

REPORT OF THE DIOCESAN BISHOP

To the Forty-Sixth Assembly of the
Diocese of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania
December 4-5, 2009
Saint Nicholas Orthodox Church, Bethlehem Pennsylvania

To the Beloved Clergy, Monastics and Faithful of the Diocese of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania:

Christ is in our midst!

INTRODUCTION: PLOWING OUR WAY TO HEAVEN

One of the foundations of Orthodox Christian spiritual life is the certainty that there is no turning back. Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ himself tells us that *No one who puts his hands to the plow and turns back is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.*¹ The glory of the kingdom of heaven is the one thing needful that our hearts desire, the only reality which has any meaning for us as human beings. Therefore, to turn back once we have embarked on the path towards that glory is to turn back from the source of our life itself and to reveal ourselves to be unprepared to enter the kingdom.

Those who are prepared – those who do not turn back – are those who have determined to persevere until the end. The plow that the Lord refers to is an image of this perseverance, but it is also, and more importantly, an image of the kingdom itself. We can understand this more clearly if we think about the farmer who is preparing to plant his crops. In his mind, he has an image of the harvest to come, but the harvest is not yet a reality. But as soon as he begins to plow, the harvest *becomes* a reality. The farmer is already participating in the fruit of the harvest even though a lot of work still needs to be done. He knows that if he stops plowing, there will certainly be no harvest and that every step that he continues to plow brings him closer to the reality of the harvest.

In the same way, the kingdom of heaven does not become a reality only at the moment of our physical death (when we are finished plowing) but at the moment of our baptism (when we begin plowing). The Christian life is hard work but the struggle itself brings us closer to the goal and introduces us into the kingdom that is to come. Our work in this world is our participation in the life of the Church. The Church reveals the glory of the kingdom through her holy mysteries, her divine services, and her theology. And the Church also offers the means for us to enter into that glory through our life of prayer, of repentance and asceticism.

While this report offers some reflections on the past year, I would like for us to be mindful of the importance of keeping our hands to the plow as we continue the work of the diocese, which means to keep our minds and hearts focused on the Kingdom. Let us use our upcoming Assembly as an opportunity to renew our commitment to Christ, to His Holy Church and to the work of spreading of His Holy Gospel. If we labor together

¹ Luke 9:62

in this sacred task, we will encourage one another to keep our hands on the plow and will accomplish great things for the glory of God.

OUR DIOCESE AND ITS MISSION

The Holy Orthodox Church is *universal* because it transcends the limitations of space and even of time. The Gospel that was received by the Holy Apostles is the same Gospel that we ourselves have received from them, through the Holy Fathers, the Martyrs and the Saints who have come after them. As Orthodox Christians in Eastern Pennsylvania, our task is to incarnate, within our parishes and communities, the eternal truth and beauty of Christ in our own time and space. How can we do this? We do not have to re-invent the wheel. We can begin with the fact that our diocese is part of The Orthodox Church in America, whose mission statement provides a good place to start:

The Mission of the Orthodox Church in America, the local autocephalous Orthodox Church, is to be faithful in fulfilling the commandment of Christ to "Go into all the world and make disciples of all Nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all [things that He has] commanded" so that all people may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth: To preach, in accordance with God's will, the fullness of the gospel of the Kingdom to the peoples of North America and to invite them to become members of the Orthodox Church. To utilize for her mission the various languages of the peoples of this continent. To be the body of Christ in North America and to be faithful to the tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church. To witness to the truth, and by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to reveal Christ's way of sanctification and eternal salvation to all.

Our task is to take this mission statement and ask ourselves: how can we implement these lofty goals in our own historical and geographical situation? How do we strive for these good things when we have to deal with the realities of our human existence, such as raising our families, finding employment, paying taxes, and keeping our parishes open (among others)? These are real and important questions to ask ourselves and, even more importantly, to answer, because the way we answer them will reveal to what degree we are keeping our hands to the plow. The Church provides us with many answers but it is up to us to implement those answers through our prayers, our common actions and our efforts.

