

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros
17th Annual Archon Retreat
Retreat: The Spiritual Sabbath
April 3, 2021
New York, New York

Beloved and Faithful Archons,

First of all, allow me to express to you and to your families how happy I am to be with you today, for this Virtual Retreat. This past year has certainly caused us to be innovative in continuing our traditions, and the tradition of the Annual Archon Retreat is taking place, despite our present challenges.

It is the very idea of “retreat” that I wish to spend this time with you and explore. I don’t want us to simply fulfill an obligation and get our annual event out of the way. I want us to leave today with fresh ideas, new perspectives, and even tools to further develop our spiritual lives.

If you consider the word “retreat”, we see that it is both a verb and a noun. And as both, it has a number of meanings. We recognize that there is double meaning when we say we say that “we are in retreat.” Depending on the context, it could mean that we have turned tail and run away in the face of a stronger adversary. Or it could mean what we are doing today, that we are taking time out of our lives to create space – to create a pause – so that we can probe the deeper meaning of our existence.

I have entitled my reflection today: *Retreat: The Spiritual Sabbath*, for we find this concept of retreat, as a pause in activity, in the very first verses of the Book of Genesis, where it reads:

And on the seventh day, God ended His work which He had created; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because on it, He had rested from all His work*

So, our *first* principle is this – that when we engage in retreat, we engage in a divine activity. Even if that activity is one of rest, or cessation from our usual labors; even our work for the Church. It is divinely ordered because God made it so. In the Ten Commandments, we read: **“Remember to keep the Sabbath Day holy.”†**

We all know that our observant Jewish neighbors take this command very literally. Every Saturday, τὸ Σάββατον, they take a very specific pause. Through the centuries, they have devised complex sets of rules and rituals to govern their behavior on that day. But our Lord Jesus Christ challenges a mere ritualistic interpretation of the Sabbath, when he said:

Τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο, οὐχ ὁ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὸ σάββατον· ὥστε κύριός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ σαββάτου.

Which means:

* Genesis 2:2-3.

† Exodus 20:8 (LXX).

“The Sabbath came about for the human being, not the human being for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” †

This last statement of our Lord is the *second* principle: that He Himself is the purpose, the τέλος, of the Sabbath, because He is its Lord – Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath.

So, we see that retreat is indeed a spiritual Sabbath, whose objective is not the fulfillment of a specific time or activity, but an encounter with the Lord of the Sabbath, our Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ.

We are here today, beloved Archons, in this virtual setting for just two hours. Not even a full day. But it is not the location, or the duration of our retreat that counts the most. It is the quality.

Make no mistake. Retreats can be very long, depending on the person. Listen to this account of an extremely long retreat, that of Saint Anthony the Great. In his book, *Life of Saint Anthony*, Saint Athanasios the Great writes:

Anthony found a fort, on the far side of the Nile. He crossed over to it and dwelt there. He built up the entrance completely, having stored up a six-month supply of bread. Having found water within, he sealed himself inside. Thus, he spent many years in ascetic discipline. Twice a year, acquaintances lowered bread down from above. After

† Mark 2:27-28.

twenty years, those who were eager to imitate Anthony's discipline came and broke down the door.

Anthony came forth as from a shrine, initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. For the first time in decades, he was seen outside the fort. And when they beheld him, they marveled, for he had the same body as before. He was neither fat, like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with demons. He was the very same as they had known him, twenty years before his retreat.[§]

I know that this sounds extraordinary, because it is! It is a shining example of the great benefit of going on retreat. Saint Anthony spent twenty years in retreat. Today, I am going to ask you to spend less than twenty seconds. I mean it. Let me explain.

In all his years inside that fort, sealed up from the world, Anthony was engaged in the sanctification of time, catching a taste of eternity, which is beyond time. That's why he emerged looking the same as he did, before he entered his retreat. Sanctifying time, **this is the *third* principle.**

So, I ask you, what does it take to sanctify time? Is not every moment – every second of the day – *capax Dei*, capable of receiving God?

The answer is: of course it is. We can sanctify our time by remembering the name of God throughout the day – when we are washing

[§] Saint Athanasios, *The Life of Saint Anthony*, chapters 12 and 14.

the dishes, driving our cars, anywhere. But it is even more meaningful when we pause – when we stop and dedicated a moment of stillness to God. Therefore, if you pause even for just a moment — just for 20 seconds — and you set your thoughts upon Him, your time will become sanctified, and you too can catch a taste of eternity, just like Saint Anthony in the fort all those centuries ago.

* * *

This, my beloved Archons – *this* is remembering the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy. This fulfills the Commandment given on Sinai which was written by the finger of God on the Stone Tables of the Law. But now, the “Law” is inscribed, as Saint Paul says, in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

***“written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God;
not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.”*****

Now, you might say: “I don’t feel any different.” Or, “How do I know it worked?”

Well, now you know why Saint Anthony spent so many years in that fort. It is a very tall order to accomplish in less than twenty seconds, what he did in twenty years!

And yet, you did make a change, however small. You paused. You ceased to pay attention to the external world – the world that passes away.

** II Corinthians 3:3.

And you began to pay attention to the reality of God, Who endures forever. For just a second or so, you stepped into eternity.

