

Report of Bishop Benjamin to the 2009 Diocesan Assembly

First of all, it is good to give thanks to God for all His benefits to us during this past year. By God's mercy, I believe I can truthfully say we are blessed with peace and oneness of mind. This is not to say we do not have our trials and difficulties. But, there is a palpable sense of unity in our diocese that I do not sense as strongly elsewhere in our Orthodox Church in America. And I give thanks to God for each of you and your contributions, great and small, to our common life in this past year.

I am grateful to God for the counsel and support I receive from Archpriest Ian Mackinnon, our Chancellor, the area deans and the clergy and lay members of our diocesan council. While our Church is a hierarchical one, our American culture necessitates a degree of conciliarity which others do not. I believe this is reflected best in the manner in which we work as a Diocesan Council. Almost without exception, we make decisions by consensus for the governance of our diocese. In addition to Fr. Ian, I would like to point to the excellent financial oversight of our Treasurer, Mary Caetta. The canons envision only one other office other than that of bishop in a diocese. It is that of *economos* – the priest who manages the treasure of the diocese. While not a priest, Mary certainly fulfills that role that with great care and efficiency for us.

I would also like to thank the two gentlemen who help manage my household and me, Reader Barry Migyanko and Subdeacon Elias Mukasa. Elias will be returning to Uganda in December and the position of *kelenik* will be taken up once more by Monk Barnabas (Day).

Let us also remember the two priests who fell asleep in the Lord recently, Archpriest Joseph Hirsch and Archimandrite Gabriel (Cooke). Many of us find it strange to be here at this assembly without the wise counsel and personality of our brother and friend Fr. Joseph. May God make their memory to be eternal! (Memory Eternal!)

Speaking of personnel, we have welcomed several new brothers into our midst to serve as clergy in the past year: since our last assembly, Deacon Yousuf Rassam was ordained to the Holy Priesthood since our last Assembly and assigned to St. Innocent Church, Tarzana, CA; Priest Ian Burgess was ordained and assigned to the St. Nicholas of Japan Mission of Redding, California; Deacon John Karchur was ordained to the Holy Diaconate and assigned to St. Nicholas Church in Saratoga; Michael Tarris, the son of Archpriest Eugene Tarris, was ordained and is attached to Holy Transfiguration in Denver. Priest James McKee returned to the Diocese of the West from St. Tikhon Seminary and has been assigned to the mission in Bend, Oregon. We also welcome Fr. Michael Spainhoward back to our diocese after his time in Alaska. He is

currently serving in Chico, CA. Finally, Deacon Gary McFarland, recently released from the Antiochian Archdiocese, was received into the Orthodox Church in America and the Diocese of the West and is attached to the St. Anthony the Great Mission in Bozeman, Montana. We welcome them and pray God will bless their ministries among us.

Our diocese is blessed with five monastic communities. They are real spiritual treasures in our midst, providing places of spiritual restoration and re-creation. As you all know, the property at Point Reyes, CA was sold and the chapel was moved, enlarged and reconstructed at Manton. It now serves as the main Church of the Monastery of St. John. Archimandrite Meletios was elected and installed as the abbot of the growing brotherhood. The work which began under our present Metropolitan has flourished to the point a new building with additional cells for the monks is being built.

The St. Barbara Monastery, now located in Santa Paul, California, has also experienced considerable growth of late. The Diocesan Council allocated a portion of the funds received from the sale of Point Reyes to build a chapel for these monastics as well. The main house being rather limited, many of the sisters have been living in RVs on the monastery grounds. Mother Victoria was recently informed by the authorities that this could no longer be permitted. Faced with an apparent housing crisis, I have given Mother a blessing to move the sisters who were living in the RVs to the Calistoga Monastery of the Assumption. This facility represents the oldest Orthodox women's monastery in North America. It was recently returned to our diocese from its brief sojourn as a stavropegial institution, that is, under the direct authority of the Metropolitan. I believe this move will be beneficial to both monasteries. The Kazan Skete and Protection of the Holy Virgin Monastery continue much as they have in the past and are quite solid. All of these communities demonstrate stability and are real blessing for us all.

Several of our parishes have undergone physical changes. The Chico Mission of Ss. Cyril and Methodius recently remodeled a part of their building, turning what was a garage into a very nice space for worship. The Ss. Constantine and Helen/Holy Theophany parish of Colorado Springs added a very nice hall/trapeza to their campus. And, I was very pleased to see the improvement the St. Innocent Church in Livermore has made in their store-front worship space. And our Tempe, Arizona mission has transformed a new building into a very attractive Orthodox temple.

