



Proximity Portal

Special Edition - April/May 2022





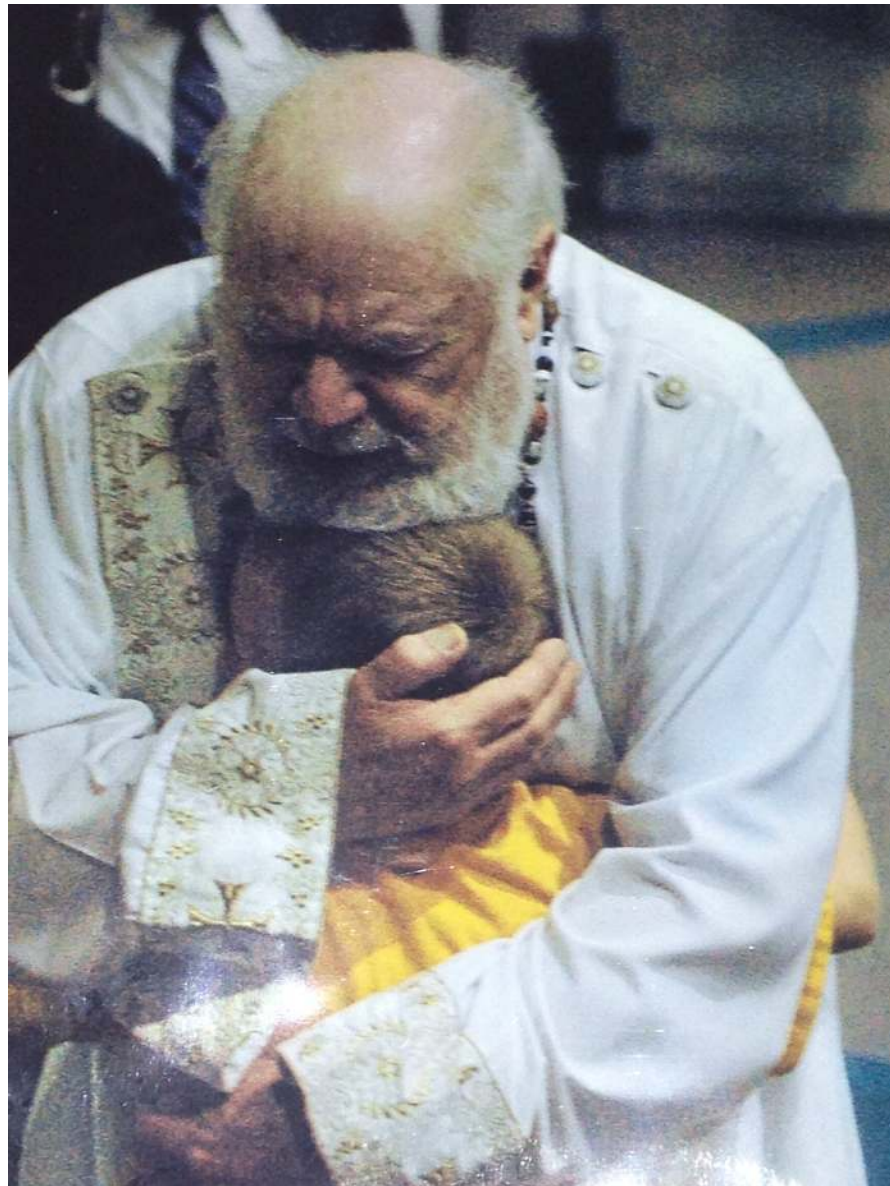
Fr. Jason Yakob McNair

Resident Editorial

"The first stage of this tranquility consists in silencing the lips when the heart is excited. The second, in silencing the mind when the soul is still excited. The goal is a perfect peacefulness even in the middle of the raging storm." -St. John Climacus

As I reflect upon the words of the great saint, I consider the age to which I have been called to speak, share and ultimately communicate. The accessibility to public opinion concerning any given topic is the order of the day. Does this accessibility lessen the influence of any particular one voice as the lead influencer? Will there ever again be a limited circle of profound voices, like St. John Climacus or even the council of early church fathers and mothers who shaped the mindset for a generation? Things that are rare tend to hold great value. What about public opinion in the age of information and technology; what is it worth? I am inclined more and more each day as we progress further into this age to heed the words of the great saint. I also am reflecting upon Proverbs 17:27 (NKJV) which states "He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit." As I retreat back to my life, from taking a pause to share these thoughts, I feel compelled to recommit myself to the practice of being mindful of how quickly and even impulsively (sometimes compulsively) the body can be used to express the intentions of the spirit and in response to this awareness, I take a deep breath.

