



The Orthodox Church in America  
DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA and EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA  
The Right Rev. Mark, Bishop of Philadelphia

January 29, 2015

Beloved Fathers, Deacons, Matushki and Faithful,

Christ is in our midst! We welcome our clergy, matushki and faithful and most especially our guests today, the Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Nathaniel Symeonides of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, who will make a presentation on the Assembly of Bishops, Canonical and Regional Planning and the upcoming Great and Holy Council of 2016. Hopefully, we may consider what impact will it have on our parishes, Dioceses, clergy and Bishops? Our Autocephaly? Who will attend the Great and Holy Council?

Secondly, we welcome the V. Rev. Fr. John Jillions, Chancellor of the O.C.A. We are grateful for your presence and look forward to your participation in the discussion with Fr Nathaniel as well as our Diocesan Assembly.

We as a Diocese have many blessings and many challenges.

**The Blessings:**

First and foremost, I want to thank Fr. John Kowalczyk, our chancellor for his dedication and service. He has provided invaluable insight into the history of the Diocese, her former hierarchs and their relationship with the clergy and faithful. While I am not Archbishop Kiprian, Metropolitan Herman or Metropolitan Tikhon, this information is helpful. While an understanding of the past is needful, it is fruitless to try and live there. We must continually search out ways to address people in the here and now.

My thanks to Fr Martin Browne for his tireless efforts to keep the Diocesan finances in order. His reports are always on time, thorough and completely transparent as they are audited several times a year. Thank you for your service.

Without the help of Matushka Sandra Kopestonsky, the Diocesan Office would be in complete disarray. She is to be commended for her administrative skills, integrity and vigilance. Not only does she keep track of the Diocesan Records, she cooks when we have visitors to the office and cleans when she sees it needs done. Her hours spent in meeting the needs of the Diocesan Office exceeds the number of reported hours. We are most grateful for her dedication.

We are blessed to have the V. Rev. Michael Hatrak, the V. Rev. Nicholas Solak and Fr. James Weremedic as Deans over the past few years. We have been working on the Deans actually functioning in the capacity of their office as outlined in the Statutes of the OCA over the last few years. Hopefully, as we move towards approving our Diocesan By-Laws the role of the Deans and that of the Chancellor will be more clearly delineated and defined.

We are grateful for the dedicated and gifted clergy, matushki and clergy family members who have sacrificially and tirelessly given of their time, talent and treasures. May the Lord bless you with things eternal for things temporal.

We are incredibly blessed with gifted and dedicated Diocesan Council members. Thanks be to God everyone knows they can speak openly and frankly without criticism.

On behalf of the Diocese, our clergy and faithful, I want to thank Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, Kimberly Metz, Nicholas Macura, Tatiana Bohush and the host of volunteers who organize the summer camp year after year and labor tirelessly to make a spiritually rewarding time for our youth. Additionally, I am grateful for their work to organize and provide a winter retreat.

Liturgical Life Committee under the direction of Fr. Victor Gorondenchuk is getting organized and prioritizing their projects. We already have a number of booklets ready to upload onto the Diocesan Website. We look forward to the work of this committee in providing smooth translations and easy to follow services to make concelebrations less stressful and more prayerful. May the Lord bless the work of their hands.

Communications --- Many thanks to Aric Gingo for his work on Alive in Christ and maintaining our website. While we need to keep the website fresh, this can only happen with your support. Please submit articles, photos with captions, etc. as per Aric's instructions in his report.

Christian Education --- I want to thank Maria Proch and Matushka Myra Kovalak for their dedication to Christian Education. Maria has also organized a very well attended women's retreat the last two years. Thank you for that ministry.

