



*ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA*  
DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST

October 31, 2011  
Hieromartyr John (Kochurov) of Chicago and Tsarskoe Selo  
No. 113

Dearly Beloved Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese of the Midwest,

Christ is in our midst! Glory to Jesus Christ!

It has been thirteen months since the Diocese of the Midwest choose me on October 6, 2010, as their nominee to be the next bishop of Chicago and the Midwest. On November 16, 2010, the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America canonically elected me as Bishop-Elect of the diocese and I became the administrator of the diocese on January 1, 2011. Consecrated on Bright Saturday, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, I have now served the diocese as its administrator for these first four months and its hierarch for the last six months. In those ten months, I have come to know and to love the clergy and the faithful of the Diocese of the Midwest.

During those ten months, I have traveled thousands of miles by car and plane to visit the 77 communities of our diocese. These are made up of two monasteries, chapels, missions and established parishes. Of these 77, I have visited 53 communities including one monastery so far, which represents 70% of the diocese. I have one monastery and 24 communities left to actually visit. The one remaining monastery and three other communities will be visited before the end of the year which will then bring the percentage to 75% of the diocese visited with 57 communities out of 77. Although my original goal was to visit every community by the end of the year, (others as well as I knew that was not realistic), that could not be accomplished while trying to administer the diocese, visit camps this summer, continuing my mission work in Guatemala and participating in Project Mexico. It has been a very busy ten months and I have learned and experienced a great deal about the many important aspects of shepherding this 11 State diocese. Although not being able to accomplish my goal by the end of the year, I am content that I have done the best that I could given all of the unforeseen circumstances of being the shepherd of this diocesan family. In addition, during these ten months, I have ordained three deacons, three priests and have consecrated one Church.

In my report today, I wish to cover the many events that have taken place in the last ten months and elaborate a little on what my vision for the diocese is for the next year and into the future. During the video interviews before my election, I said that I would be an observer of the diocese the first year until I got to learn more about the diocese and had better incite. I believe the time has come for me to begin to really get to work on what can be accomplished in our diocese both now and in the future. I can honestly say that I have inherited a wonderful diocese from His Eminence, Archbishop Job, of blessed memory. In the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 7, verse, 20, our Lord atates: "Therefore, by their fruits you will know them." Archbishop Job's work for seventeen years in selfless service to the diocese and the cooperation of the clergy and faithful has borne "good fruit." The clergy of this diocese are a wonderful ensemble of well prepared, well – educated, committed and loving pastors to their flocks. I have been so warmly welcomed by them this first year, as well as the faithful of the parishes that I have been able to meet. I feel truly blessed to be the hierarch of such a talented and dedicated group of clergy and faithful. I can only pray that the Lord, with His Grace, will use my strengths and lessen my weaknesses for the good of the diocese and of the Holy Orthodox Church.

### **Project Mexico**

First, I would like to begin by speaking about the efforts made this past summer with Project Mexico. More than 150 individuals, made up mostly of members of the Diocese of the Midwest, participated in Project Mexico this past July 12-18. The mission trip was organized by Matushka Ruth Yavornitsky, in loving memory of His Eminence, +Archbishop Job. This mission trip brought together clergy and faithful, including a large number of diocesan youth, to share in a project of charitable giving. It gave them the opportunity to honor +Archbishop Job's memory, but at the same time, put into action the call to service that +Archbishop Job inspired in them. I was truly honored to be a part of this mission trip, and despite my bodily shortcomings and injuries, was able to help in building one of the seven homes that week, which is a Project Mexico record for any team. A fantastic video was made and produced by Alex Stanovoy that will be viewed by our diocesan family and will be playing continuously at the All American Council at the Project Mexico booth. A dvd of this video will be distributed to each of our parishes and the video will be put online following the All American Council. Besides the good work that was accomplished there, the video is a fitting and loving memorial to His Eminence, Archbishop Job. Already, another Project Mexico trip is being planned for the diocese in June of 2013.

