

Your Eminence, Archbishop Mark,
Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers,
Lay delegates and observers

Christ is in our midst!

During the past year we have welcomed newly ordained priests to serve in our diocese while simultaneously offering heartfelt thanks to retiring clergy for their decades of service to their parish communities and to the diocese at large. Additionally, we had a highly successful reboot of our Summer Camp at St. Tikhon's Seminary and look forward to our first teen retreat since 2019. Planning is underway for a diocesan women's retreat and we hope to schedule a diocesan men's retreat later in 2024, something that has not occurred in almost two decades! In response to a felt need in various parishes throughout the diocese, preliminary steps have been taken to create a young men's group in the diocese, building upon such groups in parishes, some of which have already formed, others in the process of formation. The specificity of this is due to the fact that numerous parishes have experienced an influx of inquirers/catechumens/newly received converts, the overwhelming majority of whom are young men. This is not unique to our diocese but is taking place throughout the United States in the past year or two. They have expressed a desire for such a ministry and the needs they bring and wish to have addressed in this context are not the focus of existing fraternal organizations or ministries.

This is one initiative that has 'bubbled up' from our parishes, reflecting one of the many fruits of outreach, but also of witness on the part of our parishes with full(er) liturgical schedules, children's and adult education programs, along with service ministries in the form of food bank collection, homeless ministry support if not activity and also soup kitchens and special seasonal charities, at Christmas or at the beginning of the school year. Many of these have been done by many parishes in various ways for years, but there has been growth and diversification as newer clergy and newer laity have entered into parish and diocesan life. One ministry specific

to our diocese in origin and initial growth is the Heavenly Host Church School program developed by Mark Linnehan at Holy Apostles in Mechanicsburg for children ages 8 to 16. As with all our youth ministry initiatives this year, this one is fully funded by the diocese.

Administratively, the archbishop, deans and chancellor meet monthly to review our diocesan life, needs, challenges and opportunities. These meetings have proven helpful in maintaining a common mission, building cooperation between the diocese and deaneries, sharing information, identifying and resolving outstanding issues together. Archbishop Mark has been highly involved in all these activities, though better able to delegate tasks which can and should be handled by others in the administration as a matter of course. He reviews annual parish reports, minutes and budgets, maintains dialogue with parishes over By-law revision facilitating the process culminating in his approval once accepted by the parishes in question. Clergy continuing education is mandated and encouraged on multiple fronts, whether the quarterly Clergy Synaxis sponsored by the O.C.A office of Pastoral Life which includes our own Fr. Nicholas Solak and Fr. Stephen Vernak as very active members, or events organized in the diocese. This past year we held one specifically to review and explain, where necessary, the newly issued Clergy Guidelines presented to the Church before Great Lent last year by the Holy Synod. Additional presentations for deacons, subdeacons and readers are in the planning stages at this time.

A pre Nativity retreat was held for the second year at Daylesford Abbey in Paoli for our clergy and was well attended and well enjoyed. It offered us a time to come apart and be together, catch up with one another and pray together. Personally, I found it very relaxing and revitalizing at the same time. A more focused retreat is planned before Great Lent.

The full extent of the life of our diocese as it exists in our parishes and diocesan programs is evident in the numerous reports presented to the diocesan assembly. It is a life that is rooted in past commitment and energy on the part of countless clergy, monastics and laity, but it is also oriented to the future and the spiritual needs and opportunities offered by the future. Change is

inevitable. How we anticipate the change, how we then respond to it are crucial. Demographics are changing for our entire nation, and that is reflected in our church. Societal norms have changed radically in the past decade with special challenges for the church moving forward, finding a place in a society no longer supportive, in places hostile, finding our inability to accept or adapt radical ideologies a cause for active opposition on the part of institutions that now embody and advocate for these ideologies. It is essential that the church not be tempted by fear, but rather impelled to a greater, purer fidelity to the life we have received from Christ through the Church, the life we are called to share with the world, **for** the life of the world. As we confront these challenges, I respectfully suggest we focus on fidelity of witness and presence rather than headcount's. Keeping the faith once delivered to the saints, walking in the Way of the Lord with humble love, using our material and Human Resources in the most effective ways to make disciples of all nations are what is essential.

While there is much more we could do, and things presently done could be done better, we have planted seeds in our diocese which are already bearing fruit, as evident above. Those seeds need to be nurtured by our stewardship of time, talent and treasure. Such stewardship is far more than management. It is as Bishop Alexei has so powerfully and succinctly illustrated in his recently published **Spiritual Transformation and Giving**¹, an ascetical and spiritual activity that is vital to the salvation of each and all of us. I strongly recommend all parish leaders, clergy and lay, read this, discuss it and share it with their parishes.

We hoped to have Bishop Alexei with us, uniting us during this Assembly with the mother diocese of our church, long neglected, but under His Grace's leadership receiving the attention and care she needs and deserves. The success of his efforts on behalf of the Diocese of Alaska is as important to us as our own poor efforts are here. She gave us the first saint of the O.C.A as well as the most recent one, Matushka Olga, whose glorification we look forward to in

¹ <https://store.ancientfaith.com/spiritual-transformation-and-giving/>

the coming year, the plans for which prevented His Grace from being with us. But we have and should continue to support our diocese of Mexico which reflects the missionary outreach and pastoral hospitality of our church. Once again our past and our future converge, as they did this year in the Anniversary celebrations of the parishes here in Harrisburg, Glen Mills, and Shillington, and as they will in the coming year at St. Stephen's Cathedral and my own parish of St. Mark's in Wrightstown. Holy Apostles has entered the preliminary stages of the next phase of its building program, impelled by increasing numbers. My own parish is moving along with plans to expand the physical plant due to parish growth, while the Gettysburg mission is looking for a bigger place to meet for services that is more accessible than the current location. St. Michaels in Wilmington has experienced significant growth too, though physical expansion opportunities are limited. Likewise, here at Christ the Saviour maximum density has been achieved as the parish considers what comes next.

There are also many parishes where the opposite is true. Each community and each parish is different. The parishes mentioned above are doing what they need to where they are. That is what all our parishes should be doing, and that will look different in the northern or central parts of the diocese than in the south. The challenge for each parish is to discern how best to serve the mission of the Church, witnessing to the Faith in all its richness and uniqueness, where it exists. Similar communities should work together on ministries, whether educational and/or outreach, maximizing their liturgical strengths and seeking to minimize their liturgical weaknesses. In stark terms, we either work together or we die alone. The choice is ours. The truth is there is far more talent and creativity in all our parishes than we or they are aware of; recognizing this is the first step, using it is the second. The world most of us grew up in is gone and won't be back anytime soon. **This** is the world the Lord created us to live in, to love in, to serve in. Let us do what He asks, trusting that He has already given us what we need to begin and will continue to guide and bless us moving forward.

As we look forward to a new year, may we enter it with renewed commitment and a desire and intent to work with what is given to us in a spirit of humility, patience and thanksgiving.

With gratitude for the opportunity to serve and for all the work that the clergy and the faithful do,

Yours in Christ,

Archpriest Raymond Martin Browne

Chancellor