### **Broad Strokes of My Activities**

Over the past year, I have

- made approximately 70 parish visits,
- attended three Holy Synod Meetings,
- participated in several Synodal Conference calls,
- participated in the Assembly of Bishops gathering in Dallas, TX;
- held conference call for the various departments of the OCA;
- participated in PCC meetings for the 18<sup>th</sup> AAC in Atlanta this July;
- participated in several phone conferences in regards to the Synodal Commission in regards to Archbishop Seraphim
- Travelled to Russia and Concelebrated the Feast of St Sergius as a representative of the OCA with Patriarch Kyrill and served at St Catherine of the Fields, our OCA Representation Church in Moscow.
- Concelebrated with Patriarch John X, of Antioch for the Enthronement of Metropolitan Joseph of the Antiochian Archdiocese.
- Spoke at a parish retreat at Christ the Savior, Miami, FL
- Blessed the new property and broke ground for St. Athanasius in Nicholasville, KY
- Celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Justin Martyr, Jacksonville, FL.
- Met with Attorney John Krisa regarding the subdivision of Orphanage property, along with numerous phone calls to the relevant parties.
- Numerous phone calls and emails regarding the Diocesan Property issues (as Fr John Jillions will attest).
- Organized speakers for clergy continuing education

- Prepared a monthly Clergy Newsletter
- Attended Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry Board Meetings
- Participated in Pastoral Practice Meetings for the Assembly of Bishops
- Participated in Meetings and Conference Call for Endorsed Organizations of the Assembly of Bishops
- Presided over 4 Diocesan Council Meetings
- Attended the FOCA Convention in Gettysburg, PA
- Visited the St Tikhon's Summer Camp
- Attended the clergy family picnics for the deaneries of Frackville and Philadelphia.
- Reviewed Revised Parish By-Laws for several parishes
- Reviewed a Response Team Report regarding accusations against a priest, consulted attorneys and called spiritual court for the removal of two priests from Holy Orders.
- 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Ss. Peter & Paul, Endicott, NY
- Speaker at Sunday of Orthodoxy Jersey City, NJ
- Served at the St. Tikhon's Pilgrimage and hosted Hierarchs and clergy at the Diocesan Center
- Attended the Russian Ball, in Cherry Hill, NJ
- Ordained three deacons and one priest
- St. Stephen's Cathedral 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Hopefully, these broad strokes or overview of my activities and parish visits assures you of my availability to our clergy and faithful, as well as our interconnectedness with other Diocese and sister churches. When I first came in 2012, parish visits were sometimes awkward and even met with a degree of suspicion, i.e., why is the Bishop here? Hopefully, by now our clergy and faithful realize my desire to get to know and care for the flock Christ has entrusted to my care.

**The challenges before us:**

**Aging Parishes:** Pennsylvania now ranks fourth in the nation for Senior Citizens, 15.4% of the state's population is 65 and over. One would reasonably think that the demographics of the local parish would somehow be reflective of the local demographics. There are a few reasons why this is not a one-to-one correspondence. The following is not intended to embarrass or shame anyone, clergy or laity. The point is our parishes are missing a large segment of the surrounding community. First let us compare the Census Bureau's Statistics with a few of our own parish Statistics. Here is a sampling of those 65+ according to the US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/4285312.html>) and the parish census as reported to the Diocese:

	Census Bureau age 65+	Parish Census age 66+ (with children)
Bethlehem	16.2%	34.8
Berwick	17.8%	28%
Catasauqua	12.6%	57%
Coatesville,	8.3%	20.1%
Harrisburg,	9.1%	21.6%
Mt Carmel	20.3%	60.3%
Mechanicsburg	15.6%	10.3%
Nanticoke	20.2%	77.5%

Old Forge	20.4%	49%
Olyphant	17%	41.4 All Saints
		51% St. Nicholas
Philadelphia	12.1%	27.8 St. Stephens Cathedral
Pottstown	13.4%	12.7%
Shillington	16.7%	24%
Stroudsburg	14%	24.7%
Williamsport	11.4%	20.6%
Wilkes-Barre	16.2%	50.4% Holy Resurrection
		47.6% Holy Trinity
		60.8% St John Edwardsville

From another vantage point, The Wilkes-Barre Deanery has 55.61% of the adults over 66 and 81.46% are over 51. If we include the children 49% of all the faithful reported on the census are 66+ and 71.8 % are 51+.

