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“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
(Romans 12:21)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There are certain moments in history that become permanently engraved upon our memory. When an event is sufficiently monumental, tragic, or earth-shattering, we remember not only the event itself, but where we were and what we were doing when we first heard the news. Those old enough to remember the assassination of President John F. Kennedy can often describe precisely where they were and what they were doing the moment they learned that the President had been killed.

For a later generation of Americans, September 11, 2001, is such a day. Those of us who were old enough to comprehend what was happening remember where we were when we heard that an airplane had struck the World Trade Center in New York City. We then watched with disbelief as a second plane struck the South Tower and it became clear that this was no accident. We remember the terrible images from the Pentagon, struck by a third hijacked airplane, and the news of yet a fourth aircraft crashing into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and the almost unimaginable sight of the Twin Towers collapsing. Twenty-five years have elapsed since that day and yet the chilling images remain etched in our minds.

Today, we pause to remember and to pray for the blessed repose of the thousands of innocent people whose earthly lives were snuffed out that day as a result of the deliberate crashing of four hijacked airliners. We remember those who died in the years that followed from cancers and other illnesses caused by exposure to toxic substances released by the destruction of the buildings. We remember with profound gratitude the firefighters, police officers, emergency personnel, clergy, medical workers and countless others who rushed toward danger while others were fleeing from it. Many entered the burning towers knowing the risk but determined to save the lives of people they had never met.

We remember also the families and friends who lost husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. And we remember those who, even twenty-five years later, continue to bear physical wounds, emotional trauma and painful memories from that terrible day.

As Christians, however, we must do more than remember. At the distance of a quarter century, we must also ask: What is the legacy of September 11? What have we learned? What can that terrible day teach us today?

Firstly, September 11 confronts us with the terrible reality of the capacity of fallen humanity for evil. Sacred Scripture teaches us that sin wounds the human heart and that the Evil One seeks always to divide, destroy and bring death. When hatred is allowed to take possession of the human heart, when another person is no longer seen as a child of God but as an enemy to be destroyed, the consequences can be horrifying.

We have witnessed this capacity for evil many times throughout human history. And sadly, we continue to witness it today. As Ukrainians, our thoughts turn especially to our ancestral homeland of Ukraine, where innocent men, women and children continue to suffer and die because of Russia's brutal war of aggression. Once again, we see cities destroyed, families separated, innocent people killed, and human lives treated as though they have no value.

But September 11 revealed something else as well. Alongside humanity's capacity for evil, we witnessed an even greater capacity for goodness, courage, compassion, sacrifice and love. We saw strangers helping strangers. We saw firefighters climbing stairways toward almost certain death. We saw ordinary people performing extraordinary acts of courage. We saw communities opening their doors, people donating blood, churches filling with worshippers, and a nation and the entire world coming together in grief and solidarity.

In this we recognize the mysterious presence of the Kingdom of God already at work among us. Our Lord tells us that the Kingdom is like a mustard seed—seemingly small yet destined to grow into something great (Mt. 13:31-32). Evil may appear powerful and overwhelming; goodness often begins quietly—in one act of courage, one gesture of mercy, one person choosing to help another. Christ assures us that the Kingdom of God is already in our midst (Lk. 17:21), growing even while the forces of darkness struggle against it.

This is perhaps one of the most important lessons of September 11. At times we can be tempted to despair because evil seems relentless. Wars continue. Terrorism persists. Hatred divides peoples and nations. Innocent people suffer. Yet Christians must never surrender to despair. Despair is not the language of the Gospel. Hope is.

Even in the midst of tragedy, God gives us opportunities to become instruments of His love. In the face of hatred, we can choose love. In the face of cruelty, mercy. In the face of indifference, compassion. In the face of destruction, we can rebuild. And in the face of death, we proclaim with confidence the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life.

Therefore, on this twenty-fifth anniversary, we ask the priests of our parishes throughout the United States to celebrate a Panakhyda for the victims of September 11, either on Friday, September 11, the anniversary itself, or on Sunday, September 13, following the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. We ask our faithful to join in prayer, commending all who died to the mercy of God and praying for those who continue to carry the wounds of that day.

And, if ever you have the opportunity to visit New York City, we encourage you to visit the September 11 Memorial and Museum at Ground Zero. Stand for a few moments beside the footprints of the Twin Towers where they once stood. Read some of the names, inscribed there, of those who died. Remember their lives. And offer a prayer for their eternal repose.

Twenty-five years after this tragic event, may September 11 remind us not only of what evil can destroy, but also of what goodness can build. May we always heed the words of Saint Paul: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

And may the souls of those who lost their lives in the tragedy of September 11, 2001, rest with God. May their memory be eternal. Вічна їм пам’ять!

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