And why would that be so hard to believe? God is, as we pray in the Βασιλεῦ οὐράνιε, **“everywhere present and filling all things.”**

I know that we often feel it is necessary to go to another location for our retreats, because the change in place helps to shift our mental state, to make us more accepting of a new perspective. We do not have to flee to the desert like St. Anthony to experience God in stillness. In fact, we can never escape from God, for as the Psalmist says:

Where shall I go from Your Spirit? And where shall I flee from Your presence? If I should go up to heaven, You are there. If I should go down to hell, You are there. If I should spread my wings toward the dawn, and make my abode in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand guides me, and Your right hand holds me. ††

Beloved Archons:

This is Good News! The places where God dwells are infinite. There is nowhere you can go, where He is not. He has appointed so many opportunities for us, as the Lord Jesus said, on the night in which He gave Himself up for the life of the world:

“In My Father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you.” ††

†† Psalm 138:6-9 (LXX).

†† John 14:2.

In the entirety of New Testament, the Greek word, μονή, occurs only in this verse, where it is beautifully translated as “mansion,” and later in the same chapter, in verse twenty-three, where it is often mistranslated as “dwelling” or even “home.” I have no doubt that you all recognize it, the Greek word for “monastery,” the place where one dwells alone with God.

I am sure that some of you have gone to a monastery, in order to go “on retreat.” We sometimes call it a pilgrimage, which is an aspect of the concept of ξενιτεία in Greek, which could be translated “estrangement,” or “exile.”

But a pilgrimage requires movement and change of location. Ξενιτεία requires no change of place, only a change of heart. **This is the *fourth* principle.**

You see, you can access “retreat” – the spiritual Sabbath, the pause and cessation of everyday life, at any time and in any place. You can inhabit your own μονή with God, the monastery of your heart. Simply estrange yourself by the slightest change in your routine.

Saint John Climacus, whose Sunday is eight days from now, speaks of this ξενιτεία in his spiritual classic, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. This holy text is read in every Orthodox Monastery throughout the world during the Forty Days of Lent. In it he says:

Ξενιτεία means an invisible intention, unseen meditation, constant determination to love God, an abundance of love, a deep silence. §§

An invisible intention – the world does not need to know what is in our hearts. God already does. We are the ones who need to know.

Aa unseen meditation – you can bring your mind to the remembrance of God at any time, and in any place.

A constant determination to love God – your will is required to bring this about. You must engage synergistically with God, and be purposeful.

An abundance of love – finding the presence of God within your heart has lasting consequences. You will find that your love begins to flow toward others, even those you thought unlovable.

A deep silence – the silence of God speaks louder than all human voices combined. It grants assurance and peace, the peace that surpasses understanding.***

These are just a few of the blessings of retreat – whether for twenty seconds, or twenty years.

Therefore, let us now review the four principles of the spiritual Sabbath.

First, it is a divine activity, blessed and sanctified by God.

Second, its purpose is to connect us more closely to the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ.

§§ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Chapter 3:1.

*** Cf. Philippians 4:7.

Third, pausing in retreat to sanctify our time and to catch a taste of eternity.

Fourth, to enter retreat, this door of eternity, which requires a change of heart, more than a change of place. It may only take a moment, but it must be intentional, full of purpose, and motivated by love.

For if we take a spiritual Sabbath, how much more did the Lord?

I ask you to consider what God did, in the light of our slight and momentary exile from the world's activities.

The Lord Jesus Christ exiled Himself from Heaven to come to earth for our salvation. As we chanted last night in the Third Stasis of the Akathist Hymn, we heard of His own ξενιτεία, and how we might participate in it:

Ξένον τόκον ἰδόντες,

ξενωθῶμεν τοῦ κόσμου, τὸν νοῦν εἰς οὐρανὸν μεταθέντες·

διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ ὑψηλὸς Θεός,

ἐπὶ γῆς ἐφάνη ταπεινὸς ἄνθρωπος·

βουλόμενος ἐλκύσαι πρὸς τὸ ὕψος,

τοὺς αὐτῷ βοῶντας· Ἀλληλούια.

Seeing this strange birth,

let us become strangers to the world, fixing our minds in Heaven.

To this end has the Most High God

appeared on earth as a lowly man,

because He wishes to draw heavenward

all who cry aloud to Him: Alleluia!†††

Indeed, my beloved Archons:

He wishes to draw us heavenward. He wishes that we will experience the Kingdom, **“come on earth, as it is in Heaven.”†††**

He wishes us sanctified by entering into His rest, the rest that He knew on Holy and Great Saturday, when He rested in the grave from His labors:

the awesome, holy, and saving Passion of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ:

the spitting, the blows with the palm of the hand, the buffeting, the mockery, the reviling, the wearing of the purple robe, the reed, the sponge, the vinegar, the nailing, the lance, and above all, the Crucifixion and Death. §§§

All these, on our behalf.

And what of us? We are called to keep the spiritual Sabbath, and to keep it holy. May we ever be so blessed to pause with our Lord, in love and thanksgiving. Thus, we shall also attain to His Glorious Resurrection on the Third Day; through the prayers of the Holy Theotokos and the First-Called Apostle Saint Andrew.

Amen.

††† The Akathist Hymn, Stanza E.

††† The Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6:10.

§§§ The Synaxarion of Holy and Great Friday.