In this edition of the **Proximity Portal**, we reflect on the life of our Patriarch, His Holiness Mar Joseph Vrendenburgh, +Memory Eternal,



Moran Mar Joseph Narai Vredenburg

Dr. Joseph L. Vredenburg Th.D., Ph.D., was consecrated Bishop on August 26th 1963. Bishops Cyrus and Howard Mather were his primary consecrators. He and Virginia were missionary's to American Samoa. They had met when he was serving as a Minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of Christ. Virginia sang in the choir. When they met they were both wearing beanies. That's what first drew them together. Dr. Joe had attended Rutgers, Princeton and Union Theological Seminaries. Also having served the United Church of Christ he received his pension in his retirement years. Dr. Joe having being called to return to his boyhood calling to the Church of the East was duly made Bishop at Middletown, New York.

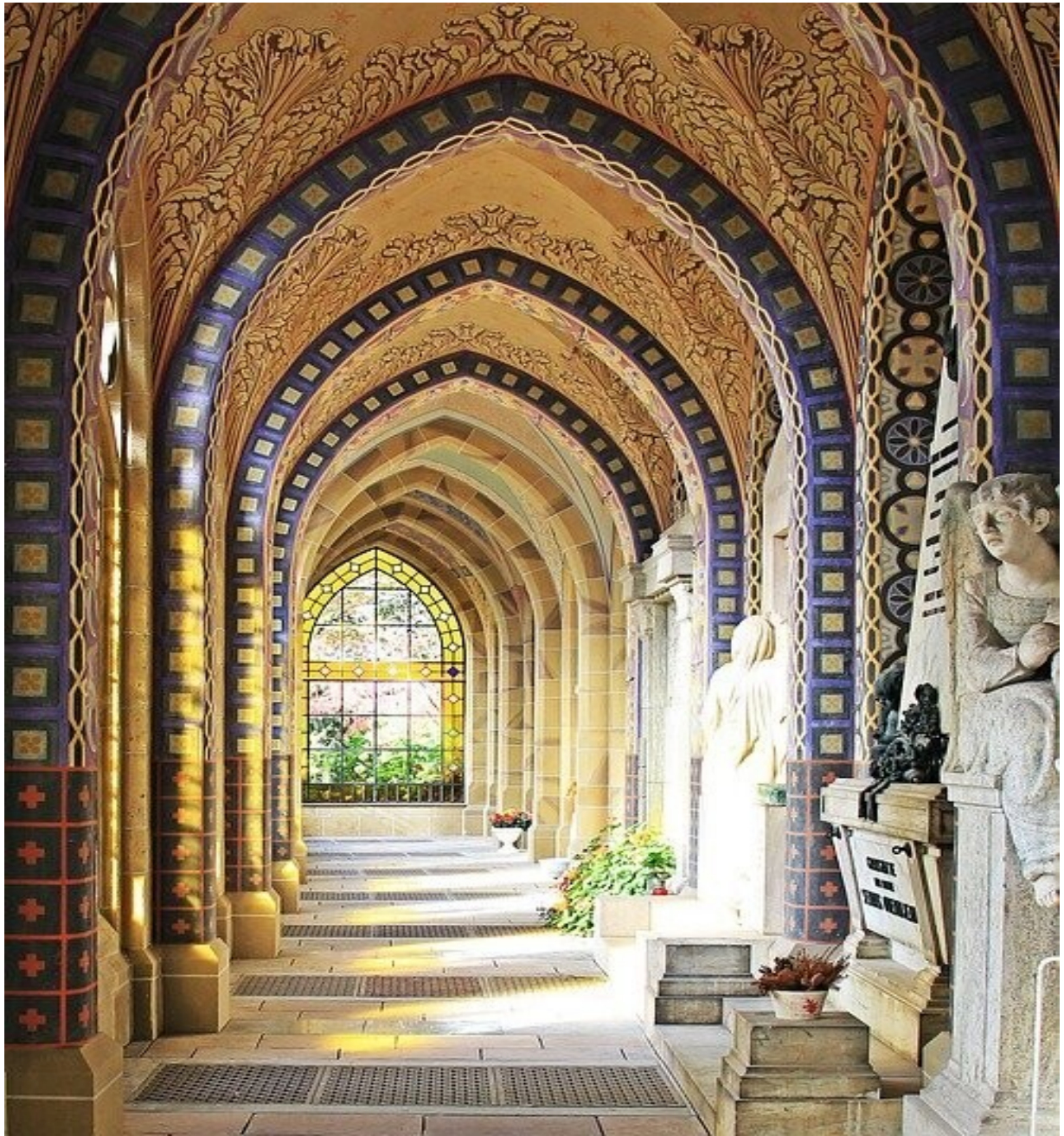
As a young lad the Patriarch of the Church of the East had lifted him up and proclaimed him to be the future Patriarch at the St. Thomas Cathedral also in New York. Another little boy there was dismayed that he was not chosen. The Federation of St. Thomas Christians was founded. The Apostolic lineage tracing back to the earliest missionary travels of St. Thomas the twin and Simon called the rock that is interpreted Kepa in the Aramaic language our Lord and his contemporaries spoke is rendered as Petros that is Peter. The church diocese of Antioch was reorganized into the order of Antioch. The communities of faith St. Thomas had established in Southern India on the Malabar coast having Antioch, Syria as its then Diocese came over to the American mainland. Thus the Syro/Malabar Rite found new expression in His Holiness Maran Mar Joseph. At the time of Dr. Joseph's consecration he received the new name Timotheus and Narsai I. Mar Narsai had established the first Christian university. In its modern establishment the Federation of St. Thomas Christians flung open the doors of inclusivity. Now Bishops could marry as in the earliest church and going back even earlier to the writings of Moses in the account of the Genesis, " then Alaha-God created humanity in the image of God." " male and female God created them." Women and men co-equal and complimentary. So Matriarch and Patriarch. Both clergy men and women. Women Deacons, Priests, Bishops and Archbishops. In the Federation Holy Communion was given to whomsoever desired it.

