ARCHIEPISCOPAL ENCYCLICAL
on the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary
of the Founding of the United States of America

July 4, 2026

To the Reverend Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church, and to all people of goodwill:

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all!

Beloved Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters in Christ,

Every good and perfect gift comes from above, descending from the Father of Lights, "with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). It is therefore fitting that, before we lift our voices in celebration of our nation's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary, we first lift our hearts in thanksgiving to Almighty God, the Lord of history, Who raises up nations, guides the course of peoples, and, in His infinite wisdom and providence, accomplishes His divine purposes throughout the generations.

On this Fourth Day of July, in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-Six, the United States of America marks the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This is a rare and historic moment, one that invites not merely patriotic celebration, but sober reflection, humble gratitude, and earnest prayer. Anniversaries of such magnitude call us to remember where we have come from, to give thanks for the blessings we have received, and to renew our commitment to those enduring principles that have shaped the life of this Republic since its earliest days.

As your Archbishop and spiritual father, I write to you today with a heart filled with gratitude—not only for the nation in which Divine Providence has placed us, but even

more for each one of you. Throughout the years, I have witnessed your faith in times of trial, your generosity toward those in need, your steadfast devotion to Christ and His Holy Church, and your unwavering love for your families and communities. It has been one of the greatest blessings of my episcopal ministry to walk beside you through moments of joy and sorrow, triumph and disappointment, hope and uncertainty. Together we have learned that God's faithfulness never fails, even when the road before us is difficult.

Today, as we commemorate this remarkable anniversary, I invite you to join me in offering heartfelt thanksgiving to the Holy Trinity for the abundant blessings that He has bestowed upon this nation over the past two and a half centuries. We do so with humility, fully aware that no earthly nation is without its faults and failings, and that every chapter of human history bears witness both to humanity's greatness and to its weakness. Yet we also recognize that the providence of God has richly blessed this land with extraordinary opportunities for liberty, faith, industry, compassion, and hope. These blessings have touched not only those who were born upon these shores, but also countless millions who journeyed here seeking freedom, security, and the opportunity to build a better future for their children.

Among those millions were our own forebears—faithful men and women from Sicily and Southern Italy—who crossed the ocean carrying little in their hands but much within their hearts. They brought with them an enduring love for God, deep devotion to family, an unshakable work ethic, and the rich spiritual inheritance of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Christian tradition. They labored in factories and fields, opened businesses, built neighborhoods, established churches, and quietly enriched the life of this nation through lives marked by sacrifice, perseverance, and faith. Their names may not appear in history books, but they are written in the hearts of their descendants and, we trust, in the Book of Life.

Indeed, the American story has always been the story of ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things through faith, courage, and determination. It is the story of immigrants seeking opportunity, soldiers defending liberty, parents sacrificing for their children, neighbors extending compassion to one another, and communities coming together in times of hardship. It is the story of men and women who believed that freedom carried responsibilities as well as rights, and that the blessings they had received were to be shared generously with others.

The opening words of the Declaration of Independence remain among the most profound affirmations ever written concerning the dignity of the human person: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..."

These words continue to resonate because they acknowledge a truth that Christians have proclaimed since the beginning of the apostolic age: that every human life possesses an inherent dignity because every human being is created by God. Long before constitutions were written or governments established, the Holy Scriptures declared: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him." (Genesis 1:27)

Here we find the true foundation of human dignity. Our worth does not arise from wealth, social standing, race, nationality, political affiliation, or earthly achievement. It is rooted in the eternal truth that every man, woman, and child bears the image and likeness of the Creator. Because human dignity is a gift bestowed by God Himself, it cannot rightly be granted or withdrawn by any earthly authority.

This conviction lies at the heart of both the Christian faith and the noblest aspirations of the American experiment. While the Church and the State possess distinct vocations, they meet upon this common ground: that every human person is worthy of respect because every human person has been fashioned by the hand of God.

As we gather to commemorate this historic anniversary, therefore, let us do so neither with pride nor with nostalgia alone, but with grateful hearts. Gratitude is among the highest virtues of the Christian life, for it teaches us to recognize the gracious hand of God in every blessing we receive. We did not create the mountains and rivers that adorn this beautiful land. We did not establish the freedoms we now enjoy. We did not fashion the sacrifices of those generations who came before us and, through hardship and perseverance, built the nation we have inherited. These are gifts entrusted to our stewardship by Divine Providence, by God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who knows each of us by name and has made us His own.

To receive such blessings without thanksgiving is to impoverish the soul. To receive them with humility is to recognize that history itself unfolds beneath the watchful gaze of Almighty God. Such gratitude neither ignores our nation's shortcomings nor excuses its failures. Rather, it enables us to celebrate what is noble, acknowledge what requires repentance, and commit ourselves anew to the pursuit of justice, mercy, and the common good.

