wholeheartedly thank the brotherhood of Hilandar, headed by my unforgettable Geronda, Father Metodije, for receiving me with brotherly love into the sacred monastery and for being my teachers in ascetic struggle and my edifiers in the Holy Spirit, so that I might come to love the beauty of the House of the Lord.

I thank the Very Reverend Archimandrite Nikolaos Liolios, present here today, a wonderful friend of our people and a man of great heart, who did many good things for my humble self during my studies in Athens.

Yet the greatest gratitude I owe to God, who directed my steps beneath your fatherly protection, Most Holy Primate of the Serbian Church, Lord Porfirije, that I might be taught by your faith and self-sacrifice, strengthened by your love, and see in practice what it means to say: "*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might win some for Christ and the Gospel*" (cf. 1 Cor. 9). Trusting in your prayers and parental support, I believe in my own archpastoral success.

I thank the esteemed envoys of the traditional Churches and religious communities, who by their presence have shown "*how good and pleasant it is when*

brothers and sisters dwell together in unity" (Ps. 132:1). I thank the Director of the Office for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, Dr Vladimir Roganović, who is with us. With all my soul I thank all those who love me, wherever they may live, as well as you who have taken part in the Holy Eucharist, and I ask you to remember me in your prayers.

And, finally: Grant me, O Lord, diligent and worthy service in the episcopal rank, so that Thy Church may never be put to shame because of me, but that the joy of service and zeal for Thy House may not leave me until my last breath. May endless glory be to the Triune God, who called us from non-being into life to serve Him, to confess Him, and to love Him, conscious that He first loved us (1 John 4:19) and left us love as the means by which time is given meaning, death is abolished, eternal life is gained, and the one saving truth is proclaimed: that Love conquers all.

Amen!