

**Orthodox Church in America**  
**Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania**  
**Annual Diocesan Assembly**  
*January 25-26, 2024*  
*Christ the Savior Orthodox Church*  
*Harrisburg, PA*

**NOTE: The agenda, reports and budget proposal were made available online prior to the meeting.**

**Session 1**

**The Assembly was called to order at 4:06 PM with prayer and the singing of “O heavenly King.”**

**Approval of agenda:**

- A motion to approve the agenda was made by Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge and seconded by Fr. Stephen Vernak.
- The motion passed unanimously.

**Archbishop Mark announced the following appointments:**

Clergy chair — Fr. Timothy Hojnicky  
Lay chair — John Buckeye  
Clergy Secretary — Fr. Silouan Burns  
Lay secretary — Daria Cortése

**The next item on the agenda, the election of the nominating committee, was accidentally included and did not take place because there were no open positions on the Diocesan Council.**

- Elections will take place at the 2025 Diocesan Assembly.
- A rotating system of terms will be implemented at that time so there will be some vacancies every year, but at no point will *all* positions be vacant.

**Archbishop’s Message:**

- Vladyka welcomed Fr. John Black back to the diocese; Fr. John was ordained to the priesthood last year and is now the rector of St. Michael’s in Jermyn.
- Fr. Nathan Clausson, who was also ordained last year, is now serving at St. Nicholas in Olyphant.
- Fr. Aleksey Paranyuk is now serving at St. Michael’s in Mt. Carmel.
- Vladyka acknowledged the presence of Fr. Dn. Bill Rusk, who was ordained recently.
- On Saturday, January 27th, Dn. Kirill Zawatski will be ordained to the priesthood. He is currently our only diocesan seminarian.
- The archbishop thanked Fr. Stephen Vernak and the parishioners of Christ the Savior for hosting this Annual Diocesan Assembly.

- His Eminence also welcomed the Very. Rev'd. Alexander Rentel, Chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, and thanked him for coming to speak to the assembly.
- There were no questions on the archbishop's message.

### **Credentials Report**

- The credentials information was collected by Jennifer Bzik and Nicholas Hojnicky, and read by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky.
  - 1 hierarch
  - 25 clergy delegates
  - 19 lay delegates
  - 2 auditors
  - 2 observers
  - 4 Diocesan Council members
  - 1 guest (Fr. Alexander Rentel)

### **Approval of Minutes of the 2023 Assembly**

- A motion to accept the minutes as presented was made by Fr. James Weremedic and seconded by Fr. John Perich.
- There was no discussion.
- The motion passed unanimously.

### **Presentation by Fr. Alexander Rentel**

- Fr. Alexander greeted the assembly and expressed joy at being able to attend.
- This Holy Week, Chrism will be made at St. Tikhon's, and in a considerably larger quantity than in previous years, as the current stock is quite low.
- Fr. Alexander will soon be visiting the hotel in Phoenix where the 2025 All-American Council will be held.
  - The space is very large and beautiful. All rooms are actually suites, and there is a waterpark on site.
- The Orthodox Church in America has a new General Counsel, Attorney Mark Hamilton from western Pennsylvania. Our former General Counsel, Judge Ray Lanier, recently retired.
  - After reviewing applications from many highly qualified individuals, the OCA hired Attorney Hamilton on December 6th.
  - Mr. Hamilton is a *fractional* attorney, which means he has other clients in addition to the OCA, and we receive a dedicated portion (fraction) of his time.
  - His law firm includes roughly 85 attorneys.
- **OCA Chancery Property Sale & Move to Washington DC:**
  - The OCA has a temporary chancery set up in an office building in Washington DC, in a convenient location near many amenities. The chancery will move to a permanent location after the sale of the property in Syosset.

- The Syosset property will likely be under contract very soon; the details remain confidential at this time.
  - The Metropolitan Council has several unresolved questions about the proposed contract which must be answered before signing.
  - After Metropolitan Council approval, the next step is approval by the Holy Synod. Fr. Alexander stated that this would probably happen within 1-2 weeks after the Metropolitan Council approves the contract.
  - The sale process will probably take 2 1/2 — 3 1/2 years to complete, including a legal review and appearance before a judge, as commonly happens in the sale of nonprofit properties.
- Roughly 90% of the OCA archives, formerly housed in Syosset, have been moved into a climate-controlled space at St. Vladimir’s Seminary.
  - Fr. Alexander mentioned that the diaries of Met. LEONTY of blessed memory, written in Russian shorthand, have recently been translated into modern Russian, and will hopefully soon be available in English.

