

Chancellor's Report
Diocesan Assembly 2021

Your Eminence, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As with everyone else in the world, this year has been the Covid-19 year, when things seemed to stop, but did not, at least for many. The lockdown came as we approached mid Lent, six weeks following our last Assembly. It called forth the human resources of our diocese to meet the challenges posed by the virus and the lockdown, and the richly talented clergy and faithful were revealed in the midst of the crisis. Taking the direction from the Holy Synod, our diocese under the leadership of Archbishop Mark, and with significant input from parish clergy and the Diocesan Council, came up with a plan for our parishes to follow that allowed flexibility to meet the particular needs of each, none of which are identical in their composition, conditions, challenges and resources. Those who were able, and they were quite a few, quickly transitioned to livestreaming services, filling a void as best as possible for our faithful and the faithful of other dioceses and parishes, within and outside the O.C.A.

Rather than a slowdown, the workload was significantly increased in accommodating the variety of regulations and directions, the concerns of the faithful and especially the pastoral needs which do not stop. The sick needed Holy Unction, the dying the spiritual support of the Church, the dead burial and families consolation. Sermons needed to be written and because of the number of churches closed, those who were able did as many services as possible, for the strengthening of the faithful.

Early on we had several Zoom meetings with the clergy of the diocese, both to offer direction and advice and to receive feedback in the planning of the reopening, which happened in many of our parishes on Holy Pentecost. While it was a great joy to have faithful in attendance at the Divine Services, that too posed challenges, and continues to as of this writing,

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for all of our parish communities. As the year comes to a close, all are feeling the physical and psychological effects of the stress and labors of the year. And there will be more to come in 2021 as the nation and the world hopefully emerge from this surreal experience.

There is no going back, only moving forward. We have learned much about what we are able to do and many of these lessons have changed our parish life permanently. Technology is the most obvious example. But it is imperative that we remember it is a tool, a good and necessary one in this world, but it does not nor cannot replace physical presence. The life of the church is not virtual, it is supremely real, and that reality is one that the past year has clarified for us. Consequently, the lessons we have all learned will require reflection, discernment and action.

We welcomed three priests into our diocese, Silouan Burns, Vjekoslav Jovicic, Michael Shepherd who were assigned to serve in Edwardsville, Mount Carmel and Uniondale respectively. And in the midst of the Pandemic, we sent Deacon John Black to seminary at St. Vladimir's in New York. Your continued prayers and support of Deacon John and his family are appreciated and encouraged.

Sadly, three of our diocesan parishes recognized that the next appropriate step for each of them was closure, which they requested and which was completed. Such an event is undoubtedly painful as it is the death of a community. However, we live in a world in which death is the only thing you can count on, so the coming to an end of a community should not shock us. Nothing and no one is immune: it is a matter of when, not if. More importantly, we are a Church founded on the Resurrection, we believe in the resurrection of the dead. These parish communities live on throughout the diocese in those who grew up in them and live

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elsewhere and worship where they now live. They live on in other Churches who received the sacred vessels, objects, furniture for the adornment of their churches and the continued offering of glory to God. *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and die it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.* (Jn 12:24). Holy Trinity in Catasauqua, Holy Ascension in Lykens and Holy Trinity in McAdoo continue, in different ways to produce many seeds, God-willing.

Some of the resources of these parishes were, at their request donated to other institutions in the Orthodox Church in America, but much of it reverts to the diocese. These funds will be utilized for the future development of our diocese. There are three areas which require significant attention and resources for development. Obviously, parish life itself, supporting parishes that have the human and other resources to function as dynamic centers of Orthodox Christian life. But within the life of every parish there are three especially important areas of ministry which require attention, cultivation and expansion. We need clergy, we need trained choir directors, and we need youth. The utilization of the financial resources acquired as a result of these closures will enable us to address these areas in ways that will have immediate but also long term positive impacts especially.

To be clear, such priorities are not to ignore the laity, who are the source of the clergy, the mature and elderly whose example and mentorship to the young is crucial, especially in a rootless age such as ours, and choirs need trained directors to bring the best out of the talent offered by so many of our laity who sing. Pastoral care, beautiful worship, the handing on of the faith, through evangelization, education and charitable service are common goods for all of

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us. So discussion and concrete planning, insofar as possible, about how to meet these present and future needs is, I believe, our main priority in the coming years.

2020 has changed the world, permanently, in ways we are only beginning to see and others we have not imagined. This is not to sound an apocalyptic tone, but rather a realistic one. We know what the church needs to be herself, clergy, laity and the glorification of God through beautiful worship and humble service to the least among us. Whatever the nature of the future, we know what we must be and have in order to meet that future as God would have us. Let us engage in that work together, confident that He who has begun in us will bring it to completion.

Yours in Christ,

Archpriest Raymond Martin Browne

Chancellor