



January 25, 2023

*“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:13-16)*

Dear Rev. Fathers, Deacons, Matushki and faithful,

Christ is in our midst! He is and ever shall be! Welcome to the 59<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Assembly. We are blessed to have Fr. Nikolai Breckinridge and the faithful of St. Nicholas to host us this year. Thank you. We are grateful for your labors in preparation and your hospitality.

This past year we have made a significant effort to invest in the lives of our faithful in various ways. No doubt, there are other ways, additional ways which can be explored in the coming year. But for 2022, by the Grace of God, the Diocese covered the cost of last year’s assembly and is covering this one as well. We covered the \$27,000 for the All-American Council without billing the parishes as in previous years. The hope is that the monies remaining in the parish will be put to profitable use, whether in education or in outreach. We provided for in person continuing education and a Pre-Nativity Retreat for our clergy for the first time since the Pandemic three years ago. The Diocesan Council graciously voted to assist our seminarians at St. Tikhon’s and St. Vladimir’s. Rent, groceries, utilities, tuition, clothing and shoes for children are all expensive. We are also subsidizing our two missions, Theotokos of the Life Giving Spring in Philadelphia and our newest mission in Gettysburg. We are investing in the youth of the diocese. By the Grace of God, the Diocese covered the cost of camp for all of our Diocesan youth last year and will do so again this year for those that need assistance. Thank God I believe about five parishes already committed to covering the costs of their own children. Families with more than one child may not be able to afford to send all their children, so they may make the decision to send none. If we work together, the faithful, our parishes and the Diocese, we can do more for our youth and their formation in the faith and life of the Church. We also did a completely new website for the camp program, allowing on line registration and applications for staff. The website contains a wonderful database reducing the work load significantly of operating the camp.

Clergy health has been a priority for our diocese before I became the ruling hierarch and will continue to be, focusing on the spiritual and psychological health and material welfare of our clergy families. Our Diocesan Office continues to provide up to date information on median income and COLA increases so our clergy can make a living wage. If we do not compensate our clergy adequately we will have difficulty filling vacancies when they occur or retaining clergy. We must encourage our clergy to participate in the Thriving in Ministry Program for their own spiritual health. Healthy priests will hopefully facilitate healthy parishes.

While the future is ultimately unknown to us, we have a responsibility to plan according to the knowledge we have. This is true not only of us individually in our families but also in our parish families. Our administrative assistant compiles the census data in a way to facilitate parishes to evaluate their



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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

membership according to its age demographics. Hopefully, you will begin fruitful discussion on long term planning with this data. I would encourage you to print the census by age bracket and discuss it at your parish council meetings and Annual Assembly (*The census data by age may be found on our website. Simply click on Diocesan Assembly 2023 and search for Census by Age Bracket*). Unfortunately, in a number of our parishes the census is significantly higher those who are actually practicing Orthodox Christians. With rare exceptions, few parishes have a long term plan. Parish councils often focus on maintaining the status quo and addressing the needs at hand. All of our parishes must focus on the faithful growing in their knowledge and experience of their faith through full participation in as complete a liturgical life as possible and, equally important, adult education and active ministry as well as growing the parish numerically. Once again, I would encourage you to look at the census information for your parish for 1975-2022. Ask your faithful to invite at least one person a month to visit the parish. We have a beautiful faith and we need to share it. While we seek to attract new members we need to encourage stewardship to remain financially viable. I want to commend Fr Stephen Vernak for his creative way of drawing people into the Church. On the flyer for their Slavic Days, he invites people to come to their upcoming lecture series. He lists the topics, dates and speakers. These flyers can also be given to people who come to the festival.

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 for the most part and more numerous than usual. Our Diocesan Council meetings were all in person at the Diocesan Chancery.

I want to 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. I must thank 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 and our Deans, the Fr. Innocent Neal, Fr. Victor Gorodenchuk and Fr Timothy Hojnicky, whose tireless efforts 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. I also want to thank Fr. Nicholas Solak for his years of service as dean of the Wilkes Barre Deanery. He continues to work hard for the Church and now chairs the Department of Pastoral Life for the OCA.

The Department of Pastoral Life organized a clergy Synaxis October 17-20 in Chicago. The registration fee is \$500. Please include in your budget an appropriate amount for travel and participation in this clergy gathering. All the usual reports, financials, budget and audit were are posted online for your review so we will not need to have anyone read them. Certainly, as always you may ask questions about any of them. Thank you for being here and your interest in guiding our Diocese.

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