

PRESENTATION OF THE DIOCESAN HIERARCH
Offered at the 44th Diocesan Assembly
On Friday, November 16, 2007

Dearly Beloved in Christ!

Christ is in our midst!

I would like to welcome all of you, the clergy and lay delegates to this 44th Annual Assembly, who have come together to represent the parishes and the faithful of the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania. We have gathered together from all corners of our small diocese, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in spirit of mutual love and support, in order to prayerfully reflect upon the work that we have accomplished as the Church in the last year, and to prepare ourselves for the challenges that lie before us in the coming year.

We have much to report upon, much to talk about and perhaps even much to argue about. If you are like me, you don't enjoy long meetings, you find reports tedious to sit through and who among us enjoys arguing? Nevertheless, we know that dialogue among Christians has always been an important part of the life of the Church. God Himself created all things with His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel itself was expressed and transmitted through the written word and through the spoken word. The Holy Fathers and Councils defended the truth of Orthodoxy with long treatises throughout the ages.

Unlike the vain babbling of the world around us, all of these words within the Church are sacred and holy words, reflecting the life of the All Holy Trinity and giving us mortals a way to enter into that life and to participate in it. All of these words are words of life, a life that requires us to act. And so we have come together as a diocesan family to act. For these two days, we will talk and dialogue and even disagree, but if we engage in this conversation in the spirit of the Holy Apostles and in the spirit of the Holy Fathers of the Church, the words we speak, the reports we hear and the discussions we enter into will bear fruit in the life of our diocese and will become our prayer and our offering to the Lord.

In days of old, the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers looked to Christ to provide the Divine Light that would guide them out of darkness and help them to lead others out of the darkness and into that Light. We now find ourselves in the midst of darkness as well. Our entire OCA is suffering and enduring a great temptation in her life. How are we to pass through this darkness and find the light, and the peace and the joy of our sweetest Lord Jesus Christ? How are we to find answers to the questions that trouble us and stir up anger and frustration within our hearts and our minds? How are we to act as a Diocese, to be as a Diocese, so that we might pass through all of this and find healing for ourselves? And, just as importantly, how can we then offer the Holy Church as a place of healing for those who are dying, hurt, wounded and suffering in the world around us?

As your diocesan hierarch, I would like to share with you my concerns about the current financial problems. I have been deeply saddened by all the events that have shaken our Orthodox Church in America for the past two years. I have grown impatient with the length of time it has taken to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. I have been frustrated by the complications brought about by legal counsel and by the costs associated with the resolution of these matters. And I have also been ashamed of the perception that others have about our Church.

If these are your concerns, then I share them with you.

But I also have hope and I ask you to share that hope with me.

Two years is indeed a long time to suffer, and yet I have hope in remembering that the faithful of the Russian lands suffered for 70 years under the communist yoke. I have hope in knowing that the faithful of the Greek lands suffered for 400 years under the Turkish Yoke. I have hope in remembering that the Church suffered for two hundred years under the iconoclasts. The knowledge of the suffering of the Church throughout the ages gives me hope in our present suffering, hope that God's grace is sufficient for us and will guide us to the calm harbor of salvation.

I have hope in knowing that, although change has been slow and progress limited, things have nevertheless changed for the better. Last year, I spoke about the Church being a very large boat which takes a long time to change its course. I believe that many things have changed for the better in our Church Administration

I have hope in the fact that that we are still here today as the OCA, as the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania, as a diocesan assembly, and that means that in His mercy, our great God has spared us and given us another opportunity to repent and to attain salvation.

So what must we now do?

We must begin. The Holy Prophet and Psalmist David sings: *Now I have made a beginning; this is the change has been wrought by the right hand of the most high.* The first part of the verse speaks about the need for us to make a spiritual beginning every day; the second part of the verse speaks about the Incarnation of Christ, Who became man so that we might be given the opportunity to make that new beginning in our own lives.

What is that new beginning? It is of course the new life that we receive in holy baptism, which is renewed through our participation in the Holy Mysteries and preserved for each of us in the Holy Church which is our home.. When we fall, we have the cleansing of repentance to bring about purity in our lives once again. Many words have been written about repentance, but it is really simple: it is how we are cleansed and how we are renewed in Christ. And we just have to do it.

