His Eminence, the Most Reverend
+ MARK
Archbishop of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania
Orthodox Church in America

January 29, 2026
Translation of the relics of the Hieromartyr Ignatius, the Godbearer and Bishop of Antioch

Hierarchical Address
62nd Diocesan Assembly of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

Dear Reverend Fathers, Reverend Deacons, Matushki, delegates, observers, and guests,

Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!

Chapter XIV. Exhortations to Faith and Love

"No man [truly] making a profession of faith sinneth; nor does he that possesses love hate any one. The tree is made manifest by its fruit; so those that profess themselves to be Christians shall be recognized by their conduct. For there is not now a demand for mere profession, but that a man be found continuing in the power of faith to the end.

Wherefore none of the devices of the devil shall be hidden from you, if, like Paul, ye perfectly possess that faith and love towards Christ which are the beginning and the end of life. The beginning of life is faith, and the end is love. And these two being inseparably connected together, do perfect the man of God; while all other things which are requisite to a holy life follow after them. No man making a profession of faith ought to sin, nor one possessed of love to hate his brother. For He that said, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,' said also, 'and thy neighbor as thyself.' Those that profess themselves to be Christ's are known not only by what they say, but by what they practice. 'For the tree is known by its fruit.'" (Letter to the Ephesians)

I extend my greetings to all our clergy, delegates, observers, and guests gathered for the 62nd Diocesan Assembly. I offer my sincere gratitude to Father Michael Shepherd and the faithful of St. Michael's Church of Old Forge for hosting us, and to the clergy and faithful of the Wilkes-Barre Deanery for their shared efforts in organizing, planning, and preparing for this gathering.

Secondly, we welcome Archpriest John Parker, Dean of St. Tikhon's Theological Seminary and our guest speaker for this year's Assembly. We also welcome Archpriest Paul Fetsko, newly assigned Rector of St. Herman of Alaska Church in Glen Mills, PA, back to his home here in Eastern Pennsylvania. Likewise, we welcome Priest Joseph Sharman and his family from Colorado Springs, CO, to our Diocese in anticipation of a new mission in Delaware.

Additionally, we welcome Mother Catherine, newly received into the Orthodox Church in America, of St. Mary Magdalene Monastery here in the Wilkes-Barre area, as an observer. We also welcome one of our Diocesan Seminarians, Subdeacon Jacob Kurtz, from St. Tikhon's Seminary. We are grateful for the presence of all of you, and we pray that the Lord will bless your ministry and time among us.

Let us hear the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch, a true Father of the Church. In these words, and even more emphatically elsewhere, Ignatius reminds us, *"We must not only call ourselves a Christian, but we must also be Christian."* Let us ask ourselves, *"If we could be arrested for being a Christian, would there be significant and substantial evidence to convict us?"*

This past year we witnessed the recognition of Mother Olga of Alaska among the Saints of North America. *Glory to God!* Unfortunately, I have heard it said that she is the first woman saint of North America. Brothers and sisters in Christ, if that were true, then we would be completely failing in our work as clergy, as faithful, and as parishes. Our Lord commanded us to go into all the world and to *"preach the Gospel, make disciples of all nations, and teach them to observe all He commanded."* The work of the Church is first and foremost to make saints through our cooperation with the Lord and His divine grace, assisting us in our journey as saints, those called to be witnesses to the Gospel as living icons. If every parish is not working toward that goal, it is not truly a Church.

By the grace of God, the Lord is blessing us with that very opportunity through the people He is sending our way. We are not even going out to look for them. They are coming to us. If you look at the census of our parishes over the years, you will see a change in demographics. Whereas the proportion of elderly people within a parish was once trending quite high, we now see the percentage of younger people and children increasing in a significant number of parishes. As I note each year, the parishes that are experiencing growth are those providing adult education, Church School, catechesis, and fellowship, especially following the Divine Services. All of these elements help weave newcomers into the fabric of the parish. Visitors are unlikely to return if there are only barebones services with no opportunity to be integrated into the life of the community. Our clergy are often feeling overwhelmed trying to keep track of when someone first began attending.

Clergy care continues to be vitally important. We continue to provide Pre-Lenten and Pre-Nativity retreats for our clergy, support continuing education, and encourage Clergy Family Appreciation Month. To retain and attract clergy, we also remind parishes of compensation guidelines, current data on median family income, as required by OCA Compensation Guidelines, and COLA increases each October. In this regard, I am concerned that this information does not always reach the Parish Council or become known to the Parish Assembly.

The budget presented to the Parish Assembly must reflect appropriate compensation. The Parish Council must not deprive the parish of necessary information regarding the care of its clergy through adequate compensation. Somewhere along the way, a mentality developed that it was easier to keep compensation low rather than address stewardship. Let us ask ourselves whether our clergy can maintain the same lifestyle that we desire for ourselves. This type of budgeting forces the priest's family to make disproportionate sacrifices for the parish while failing to ask the people to share in sacrificial giving. I am at a loss for words. Are we asking the people to step up to the plate, or are we simply taking it from the priest and his family? How can we plan, without thought, the kind of house, car, clothing, vacation, and lifestyle we want for ourselves and not consider whether our clergy can afford the same? The budget presented at the Parish Assembly must reflect current compensation guidelines. If we fail to do so, we give the false impression that the parish is doing better than it actually is.