### **Guatemala**

As all of you know, my mission work in Guatemala is a vital part of my ministry and a place where I personally am able to rejuvenate my own soul. I traveled there this past February prior to my consecration and returned again at the end of July. I am hopeful to continue to visit there at least twice a year to fulfill my responsibility to them as their spiritual father, but also have a place where I can rest and renew my own spiritual life. I consider the Holy Trinity Monastery to be the monastery that I am attached to, serving as a spiritual father to the nuns, as well as the children at the Hogar Rafael Ayau orphanage.

I would be more than happy to encourage others to travel with me, in fact, it has been suggested that a team of youth from the diocese could accompany me there on a mission team in the future. It would be wonderful to have a team travel with me each summer, if possible, opening up the possibilities of more exposure to the youth of the diocese to mission work.

Just this past month, I have been asked by the Board members of the "Friends of the Hogar" based in Chicago, to be a part of their board as their spiritual advisor. This is an organization of individuals who have served as missionaries in Guatemala and are committed to help and assist the monastery and orphanage through raising funds to complete the building of a school and dorms on the monastery property for the children to move to in the future. I am quite honored to be considered for this position.

### **Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF)**

I am extremely pleased with the involvement that our diocese and clergy of the midwest have with Orthodox Christian Fellowship. So many of our parishes have an active relationship with the OCF and many catechumens and converts to the Church have come from these college campuses. Many of our clergy serve as advisors to the OCF in their nearby colleges and universities and I would encourage that involvement to continue to grow.

I am currently planning to attend a weekend event from March 9-11 during Lent in the Cleveland area this year for the OCF. The members of three and possibly four OCF groups will come together for a Lenten retreat and time of discussion that weekend, as well as time for questions and answers. OCF chapters from Kent State, Akron, Youngstown and possibly Cleveland will participate. I will be serving a Friday evening Lenten service in one parish,

hold a retreat day on Saturday and serve Vespers in another parish, and end the weekend event with a Liturgy in a third parish in the area. The OCF members will be invited to travel with me and hold group discussions and just have some time to “hang out with Bishop Matthias.” These are opportunities that I would also welcome in other areas in the diocese where an active OCF is in existence.

### **Seminarians**

The Diocese of the Midwest is blessed with a number of seminarians. We currently have five students at St. Vladimir’s Seminary and six at St. Tikhon’s. We also have a young man from Christ the Savior in Chicago, who this past September, arrived at St. Tikhon’s Monastery.

One of the greatest challenges that I have as a hierarch is to have somewhere for these seminarians to be assigned after graduation and ordination to the Holy Priesthood. It is a good problem to have more seminarians than you need, but a challenge to be able to place them and make sure that they have a home and an income. Providing financial support to these seminarians is also a challenge.

In the past, the diocese budgeted \$20,000 a year for seminarian financial support. That has gone down to \$10,000 in the last few years and I feel strongly that we need to reverse that. Also, there was an annual appeal each year for seminarian financial support that no longer exists and should be reestablished.

I know that a number of parishes raise funds for the seminaries themselves, but we need to realize that those donations go toward the general running of the seminary and does not go to the students themselves. Therefore, I would propose that we raise the budget for financial support to the seminarians back to \$20,000 per year and that we have an annual appeal throughout the diocese for financial support to the seminarians. That annual appeal could be a special collection in the parish, a fund-raiser or a deanery activity. The names of the students as well as their families will be made available on our Midwest website along with a biography of each. If a parish would like to “adopt” a seminarian while he is in seminary, that could also be arranged.

What we face now are seminarians who graduate from seminary with large loans of at times \$25,000, \$30,000 or \$35,000. Those students who come to seminary and are married with children have an even greater burden. It is a

huge sacrifice for them to pursue their calling and when they graduate, they are encumbered with loans and then assigned to parishes or attached to parishes without a very viable income. We can't expect students to shoulder that kind of burden on their own.

### **Deaconate Program**

One of the important programs of the diocese is the late vocations program or deaconate program. The Chicago Deanery had a diaconate program overseen by Father Elijah Mueller. At our diocesan council meeting this past June, it was decided to expand that program to a diocesan level. Although we are expanding it to a diocesan level, we still need to coordinate it with the National Church program overseen by Archdeacon Kirill Sokolov.

