



DIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA AND EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

The Most Rev. Mark, Archbishop of Philadelphia • Orthodox Church in America

January 22, 2025

Diocesan Assembly Address

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Dear Rev. Fathers, Deacons, Matushki and faithful,

Christ is in our midst! He is and ever shall be! Welcome to the Archangel Michael Orthodox Church and the 61st Diocesan Assembly! We are grateful to our host pastor, Fr. Silouan Burns and the faithful of the Archangel Michael Orthodox Church for their labors in preparation of this Assembly and through our time together.

The passage above from the Book of Acts is the earliest description within Scripture of life within the early Church. The Church grew exponentially even though it suffered persecution. How or why did this occur? First and foremost through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Apostles being channels of His Grace. The Apostles were committed to teaching so much so, they Ordained Deacons to take care of the charitable work of serving the poor so they could dedicate themselves to the study of Scripture, teaching and preaching. Likewise, this would imply that the faithful *dedicated* themselves to being eager to learn their faith. Also note it says day to day they went to the temple. They gathered regularly not just on Sundays. Secondly, we see a strong sense of community with dedication to fellowship, shared meals and prayer. Thus they were committed to being together for worship regularly, fellowshiping and regular reception of the Holy Mysteries.

Over the past few years, the Orthodox Church across this country experienced an influx of converts, predominantly young men. We are seeing a record number of Catechumens in our parishes. The parishes experiencing this growth are the ones who have the fuller cycle of services. They are not Sunday only churches. The parishes which are growing have a strong sense of community with fellowship and meals following the Divine Liturgy wherein new people can be woven into the fabric. Our parishes that are growing are focused on providing adult education. Those seeking the Church are not looking for Orthodoxy-light.

St. Peter in his second epistle underscores the importance of knowing our Faith and Knowing Christ, not simply knowing about Him. Listen to his repeated use of *knowledge* in his epistle:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: 2 May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because

of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. 10 Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; 11 so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Whatever we learned in Church school was taught at a level for children. As adults, we need to be continually learning about our Faith. In order to stand fast, we need continual reminders or we will easily fall away. Let us remember, one does not have to stop attending the Church to fall away. *We need to continually avail ourselves to the things that make God present in our hearts and minds as much as a fish needs to be in the water. When visitors see we take our faith seriously and are personally committed to growing in our faith, they are more inclined to stay. If we do not take our faith seriously, why would they stay?*

In our efforts to encourage these things, the Diocese formed a Men's Group, St Alexis Toth Brotherhood to supplement the work of our parishes. This allows them to network with others who are strongly committed to learning about our Faith and *to be involved in ministry*. We must be proactive in getting new people involved in education and ministry. They need meaningful ways of serving Christ and building up the Body of Christ. Let me take this opportunity to thank our clergy who are overseeing this important ministry. Protodeacon Peter Skoog, submitted a wonderful report.

We were also blessed to restart our Women's Retreat this past year and hope someone will step forward to organize this on a semiannual basis. We thank Matushka Masha Solak for restarting this retreat and providing our women an opportunity for fellowship and growth. If you are interested in taking up this ministry please let me know.

Our summer camp program is incredibly blessed by a very competent director, Daniel Peck, volunteers, which include a number of parents, approximately ten clergy, parishioners as well as recent converts looking for opportunities for ministry. This serves a multiple purposes. We are not only caring for the youth the Lord entrusted to our care, but also allowing our newest members opportunity for ministry, to meet others new to the Church as well as those who are lifelong members. The same may be said about our Winter and Fall Youth Retreats under the direction of Patrick O'Leary. Our Youth Ministry program not only builds relationships amongst our youth, but between them and those who serve. Those who serve are also building new relationships with others adults across the Diocese and outside as well. At this point, I want to thank all of our parishes and parishioners who support youth ministry. We are blessed with dedicated people who not only sacrificially give, but love to serve as well. We cannot do it without you! Through your generosity every child of the Diocese is able to attend our camp and retreats without a fee.