**Session 1 concluded at 4:54 PM, and was followed by dinner and Daily Vespers with a Litya for the Departed. Afterwards, Fr. Alexander Rentel spoke to those present about the present and future state of autocephaly in the Orthodox Church in America.**

**Highlights from Fr. Alexander’s talk:**

- Everything done *for* the Church should be done *in* the Church. Even budgeting and real estate deals become sacred tasks when viewed this way.
- Father marveled at the great Christian mystery of *assembly*; everyone present “could be doing other things”, but has come here to further the Church’s mission.
- The point of the Church is to reveal the mystery of the Gospel, which is the mystery of Christ.
  - Any other goal is diabolical.
  - The Church is not a series of buildings or a list of names on a roster; it consists of the people *of* God who have remained *in* God.
- **Our *Tomos*<sup>1</sup> of Autocephaly is the power of God to save us here and now.**
  - The Tomos was given “with the hope that it might serve the good”. Our hope is salvation, and the good is the Gospel message.
  - We should be unhindered by the people, motives and events that led up to the issuing of the Tomos. Only God knows our hearts and motives. The most important thing is that we did, in fact, receive autocephaly.
  - Our autocephaly gives us the privilege and responsibility of governing ourselves while remaining in ecclesial communion with the other Orthodox Churches.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Orthodox Church, a *tomos* (pl. *tomoi*) is a decree issued by the primate of an autocephalous Church concerning a specific issue, such as the granting of autocephaly.

- Since we received our Tomos of Autocephaly in 1970, the OCA has endured some difficult and uncertain times: financial scandals, canonical charges, depositions, and the COVID-19 pandemic, among others.
  - These were indeed distressing and “wobbly” times, but we self-governed through each of them, however imperfectly, and eventually the ship was righted.
  - We have also accomplished a great deal, such as adopting proportional giving, drafting and enacting the OCA Statute, and placing a growing emphasis on the welfare of clergy and their families.
  - Glory to God, for the first time in several years we have no episcopal vacancies.
  - We can be satisfied with our progress, despite sometimes stumbling along the way.
- **Challenges:**
  - We need priestly and monastic vocations.<sup>2</sup>
  - We need to support church musicians.
  - We need both women and men to be theologically educated, so they may teach and catechize.
  - We must have difficult conversations with “dying” parishes. Some can be saved; others should be merged or simply closed.
  - Missionary activities are a manner of life and death. We have words of life to share, and we will be condemned if we do not.
  - We must avoid polarization at all costs. Polarization leads to isolation, which is antithetical to our common status as children of the Most High.
  - Sadly, we still struggle with issues of obedience and compliance.
    - Ultimately, all obedience is obedience to God, who has trusted our hierarchs with the authority to shepherd the Church. We need to obey them.
    - Keeping accurate records and doing everything possible to prevent sexual misconduct are acts of obedience.
    - We need to work together to accomplish the Church’s mission; this means hard work, real conversations and elbow grease.
- **Looking ahead:**
  - We have maintained *unity* — no schism, even despite great pressures. We must not become complacent about this, however. If we seek unity anywhere else but within the True Faith, it will become a cause of *disunity*.
  - There is plenty of instability in other Orthodox Churches, but we are in ecclesial communion with all major local Churches (even those currently in schism with each other).
    - On a day-to-day basis, all local Churches *do* accept OCA autocephaly: we train their clergy in our seminaries, and provide supply clergy.
  - The Tomos looks forward to the day when there will be a unified Orthodox Church in the Americas. The expectation was *not* that the OCA would instantly become this.

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<sup>2</sup> In our tradition, Bishops are monastic.

- It is God who preserves us and calls us into His Body. We are not passive participants, however. Each of us must fulfill our vocation to be a person of faith. This is absolutely essential.

## **Session 2**

**The Assembly was called to order at 11:07 with the singing of “O heavenly King”.**

**Lay chair John Buckeye thanked His Eminence for his strong leadership and willingness to address difficult issues in turbulent times.**

- John Buckeye asked for comments and questions on the department reports, which had been posted on the DOEPA website prior to the Assembly.
- There were no questions.
- The reports stand as presented. In accordance with *Robert’s Rules of Order*, this did not require a motion.
- Fr. Stephen Vernak expressed his gratitude to the diocese for sponsoring the St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp.

