



January 23, 2024

One Body with Many Members

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:12-26 RSV)

Dear Rev. Fathers, Deacons, Matushki and faithful,

Christ is in our midst! He is and ever shall be! Welcome to the 60th Diocesan Assembly. We are blessed to have the V. Rev. Fr. Stephen Vernak and the faithful of Christ the Saviour to host us again this year as they are always very hospitable and generous. Thank you. We are grateful for your labors in preparation and your usual overwhelming hospitality.

As a Diocese and more specifically the Orthodox Church, the above passage of St. Paul reminds us there is only One Church and One Body of Christ, whether we are cradle Orthodox or convert, whether we are Russian, Serbian, Romanian, Georgian, Bulgarian, Greek, American, Ukrainian, etc. We as the Orthodox Church are the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church with numerous parishes, but still one Church. In the early church, when someone referred to the church, people immediately thought of the faithful, not a building.

Sadly, over time some began to think primarily of the buildings or temples as the Church and the correct understanding of the people as the Church faded into the background. We must remember and focus on the reality, the Church is first and foremost the faithful. As the Church, missions often have no building yet they remain a viable part of the Body of Christ. We may have a Church and no building, but attachment to the place where we worship must never take priority over or replace our love, commitment and connection one to one another as a member of the Body of Christ! We as individual members of the Body of Christ, must examine our priorities to insure we are first and foremost committed to Christ and His Body as given to us in our brothers and in Christ, within our own parish and the parishes that surround us. In Ecclesiastes 4:12, we read, *Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* We need not feel threatened by sister parishes, but realize we are



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“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.” Augustine

strengthened by mutual support like the *threefold cord*. We can do more and are stronger when we work together, share our talents with each other, rather than laboring alone. As Fr Martin Browne said in his report, “*We either work together or die alone*”. Small parishes working together can provide a greater witness and stronger outreach.

Our Diocese continues to invest in our clergy and faithful in various ways and took on some financial burdens normally considered parish responsibilities. *We continued to alleviate the financial burden of our parishes in some of the following ways. Since 2019, we underwrote the cost of all Diocesan campers in 2022 and 2023 (2022 the Diocese paid for about 80 campers @360 = almost \$29K, 2023 about the same totaling almost \$60K); Rector bonus, \$31K in 2021; Continuing clergy education, \$34K; Clergy wives bonus in 2022, \$25K; Seminarian scholarships, \$36K; Christian education and youth, \$4K, Charities, \$33K, Diocesan Assemblies, for the past two years \$7.7K; the last AAC - \$27k; Missions, 76K; Cemetery Maintenance, \$4.6K (McAdoo); Wilkes Barre Deanery Retreat, \$1,100, for a Grand Total \$339,400, about 17% of discretionary spending, as well as \$732,000 to the OCA.* By way of reminder, our clergy and delegates that at our Diocesan Assembly in Jermyn the delegates voted that each parish contribute 10% of their operating income to the Diocese to support our work and that of the Orthodox Church in America. We have a few parishes that are not up to the 10%, which in some cases is less than the previous so-called head tax

Fr. Martin Browne, our Chancellor wrote a very comprehensive report of the challenges we face and the many ways we are addressing our needs on numerous levels. Thank God, the Camp was restarted with record attendance; the Teen Winter Retreat will be in a week (*We are encouraged that several parishes and individuals helped to under write the cost of camp, investing in our youth and making it possible that every Diocesan youth that wanted to attend camp could. This is of the utmost importance for families with multiple children and low income families. We wish to thank all the donors, benefactors staff and volunteers. Hopefully, this will prompt our parishes to create a line item in their budget for youth ministry. On that note, we need at least 10 (ten) more volunteers than we did last year.*

Our Women’s retreat will occur in March with the cost covered by the Diocese, something which has not been done since 2020. Several clergy volunteered to create a young men’s group as we are seeing an influx of young men throughout the Orthodox Church. In the face of cultural instability and compromise of Christian teaching, these young men sought out the Church and were warmly welcomed in parishes providing Catechesis and Adult Education. They want the stability and structure offered by our Church. Our clergy retreats allow clergy to take a break from their busy schedules, enjoy downtime, fellowship and strengthen existing relationships or make new ones. Clergy retreats provide the opportunity for new clergy to be woven into the fabric of our diocesan life.

