

FUNERAL HOMILY
PROTODEACON SERGIUS MILLER
Saint Matthew Orthodox Church
Columbia, Maryland
March 20, 2022

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is in our midst!

My beloved children in the Lord,

On behalf of the Holy Synod of Bishops and all the clergy and the faithful of the Orthodox Church in America, I offered my condolences to the family and friends of the newly-departed servant of God, Protodeacon Sergius.

In one of the funeral Gospel readings from St John the Theologian, we hear of the moment when the people are scandalized when they hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He said:

I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

These words were even more upsetting to people because Christ was claiming that He Himself came down from heaven, that He and the Father were one and that, through the Father, He would raise up on the last day all those who believed on Him.

The words of our Lord Jesus Christ are found throughout the Scriptures and are familiar to all Orthodox Christians who dwell in the Church. And yet, our

hearts often fail to grasp the deep meaning of these words and to recognize the transformative impact they might have in our life. We are daily bombarded with competing words, images and ideologies which drown out the simple, yet direct, message of the Gospel and make it more difficult, not only to hear the Lord's words of life, but to incorporate them as the foundation of our very existence.

It is often only when we encounter the reality of death that we reflect more deeply on what the Lord is trying so say to us. In some mysterious way, we all understand more clearly in the depths of our heart what our Lord means when He says that He is the bread of life. The image of bread is not merely an image, but rather the means by which we enter fully into communion with God Himself. Bread is the small gift which we offer as human beings in the Divine Liturgy so that we may receive in return the great gift of eternal life from Christ, whose body and blood we partake of.

We know that the Christian path requires an ascetical effort on our part, but this ascetical effort is not limited to fasting, prayer and attendance at liturgical services. These are tools at our disposal, not simply to shield our minds from the noise of this worldly assault, but to help us acquire a genuine life of piety, guided by the fear of God and real humility, all of which can guide us towards Christ-like love. And it is precisely these virtues of piety, humility and love which enable us to face the reality of death with hope and with peace.

The words of Jesus Christ can only be fully experienced within the context of our life in the Church. This experience is a very real and actual immersion,

not merely an intellectual understanding or emotional response. The Lord spoke of Himself as the bread of life not so that these could remain as written words on a page, but to introduce us into an experience: *Verily, verily, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.*¹ It is through our participation in the Holy Eucharist, by literally having Christ within us, His blood coursing through our veins and His body sanctifying our bodies, that we enter this experience.

This communion with Christ takes place not only at the precise moment of our partaking of the holy things but through all the mysteries by which we participate sacramentally in the life of the Holy Trinity, from the moment in the Liturgy of Preparation when the priest cuts the holy bread cross-wise, saying: “Sacrificed is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, for the life of the world and its salvation”² to the paschal explosion when we “arise at the rising of the sun” and “behold Christ, the sun of righteousness, who causes life to dawn for all.”³ All of this, and more, is what it means to be a communicant in the Church.

The newly-departed Protodeacon Sergius was a true servant of God who lived the deep mysteries of the Church as expressed through such simple images as bread: from the lamb which he carried and elevated as a deacon of the Orthodox Church to the poise and dignity with which he chanted the sacred Word of God in the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospel, from his words as a scholar of Orthodoxy and especially the liturgy, to his mentoring

¹ John 6:53.

² From the Liturgy of Preparation.

³ Irmos of the Paschal Canon, Ode V.

role with many deacons, priests, and even bishops. Father Sergius he served as a true steward, as a true man of faith who shared the bread of life with all those whom he encountered throughout his life. Outwardly, he was one of those whom we might call “a scholar and a gentleman”, but that outward dignity flowed from a deep faith and sincere love.

He lived his life and entered into death in the spirit of the Apostle Paul who writes of Christ who “must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” We are all journeying in this season of repentance not to dwell in darkness and death but to make our way to that glorious moment when we will say: “Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruit of those that slept.” Though Protodeacon Sergius now sleeps in the Lord, we know that he is already proclaiming, in advance of all of us, that he has been made alive in the resurrection.

May his memory be eternal!