It is in this spirit of gratitude, humility, and hope that I offer these reflections to you on this historic day, praying that Almighty God, Who has so abundantly blessed this nation throughout its first two hundred and fifty years, will continue to guide and preserve it for generations yet to come.

Liberty Under God: The Christian Meaning of Freedom

The founders of this Republic understood that freedom, if it were to endure, could never exist apart from moral responsibility. They did not envision liberty as the unrestricted

pursuit of personal desire, nor did they imagine that a free people could long survive if virtue were abandoned. Their hope was for a nation in which freedom would be safeguarded by justice, guided by wisdom, and sustained by a people who acknowledged their accountability before Almighty God.

George Washington expressed this conviction with remarkable clarity when he declared in his Farewell Address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."
Those words have lost none of their wisdom. A nation may possess abundant wealth, unrivaled military strength, extraordinary technological achievements, and flourishing institutions, yet if it neglects the moral character of its people, its foundations begin quietly to erode. Civilizations are seldom destroyed first from without; more often, they are weakened from within, when truth gives way to falsehood, integrity to corruption, self-restraint to self-indulgence, and charity to selfishness.

The Holy Scriptures teach us the same enduring lesson. The Psalmist proclaims: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom He has chosen as His own inheritance." (Psalm 33:12)

This blessing is not bestowed because a nation claims God's favor, but because its people strive to walk in His commandments. Divine blessing is never a reward for national pride. It is the fruit of humility, repentance, justice, and faithfulness.

For Orthodox Christians, freedom is never understood merely in political or social terms. Civil liberty is indeed a precious gift, one for which generations have sacrificed greatly, but it is not the highest form of freedom. Authentic freedom is found only in Jesus Christ, Who liberates the human heart from the tyranny of sin and restores within us the image of God that has been wounded by the Fall.

Our Lord Himself declared: "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." (John 8:36). Likewise, the holy Apostle Paul exhorts us: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1).

These inspired words remind us that political liberty, however noble, can never by itself satisfy the deepest longings of the human soul. A person may enjoy every constitutional freedom guaranteed by law and yet remain imprisoned by anger, pride, greed, addiction, resentment, or despair. Conversely, history is filled with saints who endured persecution, imprisonment, exile, and even martyrdom, yet possessed an interior freedom that no earthly power could ever take from them because their hearts belonged wholly to Christ.

The Christian understanding of liberty therefore begins not in the halls of government but in the transformation of the human heart. A free nation depends ultimately upon free

persons, and truly free persons are those who have learned to govern themselves through obedience to God, the discipline of virtue, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. This truth was also recognized by many among our nation's founders. John Adams observed: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Whether every Founder fully embodied the principles they professed is a matter for historians to examine. Like every generation, they were men marked by both wisdom and human frailty. Yet their imperfections do not diminish the enduring truth they recognized: that liberty cannot survive where virtue is abandoned, and that rights divorced from moral responsibility eventually consume themselves.

Thomas Jefferson likewise acknowledged the sacred source of human liberty when he wrote: "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time." For Christians, these words point us toward a still greater reality. Life itself is a sacred gift. Liberty likewise is a sacred trust. Neither belongs ultimately to us. Both are entrusted to us by God, Who calls us to exercise them with humility, gratitude, and love.

It is therefore incumbent upon every generation to ask not only, "What freedoms do I possess?" but also, "How faithfully have I used them?" Have we employed our freedom to glorify God, to strengthen our families, to defend the weak, to seek justice, to serve the poor, and to build communities marked by compassion and peace? Or have we too often mistaken freedom for license, confusing personal autonomy with moral truth? The Apostle Peter gives us the answer: "Live as free people, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as servants of God." (1 Peter 2:16)

Here lies one of the greatest challenges facing every free society. Liberty flourishes only when it is joined to virtue. Freedom separated from truth becomes confusion. Freedom separated from justice becomes oppression. Freedom separated from love becomes selfishness. But freedom united to truth, justice, and charity becomes one of God's greatest blessings for the flourishing of human society.

For this reason, the Church has always sought not merely to preserve liberty, but to sanctify those who possess it. The Gospel does not abolish civic responsibility; rather, it ennobles it. Faithful Christians should therefore be among the most conscientious citizens of every nation—honest in their dealings, faithful in their duties, respectful of lawful authority, compassionate toward those in need, and steadfast in defending the God-given dignity of every human life.

The Apostle Paul instructs us: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." (Romans 13:1). These words do not teach blind obedience to every human command, for the Apostles themselves declared, "We must obey God rather than men"

(Acts 5:29) whenever earthly authority contradicts the divine will. Rather, Saint Paul reminds us that civil authority exists to promote justice, preserve order, and protect the common good. Christians therefore fulfill their civic responsibilities not merely as citizens of an earthly republic, but as disciples of Jesus Christ, whose conduct should always reflect the virtues of His Kingdom.

