



Your Grace, Archbishop Stefan, brother clergy, venerable religious, my dear faithful, all brother and sister pilgrims in the Lord,

Slava Isusu Christu! Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today we greet each other as pilgrims, people of faith who have journeyed to this mountainside, overlooking what was once the thriving community of Centralia. As pilgrims, we come to this holy place seeking an encounter with the divine, through prayer, meditation, healing and reconciliation.

Pilgrims are defined as travelers who are on a journey to a holy place as an act of religious devotion. And from times immemorial, people of faith have made such journeys seeking the special graces from Almighty God from such pious endeavors. Today all of us continue this tradition as we follow in the footsteps of such pilgrims from generations past.

But what brings us to this place? Why Centralia?

This Pilgrimage was inspired by His Beatitude Sviatoslav, who was accompanied by Metropolitan Stefan and Father Hutsko, during his historic visit here on November 10, 2015. He marveled at the continuing presence of this church in Centralia, where an underground mine-fire resulted in the abandonment of the town, the demolition of almost all buildings and the relocation of all but less than ten residents. Patriarch Sviatoslav felt a sense of true holiness which pervades the entire church property. And he desired to share what he experienced and expressed his desire for all people of faith to come and experience this holiness, sanctity and serenity as pilgrims to this holy place on the mountain.

When one thinks of Centralia, two images enter the mind—the mountain and the fire. And perhaps this is providential, since many references to holy mountains and fire are found in Sacred Scripture.

The Holy Mountain

It was on the mountains of Ararat in the Book of Genesis where Noah's ark landed and Noah saw the rainbow of God's promise, God's covenant. Noah and his family came out of the ark and built an altar on this high place, made offerings and praised God.

And when God tested Abraham, in order to properly present the sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac ascended Mt. Moriah. It was on this mountain that God saw Abraham's faithfulness and rewarded him, sparing Isaac. Abraham named that place Yahweh-yireh;* hence people today say, "On the mountain the LORD will provide." And that mountain has been a holy place since biblical times. Today we pray that on this mountain, the Lord will provide.

Moses also encountered God when he climbed up to the top of a mountain, Mt. Sinai and he returned to his people with the Ten Commandments. Mt. Sinai is the epitome of the mountain top experience because Moses met God but then had to descend the mountain and return to his regular life inspired by this divine experience. And while Moses never set foot in the Promised Land, he saw the Promised Land from another high mountain, Mt. Nebo.

And in the First Book of Kings, we read about the great spiritual victory won on Mt. Carmel. It was on Mt. Carmel where Elijah proves to people that God is the one true god. He does this by calling down fire from Heaven to ignite a water soaked sacrifice. After that, the drought that had besieged the land was ended. Mt. Carmel has remained a sacred mountain throughout the ages.

In the New Testament, mountains were also viewed as holy places, places to encounter God, to see God, to converse with God. Mountains were often the setting for significant incidents in the life of Jesus. The Transfiguration was an event in the New Testament, some believe on Mt. Tabor, when Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah and Jesus' glory was revealed to those with him, his disciples Peter, James and John. It was also a visual representation of Heaven meeting Earth.

And one of the most famous sermons of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew is known as the Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer.

Another mountain, Mt. Olivet, more commonly known as the Mount of Olives, is also a pivotal mountain in Jesus' life. At the foot of this mountain was the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ prayed before his crucifixion. It was also from this mountain, the Mount of Olives that He ascended into Heaven forty days after His resurrection.

These and many other mountains in the Bible help to bring us closer to God. They bridge the gap between God and humankind, even if for just the briefest of moments and they serve to lead humanity to God and the ultimate meaning of life.

Fire

While fire is often used for punishment, destruction or purification in, in Sacred Scripture fire may also indicate the presence of the Divine.

Fire represents the very presence of God. This is especially evident in the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. Here fire is a manifestation of God himself, for Moses turned away from the sight "because he was afraid to look at God." A similar image is in Yahweh's descent upon Mount Sinai "in fire."

Fire also symbolizes God at work in a number of ways. One of the earliest and clearest of these ways is his appearance in a pillar of fire that led Moses and the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Sinai desert. Another instance of God's use of fire as an active manifestation of His presence is His sending fire from heaven to consume sacrifices offered up to Him on special and extraordinary occasions.

A special use of fire imagery found in the New Testament is that which references baptism with fire. John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and with fire", a promise that was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Then "tongues of fire" rested upon those gathered in the upper room with the result that they "were filled with the Holy Spirit" ([Acts 2:3-4](#)).

Here in Centralia, we experience both the mountain and the fire, a place to encounter the Divine and fire as a manifestation of the power of God Himself.

The mountain and the fire imagery also converge in the tradition relating to Mount Pochaiv and the Holy Icon of Our Lady of Pochaiv, an eighteenth century replica that is available for veneration today.

Pochaiv is a holy site in Ukraine where many miracles are believed to have occurred through the intercession of the Mother of God. It is the “Lourdes” of Ukraine.

The tradition is that in the late 1190’s, a monk ascended Mount Pochaiv in order to pray. After beginning his prayers, a pillar of fire appeared to him and to some shepherds that happened to be nearby. When the flame died down, the Blessed Mother of God appeared. She left an imprint of her foot upon the rock and a miraculous spring of water began to flow from the place of the apparition. That water flows to this day. The miracle was taken as a sign that Mount Pochaiv was to be dedicated as a place for monastic life and on this site a monastery was built. This event would lead to many other supernatural events through the special dedication of this region to the Mother of God.

Again, the themes of the mountain and the fire come together in creating a holy site in honor of the Mother of God. And when Patriarch Sviatoslav saw the Icon of Our Lady of Pochaiv replica he at once sensed how appropriate this location should be as its home and a place of pilgrimage.

Today, as of us come here as pilgrims to this holy site—a church on a mountain overlooking the remains of a town made famous and destroyed by fire.

We come seeking an encounter with the divine. We come with our own intentions, our prayers, our hopes, our supplications to Almighty God. We pray before the Icon of Our Lady of Pochaiv for the intercession of the Mother of God. We seek physical healing before the Icon and relics of Blessed Nicholas Charnetsky, C.Ss.R., the healer of souls. We come with open hearts, humility and faith to be in the presence of God and seek His grace and His blessings for our needs.

We come as pilgrims-- travelers who make a journey to a holy place as an act of religious devotion.

But all of us are also on another pilgrimage-- a lifelong pilgrimage from the moment Almighty God gave us life in our mothers’ womb.

And yes, life is a pilgrimage. We are travelers on a life-long journey to a holy place. This is the pilgrimage that is part of each day of our lives, as people of faith, our journey to the Heavenly Kingdom.

My prayer is that the grace, blessings, healing and spiritual nourishment we will experience here on this mountain today may ignite within us the fire of faith and assist each of us on our lifelong pilgrimage to the ultimate holy mountain, the Heavenly Kingdom of God.

May God bless you all.

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