OUR DIOCESE AND WORLD ORTHODOXY

The Holy Orthodox Church is a *local* Church, which means that the fullness of the faith is found in each diocese, which is comprised of the bishop, the clergy and the faithful. At the same time, the Holy Orthodox Church is the *universal* Church, which means that the faith is lived and experienced throughout the entire world. It is humbling to realize that there are millions of Orthodox Christians throughout the globe, every one of them struggling and laboring like we are to follow the commandments of Christ, to overcome the passions that burden their hearts and to ascend through prayer and repentance to the heavenly kingdom.

Each of us belongs in our local Church, which is our home, but our home becomes more meaningful to us when we visit other people and other places. Likewise, a diocesan

bishop belongs with his flock and should not travel too much beyond the boundaries of his own diocese. Nevertheless, when he does travel, the experience enriches him and his flock as well. At the beginning of this year, I had the blessing of travelling to **Moscow** for the enthronement of His Holiness, Patriarch KIRILL as the new Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. I also travelled to **Mexico City** for the installation of His Grace, Bishop ALEJO, who was enthroned as the ruling hierarch for the Diocese of Mexico City and All Mexico. Finally, I spent one week in **France**, where I visited with my grandmother and attended the Divine Liturgy at the Romanian Church in Paris.

Others in our diocese have also travelled abroad and thereby enriched us. **Christina Semon** has begun her work as a long-term (2 year) OCMC missionary in Romania. Although she received funding from many sources, I was very encouraged by the level of support she received from the parishes and faithful of her home diocese. **Professor Harry Boosalis**, a professor at St Tikhon's Seminary and his son **Michael Boosalis**, both parishioners of the Monastery Church of St Tikhon of Zadonsk, spent several weeks in Tanzania, teaching and helping the Church in that country. **Fr. Nicholas Solak** once again led a team for a **Project Mexico** trip this year. It is my hope to see this missionary activity of the clergy and faithful of this diocese continue to contribute to the enrichment of our local diocese.

Another way in which our diocese will need to be engaged with world Orthodoxy will be our participation in the recently formed **Episcopal Assembly** for North America and Central America. At a meeting on June 6-12 of this year, delegates from all Autocephalous Churches (excluding the OCA) met in Chambésy, Switzerland. The delegates affirmed that it was "the common will of all of the most holy Orthodox Churches that the problem of the Orthodox Diaspora be resolved as quickly as possible, and that it be organized in accordance with Orthodox ecclesiology, and the canonical tradition and practice of the Orthodox Church." In order to accomplish this, Episcopal Assemblies were established, including one for North America and Central America. The first Episcopal Assembly for this region will gather on May 25-27, 2010. All canonical Orthodox Bishops will be invited but it should be stated very clearly that these Assemblies are not canonically binding on any of the local Churches, including the OCA. These Assemblies present many challenges to us but also offers some hope for a positive resolution to the question of Orthodox administrative unity on this continent. Together with the other hierarchs of the OCA, I will be attending the first Assembly, and our Holy Synod has planned several meetings to prepare our own approach to the difficult issues that will undoubtedly be addressed.

Regardless of the outcome of these Assemblies, I am encouraging our clergy and laity to continue to establish good relations with our Orthodox brethren throughout the world and with those of other jurisdictions on this continent. There have been many examples of such local cooperation within the last year, such as our joint celebration of the **Triumph of Orthodoxy** services at Holy Resurrection Cathedral and St Mary's Antiochian Church in Wilkes-Barre with His Grace, **Bishop THOMAS** and the clergy and faithful of the Antiochian Archdiocese. Additionally, we have seen pan-Orthodox cooperation in educational activities such as the **Wilkes-Barre Vacation Bible School**, liturgical events such as the reviving of the **Wyoming Valley Pan-Orthodox Choir** and other events such as joint celebrations of Akathists and Blessings of Water.