As we celebrate this historic anniversary, let us therefore renew our gratitude for the liberties we have inherited, while remembering that every generation must earn the privilege of preserving them anew. The surest safeguard of freedom is not found in constitutions alone, but in men and women whose hearts have been formed by truth, whose consciences have been illumined by faith, and whose lives bear witness to the transforming power of the Gospel. Only such citizens can sustain a truly free nation. Only such hearts can preserve a truly just society. And only a people who humbly acknowledge their dependence upon Almighty God can hope to transmit the priceless gift of liberty to generations yet unborn.

A Call to Gratitude, Virtue, and National Renewal

As we give thanks for the blessings God has bestowed upon our nation over the past 250 years, we must also recognize that gratitude is never passive. True thanksgiving always gives birth to responsibility. Every blessing entrusted to us by God becomes a sacred stewardship, and every privilege carries with it a corresponding duty. This is true in our spiritual lives. It is true within our families. It is true within the life of the Church. And it is equally true in the life of our nation.

The liberties that we enjoy today did not come into existence by accident, nor were they secured without sacrifice. They were purchased through the courage of those who were willing to risk everything for the hope of a freer and more just society. Across the generations, countless men and women have labored faithfully, served honorably, and, in many instances, laid down their lives so that future generations might live in peace and freedom. We remember them today with profound gratitude and reverence.

Our Lord teaches us: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13). While these sacred words find their fullest expression in the saving sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, they also remind us to honor all those who have willingly sacrificed themselves for the welfare of others. We therefore remember with gratitude the members of our Armed Forces, our veterans, law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, first responders, physicians, nurses, teachers, and the countless public servants who labor each day—often without recognition—for the safety, health, education, and well-being of their fellow citizens. Their quiet acts of fidelity strengthen the very fabric of our society.

Likewise, we remember those whose sacrifices are seldom celebrated in public but whose influence has shaped generations: faithful mothers and fathers who have nurtured their children in love; grandparents whose wisdom has preserved the treasures of faith and family; honest workers whose integrity has built businesses and communities; clergy who have proclaimed the Gospel faithfully; monastics whose hidden prayers uphold the world; and every neighbor whose acts of kindness have quietly reflected the mercy of Christ.

History is not fashioned only by great leaders whose names appear in books. More often, it is built by ordinary people who choose, day after day, to do what is right simply because it is right. The greatness of a nation is measured not merely by its institutions, but by the character of its people. For this reason, anniversaries such as this invite us to look not only backward but also inward.

It is easy to celebrate the achievements of those who came before us. It is more difficult—and far more important—to ask ourselves whether we are leaving to those who follow us a nation that is stronger in faith, richer in virtue, and more deeply committed to justice than the one we ourselves inherited. This is not merely a civic question. It is a profoundly spiritual one.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). These inspired words remain as relevant today as when they were first written. Every generation faces its own trials and temptations. Ours is no exception. We live in a time of extraordinary technological achievement, yet many hearts remain burdened by loneliness. We possess unprecedented access to information, yet genuine wisdom often seems elusive. We communicate instantly across great distances, yet meaningful human relationships too frequently give way to isolation and division.

The pace of modern life can easily distract us from the things that matter most. We become occupied with success while neglecting holiness; concerned with comfort while forgetting compassion; absorbed in endless distractions while allowing prayer to grow silent. In such moments, it is not our nation alone that requires renewal. It is our own hearts.

Every lasting renewal of society begins with the conversion of the human person. No legislation can create holiness. No election can produce virtue. No court can compel love. These are the fruits of hearts transformed by the grace of God. Whenever men and women sincerely repent of their sins, seek the face of Christ, and strive to live according to His commandments, families are strengthened, neighborhoods become more compassionate, communities grow more peaceful, and nations themselves are quietly renewed from within.

The Prophet Micah summarizes God's desire for His people in words of timeless beauty: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) If every citizen sought to live these simple yet profound words, how different our nation would become.

Justice without mercy becomes harshness. Mercy without truth becomes sentimentality. Humility without courage becomes weakness. But when justice, mercy, humility, truth, and love are united within the human heart, they become the very foundation of a flourishing civilization.

As Christians, we must never surrender to discouragement or cynicism. It is easy to lament the problems that surround us. It is far more difficult—and infinitely more Christian—to become part of God's answer to those problems.

The world does not need more anger; it needs more holiness. It does not need louder voices; it needs wiser hearts. It does not need greater division; it needs men and women who have learned to forgive, to reconcile, to serve, and to love. This is the vocation entrusted to every disciple of Jesus Christ.

As Orthodox Catholic Christians, we are called to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16). Salt preserves what is good. Light dispels darkness. Neither accomplishes its purpose by drawing attention to itself, but by quietly fulfilling the work for which God created it. So too must our witness be.