The Frackville Deanery has 43.74% of the adults, 66+ and 80.44% are 51+. If we add the children to the equation, then 34.8% are 66+, and 56% are 51+.

In the Philadelphia Deanery, 35.7% of the adults are 66+ and 66.6% are 51+. If we include the children in the calculation, 27.7% of the faithful are 66+ and 51.7% are 51+.

Given the disproportionate amount of seniors who faithfully attend and support our churches, we must ensure we are prepared to meet their needs, as well as explore ways to keep our youth engaged and bring in all who have lost their way. Let us explore ways to minister to our seniors and honor them for the sacrifices they have made, without neglecting the call to make disciples of all people. Additionally, let us honestly report our parish census so we can better prepare for the future.

**Youth and Young Adults:** One moderating factor to the above statistics is that college students, i.e., 19-26 year olds have an unusually high dropout rate. This is a time when many go away to college and take a hiatus from the church. Approximately 8 out of 10 of the youth in NA inclusive of all church bodies that go away to college do not return to the Church. Many Universities are antagonistic to the Church and her beliefs.

**In an article** "Why do young people leave the Church?"

<http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>

Fifty-eight percent of church dropouts selected at least one church or pastor-related reason for leaving church. Most common was, "church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical" (26 percent). Another 20 percent "didn't feel connected to the people in my church."

The final category of reasons, "religious, ethical or political beliefs," contributed to the departure of 52 percent of church dropouts.

Two reasons for leaving reflect this category: "I disagreed with the church's stance on political or social issues" (18 percent) and "I was only going to church to please others" (17 percent).

"Clearly the reasons young people leave are a reflection both of their past experience in church and the new opportunities they have as young adults. "To remain in church, a person must have experienced the value of the teaching and relationships at church and see the relevance for the next phase of life."

If we want our young people to remain faithful members of the Church, we must be invested in them as clergy, parishes and a Diocese. Fr. Alexander Atty of blessed memory always had an Altar full of young college age men serving each Sunday. He took time to acknowledge their presence or their absence. In another article I read about generation X, it said this generation is not looking at learning Doctrine, *they look at us to see if what we are teaching corresponds with what we do, how we act and how we live.* Fr Alexander received numerous youth from one of the local mega churches with contemporary music. What drew them to Fr. Alexander was his tremendous honesty. The mega-church pastor tried to be buddies, Fr. Alexander was their pastor and friend ---a friend who loved them enough to tell them the truth, challenging them to be everything Christ created them to be. Authentic relationships can only grow and mature when there is transparency and honesty. Young people can spot a phony.

I ask Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, Kimberly Metz, Tatiana Bohush, Nicholas Macura and those committed to youth ministry to increase youth activities in the Diocese. Let us know how the Diocese may help. Perhaps, you and our youth leaders can arrange for a retreat / basketball, bowling or softball tournament between the deaneries and other local Orthodox parishes. Why not have a clergy team and challenge the deanery youth? This year, Fr. Daniel & Mat. Myra Kovalak brought a number of their youth from Williamsport to Cherry Hill, NJ for the Novogodny Ball. Why not use this and similar opportunities to partner with FOCA for our youth to gather and build relationships with one another and their youth leaders? Let us seek to provide opportunities and encourage our youth to gather regularly for worship, witness, fellowship and service.

Another opportunity we have as a Church is that a significant number of young people do begin to consider the importance of their faith when they decide to marry and even more so when they have their first child. Let us use these opportunities to get them back into the life of the Church.

**Stewardship:** In the Book of Genesis, we are told that Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Abel's offering was accepted, but Cain's was rejected.

Let us look at the passage:

. . . Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. 3 So it came about [d]in the course of time (literally, at the end of days) that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. 4 Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; 5 but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard (Gen. 3:3ff).