Mar Joseph networked a vast number of religious communities. He met with Baha'i, Mormon, gnostic, metaphysical, the 7th Day Adventists, Samoan Protestants, Assyrian Protestants just to name a few. His relationship with the Swedenborgian foundation brought new insight to holy scripture to many, as in Luke 24:45, "and he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Dr. Joe did for me as our Lord Jesus did making students "on the job" I remember him saying, "the Holy Spirit is an equal opportunity employer." He and Virginia would reach out to people near and far. Locally they would go pick folks up at home, bring them to church services provide refreshments and bring them back home. At home he both studied and gave Pastoral counseling on the phone and in person. People traveled from many faraway places to receive holy orders from him. I myself carry on the form of liturgy I learned from him. I also continue to teach his course, Basic Christian Philosophy. A federation is a union. May the Ancient Aramaic Blessing of Eternal Light Bless, Keep, and Preserve each of you to everlasting life.

The Most Reverend Joseph Eaton S.T.D., D.D. Mar Thoma II



Special Memories of "Dr. Joe"





My memories of Moran Mar Joseph Narsai Vredenburgh begin with the stories shared with me by members of the Saint Mary of Magdala Cathedral when I became a member of the community in the early 2000's. Every deacon, priest, and parish member shared their own story of how they met Mar Joseph. I wouldn't meet Mar Joseph for several years after leaving my community in Southern California. I was serving the small community in Fresno, California as deacon, traveling between Southern California and Fresno, to make available to them all of the sacraments. I was encouraged by the community to approach Mar Joseph Narsai Vredenburgh in Santa Cruz, California to ordain me a priest of the Federation of Saint Thomas Christians. I wrote to His Eminence regarding the matter and he requested that I join him and the Federation on the feast day of Saint Thomas the Apostle in July of 2010.

Meeting Mar Joseph and those gathered at the "Circle Church" in Santa Cruz was strange and yet familiar to me. When introduced to Mar Joseph the images of those from the Fresno Cathedral descriptions of him as, "Papa Joe", "Santa Claus", and a few I can't remember at this time flooded my mind. He was a kind looking gentleman, smiling, and having an aura of peace. "Hello deacon!" Mar Joseph greeted me, "I received a letter from Bishop Aline Caldwell from France that you desire to be ordained a priest? I am glad to hear you are in Fresno. I have always loved that community! My heart is always there. Do you want me to concentrate you a Bishop!?!?" Well, you can only imagine what raced through my mind. "No your Eminence, thank you, I'm here that you may ordain me a priest for the Fresno community.", "Very well then, and what is the name you are to be ordained with?", "I have chosen Saint Ephrem.", "Ahhh, Saint Ephrem the Syrian! Good name – a poet and song writer.", "Bishop Matthew will be your sponsor." And the rest is history.

