

Report of the Diocesan Chancellor 2023

As you know this past year we had an All American Council, at which the most controversial question had to do with the performance of the Pension Plan and the composition of the Pension Board. Our diocese co-sponsored with the Diocese of New York and New Jersey a meeting for all our parishes to hear from representatives from the different sides of the question.

The discussion brought to light many issues of Church life which come to a head in the question of the Orthodox Church in America Pension - funding, participation, future status. These issues are not unique to any diocese, though some of them have greater impact or presence in some rather than others, but all of us share the same set of challenges. We have an overabundance of parish infrastructure and a scarcity of parishioners for such an infrastructure. We have a clergy shortage for such an overabundance of infrastructure. We have isolated pockets of a culture of stewardship in the midst of a much older culture of membership and dues. We have an abundance of aging adults and a scarcity of children and younger people, which does not bode well for the future. None of these major challenges are unique to the Orthodox Church in America - they are found throughout the entire spectrum of Christian Churches in North America. Their numbers may be much greater than ours, but the challenges are no less different. Some of those groups have taken decisive steps to address some of these challenges, and while many of those are not acceptable for us for theological or pastoral practice, others may be.

A few years ago, three parishes closed at their own request. This past year we opened a new mission in Gettysburg which has a committed corps of laity and a priest who is serving them weekly. Some of this is made possible by funding from the diocese, which we are able to give due to the monies accrued from the closure of the parishes in previous years. Moreover, one of our parishes, our host for this Assembly, made a very generous donation to the mission because there is a connection between the two. Here is an icon for the future of our diocese, parishes helping missions. Such outreach is to the benefit of both as will become evident in

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God's time. No doubt, there are other areas in the diocese which are ripe for mission, but to develop them takes money and manpower. We are actively looking for such opportunities.

But we have also been proactive in using these funds we have accrued. Last year we scholarshipped one hundred children to the St. Tikhon's Summer Camp, while this year we are asking parishes to sponsor children from their parishes and the Diocese. Such support is common in other jurisdictions and is a tangible way for us as Orthodox Christian communities to put our money where our mouth is when we say these are our children. Parents need help, financially, in some or many cases, and even if they do not, what do our parishes do for children? Perhaps if we did more, the Lord would send us more? This is a commitment the diocese has made and will continue to maintain, not just financially, but also in the substance and quality of the camp experience. But it is not enough. Retreats and social opportunities are also important and we hope to establish those in the coming years in ways that will make them regular and accessible as well as positive experiences of the faith in the lives of the young.

By the Grace of God, we have had no shortage of new clergy coming to the diocese, from within but mostly from outside. This latter fact is due in no small part that we have put a premium on clergy family welfare - spiritual and psychological through Clergy Peer Learning, and material through working towards adequate levels of compensation which is the single greatest stressor in clergy life. However, to provide such levels you need a parish culture of stewardship and a parish that has the adequate human resources to maintain a proper parish life which begins with but is not identical to a schedule of liturgical services: education, charitable and missionary outreach, accountable and transparent administration that understands the purpose of the life of the Church and works to maintain and develop that are all required. For the future of the church, new and dedicated clergy are needed but they need parishes that are focused on spiritual vitality expressed in a variety of ways - number of parishioners, not just a schedule of services but well attended services, education and outreach

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to the community. Such parishes need full time priests but they need to be able to live without medicaid, food stamps or donations from their own families, many of whom are not Orthodox.

Thus the coming year is a time for all of our parishes to take inventory of where we are and where we are going and what we all need to make the most of what we have. Change will occur. What can each parish do to make sure the future for the people in it a hopeful one, even if it is a difficult one, at this time or from this perspective? This is true of our clergy and lay leadership and of all the clergy and laity of the diocese. Many of the changes mandated by the archbishop regarding term limits and sabbaticals are designed to open up the leadership of the parishes so that the responsibility and let it be said, often, the burden of parish leadership is shared, that those who carry it get to rest before they are burned out, and that fresh perspectives have the opportunity to offer their vision and efforts to maintain vitality.

No doubt these have not been universally welcomed, sometimes misunderstood, even misrepresented, but they are part of a vision that is looking not toward the past but to the future, not as some ideal condition, but one that is coming, whose outline is clear and which it is our responsibility to prepare for. The question that will be asked of all of us is what have you done with what you have been given? Rather than bury our treasure in an effort not to lose what we have been given, we hope to multiply it by investing it wisely, in human formation as Orthodox Christians, more than property maintenance. New missions, youth formation, spiritual formation for adults, programs for training choir and choir directors, vocation programs for ordained ministry in the church, are some of the needs and the opportunities we have before us. If we meet them, the future looks healthy. If we don't, there is not much of a future for any of us.

These are difficult times in which we live. They require clear fidelity, courage and steadfast engagement in the full life in Christ. This is what we are to offer. Whether we do so is up to us.

In closing, I would like to thank the deans with whom I have worked throughout the past year, especially Father Nicholas Solak who after ten years stepped down as Wilkes-Barre dean

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and who has been ably succeeded by Father Innocent Neal, the members of the Diocesan Council and the Diocesan Administrative Assistant, Carmen Hodgson.

I am very grateful to His Eminence for his confidence in me and for the excellent working relationship we have.

I wish to acknowledge the service of two of our clergy who retired this past year, Father Vladimir Fetcho who was my first dean and who served the diocese for over half a century and Father James Jadick, a son of the diocese who served in New York and in the Air Force as a chaplain and most recently as Rector of Holy Ascension in Frackville for fifteen years. And to welcome the newest member of our presbyterate, though not the clergy of the diocese, the newly ordained Father John Black, who is finishing his studies at St. Vladimir's Seminary and was ordained this past Sunday by His Eminence.

Yours in Christ,

Archpriest Raymond M. Browne,

Chancellor