

“Sowing Seeds: the Proclamation of the Gospel in the Age of the New Normal”

Diocesan Assembly Address of His Grace Bishop Paul

Today I will speak with you about our diocese and her life, and where I would like to see things go. This is a start and I am sure you will find something lacking in it of which I ask your forgiveness. This is the best I can do for now. Why this title in speaking to what my vision is for the diocese? We simply can't make the assumptions about people we could 25 to 30 years ago. The culture we live in continues to become increasingly secularized and humanistic. Lifestyle changes we encounter are commonly referred to as the “New Normal.” I find this to be an accurate description and yet a scary one. These changes include the following observations from me:

1. *Many Youth (including our own youth) are sexually active from early teens and see no problem with it as it is not seen as a sin. In fact many believe the church needs to change its views to accommodate the times.*
2. *It is common for couples to live together before marriage (sexually active of course) with no sense of this being seen as sinful or a problem.*
3. *Older people after divorce are sexually active and live together prior to marriage.*
4. *Single parent families, divorced families, and reconstituted family systems are common.*
5. *Families live and breathe off their I-phones, twitter, snap chat, and instagram. Facebook is for old people*
6. *Young adults graduate from universities in debt from student loans ranging from \$30,000 to \$80,000 (if not more).*
7. *The two sports, two instruments, two whatever school activity oriented family was an issue 20 years ago and it is even more so today. Try scheduling a youth activity in your parish today.*

Homosexual behaviors are increasingly seen as a normal alternative to a heterosexual lifestyle.

1. *It is no longer an issue of it being sinful, but as a civil right under the constitution. This is evidenced by the recent Supreme Court decision to make same sex marriage legal.*
2. *Hollywood, and the Public Media encourage and portray the normality of this in TV shows, movies, and news programs.*
3. *The reality of Lesbian/Gay/Bi-sexual/Transgender rights is **quickly arising** on the new normal scene. This is being imposed with no time to reflect and ask is this a good thing?*
4. *I hear more and more stories about Orthodox families (including clergy families) who have a son or daughter or former/current spouse who is lesbian, homosexual, or has married their same sex partner.*
5. *To say any of the above isn't happening in my backyard is living in denial.*

We live in an increasingly polarized culture where we are intolerant of each other's political viewpoints. This is relevant to the extent it surfaces in our churches where our politics become more important than our faith or we identify church belief/teaching as consistent with our political views. **THEY ARE NOT!** I am saddened by discussions I see on websites, blogs, and Facebook of clergy and laity manifesting this polarization. In these observations, my intent is not to set up an us vs. them mentality. We all know that in Genesis, “God looked upon what he created and called it good.” Our real enemy is the prince of liars who is persuasive in his deception; the deceiver takes a truth and distorts it in a manner that takes us away from God. The result is something created becomes an idol and a false source of all that is good. The fruit of that is alienation from God, and enmity between people. A tower of Babel is still being built today.

Finally our Diocesan demographics have changed dramatically the last 20 years. The DOM has lost about 3700+ members between 1996 and 2016. That is a 40% to 43% drop in membership. Fr. Eric Tosi at this year's Small Parish Forum stated that at least 60% to 70% of OCA parishes consist of 50 members or less.

It is far more common for people to leave parishes and relocate for various reasons. We are a more transient people than we were 30 years ago. I think the reasons for the membership drop are multi-faceted and can't be explained with a single brush stroke. To conclude, this is the world we are facing today. Today, this is the world Christ has called us to live in to proclaim the good things that He has done for us.

Sowing Seeds In Order to Lay a Solid Foundation

We need to realize that we still live in a fallen world in need of Christ and the good news. We live in a world where people claim they see but they are blind; Jesus tells us, "but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt. 6:30) Like it or not we are a culture in denial. A good foundation is necessary because if we begin with issues and not with Christ:

- *We come across as a church with rules and regulations.*
- *Morality, and sanctity of life become legislated issues and instead of the gospel, a moral code is preached.*
- *Issues of social justice, social welfare becomes secularized; ends in themselves when separated from the Gospel.*
- *All the above become ends in themselves offering nothing transcendent*

The starting point is the announcement of Christ when he began his public ministry, "**Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!**" Our beliefs about how to live in this world are founded on the call of Christ to sell all we have, give to the poor, to follow Him, and make the Kingdom the treasure we seek. We joyfully renounce all things, (passions, desires, love of mammon) which would be obstacles to seeking His kingdom. This is the motivation of the monastic. They gave and still give up the above out of joy to pursue treasure in heaven! Marriage in the Orthodox Church is a witness and icon of the Kingdom that reveals Christ's love for the Church and those images are male and female. Answering the call of our Lord to follow Him is a choice and not a law we have to follow. The gospel call is to touch Christ's humanity and come to confess His divinity. Our faith is transcendent and fulfilled in His Kingdom which is revealed in this world through God incarnate **but is not of this world**. This is to be a joyful journey we undertake. If this joy is not in us first, I don't know if we will ever have much to share with those in the world we interact with.

