

ADDRESS TO THE 2019 DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY OF THE DIOCESE OF THE WEST

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Glen Eyrie Retreat Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado - Tuesday, October 16, 2019

Your Eminence, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Venerable Monastics, Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ: Glory to Jesus Christ!

In Chapter 21 of John's Gospel, we find a very significant and even moving exchange between the Risen Lord Jesus and Saint Peter. This moment is sometimes referred to as the "recommissioning," the "restoration," or the "reinstatement" of Peter.

"So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You. "He said to him, "Feed My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep. Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me" (John 21:15-19, NKJV).

As we know, this exchange took place on the beach after the Lord's resurrection from the dead. But prior to the Lord's crucifixion, and much to his own shame, Saint Peter had denied Jesus three times (Mark 14:72). As relayed by John in this post-resurrection passage, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him: not once, but three times. And each time, Peter affirmed that he loved the Lord. Also, each time, the Lord responded to Peter's answer with the command to feed or tend or shepherd Christ's flock. Indeed, shepherding the flock entrusted to him was to be Peter's mission and life-work.

In the fifth chapter of his first epistle (1 Peter 5:2), Peter shares the very same mission he had received with the leaders of the local Churches to whom he addresses his letter, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind..." (KJV) and, in another translation, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly..." (NKJV).

This pastoral exhortation reveals how and why leadership should be exercised in the Church of God. This is something worthy of our reflection as we gather to exercise leadership on behalf of Christ's Chosen Flock, the Holy Orthodox Church, here in the Diocese of the West.

"Feed the flock of God," Peter says. The first thing a leader should realize is that the community of the faithful- the Church- belongs to God. A leader does not own the flock, God does. And so leaders in the Church are called to provide their leadership to a people owned and loved by God.

"Serve as overseers." The leader's role is one of supervision- and we see, most obviously in the New King James translation, above, the word overseer. In the Greek this is the same word we translate into English as "bishop," the one who has oversight. And while within the context of a hierarchical Church, we might want to limit that oversight to the ones specifically called to be bishops, we should also speak here of the oversight that all leaders in the Church have on many different levels of Church life. Of course, these are always to be exercised in union with the Diocesan Bishop. And this requires that those who are called to servant leadership in parishes, on the diocesan level, or beyond, are to have an awareness of the needs, the realities, the strengths and the weaknesses of those they are called to lead by their service. More simply stated: leaders in the Church need to know what is happening in the lives of the believers in order to best help, serve, guide, and lead them.

"Serve... not by compulsion but willingly." No one takes on the role of leader to because someone tells them they have to or in order to fulfill the needs or expectations of others. If someone is called by God and recognized by his or her fellow believers as a leader, then that leadership is exercised by the individual freely. A person cannot be forced into the role of leader. Or, if he or she is, then that leadership usually serves the needs of someone else and cannot serve for the good of the Church.

"Serve not for gain, but eagerly." Leaders are called to lead for the sake of the Church alone. No true leadership in the Church has money, power,

control, ego, or self-serving schemes as the basis for motivation. And true leaders serve with eagerness and enthusiasm for the tasks to which they have been called.

Again, while Saint Peter's words of exhortation are especially aimed at those who are bishops and presbyters, elders, within the community of the Church, we can understand that his words are an appeal to all those who have any form of leadership within the Church, including all of you- all of us- gathered here who are here performing a role of servant leadership in our own much-loved Diocese of the West.

It is within this context, as one called to servant leadership in the Church- as you are called to be servant leaders- that I want to speak only briefly of my role as Chancellor, of my continuing role as Vicar Bishop of His Eminence Archbishop BENJAMIN, and of the other roles of service entrusted to me within the Orthodox Church in America. As Vicar Bishop and Chancellor, I am pleased to offer whatever assistance His Eminence requests of me, to visit parishes on various occasions, and to generally assist in the administration of the Diocese. Visiting parishes, as His Eminence often notes, is a true blessing as it offers the opportunity to see the good work of our clergy and faithful, when appropriate, to offer guidance and assistance, and always to be edified by the faith and fidelity of our communities.