## **Session 3**

### **Treasurer’s Report**

- The report, which was posted on the DOEPA website prior to the Assembly, was summarized by Mark Linnehan, our diocesan treasurer.
- There were no questions on the report.
- A delegate thanked Mark Linnehan for explaining financial concepts in a way that those without professional expertise in that field could understand.
- Mark stated that he is available to assist parish treasurers understand what they need to do, and how to do it efficiently. He also expressed willingness to help parishes who would like a diocesan audit, which can help identify accounting errors.

### **2024 Budget Proposal**

- The proposed budget was posted on the DOEPA website prior to the assembly.
- There were no questions on the proposed budget.
- Mark Linnehan made a motion, on behalf of the Diocesan Council, to accept the proposed budget. Fr. Stephen Vernak seconded the motion.
  - Discussion: A delegate asked for details about the Heavenly Host program. Mark explained that it is a theological education and enrichment program for young people aged 8-18.
  - The motion to approve the budget passed unanimously.

### **Auditors’ Report Approval**

- Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge raised a point of order: the Assembly must vote to accept the auditors’ report, even though none of the other reports required votes.

- The auditors' report was unanimously approved via general acclamation.

### **Updated Credentials**

- Credentials information was collected by Jennifer Bzik and Nicholas Hojnicky, and was presented by John Buckeye.
  - 1 hierarch
  - 25 clergy delegates
  - 21 lay delegates
  - 1 observer
  - 2 guests
  - 4 Diocesan Council members
  - 2 auditors

### **There was no Old Business.**

### **New Business**

- Vladyka introduced Dn. Kirill Zawatski, who will be ordained to the priesthood on Saturday, January 27th.
- Fr. John Perich shared the story of the Icon of the Mother of God of Nicæa.
  - Parishes who would like to have this icon present for an akathist service should contact Fr. John.
- **Donations to the Dioceses of Alaska and Mexico:**
  - His Eminence spoke about the \$10,000 gift to the Diocese of Alaska contained in the approved 2024 diocesan budget.
  - Fr. John Perich made a motion to increase the gift to \$15,000-\$20,000, and to give \$5,000-\$10,000 to the Diocese of Mexico.
    - Fr. Stephen Vernak expressed concern over the difficulty of sending funds to Mexico and ensuring that they reach the intended recipient. Fr. Silouan Burns concurred.
    - Fr. Alexander Rentel stated that he is aware of the problem, and will discuss it with the OCA treasurer at their next upcoming meeting. He suggested that we delay sending money to Mexico until we establish a more secure procedure for doing so.
    - Fr. Silouan Burns seconded the motion to give \$20,000 to the Diocese of Alaska. The motion passed unanimously.
  - Fr. John Perich made a motion to give \$10,000 to the Diocese of Mexico upon the establishment of a more reliable way to do so.
    - Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.
  - Fr. Nikolai Breckenridge moved to amend the 2024 diocesan budget to reflect the \$20,000 gift to the Diocese of Alaska and the pending \$10,000 gift to the Diocese of Mexico.
    - Fr. John Perich seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

- Fr. Martin Browne stated that Vladyka's 10-year anniversary of being our hierarch is approaching this Spring.
  - He thanked His Eminence for his willingness to tackle difficult issues with courage and compassion, and for his intelligent and diligent care for this diocese.
  - Fr. Martin emphasized that we owe the archbishop a great deal for all he has done, and continues to do, for us.
- Vladyka expressed that he is grateful for the peaceful diocesan assemblies, productive and respectful Diocesan Council meetings, and mutually supportive clergy relationships we have had under his omophorion.
- Fr. Stephen Vernak shared that Christ the Savior has undertaken a memorial project in memory of Fr. Daniel Ressetar, who touched many of those present at this assembly.
  - The project is a renovation of the church's bell tower, including new bells.
  - Please see the donation link on Christ the Savior's website and share this information with your parishes if you feel moved to do so.
- John Buckeye thanked Fr. Alexander Rentel for making time for us in his extremely busy schedule. He also urged those in attendance to bring Fr. Alexander's message about the importance of reading the Holy Scriptures back to our parishes.

**Date and location of the 2025 Annual Diocesan Assembly:** January 23-24, in the Wilkes-Barre Deanery (parish TBA).

**A motion to adjourn the Assembly was made by Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, seconded by Archbishop Mark, and passed unanimously.**

**The Assembly was adjourned at 12:06 PM with the singing of "It is truly meet".**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Fr. Silouan Burns, Clergy Secretary  
Daria Cortése, Lay Secretary**