

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2023
HUMAN LIFE SUNDAY

“BE LIKE ST. ATHANASIUS (January 18th)

Joseph Stalin, the murderous Soviet dictator, died in 1953. Over the next couple of years Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the new leader of the U.S.S.R. In 1956 he addressed the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. His speech was not supposed to be shared outside of the meeting; it was called “the secret speech”. But the whole world found out about it right away! The speech focused on what was called “de-Stalinization” ----a rejection of the old hero-worship of Stalin and a recognition of how horrible he was in many ways.

In his speech Khrushchev lambasted his predecessor, Stalin, over many things, including the killing of huge amounts of Communists that he considered traitorous. As the speech went on, one delegate to the Congress wrote a note on a piece of paper and secretly had it delivered to Khrushchev at his podium. Khrushchev paused in his speech to first quietly read the anonymous note.....and then he read it out loud to the crowd. It went like this---“Comrade Nikita---you are very brave today, now that Stalin is dead, to strongly criticize him. You were one of his helpers----why didn’t you criticize him when he was alive?” Khrushchev then said the following---“My words are for whoever secretly sent me this note..... The reason that I didn’t criticize Stalin when he was alive is the same reason why you today did not stand up and speak out loud your criticisms of me. The reason is that both of us were too afraid to speak out!” (“Ambo”, St. Theodosius Cathedral, 8/18/04)

Just a few days ago on January 18th we Orthodox commemorated a man very different from those 2 men! The man is St. Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria, Egypt in the 300s A.D. Athanasius stood up for the truth no matter what it cost him. Sometimes it seemed it was almost just him against the world----there was a famous saying in Latin about that: “Athanasius contra mundum”---“Athanasius against the world.”

The problem going on in the Church back then was the very strong Arian heresy. Arius and his followers denied the divinity of Jesus Christ and thus denied the truth of the Holy Trinity. And this false teaching got very strong and took over much of the Church. Many, many caved in. But not

Athanasius---he wouldn't give in, he stuck to the truth no matter what. And in the long run, the truth won out—and partially thanks to Athanasius we still believe in the truth: the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. So we should remember St. Athanasius, venerate him, learn from his writings, and strive, with God's help, to be like him. We should also defend God's truth and oppose false and heretical teachings.

A very big false teaching in our time is that abortion is fine and acceptable. America seems split about 50/50 on this hot issue. And it's similar with churches. The Roman Catholics and we Orthodox still hold to traditional Christian belief on the issue. And about half the Protestants do, too. And the other half are long gone and sold out to the pro-abortion side. Of course, this last year there was a huge and wonderful change for the better---the overturning of the Roe v. Wade decision 50 years ago that legalized abortion on demand for the whole nation. But that great improvement doesn't mean the struggle is over---now it's a matter of each state deciding what to do about it. And today, churches all over the country, including us, will have prayers that things might improve more yet.....and, of course, prayers for all involved in this issue: the mothers, the government, and, of course, for the souls of the millions of babies who have been killed before being born.

Our Orthodox Church has always believed that abortion is a serious sin—the taking of human life before birth. It's clear in the Bible, the teachings of our Church Fathers and Saints, our canon laws, etc. Clear and unanimous. If you think differently, please realize---your different belief is un-Orthodox belief.

Some Catholics speak of being “smorgasbord Catholics”---just like a person in a smorgasbord restaurant picks and chooses what to eat, so they pick and choose what to believe (and not believe) of what their religion teaches. Some people wish to be “smorgasbord Orthodox”---deciding to believe parts of Orthodox truth and to not believe other parts.

Don't pick and choose. Be true to all that God teaches through our Church's Holy Tradition. Be true to the law of God and don't cave in to society's pressure. Don't think it can possibly be okay to kill a child before it even has a chance to be born.

Like St. Athanasius, we need to stick to the truth so that truth, God's truth, will win out. Our Church went through this same struggle before. Abortion was common and mostly accepted in the ancient world. And then things changed because our Church, empowered by God, changed things. The

world turned against abortion. It was outlawed. Sure, it didn't disappear, but it became much less frequent it was seen for the evil it was. It was our Church that changed things before. With God's help, that can happen again.

So be like St. Athanasius and stay with God's truth, no matter what!

But just being loyal to the truth is not enough. Just saying abortion is wrong is not enough. Jesus Christ condemned sin. But He also forgave those who repented of sin and He helped sinners. And so we also must not just proclaim the truth, but help those who have gone astray.

Two ways in particular to do that:

ONE—As individuals and as a parish, give concrete help to those in crisis pregnancies. Help them to have the child and to either raise it or have it adopted. Especially support unwed mothers in their difficult situation---and continue to give them support long after they give birth.

Whatever you can do on your own in this regard is great. And we also can help through channels such as the Orthodox "Zoe For Life" ministry, the Orthodox Christians For Life (active in our own parish), and through the various Crisis Pregnancy Centers.

Sometimes it might be a very simple thing, but simple is fine—like our parish Women's Group's current month long drive to collect diapers for mothers (and babies!) to be distributed by Zoe For Life.

TWO---We should truly believe and stress that God forgives those who have had abortions and turn to Him for forgiveness. It is just the same as with all other sins. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived about the same time as St. Athanasius, wrote—"Add up all your sins and they are smaller than God's mercy." (Lecture II, Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, Volume 7, Eerdmans Press) And St. John wrote in I John 1:7---"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

God forgives; so should we. If you have had an abortion, know and believe that God forgives. And if you need help working through that truth, even if long after your abortion, let me know. We have help available here (not me!)----we can have a confidential conversation to put you in touch with help to truly live in God's forgiveness.

Once there was a 6 year old Michigan boy who accidentally broke a neighbor's window while having fun throwing stones. He figured he was in heap big trouble, so he just disappeared. His family, the man with the window, the police, and all the neighbors searched hard for him for 18 hours.

Finally they found him hiding in the woods. Was the man with the window or the police or all the searchers angry with him when they found him? Did they threaten him or punish him? No! They hugged and kissed him and celebrated his being found! If you have had an abortion, know that God wants to forgive and help you. Come to God and get helped.

So we should be strongly against abortion as Orthodox Christians---and we must forgive those who have had abortions.

A final detail about St. Athanasius. Eventually the Arian heresy began to fade away some. Many of those who had denied Christ's divinity saw the errors of their way; they saw their mistake. They asked forgiveness and wanted to be accepted back into the Church. Some people were hesitant to allow that. St. Athanasius was happy to bring them back in. His basic response was something along these lines—"God forgives. Welcome back!".

May we be like St. Athanasius. Strictly sticking to the truths of God and not giving in to the false teachings around us---just like he did. And forgiving and helping those who have fallen---just like he did. Just like God does.

Through the prayers of St. Athanasius, may God have mercy on us!