Additionally, I continue to attend the meetings of the Holy Synod and to serve as a canonical consultant to His Beatitude and the Holy Synod, as well, of course, here in our own Diocese. I gladly continue to serve as Rector of Saints Peter and Paul Church, Phoenix; I am grateful to Archpriest David Balmer and the clergy for their support and assistance and to the faithful of the parish for their patience and understanding when duties call me away from the parish. And finally, allow me to add that I am also grateful to Archpriest Lawrence Margitich and the clergy and faithful of Saint Seraphim Cathedral, Santa Rosa; I am thankful for their continual prayers as well as for the warm hospitality offered me throughout the year when I am able to visit.

Additionally, this year, I again had the opportunity to travel to Russia with a group of eleven clerics of the Orthodox Church in America. Included in this group were two presbyters of our diocese: Archpriest Kirill Sokolov, Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral, San Francisco, who was the overall coordinator of the trip, Priest Andrew Smith, Rector of Nativity of the Holy Virgin Church, Menlo Park, and Deacon John Weiss, deacon at Saints Peter and Paul Church, Phoenix. This trip was part of an ongoing exchange program between clergy, seminary professors, academics, and those who serve in various other

church ministries, of the Church of Russia and the Orthodox Church in America. A group of exchange participants from Russia is expected to be received sometime in 2020.

During our week in Moscow, our group had the opportunity to meet with representatives of various Synodal Departments (such as Charity, Christian Education, and Mass Communications and Social Media), to visit parishes, monasteries, institutions of theological education, and an assortment of museums and archives of significant Russian religious historical, and cultural importance. The intention and purpose of this visit was to introduce our clergy to the life, mission, works, struggles, growth, challenges, successes, and joys of the Russian Orthodox Church. For some participants, it was their first time visiting Russia and, thus, I believe, somewhat of an eye-opener, revealing the realities of Church life in Russia as opposed to whatever ideas some may have of the Russian Church, both positive and negative. However, in addition to learning more about the Church in Russia and its life and its unique place in world-wide Orthodoxy, I think a wonderful "side-effect" or "by-product" was the fact that, in learning more about the life of the Russian Church, we were given the opportunity to reflect upon the life of our own Orthodox Church in America. We were able to reflect upon our similarities, to better understand our differences, and to appreciate the different experience of Orthodox Christians in Russia and those in North America. More simply stated, by learning more about the Russian Church, we learned more about ourselves. We gained insight, I believe into what it means for us, in this present day and age and on this North American continent, to follow Christ as members of the Holy Orthodox Church and to continue the mission initiated here over 200 years ago. And this offered to me, personally, the opportunity to reflect upon the uniqueness not only of our Orthodox Church in America, but also upon the uniqueness and the distinct nature and character of the Diocese of the West.

I would like to comment on my experience of our diocesan life and to highlight a few of its aspects and characteristics, particularly as they all relate to the leadership that is exercised by our diocesan clergy within the context of diocesan and parish and community life. I briefly mentioned these same areas of diocesan life in my address to last year's Diocesan Assembly and have retained the same categories in this year's report.

Shared history, shared vision.

In the coming year, the Orthodox Church in America will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its Autocephaly, granted to us by the Russian Orthodox Church on April 1, 1970. The parishes, clergy, and faithful of the entire

Church in general and of our Diocese in particular have an understanding of and an appreciation for the history of the Church in North America and for our shared understanding and vision of mission. This shared sense of mission also provokes a special sense of unity and shared vision. We are humbly grateful for the place our Diocese holds within the history of Orthodox in America as well as for our own sense of mission and appreciation for the missionary efforts of our Diocese. Of course, this sense of sharing a united vision is fostered and developed by our own Archbishop who, as we all know, provides us all with a sense of focus and commitment to moving forward in the work of the local Church on the diocesan level.

