

Orthodox Church in America Diocese of New York and New Jersey

ARCHPASTORAL LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL CLERGY AND LAITY OF THE DIOCESE OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY CONCERNING THE SHOOTINGS AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL NEWTOWN, CONNECTICUT ~ FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2012

Beloved in the Lord:

Christ is in our midst!

The joyful anticipation of the Christmas celebration was shattered for many this past Friday, when the senseless murders of 27 schoolchildren and adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, thrust that community into unimaginable horror and pain. This tragedy goes against the nature of morality – and against the very order of nature itself. There is nothing natural about parents burying their children.

Many will ask, “*Where was God when this happened?*”

I too have asked this question... and I speak from experience, having lost my wife at 21 years of age, after only 29 days of marriage. The reality is that God was in the same place this past Friday that He was on that terrible and Holy Friday when His Son was nailed to the Cross for us. God the Father beheld that crime against His Creation, twenty centuries ago, just as He beheld this one, just days ago... and God the Son laid down His life then, that He might claim our lives back from the depths of sin and death, today and forever. Our answer ... our only hope ... is that Christ has turned the agony of death into the victory of Pascha.

And our Lord promised us to share in that victory in these incredible words, also spoken to a grieving family: “*I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though may he die, yet he shall live*” (John 11:25). In this awesome promise, we gain for ourselves – and can give to others – hope and consolation.

While the evil of this tragedy seems diametrically opposed to the joy and hope of the Christmas season, we recall that even the joyous coming of the Infant Messiah brought with it the slaughter of the innocents. The Church regards those sinless souls slain because of Christ, at the hand of Herod, as Saints and martyrs ... and so we trust that these newly departed innocent souls, too, have been received into the arms of God, “*where sickness, sighing, and sorrow have fled away.*” And we have recourse in our grief to the Mother of God who, having lived the agony of watching her Son mocked, tortured, and murdered, shines forth as the ultimate model for us in the face of this tragedy. As she prayed for her Son at the foot of the Cross, even now she prays for and prays with the mothers, fathers, neighbors, and loved ones of the sons and daughters taken last Friday.

And so we know, in hope and in faith, that these innocent children have gone to God... we have hope also that the teachers and volunteers who laid down their lives for their students may be received by Him as martyrs of love – for “*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends*” (John 15:13). In their memory, we must work to ensure that evil does not continue to hold sway over the hearts of those who bear the grievous wounds of this tragedy. Accordingly, I urge you to pray for the repose of the victims, to pray and fast for the intentions of the grieving families, and to offer any help you can, both in prayer and in good works, for the healing of this heartbroken community.

I ask parish priests to continue praying for the victims and the survivors of these killings, and even for the man who committed this evil deed. A set of petitions for your consideration is enclosed below. I encourage those charged with teaching and youth ministry to be open to the questions and the fears of our young people as they struggle to understand what has happened. And I assure you of my own continual prayers for all those touched by this tragedy.

With my blessings, my prayers, and my love,

+ M I C H A E L

Bishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey

PETITIONS IN MOURNING THE DEATH OF CHILDREN

[The following petitions may be added in the Litany of Fervent Supplication before “Again we pray for those who bring offerings...”; and the closing prayer, “O Lord, Thou hast spoken through the prophet Isaiah...” may be used before the doxology, if the celebrant wishes.]

Priest: For the newly-departed servants of God (names), with all of their family and friends who have suffered the death of their children, that they may not despair in their pain, but be granted hope and consolation in Thy mercy.

Priest: That the Lord God will not turn His face away from His suffering servants, but will receive the prayers which we now offer for them, and that He will heal every illness and grief by the visitation of the most Holy Spirit.

Priest: That the merciful Lord will hear the cries of us, His unworthy servants, as He heard the cries of the Canaanite woman, and will heal and console the suffering family members, and receive the souls of His newly-departed servants (names) who have been taken from their loved ones and save them forever in life everlasting.

Priest: Again we pray for those who bring offerings and do good works in this holy and all-venerable house; for those who labor and those who sing; and for all the people here present, who await Thy great and rich mercy.

Priest: O Lord, Thou hast spoken through the prophet Isaiah saying, “For there shall be a new heaven and a new earth; and they shall not remember the former things, nor shall these things come into their heart. But they shall find gladness and exceeding joy in her, for behold, I will make Jerusalem an exceeding joy, and My people gladness. I will rejoice exceedingly in Jerusalem, and I will be glad in My people. There shall no longer be heard in her a voice of weeping, nor a voice of crying. There shall not be the untimely death of a child there...” [Isaiah 65:17-19, 20]. O Lord our God, on that Day when Thou shalt create the new heavens and a new earth, there will be no need to gather to mourn the loss of a child. But on this day, we come with sadness to seek Thy comfort. We mourn the loss of these children (names), grieved by the mothers and fathers who gave them life, and by the families and teachers and neighbors who nurtured them. Grant them rest in blessed repose, and number them among just in Thy mercy.

Priest: For Thou art a merciful God and lovest mankind, and unto Thee do we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.