In the years after that feast of Saint Thomas, I met with him and the Federation of Saint Thomas Christians every July in Santa Cruz and in time joined with Marta Cheryl Naomi Windom-Davis, Mar Stephen Avi Abraham Penhallow, Deaconess Teresa Garcia and Deaconess Ruth (Ramika) Lawson. Mar Joseph Thooma II hosted the annual Federation of Saint Thomas Synod on the feast of Saint Thomas at the retirement community where Mar Joseph lived with his wife Marta Virginia. We gathered, gave a report of what we were doing and how we were serving the people of God. Mar Joseph would impart some wisdom on us and celebrate the Holy Qurbana. He would collect a small offering from us and Mar Thooma II would distribute it to a person of need in his retirement community. The day ended with us all going to diner at his favorite Chinese restaurant "The Golden Palace" where we would have fellowship and spend time getting to know one another.

I stated that Moran Mar Joseph Narsai Vredenburgh was a true ecumenical patriarch. In getting to know more about Mar Joseph, I had come to know some of his own life story. I told him that I lived in Oakland California and he shared that he was the pastor of the First Congregationalist Church in downtown Oakland. Mar Joseph was known for his walks through out Santa Cruz, or any other town or city, and walk up and greet people, anyone who came by him. In Santa Cruz he held yoga classes at a community center open to anyone who was interested in joining him. My last visit with him before entering into + memory eternal, he asked me to vest him, put on his cope and mitre with blessing cross in hand roll him in his wheelchair throughout the retirement facility and he blessed everyone in their rooms and those in the hallway. What came to mind where the saying of Saint Francis, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words."

+ Bishop Robert Mar Ephrem Lopez, Mar Thoma Orthodox Church in America, Diocese of Fresno.

Photo – Left to Right: Front row; Moran Mar Joseph Narsai Vredenburgh, Archbishop Bernard Price, Sally May. Second row; Father (Bishop) Robert Ephrem Lopez, Bishop Shirley Gaunt, Bishop Matthew. Third row; Marta Virginia Vredenburgh, Bishop Joseph Mar Thooma II Eton, Father (Bishop) Richard Heredia-Price.

*Santa Cruz, CA
2015*



Above: Marta Virginia and Mar Joseph Vredenburgh. Below: Mar Abraham Penhallow and Mar Joseph





I met Mar Joseph the first time in Santa Cruz, California at a wonderful restaurant on the pier. I was so nervous. I was just starting this journey into Orthodoxy. I didn't know enough to have a smart conversation. I was uncomfortable. There were so many important people around, I thought that I would be able to sit on the outside and let the day just take its course. Nope, he sat with me. He proceeded to discuss things that resonated with me. He told me about his work with civil rights. He explained that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a saint in the Orthodox church. I was floored that he would make such an

effort to connect with me. We would become pen-pals exchanging dozens of letters over the years. His wisdom and insight would be invaluable. He was like no other leader that I have ever known. His heart was truly for us to experience the faith. I remember the first time Mar Joseph came to visit our church, the Saint Mary of Magdala Cathedral in Fresno, CA. We were so anxious to do everything right. He was so kind. When we lowered our heads to kiss his ring, I remember him saying, "oh yes, yes", as if he had forgotten this gesture of respect. It didn't matter to him, because he followed every gesture with a enormous bear hug. (If you have ever been hugged by Mar Joseph you know what I mean). After the liturgy, he had to meet everyone. He especially loved the children. I recall, him gathering them around him and they asked if he was Santa Claus? He smiled, sat down on the steps of the altar, and told them a story about the life of Saint Nicolas. I wish I had taken a picture of him. They were enthralled. It of course did not hurt that his laugh filled the room and dressed in white, he did resemble Santa. Many will recall his scholastic mind or historical lineage. I will remember his love for Christ, his family, the people, and for me. Submitted by ***Amma Naomi Davis***

*Visit to see
Patriarch*



Bishop Eaton, Bishop Avi, Mar. Joseph, Marta Virginia & Amma Cheryl





My first meeting.