Father Elijah has given additional information concerning this program in your Diocesan Assembly packet. This is a vital and important ministry for the diocese to support. Father Elijah is currently working out of the chancery offices to oversee this program.

### **Clergy Convocation**

This coming May, I will meet with all of the clergy of the diocese, priests and deacons, from May 7-9 at the Carmelite Retreat Center in Darien, Illinois. This will be the first time since my consecration that I have had the opportunity to be in the presence of all of the clergy in one gathering. I look forward to it as a time of fellowship and getting to know one another in a relaxed and very candid way. There are a number of issues that I will address with the clergy, but also give them the opportunity to ask me questions and have discussions concerning the growth and future ministry of the diocese.

There is one area that I would like to address at the clergy convocation and come into conformity with the "Statute of the Orthodox Church in America." If you read in section 9, article 4, which has to do with the way deaneries are set up and deans function, it mentions the following: "The District Dean is elected from among the rectors of the deanery and confirmed by the Diocesan Bishop for a term of three years." This is one statute that I don't believe has been followed by the diocese in more than a decade. I believe that it is important that we be in agreement with this statute and the input from the deanery clergy as to who their dean is. Therefore, at the clergy convocation in May, each deanery of priests will elect their dean for the next three years. They may

choose to elect their current dean or they may decide to make a change. The deans of our diocese have served the Church faithfully and this is not at all a judgment upon their service. I just think that this statute exists for a reason and that we should observe it and I believe that this will involve the clergy and possibly renew the spirit of each deanery.

The Bishop's Council is presently made up of the chancellor and the six deans. These are the bishop's advisors. This group of advisor's have been very helpful to me this first year of my serving the diocese. We have met on two occasions preceding each of the Diocesan Council meetings and they have been extremely helpful to have the input of priests in different areas of the diocese. I would like to expand this group of advisors to include five other rectors that would join with the deans and chancellor to be my advisors. This would be a group of 12 clergy – six elected by the clergy and six appointed by the bishop. I believe it would add to the people that I could rely on for their opinions and council.

### **Christ the Savior/Diocesan Chancery**

Many years ago, the diocese was blessed with the acquirement of the LaSalle Street property. Archbishop Job decided to accept this property for the diocese, which at the time was virtually a gift to us. There has been a great debate about this property and the part that Christ the Savior parish plays into this. My three predecessors, Archbishop John, Bishop Boris and Archbishop Job began a tradition. Each one of them moved the Chancery of the diocese. I am letting you know that this bishop is ending that tradition. Archbishop Job had a vision for this property that I think finally has come to realization. There were many that disagreed with him and what his vision was, but I believe he had the right vision. Now it is up to us to make that vision a greater reality than it already is.

Since the acquirement of the Diocesan Center over twelve years ago, there has been the opinion that the parish and the diocesan center are separate entities, even though they share the same address. Some have looked at the bishop's chapel as just that, but now it has become a viable and very healthy parish community. Having a parish separated from the diocesan center and add to that a hierarch who travels throughout an expansive diocese and a chancellor who lives six hours away and is not in residence leads to at best, bad communication and at its worst, dysfunction.

I would like to see an end to the unnatural division of the parish and the diocese and to acknowledge and affirm the symbiotic relationship of the

Diocesan Center and Christ the Savior parish. The parish, the chancery, the residences are all the DIOCESAN CENTER of the Bishop of Chicago.

Christ the Savior is not a mission parish – it is a vital and necessary part of the Diocesan Center.

This is not just theoretical, but over this next year I want to make this merger a reality.

What does this merger mean? It means that all income from Christ the Savior parish will become income to the diocese and all expenses at the Diocesan Center will be expenses of the diocese. Here are the benefits to this merger:

- 1) The outcome of the utilization of diocesan and parish resources will put an end to any overlapping expenses. There will no longer be a debate of what the parish pays and what the diocese pays.
- 2) It will increase the income of the diocese.
- 3) It will maximize the communication and dissemination of information.
- 4) It will provide for a full time chancery staff.