Given that our historical roots are based within the concept of mission, we also possess within our diocese a sense of mission and a commitment to planting new missions, of building new communities and building up established ones. We are grateful to God for the past, but we look to the future. And certainly, we use all at our disposal in this modern world to preserve, promote, and preach the fullness of the Gospel as it has been preserved, promoted, and preached by the Apostles, Fathers, Saints, and all those who have gone before us in this corner of the Lord's Vineyard. We are a diocese rooted in mission. A commitment to mission is our legacy, our vocation, our special gift to give to offer others in the Orthodox Church in America. And is something we should always highlight and maintain lest we fall prey to allowing it to become merely a talking point.

Unity among the clergy, the sense of Brotherhood among the clergy.

Those whom the Church has called to ordained ministry and leadership in the Church share a unity and a common sacramental bond. They also share in what it means to bear the yoke the Lord has placed upon their shoulders. Within our God-protected Diocese, there is certainly a sense of oneness, of unity among our clergy, a sense of serving together in love. It's not that other dioceses do not have this, indeed they do. But this unity, this brotherhood among our diocesan clergy is something that I can personally attest to, as I continually witness and experience it on a very deep and personal level here within our own Diocese of the West. Just as I did last year, I would again call upon the clergy of our Diocese to be attentive to this, to give thanks for it, to celebrate it, and to preserve it. His Eminence certainly adds to this by promoting it through his own personal support of our clergy and their families.

Sense of continuity and tradition.

In our lives as Orthodox Christians, we often refer to the “received tradition,” the tradition passed down to us from the beginning of the Church’s life and mission. For some, this is a cumbersome concept. And often these days we observe a desire to be on the “cutting edge” of church life. But we remain faithful in adhering to the received tradition; we seek to remain true to what we have received, including both our liturgical heritage and our general pastoral practice. As I mentioned last year concerning our continuing liturgical legacy, within our diocese there is the sense that we seek always to serve the Divine Services beautifully, prayerfully, and in a spirit of continuity. Our attentiveness to liturgical norms also provides for more consistently beautiful services. And we should never underestimate the evangelizing power of beautiful Liturgies. “A well-served Liturgy provides for a well-preached Gospel.”

Financial responsibility and stewardship on the diocesan level.

As we prepare to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of our Autocephaly, we might remember that these past fifty years include, in recent years, wasn’t so long ago that we were focused on concerns and scandals relating to financial mismanagement within the Church. This was centered on the Church on a national level. Here in the Diocese of the West, we have maintained a longstanding commitment to responsible stewardship and transparency relating to the material and financial means entrusted to the Diocese to maintain its life, mission, and ongoing administration. His Eminence and the Diocesan Council remain committed to stewardship in a way that include, as a base philosophy, accountability, professionalism, and responsibility. And, we should acknowledge once again, this commitment and our diocesan experience are also shared on a Church-wide level.

Monasticism.

Our diocese is blessed with seven monastic communities. Two of these are now in my own backyard in the Phoenix metropolitan area: Saint John the Baptist men’s monastery and Saint Macarius women’s monastery. To the best of my knowledge, we have more monastic communities in our diocese than in any other diocese of the Orthodox Church in America. We are grateful to the Lord for the monastic witness provided by the monastics of our Diocese. We pledge our prayers for them, even as they pray for all of us.

Commitment to the Orthodox Church in America and beyond.

Almost every type of board, commission, committee, council, project, plan, etc. of the Orthodox Church in America numbers among its members clergy

and faithful of the Diocese of the West. This can be seen beginning with the leadership exercised by Archbishop Benjamin as a member of the Holy Synod, by our representatives on the Metropolitan Council, in OCA financial matters, pension board, audit committee, theological education, communications, music... and the list can go on.

Conclusion.

These are just a few areas that I wanted to highlight as a way of offering you a means to reflect upon who we are and how we are called to serve as leaders within the Diocese of the West of the Orthodox Church in America. I have emphasized these areas in a spirit of gratitude and in a spirit of service- to Christ, to the Church, to our monasteries and parishes, and to all those who are still waiting to hear the Good News of salvation. As we learn more about the life of our Diocese at this Diocesan Assembly, as we make decisions that will affect its future, and as we give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the gifts and the responsibilities granted to us, let us remember the exhortation of the Holy Apostle Peter and hear those words as being addressed to each one of us: let us care for the flock that is Christ's, always acting and serving willingly and selflessly.