OUR DIOCESE AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

The Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania is geographically one of the smallest dioceses of the Orthodox Church in America, yet it has played, and continues to play, an important role in the life of our Church. Particularly during the past several years of turmoil and confusion, I was pleased with the manner in which the clergy and the faithful of Eastern Pennsylvania presented a balanced and constructive response to the crisis. It was encouraging to witness the active involvement taken by the deaneries, the parishes, the Diocesan Council and the clergy and faithful as we considered positive and constructive ways of helping our Church move forward. If we can deal as actively and honestly with the challenges that face our diocese, I believe that we will continue to grow stronger on all levels.

One sign of health has been the strengthening of the bond of unity and brotherhood among the members of the Holy Synod, at whose meetings I represent this diocese. This unity was reflected, over the past year, in the great number of gatherings (two regular meetings, four special meetings, six conference calls and one retreat) and in the willingness of each hierarch to honestly discuss the difficult issues that face the Church. Numerically, the ranks of OCA hierarchs also continues to grow. In addition to the enthronement of His Beatitude, **Metropolitan JONAH** in December of last year, His Grace, **Bishop MELCHISEDEK** (Pleska) was elected and consecrated as Bishop of Pittsburgh and the Archdiocese of Western Pennsylvania, relieving me of my responsibilities as *Locum Tenens* of that Diocese. His Grace, **Bishop IRENEE** (Rochon) was elected as Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of Canada and finally, **Bishop-Elect MICHAEL** (Dahulich) will be consecrated as Bishop for the Diocese of New York and New Jersey on May 8, 2010.

There continue to be many challenges facing the OCA but there is also a new energy being generated as work continues for a strategic plan for the OCA. The most fruitful way that we, as a diocese, can help in this process is to work to make our own diocese function as effectively as possible and to live out as fully as possible the mission that we have set out for ourselves.

THE LIFE OF OUR DIOCESE

Our diocese is showing signs of increased activity, which is always a sign of life, even if this activity is a response to the reality of death. There is no other way to move forward than to cling to the source of life, our Lord Jesus Christ and to allow his grace and his strength to guide us in our work.

Our Parishes and Deaneries

At the **clergy retreat**, which was held on August 13th of this year, I announced a plan to strengthen the local work of the deaneries as a means of assisting the life of our parishes. Too often, we focus narrowly on our own parish to the exclusion of our neighbors (which is parochialism) or else we try to include the entire diocese in events (which often proves impractical). I believe that a stronger and more active cooperation between parishes in a local area can only be beneficial for the growth of the diocese. A stronger

local organization to help with administration and with the coordination of mission, outreach and educational activities would stimulate growth in many areas.

Mission and Outreach

Mission and outreach are often understood to be things done by “other people” or done “over there.” There is a certain truth to this, as can be seen by the previous examples of the work of our own clergy and faithful who have traveled “over there” as missionaries. But mission and outreach are integral parts of the work of our local parishes. I am pleased to see the consistent and continual growth and expansion of our diocese’s only mission: **Holy Apostles in Mechanicsburg**. As can be seen from its report, the community continues to expand liturgically and to grow numerically. It is truly a testimony to the dedication and zeal of the clergy and faithful who have labored there that so much as been accomplished in five short years.

Another area of missionary outreach that has begun to flower this past year has been the **Agia Sophia Coffeehouse** project undertaken by the parishes of the greater Harrisburg area. I have given my full blessing to this endeavor and I encourage the entire diocese to offer its support, not only so that this ministry will succeed, but so that the impetus might be given for similar ministries to develop in other locations within the diocese. It is important to emphasize that this coffeehouse is not a money-making project, but rather a means to encourage outreach, a way to preach the Gospel, a path to bringing the message of the resurrection to a world full of death and corruption. This should be a model for all of us and a reminder to us that the Lord blesses us most not when we take, but when we give. There are so many ways for us to offer ourselves sacrificially, beyond the giving money, and we need to take advantage of those opportunities through which we fulfill the Gospel.

Education

At our Diocesan Assembly in 2007, I appointed a **task force for education**, which was charged with evaluation the state of our education programs in the diocese and proposing some concrete ways to improve this important area of Church life. Although this task force has not met recently, some fruitful discussions took place and concrete actions were proposed. These discussions have helped me to re-envision the ways that we might energize the clergy and faithful of our diocese in order to better develop our educational programs.

