

WILKES-BARRE DEANERY HOLDS UNPRECEDENTED PARISH ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE

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With the blessing of His Grace, Bishop Tikhon, and the leadership of our new dean, Father Daniel Kovalak, Rector of Holy Cross Orthodox Church in Williamsport, the Wilkes-Barre deanery of the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania held a ***Parish Administrative Conference*** on Saturday, April 17, 2010. Parish priests along with more than fifty elected parish council members from throughout the deanery attended this unprecedented event hosted by St. Michael' s parish in Jermyn. The conference began with a continental breakfast where those in attendance interacted in fellowship with their fellow deanery members. Bishop Tikhon opened the event with a half hour presentation followed by the main speaker and coordinator of the conference, Fr. Daniel Kovalak, who delivered a dynamic and eye-opening presentation about parish leadership. Following the main address, a luncheon was served by the parishioners of St. Michael' s. And the entire event was free thanks to the generosity of St. Michael' s parish community and the host pastor Father John Kowalczyk.

Bishop Tikhon welcomed everyone who came to participate in this historic event in our deanery. His Grace spoke humbly and from his heart about lay leadership within the church and how each and every one of us is called in one way or another to participate in Christ' s ministry and to strive to imitate Christ in our daily lives and within our parish communities. He intimated that this conference could and should be the impetus for further such gatherings within the deanery and that possibly the other two deaneries in the diocese could follow suit.

In his opening remarks, Father Daniel reminded us that everything we do should be Christ-centered. He used the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as the basis for his presentation. What was remarkable to this writer was the way in which Fr. Dan dynamically and enthusiastically held the audience' s attention for two hours and not one person as much as winced. His remarks were scripturally sound sprinkled with elements of comic relief. Fr. Dan described the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts as the model for all parish councils, as it is for all councils of the Church: parish councils, Holy Synods and Ecumenical Councils. Christ is the Head, the Holy Spirit provides the guidance and the members seek to serve Christ by discerning and carrying out His Will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

My next thought then made me shudder just a bit. " If we, as parish leaders, are to carry on the tradition of that first council, how come we have strayed so far away from Christ, the center of our existence?" Let' s face it: today' s parish council meetings

are far from being Christ-centered. So, the ideal way to continue in the footsteps of the Apostles is to try to emulate them in today's world. Is this a challenge? You bet it is! But, we must be able to rise above our petty differences, and to quit squabbling about where the money is going to come from for this or that and learn to love one another the way Christ loved His Apostles. Thank you, Father Dan, for allowing this observer to reflect on this powerful message.

Fr. Dan then spoke about areas of parish administration, again quoting scripture and comparing our actions and deeds to the events taken from the ACTS of the Apostles. First and foremost, he reminded us that **we must worship together**. If we don't know how to worship **with one accord** and **in one place** then how can we expect to carry on any of the other responsibilities entrusted to us as the lay leaders of the Church? I then wondered to myself, "How many of us really listen and heed the priest's proclamation just before the **Creed** at every Divine Liturgy? "***Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess...***" Just think how much more productive our parish council meetings would be if we all accepted this declaration as our parish council *motto*. I then had an introspective reflection and shocking revelation; I thought, "Just how much do I love Christ and the Holy Church?" And sadly, my answer was, "NOT ENOUGH." So right then and there I decided it was time to quit "talking the talk" and begin "walking the walk" and actually try to make my life more Christ-centered than it is right now. I venture to add that any participant who wasn't affected in some similar manner just wasn't listening to Fr. Dan's message.

The rest of Fr. Dan's talk focused on our spiritual life, pastoral care, education and enlightenment, mission, and philanthropy. Without going into detail, these areas of parish life are not only the responsibility of the parish priest, but also the ministries of each and every parishioner within the church. For the Lord gave each of us some kind of special talent. In His infinite wisdom, He has placed within each of our parishes individuals with varied and diverse talents. Fr. Dan stressed that Christ providentially allows our parishes to be comprised of individuals with many different kinds of talents. In this way, the parish is able to thrive, for each person offers that special gift back to Christ which was given by Christ in the first place.

The focus then turned to the parish council meeting and its prescribed agenda. Our meetings should (1) have a focus; (2) solve problems; (3) make decisions for the good of the church; (4) develop plans; (5) generate ideas; (6) gather and convey information; (7) report the status of prior decisions; (8) assign tasks to implement plans; and (9) assure accountability. A typical sample meeting agenda should begin with a prayer. Next, roll call should be taken followed by the minutes from the previous meeting. The officers' reports should come after that. The remainder of the meeting should consist of old business, new business, parishioners' interests and the announcement of the date of the next council meeting. Finally, the meeting should

conclude with a prayer. Fr. Dan reiterated that parish leadership **IS** a ministry and that a vote **IS** a commitment.

All in all, the conference was definitely a success and an inspiration to all attendees. Now all of us should go back to our respective parishes and try to utilize some of the tools that Fr. Dan provided during his talk. Some lay leaders will resist, but persistence pays off. If we truly begin with Christ as our Supreme Leader, and believe that He will guide us in all of our endeavors, then surely our churches will grow, prosper and become beacons within our local communities.

This attendee would like to thank our host parish, St. Michael' s Orthodox Church in Jermyn, for hosting this momentous event in the life of our deanery. Special thanks go to His Grace, Bishop Tikhon for taking the lead in establishing a new development within our Wilkes-Barre deanery—open communication between parish priests and their church council leaders. And finally, I would like to personally thank Fr. Daniel Kovalak for his warmth, his genuine love for what he preaches, and for his fortitude in educating us in the true nature of what it means to be a parish leader. Follow Christ, and everything else will fall into place. Thanks be to God for such a wonderful day of enlightenment.

The unworthy servant of God,

The Reader David