By the grace of God we continue to see growth in a number of parishes that provide *adult education, opportunity for fellowship* after the services and *a strong sense of community*. The growth of these parishes more than offsets the declining membership in others. Overall the *Diocesan census increased the past two years*. The numbers for 2023 took a dip because two parishes purged inactive and out of state parishioners from their census. A number of our parishes carry a significant number of inactive members on their census, which makes it difficult to assess the health of the parish. Once again, I would encourage you to look at the *parish census by age brackets* found on our website, under the *Diocesan Assembly 2024* tab. Look around on Sunday morning to see if your census truly reflects those committed to their personal life and growth in their faith and to parish growth. If the parish is declining, ask your priest and parish council what is being done and what you can do to change from decline to growth. Some parishes have almost 70% of their faithful over 66 years old and no children.

We are currently subsidizing our two missions, *Theotokos of the Life Giving Spring* in Philadelphia and the *Gettysburg’s Mission*, which already outgrew its current worship space. We may also consider another two missions in the near future. Currently, we only have four parishes without a rector due to their inability to provide a living wage (*three of which have not had their own rector for perhaps decades*). There continues to be a shortage of clergy throughout the OCA and we will have a few retirements this year. Thank God, Dn. Kirill our seminarian will be ordained to the Holy Priesthood this Saturday and graduate

in May. Hopefully our clergy are preparing the faithful for a smooth transition, as the Church is about Christ, not us. Fr. Alexander Atty of blessed memory said on numerous occasions, if a priest has done his job properly, when he leaves the parish will not miss a beat. As clergy we must remember Christ is the Only Bridegroom and we serve in a role similar to John the Baptist.

As at previous Assemblies, I remind you that we must care for those who care for us. Clergy compensation must be according to Diocesan Guidelines if we expect to retain clergy in the Diocese. The Department of Pastoral Care, chaired by the V. Rev. Fr. Nicholas Solak provides ongoing support to OCA clergy in a number of ways, one of which originated and was subsidized from our Diocese through *Clergy Peer Learning*, now known as *Thriving in Ministry*.

His Beatitude appointed me to participate in joint meetings with the Pension Board and the Metropolitan Council, chaired by Archbishop Daniel. The Holy Synod also receives regular reports from the Pension Board at every meeting. The Pension Board continues to maintain they are underfunded because the Bishops are not enforcing the mandate of participation. However, over the past two years or so, I have repeatedly requested *the data to substantiate this claim*. Each bishop was given a list of parishes and clergy not participating almost two years ago. Some of the clergy on our list were bi-vocational priests who do not qualify. Parishes without clergy were also listed. There are also clergy who were too old to join the plan when they began drawing a salary from an OCA entity. I corrected the data two years ago and was recently sent virtually the same list and corrected it again. In our most recent meeting I said it was inappropriate, insulting and derogatory to say the Bishops are not enforcing the mandate when they cannot provide data to support such a comment. Furthermore, it raises questions about the reliability of other statements. While the Pension Board is able to say how many clergy are not participating, they have not distinguished between those who were too old to join the plan when they entered active ministry, those who whose main source of income is not from an OCA entity, but secular employment, those simply attached to a parish but not compensated at all, as well as those who take no salary or benefits from the parish, etc.. Fr Alessandro, Secretary of the Orthodox Church in America is working on cleaning up the list. As a Diocesan Assembly, addressing Pension Plan concerns is outside our competence.

The Antiochian Archdiocese offers Parish Council workshops annually. I remember quite clearly the comment that parish councils often deal with immediate needs and seldom think long term. Perhaps, our councils could appoint a committee to develop a long term plan, or minimally a 5 year plan. If we think in those terms, what would we start doing differently for the health and growth of the parish?

Parish visits returned to normal this past year and as in the past my visitation schedule is online, though it does not show private meetings with clergy, laity, parish councils and parish assemblies, etc. The Holy Synod Meetings were in person, with a few issues addressed through email or Zoom. We continue to have three Diocesan Council meetings at the Diocesan Chancery.

I must thank Carmen Hodson our administrative assistant for the excellent job she faithfully continues to do. We are blessed with a wonderful Diocesan Council and I thank them for their dedication, collaboration and diligence. The V. Rev. Fr. Martin Browne, our Chancellor, who goes out of his way to be supportive, continues doing an exceptional job and offering wise advice. Our Deans, the Fr. Innocent Neal, Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk and Fr Timothy Hojnicky work tirelessly to take a heavy load off of my back. Given the shortage of clergy much falls on their backs and they all go above and beyond my expectations in caring for the clergy and the faithful.

While I do not see many parish budgets with a charity line, I know our parishes support our seminarians, work at soup kitchens, provide meals for the homeless and sick parishioners, backpacks for children, food baskets at Thanksgiving and many other things that simply do not make it on their financial



reports. As our Lord taught, “. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” I pray you enjoy your time with one another at this assembly.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

+MARK, Archbishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania