

Report of the Diocesan Chancellor to the Annual Assembly of the Diocese of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

Your Eminence, Very Reverend, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Christ is in our midst!

This year the **Diocesan Council** met three times instead of four. It was an experiment undertaken since the four meetings a year proved challenging for people's schedules and the hope was to provide greater focus and productivity for our meetings.

The new Diocesan Council quickly became an integrated, effective and productive body with the addition of new voices and perspectives. What is shared is a commitment to building up the Body of Christ throughout the diocese, which exists in our parish communities.

As part of our ongoing work for a healthier, spiritually and physically growing diocese, we have for several years now put a consistent emphasis on clergy health and continuing education. The reason is very simple – healthy clergy lead healthy parishes – as demonstrated by research data done by, among others, the Pew Foundation. We were the pilot program for **Clergy Peer Learning** groups which has since gone national with the O.C.A.'s reception of almost \$500,000 grant that is the substance of the **'Thriving In Ministry'** program. T.I.M has been assisting not only Eastern PA clergy but Orthodox clergy of several jurisdictions and is now doing so on the national level as well. Fr. Nicholas Solak has played a decisive role in all of this, both locally and nationally. We encourage our clergy to participate and to make the respective clergy brotherhoods aware of this too. The premise is simple: clergy are the best resource for one another in learning how to do what it is we do. Seminary is preparatory and limited by nature. Like Drivers Education, seminary provides you with the basics of preparation, but your own experience and that of even more/different experienced priests is vital to healthy ministry. Consequently, the groups are diverse in background and experience and guided by trained facilitators, they have an undetermined life span in that the group becomes companions on the journey rather than a course of study.

Continuing Education is, in its way, a course of study, but has been in our diocese a course determined by the real needs, pressing and foreseen alike, which clergy are facing in our parishes, because our faithful are facing these needs in their parishes. Whether seminary education ended 5, 10, 20, or 30 or 50 years ago, the social context in which we minister has changed and continually changes. Recognizing that we need to be able to respond pastorally brings with it the recognition that we need information and direction in the ways that are helpful and not harmful. So, we bring speakers in, clergy and lay, who have expertise which they can share with us to assist us. This year we had our **Pre-Lenten** and **Pre-Nativity Retreats** with Bishop Anthony of Toledo of the Antiochian Archdiocese, who had given the same presentation to our Holy Synod. Speaking on the phenomenon of secularization and its implications for us, the presentation was so well received that we invited Bishop Anthony back to talk to us about the opportunities for outreach in this social environment. In May Fr. Michael Kon, a retired priest of the Bulgarian Church, who has been a substance abuse counselor working in school and other settings, gave an excellent presentation on addiction, recognizing it, what treatment involves and what steps parish priests can/should, and should not do. In the Fall Dr. Al Rossi gave a very well received presentation on time management and making time for the necessities of self-care and pastoral care. Other opportunities were available to our clergy at St. Tikhon's Seminary and local programs sponsored

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by colleges or other Orthodox jurisdictions. We plan to continue this program in the upcoming year.

Priorities in the coming year include

Addressing the issue of dying parishes – a reality we can no longer afford to speak about in a theoretical sense but as a practical imperative. We need to move away from the blame game, from trying to force people to adapt who do not want to adapt, from captivity to infrastructure, whether buildings or number of parishes, many of which are parishes in name only. Doing what we have always done does not work anymore. It does not work because it was designed to maintain, not grow. And it failed at maintaining, and it cannot lead to growth. The necessary change is not programmatic or financial, it is one of heart and mind. We need new and renewed parishes. As an immigrant, I note that the immigrant experience in America is not one of replicating the past but of building a new life from the elements we brought with us – our abilities and our faith, though it should be in the reverse order. We honor our immigrant ancestors not by building museums to them but by carrying on the life they began here. Most came for material betterment, greater personal or communal freedom, the opportunity to practice their faith. Their descendants are living in a time and place where the limitations of each of those are painfully obvious. More than fifty years ago The Beatles addressed the first issue, “Money can’t buy me love.” Nor can it buy peace, joy, patience, long-suffering. Freedom without purpose other than self-satisfaction creates increasing disorder leading to any number of dead ends, some of them fatal in the form of substance abuse. And the practice of faith is far more than church attendance – it is a way of life that informs and directs every aspect of our lives so that we become like God in Christ. The crisis of our shrinking population is a challenge and a judgment. We have been given all that we need in Christ, none of it because we deserve it or have earned it. Additionally, we have been blessed with material prosperity and social influence, as individuals if not as a church, far exceeding that of many. To which the question is ‘What shall I render to the Lord for all He has given unto me?’ Moreover, let us remember ‘Unless the Lord build the house, in vain do the builders labor.’

Building up youth outreach – this began at an encounter at St. Tikhon’s Summer Camp this summer but there is much to be done not only in ministering to youth, but involving them in the ministry of the church. We are fortunate to have many engaged and talented young people, they are a God given treasure it is our responsibility to cultivate.

Creating a regular schedule of retreats for men, women, and young people. We need to do more to enliven and inform the spiritual lives of all the people in the diocese by offering retreats that focus on state of life, stage of life, and the challenges of living as Orthodox Christian life in the 21st Century.

We have a substantially new clergy in the diocese, coming from both seminaries, a variety of backgrounds, experiences and ages but a common desire to serve Christ in His people. We have an immensely gifted and able laity, of all ages and parts of the diocese. Creating opportunities and bringing people together to work in the use of their God-given talents, both within and between parishes and deaneries is another priority for the coming year. When any of us are asked what faith we profess who says I am a St. “X” Christian or a Philadelphia, Frackville or Wilkes-Barre Christian? We all answer that we are Orthodox Christians. And our talents are not only for ourselves to share, but to be shared with any. Whatever we can do to build upon what is being done in this respect is worthwhile.

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With gratitude to all for their support and patience, and asking forgiveness for my failures and omissions,

Yours in Christ,

V. Rev. Raymond M. Browne
Chancellor