One cannot know this joy, if the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and regular sacramental confession are not part of the ascetical work we do to nurture and form the Christian virtue of joy and the other virtues in us. One can't neglect regular reception of the Eucharist. Living the ascetical life opens to us a divine joy that only Christ can give. Paradoxically we take the kingdom by force by doing violence against those internal passions run amok that seek to rob us of the Kingdom and the joy we are called to embrace.

How do we lay a good foundation in our personal witness of sowing seeds?

Here are snippets to consider; we lay good foundation in our personal witness of sowing seeds by

- *Loving those we encounter where they are at*
- *We don't dress people up in their sin.*
- *We don't judge a book by its cover*

No matter how distorted the image of God in us has become, it is still there. In their own way many are seeking a "stairway to heaven." This reference to a stairway to heaven comes from the famous Led Zeppelin song (which many refer to as the greatest rock and roll song ever written). I used it to begin the homily I recently gave at Holy Dormition Monastery on their feast day. The popularity of this song tells me that many people are seeking a stairway to heaven. In the person of the Holy Theotokos she is for us the stairway to heaven. In her great example (not exception) she is the perfect image of a human being

who was saved by her Son. She is the ladder or stairway that leads to Jesus Christ. So when I say don't dress people up in their sin, I mean find and speak to the part of that person who deep down wants to know who she or he is in relationship to the one who made her or him. Don't judge people based on what they appear to be without getting to know them first.

We lay a good foundation by:

- *Sharing our experience of how Jesus Christ has worked in our life; leading us to the Orthodox Church.*
- *Avoiding religious discussions and comparisons with other faiths.*
- *Starting with Jesus of Nazareth and who He is!*
- *Loving in deed and truth. In doing so we are to be "wise as serpents, innocent as doves."*
- *When called to, speaking the truth in love, we are not to be embarrassed about our faith.*

Lay people are the primary evangelizers of Christ and witnesses to the Orthodox Church. Contrary to popular belief it is not the priest. Each person who is received into the Orthodox Church has a network of hundreds of people they know that they bring with them. The potential seeds of growth can be laid through our ongoing witness in these relationships and we pray for the Holy Spirit to bring about this growth.

We lay a good foundation for sowing seeds when we live out Matthew 25 in witness and service to others.

In my travels throughout the Diocese I have become encouraged and have rejoiced over the work of the Focus North America Chapters that are now operating in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland-St. Herman House, and others to come. Focus has been a wonderful example of incarnating Matthew 25 and planting seeds. These chapters are Orthodox Christian driven yet serving all that come to them. If one doesn't exist where you live, be part of the solution to start one in your area. Of course there are other ministries to support such as Zoe for Life, Martha & Mary House in Chicago, Reconciliation Ministries in KC, Prison Ministries in Minneapolis, Central Indiana and elsewhere, Orthodox Detroit Outreach in Southwest Detroit, and St. Gregory in Columbus Hot Meal Ministry.

How do we make our churches places where people may want to come back?

We are servants; it is God who gives the growth through the Holy Spirit. *"What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."* (1 Cor. 3:5-7) Before I go on to talk about anything else this lays at the foundation of all "church growth."

If we want visitors to come back then worship needs to be the foundation of our Church life.