We must clean our own room. As I was preparing for this assembly, during the past week, I decided that I would clean my home at the same time. If some of you are like me, you can only take so much talking, so many meetings, so much mental work, before you need to get outside and take a walk, or rake the leaves, or wash your car or clean your house. So I decided to clean my house. Again, if you are like me, you know that it is sometimes difficult to clean the whole house. Things from the living room are in the kitchen, things from the kitchen are in the bathroom, papers from the office are all over the couch, and so forth.

There is a story from the desert fathers in which we hear about a certain farmer who sent his son to clear the fields for planting. The son, seeing how great the task was, decided to take a rest and begin the task the next day. But the next day came and the same thought came to him, and so he rested again. When, once week later, the farmer came to check on the work of the son, he saw that nothing had been done. When the son explained that he could not get up the courage to begin, the father offered the wise advice that, had he undertaken to clear a small section of the field each day, he would have been finished. So, taking my inspiration this story, I began to clean one room on Monday, a second room on Tuesday and another room on Wednesday. And by the time I left this morning, the whole house was (more or less) clean.

We must follow this same principle in dealing with the disorder that surrounds us in our OCA today. If we can keep the part of the house that is our diocese clean, then we will be in a better position to encourage and help our brothers in the other rooms. And by God's grace, we will move forward in a God-pleasing way.

We must blame ourselves. What is going on right now is that everyone is trying to clean everyone else's room, or criticizing everyone else for the way that are cleaning their room. All of these endeavors are attempts to clean, but they are not working. They are not working because the attempts to clean are not bringing healing bur rather more wounding and more division. And we are left wondering when and how this will all end.

One way for it to end to pray for the Lord to slay all of the sinners in our midst and allow us to have a fresh start. Even though this way may have been tolerable for the people of the Old Testament, it is a way of temptation. When faced with our merciful and saving God (who was also such such a God in the Old Testament), our only true path towards healing that is open to us is the Christian path, the path of humility, of patience and of common work for our mutual healing.

We must focus on the work of the diocese. For this reason, we must concentrate on the work of the diocese, and in particular today and tomorrow, to seek to continue the good work that has been accomplished in the past year. In the Statutes of the OCA, there are six items that lie in the competence of the Diocesan Assembly. I would like for us to focus on the two most crucial ones:

- 1) Approves measures to strengthen the Orthodox Faith and piety, religious education and charities of the Diocese.

- 2) Discuss financial means to fulfill these aims and approve the budget and other related financial questions

I will address some of the ways I believe we should address these important aspects of our diocesan life in my report tomorrow and will look for your input into, and for your discussion concerning, these crucial matters.

We must ask for help. Finally, if we are to do all this, we need help. We must ask for help from our Lord Jesus Christ, from his most Pure Mother and from all the Saints. Today I brought with me, from St. Tikhon's Monastery, the relics of three saints: St. Alexis of Wilkes-Barre, the New Martyr Maxim and St. Nicholai of Zhicha, who labored here in our Diocese.

Relics are the most visible sign to us that life can come from something that is dead and dried up. The relics of the Saints are our confirmation of the Resurrection of the dead, of the healing that has been granted to us by the great and holy Physician of souls and bodies: our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ.

If we turn to Him, then we will begin to see more clearly the way the attain this healing. If we turn to Him, we begin to see those who followed him perfectly: the holy saints of our Church, who gave themselves up to the Divine Physician through their lives of prayer, of fasting, of struggle, of almsgiving, or mercy of love, and now their dead and dry bones have been tuned in to life-giving relics which give off the healing myrrh of Christ.

I would like to conclude this evening with the words which I offered in my last pastoral letter to the diocese:

“As we make our way through this new Church year, let us strive to be watchful rather than judgmental; let us strive for honesty and truth in all things, without descending to the level of gossip and slander; let us strive for true humility, which is not defined as unquestioning acceptance, but rather as the boldness before the Lord in seeking our salvation and the salvation of our brother. Above all, let us show our love for one another through our prayers for one another: let us pray for our Metropolitan, let us pray for the Hierarchs of the Holy Synod, let us pray for the Members of the Metropolitan Council, let us pray for our clergy and our faithful and for one another at all times, so that we may indeed receive God's mercy and His grace. For it is only by the power of Almighty God that we will find rest and peace from our earthly struggles and from the tempest of life. May this be so by God's great and abundant love for mankind.”