I do worry about some of our missions that struggle financially and are so far from the other parishes. Helena, Montana and Kona, Hawaii are two such missions. They are rather isolated from other parishes and missions. Our Mission Board continues to do its best to support our missions given the limitations of the resources available. I am very grateful for the work of our Mission Dean, Archpriest Matthew Tate and the oversight he provides. And I would like to say,

I am deeply grateful for and keenly aware of the sacrifices our clergy and their families make to keep our missions alive and growing. In the past year we were forced to close down our Olympia, Washington mission. But, where God closes one door, He opens another. And, we were able to open a mission using the same name and organizational documents in Spokane.

As a Church, we are still in the process of recovering from the abuses and weaknesses of previous administrations. We are by no means out of the woods. But, the measure of all we do must be Christ. If we are to have any hope, we must learn to love and care for each other. If we cannot or will not love Christ in the person of our brother, the Christ in each of us, then we deserve to perish as a Church because we have disregarded the most basic commandment of Christ.

Perhaps the most obvious change in our Church since our last Diocesan Assembly was the election of our new metropolitan, Jonah. I don't need to remind any of you that he is a son of our diocese. Consequently, in a very real sense, the focus of Church life here in North America is shifting westward, if only one or two degrees, and its vision getting a bit broader. The Holy Synod has met a number of times since his election and in places other than New York. I am very pleased to announce that the Holy Synod and Metropolitan Council both have expressed a desire to hold the next All American Council in the West. The two front-running sites are Seattle and Denver. Seattle is the current favorite in that it would make it easier for the Alaskans to attend. If our diocese is, indeed, chosen as the site of the next AAC, I hope we will have a very different council, something more inclusive.

There has been a substantial change in the membership of the Holy Synod. There is a real sense of fraternity and mutual love and respect. Bishop Alejo's presence here with us is a reflection of this very welcome change. We, the bishops, actually look forward to our meetings and to seeing each other. Sadly, I don't believe that was always the case in recent years. And, I feel the recent additions to the Synod, Bishop Melchisedek of Pittsburgh, Bishop Irene of Ottawa, and Bishop-elect Michael Dahulich, represent further steps in the right direction. I am also very hopeful we will have an acceptable candidate for Bishop of Alaska soon.

Speaking of Alaska, I continue to serve as the *Locum tenens* for the Alaskan Diocese. This involves several trips a year to Alaska. In fact, I will be leaving for two weeks to consecrate two new churches, visit the seminary and hold their diocesan assembly. I want to tell you all that I appreciate your patience as we help our brothers in this difficult time. I am especially grateful to the community of Holy Trinity Cathedral which sees me far less than I would prefer. I hope this duty will not last too much longer. But, I assure you your willingness to allow me to serve them as well is greatly appreciated by the Alaskans.

One of the items of business on our agenda is the development of the OCA's Strategic Plan. It will be our opportunity as a diocese to contribute to what may be fundamental changes to the Statute of the Orthodox Church in America. It will reflect, I hope, a better understanding of our Orthodox ecclesiology. It will also give us a chance to reflect on the basic structures of our Church, how they relate to each other and to the clergy and faithful which make up the Body of Christ in North America. What does God want us to look like? How does He desire us to work with each other? How can we pass on to the next generation what has been entrusted to us and yet translate and express it in such a way that it will clearly understood in our time and culture. It is that old paradox: faithfully deliver what has been entrusted to you to the next generation; but in such a way that it remains vital and alive so that it will not become a lifeless fossil.

Finally, there are several things about which we as a diocese need to be mindful. I have asked for background checks to be done on all persons who have more than passing contact with our children. The deans and rectors have been instructed to have these checks done, the results kept in a confidential file at the parishes and to certify that this process has been completed. It is one of the easiest and most important ways that we can protect our children as a church and diocese. Unfortunately, we have less than 50 percent compliance at this point. There is no excuse for this and I expect every parish to certify background checks by the end of the calendar year or I will be forced to suspend all youth and parish programs for children in parishes that have failed to take this easy and simple step. We are also asking all the clergy who are currently active to fill out forms which permit us to do background checks on them. These will also be kept in a confidential file in the diocesan office. I expect 100% compliance and nothing less.

We have also been working with Syosset to ensure all the relevant parish paperwork is in place. This means we will be reviewing parish bylaws, 501.c status, and articles of incorporation. There is nothing to be feared. It is simply a matter of making sure everything is in order in case there is a problem.

Thank you all for your attention.