May our homes become places where children first learn reverence for God, respect for others, and gratitude for the blessings they have received. May our parishes continue to be sanctuaries of prayer, mercy, truth, and healing, where every person who enters encounters not judgment but the compassionate face of Christ. May our communities become places where differences are met with charity rather than hostility, where neighbors care for one another, where the elderly are honored, where the poor are not forgotten, and where every human life is cherished as sacred from conception until natural death. And may each of us remember that the future of our nation is shaped less by the decisions made in distant halls of power than by the countless acts of faithfulness performed each day quietly in our homes, our workplaces, our churches, and our neighborhoods.

The future of America will ultimately depend upon the moral and spiritual character of her people. For this reason, I ask each of you, my beloved spiritual children, to renew your commitment to Christ with fresh zeal. Pray faithfully. Worship reverently. Receive the Holy Mysteries frequently. Read the Holy Scriptures. Teach the Faith to your children and grandchildren. Serve those in need. Forgive those who have wronged you. Defend the dignity of every human person. Love your country—not with blind pride, but with humble gratitude and a sincere desire to contribute to its goodness. If we do these things,

then regardless of what challenges the future may hold, we shall have fulfilled our sacred vocation. We shall leave to those who come after us not merely a stronger nation, but a holier one; not merely a more prosperous society, but a more compassionate one; and not merely a richer inheritance, but a nobler legacy.

Such is the work to which Christ calls us. Such is the stewardship entrusted to every generation. And such is the gift that we, by the grace of God, may yet bequeath to the generations that will celebrate the tricentennial of this beloved Republic.

Our Hope for the Future: A Prayer for America

With hearts united in thanksgiving, let us offer this prayer:

O Lord God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator of heaven and earth and the righteous Governor of all nations, we bow before Your divine majesty with grateful hearts. We thank You for the abundant blessings You have bestowed upon the United States of America throughout these past two hundred and fifty years. We thank You for those men and women whose courage, sacrifice, wisdom, and perseverance laid the foundations of this Republic. We thank You for every generation that has labored to preserve the blessings of liberty, justice, and peace.

Forgive us, O Lord, for those times when we have failed to walk in Your ways. Forgive us whenever pride has replaced humility, whenever selfishness has overcome charity, whenever truth has yielded to falsehood, and whenever we have forgotten that every good and perfect gift comes from You. Create within us clean hearts, renew within us a right spirit, and make us faithful stewards of the blessings You have entrusted to our care.

Look with mercy upon this nation. Grant wisdom to all who govern; courage to those who defend the innocent; strength to those who labor for justice; healing to the sick; comfort to the sorrowful; hope to the discouraged; and peace to all who call this land their home. Preserve our liberties, strengthen our families, bless our churches, protect our children, and guide us ever more closely into the paths of righteousness.

Spread over this nation the protecting veil of the Most Holy Theotokos, who ceaselessly intercedes before the throne of her Divine Son. Through the prayers of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, our Father among the Saints Gregory of Syracuse, Saint Neilos of Rossano, Saint Bartholomew of Grottaferrata, Saint Elias the Younger, Saint Phantinos the Younger, Saint Lucy of Syracuse, Saint Leo of Catania, Saint Agatha of Sicily, and all the holy men and women who have pleased You throughout the ages, preserve this land in peace and grant that we may live lives worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

May the light of Your truth continue to shine upon this nation. May the grace of Your Holy Spirit renew the hearts of its people. And when our earthly pilgrimage has come to its end, receive us into that eternal Kingdom where every tribe and tongue and people and nation glorify You forever,

together with Your Only-Begotten Son and Your All-Holy, Good, and Life-Giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Beloved faithful, as your Archbishop and spiritual father, I entrust each of you, your families, and our beloved nation to the mercy of Almighty God. May He bless these United States of America. May He preserve her in liberty under law, in justice guided by truth, in prosperity tempered by compassion, and in peace founded upon righteousness. May He strengthen every home, every parish, every community, and every citizen who seeks what is good, honorable, and just.

May the protecting veil of the Most Holy Theotokos remain ever extended over this land and over all who dwell within it. And may our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, grant that, as faithful Christians and grateful Americans, we may live in such a manner that future generations will bless His holy Name for the witness we have left them.

Invoking upon you the blessing of Almighty God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Consubstantial and Undivided Trinity, I remain,

Your father and unworthy servant in Christ,

+ Archbishop Stephen
Archbishop of Siracusa and Ortigia, and of All Sicily, Southern Italy, and Magna Graecia
Metropolitan of the Americas and Canada of the Italo-Greeks
Bishop of Utica
Primate, Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church

Given at the Metropolitan Chancery, in the God-protected city of Utica, New York, on this fourth day of July, in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-Six, the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America