

PATRIARCHAL GREETINGS

TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE THIRTY EIGHT ANNUAL CONVENTION
OF THE BULGARIAN DIOCESE OF USA, CANADA AND AUSTRALIA

SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA
JULY 19-21, 2013

DEAR BELOVED IN THE LORD SPIRITUAL CHILDREN,

It is our pleasure, for the first time since being elected Patriarch of Bulgaria, to congratulate you on the strict observance of the Diocesan By-Laws, and on your beautiful tradition of getting together every year to review everything that you have accomplished, and also to outline more effective ways of pastoral work in your Diocese.

Your diocesan prelate, His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph, gladly shared with us the fact, that for the first time in the history of the Diocese, you convene on the West Coast of America, the Beautiful, in the lovely garden of the Mother of God, with Holy Dormition Orthodox Church as a host parish and its clergy: The Very Reverend Michael Oyer, Rector, The Very Reverend David Skopp, The Very Reverend Philip Tolbert, The Reverend Stephen Steineck, Protodeacon James Hughes, and Deacon Samuel Woolums.

We have heard so many good things about your church parish which is known for its vibrant spiritual life: your active membership, diligent Sisterhood, strong leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Youth Apostolate and the well known St. Michael Orthodox Elementary School. By the grace of God you have invited all member parishes of the Diocese to a convention in the newly completed cathedral and will be able to rejoice as the owners of your renovated church property and "Bishop's Garden", tucked in the magnificent Californian Redwoods.

Now we would like to take the opportunity to thank the host parish for sending to New York our old friend in the Lord, Very Rev. Fr. Michael Oyer, who along with the other twenty seven parish representatives elected three clergymen and two lay people on January 13, 2013. Those five diocesan representatives took part in the election of the Bulgarian Patriarch on February 24, 2013, in Sofia. Their participation will remain in the memory of all of us for life, because for the first time in the annals of The Bulgarian Church – Bulgarian Patriarchate, and the history of the Diocese of USA, Canada and Australia, representatives of that Diocese were active participants in the Patriarchal Election Church Convention.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude for all your heartfelt prayers and expressions of filial love toward us as your Archpastor, that have been demonstrated in every church parish, mission or skete in our largest diocese, beginning from Adelaide and Melbourne in Australia, through Montreal and Toronto in Canada, to as far as the church in Santa Rosa in California and St. Innocent's Academy in Kodiak, Alaska.

We thank you for the fact that with the blessing of your Diocesan Metropolitan Joseph, our spiritual brother and a dear friend from youth, all of you keep mentioning our name in your holy services and in particular, during the Proskomedia and Divine Liturgy.

We fondly remember how happy the late Patriarch Maxim was when we talked among ourselves, that only within the Diocese of USA, Canada and Australia, you pray and mention his

name all twenty four hours. It seems that God heard your prayers and granted him 41 blessed years of Patriarchal service and a long life of 98 years. For this reason we kindly ask you to continue mentioning his name in your prayers for the departed. He loved you because you had a special place in his heart.

Here in Bulgaria, with God's help and despite of our human inequities, we do everything possible not to let our hearts be troubled, neither to allow our faith to be shaken, nor to become ambivalent about our hope, nor to grow weary with all the trials, which God allows to occur for our own good. You know the words of the Lord, when He addressed the people and His disciples saying: *"If anyone come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life, will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it"* (Mark 8:34-35). Those are hard words, aren't they? For bearing the cross is heavy. This is why the Lord pointed out this requirement not only to his disciples, but also to the people, so that they are aware of it, and within their own limitations, can apply it in their own lives.

To follow the Lord means to follow His will: to help, to console, to admonish, and to suffer and endure all kinds of hardships. The monks of the Holy Mountain have said it best: "To die before we die, so that when we die, we won't die." In order to understand the message of the Cross, we must live it through the wisdom of self-denial and focus on the significance of the spiritual values.

We need to overcome all earthly things that tend to subdue the soul. To deny ourselves means to live for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This is what saves the soul, if we are to be in a fellowship with the Lord. He Himself says, *"Remain in Me and I will remain in you. No branch will bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him; he will bear much fruit, apart from Me you can do nothing"* (John 15: 4-5).

These words of our Lord Jesus Christ are true and eternal. Being the Son of God and our High Priest, He came down from God, so that with filial confidence we may rely on His Mighty hand and hold on to our faith.

None of us should fear the burden of the cross, because The Son of God provides us with faith and strength, if we follow Him. He knows us as our Good Shepherd, and He understands our weaknesses. He calls upon us to approach the throne of grace, in order to receive timely help, so that His load be light and His yoke bearable. (cf. Hebrew 4: 16)

Prayerfully, we wish the delegates of the 38th Diocesan Convention good health, joy, peace and successful work.

*"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you,
and my love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen." (1 Cor 16-23-24)*

With paternal love in Christ,

+ NEOFIT

PATRIARCH OF BULGARIA