Early in 2024, Holy Resurrection Cathedral began to have chunks of plaster falling from the dome. An architect told them it was unsafe to continue to hold services. They began attending Holy Trinity, their sister parish and were well received. Sadly, the Cathedral suffered from a flawed design when it was constructed involving the large dome which drained their financial resources over the years. Repairs to the roof were being made annually. Over a year and a half ago, I was there for Liturgy on a rainy day and water was pouring through the ductwork in the Sanctuary and they had numerous large buckets in the basement to catch the water. This also created the potential for mold blowing through the air conditioning system, which is also a health hazard. The plaster in the dome, as well as the walls, are visibly compromised. The cost to simply evaluate the integrity of the plaster in the dome alone was projected to cost \$160,000. In all likelihood, the entire Dome needs to be replaced, be re-plastered, the walls repaired and ductwork checked for mold, etc. There are also electrical issues to be addressed.

While their census showed 69 adults, it did not accurately reflect those committed to the parish. 64% of the people listed on the census were over 66. As they scheduled multiple meetings with the faithful with approximately 25 active members, they realized they could not afford to address the needed repairs, ongoing maintenance and afford a priest. They felt, with their demographics, the cost of repairs could not be justified. Therefore, after numerous meetings and discussion, they asked permission to call an assembly to discuss closing, which I approved. They held

multiple meetings and finally voted to close. Their decision was then ratified by the Diocesan Council and submitted for my approval. This is precisely the procedure followed in the past with other parishes requesting to close. The discussion to close is initiated by the parish itself. A request to call an assembly to discuss closing needs Hierarchical approval. Once they arrive at that decision their documentation of the required announcements, a quorum, a resolution to close and vote are submitted to the Diocesan Authority. Their decision requires ratification by the Diocesan Council followed by Hierarchical approval.

Since September, Fr Innocent Neal and a number of clergy inventoried the Liturgical items of the Cathedral and sent it out to our clergy. On January 14th many liturgical items were given to our Diocesan parishes. Fr. Innocent and other clergy will also create lists of the numerous other items available, especially from the kitchen. While the closing of Holy Resurrection Cathedral is sad, we are encouraged that the various liturgical items will continue to be used by our parishes.

Over the past three years our Diocesan Council met faithfully to discuss and address the administrative aspects of the Diocese. Our meetings always include open discussion and collaboration. Meetings were held at the Chancery and on occasion via Zoom. Over the last ten years, we enjoyed fruitful discussions and productive meetings with our various council members while maintaining a Christian manner of conduct. At this meeting we will be electing for numerous positions on the Diocesan Council and I have purposely codified in the Diocesan Bylaws staggering the terms to facilitate a healthy rotation of council members. This will facilitate greater stability by providing for change and continuity. At future assemblies, we will need to elect approximately three new members. Currently, most of the Council is eligible for one more term and are willing to continue if nominated and elected.

I want to thank our Administrative Assistant Carmen Hodson for her competent and capable service to our Diocese and the Church. Our Chancellors and Deans, the V. Rev. Frs. Raymond Browne, Timothy Hojnicky, Victor Gorodenchuk, and Innocent Neal all continue to assist and oversee matters in their respective areas thereby lightening my burden. I am most grateful to them and all our clergy who are laboring to fulfill Christ's calling and to be faithful stewards of the ministry entrusted to them.

Finally, I want to thank the V. Rev. Fr. Nicholas and Matushka Masha Solak for their years of service. Fr Nicholas served Holy Trinity in Stroudsburg faithfully for many years. He also served as a dean, Diocesan Council Member and Metropolitan Council Representative. He spearheaded our clergy peer groups and raised the bar on addressing clergy health. Matushka Masha served faithfully as choir director at Holy Trinity, organized women's retreats, assisted in the development of our Christian education component at camp and organized and directed the youth choir. Fr. Nicholas, Matushka Masha and their family will be dearly missed as he assumes his new position as Director of Pastoral Life for the Orthodox Church in America.

I pray you enjoy your time together at this assembly and each are able to take something home of benefit for you and your parishes.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

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