We were instructed to say 'Barekmor, Mar Joseph...' and bow to kiss the bishop's ring. He was on his way to the church (the building where we gathered for worship) and we were excited, some were full of anxiety at making sure we 'get it right,' to meet the archbishop for the first time. However, when Mar Joseph entered the church, he grabbed the person holding the door open and gave them a huge hug! He said, 'Hello there, and what would your name be?' After getting a response and having a short discussion about the origin of the name given Mar Joseph proceeded to greet each of us with a hug. While a few tried to kiss the bishop's ring he wasn't really in the frame of mind. Mar Joseph taught us that orthodoxy is a revelation to those already saved, as some would say, it should be taught at pace. This first meeting was glorious!

My second meeting.

We were having a conference and Dr. Joe, as we had grown to call him, had a schedule carefully prepared for him. Each time we went to meet him where we anticipated he would be, he was in another place. For example, we had a minister's breakfast one morning and we went to meet him at his room to escort him to the breakfast. He had gone to get his daily exercise in the hotel pool. Before we could find him at the pool he had gone back to his room, changed clothes, and was headed for the breakfast. Dr. Joe, taught us, who were ready to receive, that orthodoxy does not interrupt being led by the Holy Spirit! This lesson is powerful.

My last meeting.

We met in Santa Cruz, California near Mar Joseph's home. This meeting is pointed because there were two truths that we had to embrace. One, Mar Enoch had made his transition, which was one reason for the gathering, and two, we had newly ordained clergy who had not met our patriarch. As we all embraced at our own pace and passion Mar Joseph was very present during the Qurbana, so much so that he gave words to affirm and confirm our presence and continuance in the faith. In this, Mar Joseph taught us to remain open to the Holy Spirit and continue in the faith.

I encountered Mar Joseph more than three times. I choose to write about these few times because I could be brief. There are many words I could write regarding my interactions and communications with Archbishop Joseph Vredenburg +. In sharing these hopefully, you will see his character and caring in making sure orthodoxy continues, not in a way that all would agree with, but in a way necessary to humanity.

With peace and blessings. Dc. R Ruth Lawson



Deaconess Ramika, Amma Naomi, Bishop Avi, Mar Ephrem, Bishop Eaton, Mar Joseph, and Marta Virginia



Because of his love and compassion, our communities continue...







Easter/Pascha Reflections 2022





Fr. Nicolas Ishak O'Rourke

Reflections of Pascha/Easter Celebration '22

The Resurrection of the Lord, as it is referred to in the Revised Common Lectionary, served also as the return to in-person worship services of the small Northeast Philadelphia Christian community, ***Living Water***. Affiliated with the mainline United Church of Christ, protestant Christian denomination. For two solid years this faith community discovered together the unique opportunities and challenges that come with keeping the charge of holding fellowship, while also being physically separated from each other. Beginning in March of 2020, the proliferation of virtual devotionals, communions, baptisms, weddings, Bible Studies, etc that ballooned across social media platforms in 2020 also had a consistent contribution coming from churches like ours. All events, traditionally performed in the physical presence of other human beings, had by necessity, been exclusively re-formed into small video boxes on our personal tech gadget of choice. It would be difficult to deny *the ways in which it felt as if our spirits had been forced into restrictive boxes of similar size. A minor reformation*, of its own kind, experienced in most corners of the observing Christian world by those close enough to discern it. This time, set aside for the observance and celebration of the *bodily* resurrection of the Lord, served also as the first time we, as a church, gathered *bodily*, aside from burying our dead, to celebrate.

Even with three months of meeting in preparation for the return, assuming all that would happen, I don't know if I could have anticipated the bodily reaction, I ultimately experienced from rising early, dressing *myself*, and *physically* driving to be in worshipping, human community for the first time in two years. The commute alone brought both myself and my Muslim wife to a sudden clarity on the benefit of an *embodied* faith. Not simply a dry, intellectual pursuit. Not a zealous, mystical overshoot, or a passionless YouTube search for half-baked inspiration. But, rather a lived and an intentional, somatic faith. Through watery eyes, I felt both the weight of the call of ministry and the lift of the joy of the Lord as we listened to various psalmists leading worship over the car sound system. *In person. Together.*

Upon reflection on that morning drive, it became clear that the meeting of the call to worship on a Sunday morning has within its pull, a drawing power on our actual bodies. It impacts us *physically, not just spiritually or intellectually*. Like the recalled memories that make up the poetic verses of the Psalms of Ascent, sung by the living Levites physically ascending the three, five, & seven steps of the Temple, *on their* way to in-person worship. This was an intentional practice tied to Temple worship that, in our own unique ways, still shows up in our own modern commutes. It was likely understood by the priests of that era that the pull of obligation, joined with the push of celebration, generates a force on the human person that produces a positive experience, felt *in the body*. That there is a bodily response & benefit to gathering in-person, on purpose. So much so, that one whose faith was never formed under the central teaching of a bodily resurrection, also experiences a resurrection of inspiration, of possibility, *within her body*. When participating in worshipping community.

Something needed rose in us, this Easter. The Kingdom, as we say, is indeed in proximity. While physically on the way to a return worship experience, that was shot through with expected smiling eyes over masks, warm embraces pushed out past distancing apprehensions, and the air of a long-needed joy that can only come from such a reunion, *I was surprisingly quenched, satisfied and lifted, my needs were met, at the very act of drawing close again, in community.* The benefits only continued as we continued through with the formal worship service and the *celebration of the Eucharist.* The Resurrection of the Lord, more accurately, became the Resurrection of the Body of Christ. The Resurrection of *We*, the parts that make up the body. Something in us becomes more alive, more human when we are in community with other human persons.

We know this when we are together. We can forget it when we are apart. For this reason, I'm reminded, when we can and when safety and a sound mind permit, that we would do well to heed the suggestion of the mysterious scribe to The Hebrews and, "*forsake not the assembling of ourselves together*".



Our first face to face liturgy was held in Palmdale, CA during the Eastern Pasha April 24,2022

Proximity Portal - April/May







He that hath an ear,

As we reach the halfway point of Lent let us look to the sky to see of the glorious works the Lord has wrought. The stars in the heavens which shine the glory of the Lord so shall you shine forth the glory of the Lord. This Lenten season you will be on the potter's wheel a broken vessel being remade and remolded in the image of Christ. The Lord will blow upon the coals of your life that the heat would bring to the surface all the impurities which keep you from manifesting his image. He will blow upon the coals the entire Lenten season and bring about an instrument for His use. Fast, pray, seek the Lord as never before and in this season He will answer you. Upheaval and ox carts being overturned will be the norm during this season but fear not for in the midst of it all He will bring a peace which goes beyond understanding what is going on to guide you and upholds you. I will carry you through says the Lord of hosts and I will bring a cooling to the fire which will come forth and cover you as the flames burn around you and seem to have no end. I will bring an understanding to all things and many questions will be answered which have gone unanswered for many seasons for this is the season that you all will find yourselves in me. Do not despair if the desert seems to stream out before you with no end in sight for in me there is always a beginning and an end and focus not on the path but keep your eyes to the horizon and to the end of the path only. This will be a time of refocus and focus where clarity is to be had. I will wash away the chaff from your minds and I shall bring the Holy Spirit to renew and refresh yourselves in my light.

Do not despair, do not sink back into old habits for this is a season of new habits and new paths to walk upon. Old things will be put away and new things will be brought to you when you least expect and I will speak to you in new ways when you least expect it. I shall bring dreams to the dreamers and words to the speakers and a new understanding shall be made for this is a new day, a day in which you all have been waiting for since before you were in your mother's womb I spoke to you of this day. A day in which the faithful will be rewarded and a day in which those who have only been playing church will be cast aside. Pray my children for those who are in need for never before have they seen the great and terrible day of the Lord and I will visit upon them and I will bring a newness to the but a newness born out of pain and trial. I will visit them in their sleep, in their prayer times and in their study time and speak to them of things which they may not be ready for but it will be necessary for them to hear my voice in clarity and in newness to take them into the Holy of Holies and to show them how to be made new. There is no God like me and all false gods must be stripped away and all things which are keeping them from becoming like me will be torn away and the path will become straight and narrow for them once again and their footsteps shall once again be ordered by me. No longer will you just play church but you will be the church I have called since the beginning of time and you shall shine forth as never before of my newness and my purpose. You will no longer be confused or unsure of what my will is for you for it will be made known in this hour and in this season and for those who do not wish to follow the path I will lay before them woe unto them and they shall be cast unto utter darkness and shall not be heard from again. This is the time prophesied so many years ago and the time is now where you will bow down and worship me alone. (Released by Deaconess Teresa Garcia)

The Proximity Portal

The Mar Thoma Orthodox Church is a faith-based organization where ancient Christianity is united with a modern Pentecostal experience. MTOC has ministers in California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

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