Right now Father John Baker is the rector and dean of Christ the Savior parish. Philip Sokolov is the bishop's aide and the choir director of Christ the Savior parish. The job descriptions of these two would change.

Philip Sokolov is currently the bishop's aide and is also doing some bookkeeping for the diocese. With the merger, he would be doing the following.

- 1) Answering diocesan and parish phone calls and directing them properly as well as message taking.
- 2) Setting appointments for the bishop.
- 3) Upkeep of the bishop's vehicle and running office errands.
- 4) Making travel and lodging plans for the bishop's trips.
- 5) Assisting Father John when needed.
- 6) Continuing to be the choir director of Christ the Savior.
- 7) Work on parish bulletin
- 8) Additional bookkeeping which would include the merging of parish treasurer responsibilities.

Father John is currently the rector and dean of Christ the Savior parish. With the merger, he would be doing the following.

- 1) As the dean of the chancery, he would hold regular office hours (to be determined)
- 2) He would answer phones when in the office.
- 3) He would respond to e mails sent to the bishop and an e mail notifying the sender that the e mail was received. The e mail will be given a timely answer with a response to follow within 24 hours or by the following day when office hours are held.
- 4) Father John would act as a liason between the bishop, his chancellor and deans when requested by the bishop or when appropriate.
- 5) Father John would handle all confidential matters that are directed toward the chancery and in that way, only a clergy member would be privy to this information.
- 6) He would also oversee and facilitate responsibilities and communication of the diocesan chancery.
- 7) Monthly diocesan e mailing
- 8) He would also oversee the bishop's visits. He would contact the rector of the parish and discuss details of the visit such as:
  - any ordinations, gramotas, special circumstances
  - schedule time for the bishop to visit the rector and take him and his family to dinner.

There are a number of other advantages that will occur on a deanery and diocesan level as well that need not be discussed yet. I just wanted to present an overview of this merger. It will take the next year to actually blend this merger. At our next Diocesan Council meeting in December, we can begin to look at more of the details and hopefully by January of 2013 - the merge will be in place.

The Diocesan Center functioning as one entity and the streamlining of the job descriptions will help me, as the bishop, to focus more on my pastoral role than that of an administrator. I am frustrated that I can't do it all. I don't want to feel like I am chained to a desk and operate like a CEO. I am your bishop and shepherd. I need to focus on fulfilling that calling. Being better organized in an administrative way will allow me to spend more time as a pastor to the clergy and a shepherd to the diocese. I would much rather be visiting a camp where the youth are than to be in my office answering hundreds of e mails that could be handled by others.

### **Stewardship**

The time has come for all of our parishes to take seriously the idea of stewardship. Stewardship includes the tithing of our time, talent and treasure. This is not an idea or concept that comes from the protestant tradition or from the new converts to Orthodoxy. It is biblical. Throughout the Old Testament, the giving of 10% of what we have is the acceptable tithe. For the Christian in the New Testament, we realize that all comes from God, so that the 10% is really a minimum from the Old Testament. Even if we give 10% of what we have to God, we are still holding onto 90% for ourselves. We need more education concerning this in our parishes and I am hopeful that we can begin to do that this year. In stewardship, we seem to overlook the idea of tithing our time and our talent to the Church as well. We have 168 hours a week given to us by God. That means that we should give back at least 16.8 hours back to God each week. That is almost 2 ½ hours a day. Do we do that? Then, there is our talent. This is the way that all in the Church can serve the Church. Whatever talent or ability you are gifted with, you should be willing to share in the service of the Church. Each of us is gifted with talents and abilities. We need to commit them to the Church.

### **Missions**

We have in the diocese a board of missions and parish development. This has served us well in helping to begin new parishes as well as to try to revitalize those parishes that need our help and assistance. We have a yearly budget of \$100,000 to do this kind of work. It is a vital work and one that we need to continue. We also, out of obligation, need to find ways to put this budget to work for the best outcome for the resources that we spend. Every dollar needs to be spent wisely and efficiently with the long term goal of building the vineyard of Christ in the Diocese of the Midwest.