As a result of these task force discussions, I have decided to expand the **Department of Education** by separating it into its component parts and thus increasing the opportunities for educational activities on all levels. I have therefore decided to create the following:

- 1) The **Office of Church School Education and Curriculum** which will focus on the area of Church School education, teacher training and curriculum development. A meeting of **Church School Coordinators** was held at the Diocesan Center on September 19 and the seeds for this office were planted there. I have appointed

- Maria Proch as the Coordinator of this Office and look forward to her continued leadership in this crucial area.
- 2) At the request of the **Teen Activities Committee**, which has been an unofficial division of the Department of Christian Education, I am recognizing this group as a separate entity which will be called the **Office of Young Adult Activities**. This office will oversee the activities for teens and young adults for the Diocese and will be under the guidance of Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, whom I have appointed as the Clergy Advisor, and will continue under the excellent and energetic coordination of its three officers: Tatiana Bohush, Kimberly Metz and Nicholas Macura.
 - 3) Although the college years often overlap with other age groups, an important area that requires our attention is our college students. In addition to the young adults, I believe that it is also imperative for the Church to provide guidance and direction to our many college-age youth. We presently have five officially recognized chapters of the OCF (Orthodox Christian Fellowship) and the potential for many more. It is my intention to appoint an **OCF Coordinator** for our diocese, whose responsibilities will be to help facilitate inter-campus activities and assist in other ways.

Another proposal that arose out of the Education Task Force was to have diocesan-wide lecture series, in which a speaker could be invited to speak at several locations throughout the diocese, hopefully with one location in each deanery to allow for the broadest possible participation. Several such lectures took place last year. **Father Peter Gilquist** spoke in five different locations in our diocese and the cost of this was jointly borne by all the parishes involved. A similar process took place in conjunction with the lecture series at St Tikhon's Seminary, with **Fr. Moses Berry, Hieromonk Damascene and Archimandrite Daniel Byantoro** offering very interesting talks in multiple locations in our diocese.

Diocesan Center and Administration

One external sign of life has been the increased activity at our **Diocesan Center** into which all of our diocesan offices have transitioned during the past year. I have taken up my residence in the lower level of the Center and the second floor has been set aside as guest quarters. The first floor has been set up as our diocesan office space and has been used extensively during the past year for meetings (with clergy and faithful, for two clergy retreats, and three Diocesan Council meetings), luncheons (with the clergy widows), receptions (St Tikhon's Century Association) and many other events.

More importantly, this activity has been facilitated and made possible by the help provided by the hiring of additional staff for the chancery. **Matushka Alexandra Kopestonsky** has been an invaluable addition as my new **Administrative Assistant** and she has proven to be an incredible asset to the work of the Diocesan Chancery and to my work as the Bishop. Her daily presence in the office alone has added a level of continuity and stability within the chancery and has provided a stable point of communication for the clergy and faithful who seek to have contact with our offices. Thanks to her tireless labors, there has been a marked improvement in the flow of information and in the processing of correspondence. She has used her many skills to assist with the

preparation of our diocesan magazine, with the compilation of the census and with many other tasks (including making sure the Bishop is well fed).

Another important addition to our office staff was the hiring of **Cindy Davis** as **Director of Communications**. In only a few hours each week, she has succeeded in breathing new life into our Diocesan website, editing and doing the lay-out work for the latest issue of *Alive in Christ*, and spearheading an exciting new tool for communications: our new diocesan newsletter, *Living Waters*. The latter project was tentatively begun last year and has blossomed more recently with regular issues for the past 6 months. As we move more definitely into the high-tech world, it will become more necessary for us to wisely use the tools available to us for communications. I strongly encourage our clergy and our parishes to take advantage of Cindy's expertise by forwarding to her news and information from your parishes.