In this passage, one of the earliest references in Scripture we see a reference to offerings. The offering was an expression of gratitude in recognition that all they had came from God. You

may ask, why was Abel's offering accepted and Cain's rejected? The passage is nuanced and subtle. But when studied carefully, we see that Abel brought the firstlings of the flock and the very best to God. Cain on the other hand brought his offering at the end of days, i.e., he brought at the end of the harvest the poorest of the crop and certainly not the best. Abel gave God his very best as an expression of gratitude. Cain brought God the leftovers when the produce is not of the same quality.

Throughout the Scripture we find references to offerings, even the most elaborate and expensive offerings being unacceptable because they were obtained through violence, deceit or oppression of the poor, orphans and widows (Amos). Through the Prophet Isaiah the Lord chastises the people for bringing sick and diseased animals as their offering. The passages are too numerous to discuss at this gathering, but needless to say there is never mention of "paying God for anything." "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and the round world and they that dwell therein."

Scripture clearly teaches that we give to God the very best portion of all He has blessed us with as an expression of our personal gratitude for all that He has blessed us with. One is to offer God the first fruits of their labors---not the road kill, something diseased, sick and certainly not the leftovers. Using this principle, before we decide what kind of house we can afford, clothes we wear, food we buy, first and foremost we honor God with the First-Fruits of our labors. In the Book of Malachi the Lord accuses the people of robbery. Why? Because they did not offer the tithe, i.e., the tenth of the first fruits. It is the only place in all of Holy Scripture where the Lord says, "Test Me."

#### **Malachi 3:8ff**

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. 11 Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. 12 "All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts.

In Scripture we find we give in accordance to how the Lord has blessed us. No where do we find giving based on what we think the Church needs or everybody "pays" the same thing. To whom much is given much is required. We will hear more about stewardship tomorrow. Let our offerings be an expression of our heartfelt gratitude for all the Lord has done for us. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

As we wrap things up, we must realize that this Diocese and the parishes of this Diocese are facing a crisis. The word, crisis, should not be understood in a terrifying way, but in the Biblical sense of a time for decision and an opportunity. A significant segment of our faithful will not be with us in 10 years. What will your parish look like in 15 years if no changes are made to address the decline in membership? What can we do? First let us rededicate our lives during the coming Lenten season. Let us pray, fast, listen and participate fully in the services. Let us remember the poor and less fortunate. Read the Scriptures daily. Make peace with your fellow parishioners, forgiving and asking forgiveness. Reach out to those who have fallen away. Welcome visitors. Invite someone to church on a monthly basis. There are a

large number of unchurched people living around us and there is no future for our parishes if we strive to maintain closed communities. In the Kingdom of God there is no such thing as "our people."

Several years ago, I assigned a priest to the farmlands of Northern Indiana in Amish and Mennonite country. There were horses and buggies up and down the highways. The parish was small and predominantly elderly who would drive more than an hour to a church with no pews. The elderly women would stand through the services with their walkers. The priest could find no job to supplement his income. Over a few years there was a noticeable increase of young people. They had piercings and tattoos, but were vibrant and enthusiastic about their new found faith. I asked the priest how these young people found their way to an Orthodox church. He told me he went to a coffee shop regularly with his Bible. He would converse with whoever was there. Over time the lives of these young people was transformed. Their presence in the parish brought new life and vitality to the community.

Who is responsible for reaching out to our senior citizens? Our youth? Those who fell away? The sick and shut-ins? Those who have never even heard of Orthodoxy? Let me conclude with a little story.

**Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, And Nobody**

This is a little story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it.

Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

+Mark,  
Bishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania

---

144 St. Tikhon's Road \* Waymart, Pennsylvania 18472  
Telephone: 570.937.9331 \* Email: [dioceseoepa@gmail.com](mailto:dioceseoepa@gmail.com)  
Chancellor: Very Reverend John Kowalczyk \* Telephone: 570.876.1241 \* Mobile: 570.561.8696