### **Technology**

We live in a new world today and communications is a very vital element to spreading the good news of the Gospel. Parish websites, diocesan websites, teleconference calls, skype, and podcasts are all tools that we can use to benefit the Church. Since we do not have a diocesan newspaper, I believe it is even more important that we have an active, relevant and newsworthy home page website for the diocese. Here is where we need to utilize the talents of those who are gifted in this realm to put forth a website that will keep our faithful

informed concerning the activities of the diocese. Having the same things on the website for a long period of time, discourages people from checking it often. I want to make the diocesan website more relevant so that people will be excited to check it and follow the happenings of our diocese. We need to share more pictures of parish activities, and by doing that, share the ideas we have with others.

I mentioned at my consecration that I was interested in doing podcasts each week for the diocese. I am ready to begin doing that with the help of the Maddex family from Ancient Faith radio. These are individuals who are members of St. Elizabeth, the New Martyr in Chesterton, Indiana, members of our own diocese. We are proud of that fact and they have served the Church so well with their radio and podcast ministry. We need to put that to better use for ourselves.

We need also to use this technology for our benefit with meetings. Our Diocesan Council meets twice a year – we could make that more often and cost affective if we were to meet by teleconference or by skype. Deanery priests would like to have the bishop attend their deanery meetings. For the bishop to drive 12 hours round trip to attend a deanery meeting and spend a night in a hotel can be accomplished by having the bishop skype into the meeting. It might allow your bishop to live a little longer life that way. We have the tools, we need to use them.

### **OCA Assessments**

Finally, at this All America Council, a debate will be held over the idea of reducing the National Assessment of the OCA to drop to \$50 per person. I believe that would incredibly cripple the work of the National Church and the function of the Synodal Chancery.

I do not personally believe that this would pass, but in the event that it should, our diocese needs to prepare for that. If the budget of the National Church is cut, each diocese will have to take on added expenses to make up for it.

My proposal for our Diocesan Assembly is that we pass a contingency plan. If the AAC should lower the assessments for each individual, my proposal is that the amount cut will be added to our own diocesan assessment. In other words, if the National assessment is cut by \$75, the diocese of the Midwest will still collect the same amount from our membership and it will stay with the Diocese

of the Midwest. In that way, any cuts that will be passed down to us, we will be able to handle as a diocese and it will be of no additional cost to our membership.

### **In conclusion**

In conclusion, I am very confident for the future of the Diocese of the Midwest. I know we have many challenges to face, but in general, we are a healthy and growing diocese. I have seen it with my own eyes during my travels. We cannot always look at the bottom line, so to speak, or the numbers. Quality is much more important than quantity. We are growing in spiritual strength and if we can put aside the problems of the past in the National Church, and look to the future of the Diocese of the Midwest, we will be fine. I will not allow my flock, or myself, to get bogged down into the politics or antics of the National Church. My loyalty and service is to protect and to love the flock that Christ has given me to care for. They will be the ones I must answer for on judgment day.

I have said it before and I will say it again. I have no personal agendas. My only agenda is to serve Christ and His Bride, the Church. This may not make me popular at times, I may disappoint people at times and I know that I will probably make mistakes at times, but never question the sincerity I have to serve the Church and to faithfully shepherd this diocese in the best way that I can. I want to be the best Orthodox bishop that I can be and to serve our Savior first of all!

My thanks and appreciation to our Chancellor, Father John Zdinak, who always gives me good council and advice. Although he always thinks his job is in jeopardy, he has been a strong support to me and gives me his opinion although at times it may be contrary to mine. There are times he even persuades me to change my mind. My thanks also to the Deans, Diocesan Council, and all of the Clergy and Faithful of this Diocese. May we all continue to work together for the glory of God and His Holy Orthodox Church!

With love in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matthias". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the text "With love in Christ,".

Matthias  
Bishop of Chicago and the Midwest