Finally, I am grateful also for the continued work of the **Chancellor** and **Treasurer**, both of whom continue to provide invaluable help to the Bishop and to the diocese. Both offices continue to evolve: the Chancellor is assuming more responsibility in overseeing the operations of the chancery offices and continues to assist me in fulfilling the many pastoral matters that require my attention. With the increased role of the Deans, the focus of the Chancellor's responsibilities will shift more directly towards matters that affect the diocese as a whole. The Treasurer continues to assure that the financial processes we have in place are accurate and transparent and provides timely reports to myself and to the Diocesan Council. In a part-time capacity, he performs the full-time work of keeping the diocese solvent and the financial records accurate. He has also provided pastoral and practical guidance to those in our diocese who are seeking to better their parish stewardship.

THE DEATH OF OUR DIOCESE

Although I have spoken about the life of our diocese, it is also necessary to speak of the death of our diocese. As has happened for many years, our population census this year reveals a decline in overall diocesan membership. Likewise, our financial situation, as detailed in the report of our treasurer, makes it quite clear that many parishes are struggling and, in fact, facing death. This means that the diocese as a whole is struggling and, ultimately, facing death. If this is not alarming news, it should be. The real question is: what are we going to do about it?

If we look upon the death of our parish in the way the world looks upon death, as something which brings only annihilation and nothingness, then, like those in the world, we will simply accept this death without question (and do nothing about it). If, however, we face the approach of death as the reality which brings us closer to the next world, to the kingdom, then this death should motivate us to action, since we are precisely called to proclaim the overcoming of death by Christ.

One contemporary elder writes: "Our death is our birth into eternal life. Our efforts in learning how to pray, how to humble ourselves, how to have confidence, not in ourselves, but in the living God, have but one aim: namely, to train us for the great day

of our death. And in which God do we put our trust? 'In God which which raiseth the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:9) "

The same spiritual principles apply to our work in our parishes. If all of our efforts to "keep our parish running" are directed only to "keep our parish running until we have no more parishioners," then we will only be left with death as nothingness. But if all of these efforts are directed to keeping our parishes running so that they might declare the glory of the kingdom, then we might actually accomplish something, and, by God's grace, perhaps even bring a spark of life back into what is dying.

The most fruitful approach to death is not to avoid it (which is the way of the world) nor to be resigned to it (which is the way of the lazy) but rather to boldly run towards it and to prepare ourselves for it. This is the way that all of us, as persons and as parishes, must follow: "We die, and behold, we live again in Jesus Christ. This transitory life which has been given to us is of great significance: it is our one and only opportunity to struggle to prepare ourselves for the great and holy moment of our encounter with God – the day of our true birth into the heavenly kingdom which cannot be moved (cf. Heb. 12:28)."

The parish is the place where our death into eternal life takes place. We should make every effort to preserve that place so that all generations would have the same opportunity we have to participate in that eternal life. Our Divine Services are not shows that we put on once a week for our enjoyment and relaxation: they are opportunities to experience eternity; our work within the parish and within the community are not simply ways to generate income: they are opportunities to share in the bond of love and community; the classes and lectures that are offered in our parishes are not simply distractions during our already busy schedules: they are means for us to share the glad tidings of the Resurrection with the whole world.

CONCLUSION

Let us continue to bear one another's burdens, whatever those burdens may be. Let us remember that all of us, as persons, as parishes, are responsible for one another before God. Let us all put our hands to the plow together, however difficult it may seem, make our way with hope into the heavenly kingdom. One of the great monastics, Saint Anthony, writes:

Let us hold in common the same eagerness not to surrender what we have begun, either by growing fainthearted in the labors or by saying, "we have spent a long time in the discipline." Rather, as though making a beginning daily, let us increase our dedication. For the entire life span of men is very brief when measured against the ages to come, so that all our time is nothing in comparison with eternal life.²

May we take this advice to heart and begin to make that daily beginning in our own personal spiritual lives, in the work of our parishes and in our diocese as a whole, knowing that, though we must put our hands to the plow and offer this work, none of it

² Saint Anthony the Great

will come to fruition without the grace and mercy of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.