An Arabic proverb says, *"Your friend is the one who tells you the truth."* At the Diocesan Assembly in Jermyn in 2016, the clergy and parish delegates resolved that we move from the former head tax of $160 per baptized soul to tithing, defined as ten percent of parish income, to be implemented within five years. At that time, parishes were given five options for this transition. In rereading the

minutes of that Assembly, I note that Mark Linnehan, who made the motion, remarked that we are a family and not a business, though we are nonetheless compelled to use certain business paradigms.

As I review the Standardized Financial Report, which was also introduced and approved at that Assembly, I note that not all of our parishes are honoring their commitment. A tithe is ten percent. Anything less is not a tithe. Anything more is an offering above and beyond. No individual has the authority to overrule a decision of the Diocesan Assembly that was approved by its clergy and delegates. No one may simply say, *"Give what you want."* Holy Apostles, as a mission, tithed from its inception, even before it had its own building, and God has blessed them. Our parishes would be thriving financially if our people tithed faithfully to their parish.

The Prophet Malachi chastened the people who failed to tithe, calling them robbers. This is the only place in Scripture where God invites His people to test Him. Malachi proclaims by the Spirit of God, *"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this," says the Lord of Hosts, "and see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour out for you blessing without measure." (Malachi 3:10)* Sadly, statistics on Orthodox stewardship indicate that Orthodox Christians give between 0.03 and 0.07 percent of their income. That is not even one one-hundredth of one percent.

Tithing is a recognition that all we receive is from God and an expression of our gratitude to Him. When we do not tithe, we must ask ourselves whether we are showing a lack of gratitude and trust. Please remember that we are a family, and we all need to do our part. Reexamine your commitment to your parish, and your parish's commitment to the Diocese and the OCA. This reflects your acknowledgment that all you have is from the Lord Himself and your gratitude for His abundant blessings.

Youth ministry is thriving within the Diocese. Over the past few years, through the generosity of our parishes, the demographics of diocesan children attending our youth events, including camp and retreats, have changed significantly. Whereas several years ago 60 percent of campers were from outside the Diocese, now two-thirds are from within the Diocese. This is an investment in our youth. We are grateful to Dan Peck, Camp Director, and Patrick O'Leary, Retreat Organizer, and to all the volunteers who work together to connect our youth to the Church, to one another, and to our staff and volunteers. We are also blessed with approximately ten clergy who are present throughout camp and retreats, providing our youth with opportunities for personal interaction that may not exist on a parish level. I would be remiss not to mention the donations of food from parishes and from Mrs. T., which are greatly appreciated. Camp costs us approximately $55,000, and food costs around $23,000 for that one week alone. Families with more than one child are now able to send their children, and we are grateful for all you do to make this possible.

With regard to Annual Meetings, this is an area where we need to do better, and we need your full cooperation. We do not receive the required documentation following an Annual Meeting, as outlined on DOEPA.org under Documents and the Annual Meeting List of Requirements, in a timely manner, if at all. We waste countless hours chasing these materials down. The decisions of the Annual Meeting require hierarchical approval, and the Parish Council must be confirmed before taking the oath of office. Additionally, the newly elected Parish Council is required to read and sign the Sexual Misconduct Policy.

We are missing Annual Meeting information from some parishes. Others fail to submit all required documents, which prevents confirmation of the Parish Council. The new Parish Council cannot

legally meet without confirmation, as this is contrary to parish bylaws, diocesan bylaws, and the Statute of the OCA, and consequently violates civil laws governing non-profits. Any decisions made under these circumstances are invalid and expose participants to civil liability, including being sued jointly and severally. Once the new Parish Council is blessed and installed, its members must read the abbreviated Sexual Misconduct Policy and sign the appropriate acknowledgment form. This form must be returned to our office immediately following their first meeting. We continue to experience difficulty receiving this documentation, and these delays waste valuable time due to repeated requests.

With regard to background checks, our policy is in accordance with civil law and the Statute of the OCA. Everyone who has more than incidental contact with children is required to have a background check. This includes all clergy, readers, subdeacons, deacons, and paid employees. Liability does not rest solely with the Diocese, but also with the parish and the Parish Council. Consequently, we must all ensure that this policy is strictly followed.

Our background check process is multifaceted. Please refer to https://doepa.org/background-checks. At the bottom of the page, under Resources, click on Background Checks. Once a person requests a background check, they will receive an email containing a code for Pennsylvania Child Abuse History. That code must be used within the allotted time period. If it expires, we must generate a new code and resend it. Additionally, everyone is required to watch a training video on sexual abuse and complete a quiz, which also requires a time-sensitive code. In both instances, we waste countless hours tracking compliance and resending expired codes. No one may engage in ministry without fully completing this process. Furthermore, within the state of PA, anyone who has not lived in the state for ten consecutive years, as well as all paid individuals who require background checks, must also be fingerprinted in accordance with state law.

Once again, I thank you for your attention to these administrative matters, as there are legal implications for you, your parish, and your Parish Council, not only for the Diocese. Thank you for all that you do for the Church. We must do better at working together. Your support will be greatly appreciated as we train a new Administrative Assistant. I also thank our Chancellors, Deans, Treasurer, Communications Director, Diocesan Council, Youth Workers, Parish Councils, and clergy who help us carry out the necessary administrative work and keep us moving in the right direction, so that we may give our attention to things eternal.

By addressing these matters and completing them expeditiously, we will all have more time to focus on the Lord's commission and to attend to prayer, fasting, and repentance.

As we approach Great Lent, I ask your forgiveness for my many failings. May our Lord continue to look down from heaven, visit, establish, and perfect this vine which He planted with His own right hand.

Your unworthy father in Christ,

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