- *This means: the need to commit to the fullest possible cycle of services in our liturgical calendar.*
- *It means a commitment to excellence and doing the services decently and orderly.*
- *It means commitment to a disciplined effort to sing the responses to the services so that they can be understood and sung with beauty.*
- *Homilies need to be about preaching the gospel and not doing catechesis of issues from the pulpit.*
- *Diversity is fine but there can't be disorder and chaos.*
- *We need to be of one mind concerning the essentials of the faith.*
 - *In our own parishes, warts and all*
 - *In our Pan Orthodox relationships, warts and all*

- *In our local deaneries, warts and all*
- *Participating in events sponsored by all three, warts and all.*
- *Close down your parish when a sister parish nearby is celebrating their patronal feast and attend services there. (Except on Sundays)*
- *Instead of seeing parishes as rivals to compete with, let us cooperate with each other and see that our growth will be based on supporting each other.*

Catechetical instruction and education is critical to help those coming into the Church to properly understand our teachings and why we believe the way we do. The parish priest is responsible for Christian formation in the parish and to enlist qualified people to assist him in this if needed. These qualified people have been called catechists in the church from ancient times. I wish to put in a plug for the St. Macrina Institute. It is not just a diaconal training program; it prepares people to be lay catechists.

A good foundation also means having healthy well-educated clergy especially priests

I can't stress enough about the need for vocations to the priesthood and that a seminary education is an important piece of this. We should not view lay/late vocation programs as short cuts to being a priest. Currently the DOM has many rectors or priests-in-charge aged from 61 to 64. I anticipate many parish vacancies in the next three to six years. My fear is there will not be enough people graduating from seminaries to fill these vacancies.

Furthermore we need to place newly graduated, ordained seminary priests in parishes under experienced priests for two years for mentoring and preparation for their first parish/mission. I would love to see them get paid for it. Right now we don't seem to have any parishes that can afford the salary of a second priest. If tentmaker priests are needed, we need do it in a way that helps a priest's family and can allow for the most participation in parish life. There is such a thing as a good tentmaker priest and one that doesn't work. Finally in this time of diocesan transition I will be looking at the need to replace our Deans and Chancellor in the next year to six years. I intend this to be a gradual process to allow for as little disruption as possible. This is not because I am dissatisfied with any of them, but most are between 63 and 70 years old; and it is time for a change.

A good foundation for laying seeds also means having healthy and accountable Stewardship practices on all levels of church life; national, diocesan, parish, and personal

As many of you know I am a big supporter of the work of the Stewardship Work Group that is developing a plan for funding the Diocese based on percentage giving of parish income as opposed to a per capita head tax. The more we get away from the head tax and other mechanisms of funding budgets, the better off we will be over the long haul. Some of the questions we are dealing with right now are discerning the needs of the diocese and whether the percentage formula that is being considered is sufficient to meet those needs. I also support this work because this trend is happening throughout the OCA on a national and diocesan level; it is moving in this direction.

For this plan to work two things need to happen. We need to be accountable on a diocesan and parish level with how we report the financial state of our diocesan and parish life. I have encountered a mentality over my history as a parish priest that states, "We don't need to give to the diocese any more than what they need or should get." It is interesting to note whenever we speak to growth issues in the church we tend to maximize numbers, but when membership is tied to money we tend to minimize numbers. If this mentality continues to define the way we deal with stewardship and the current reporting of our finances, it will sabotage a percentage plan as well. We need to give accurate accounts on both a diocesan and parish level that gives a true picture of our stewardship and management of God's household. If the reported numbers are not accurate, it will impact on the success of this plan. I do hope this Diocesan Assembly will adopt it when it is ready to be presented to you.

Secondly, stewardship education continues to be an important priority on a parish level. I do realize parishes are making efforts to do so. We need to understand that all we have belongs to God; it is a gift, nothing is our own. We have been entrusted to manage what we have in accordance with God's will. We will be judged on how we have exercised that stewardship. So if as a diocese and parish, we do become percentage givers, then as persons, we need to become percentage givers as well (I do confess to favoring a full tithe in personal giving). But that giving is sacrificial in nature. Consider the gospel story of the widow with the two mites and how she gave as compared to the wealthy who gave more but out of abundance. All these formulas mean nothing without proper stewardship education. It reminds me of a parish in our diocese that asks for no earmarked assessment checks, no pledge cards of its people, but to only give what they can; if not in dollars then in terms of service. Money is not an issue in determining membership. For the last two years, income has exceeded expenses (the last report received showed they were \$30,000 in the black for 2015). Go figure! It seems that this parish has a healthy understanding of stewardship.

We need to include our Youth in the life of the Church to build a good foundation, today; the future is now

The number one question I have fielded by far in my parish visits has been "How do we keep our youth in the Church?" My answer is the same, "We don't get our youth to do anything. We don't keep them in the Church. As they get older, they have to own this as their choice and see the need for staying in the Church or to come back to Her. I have some questions to ask for your consideration. Do we pray for our youth? Christ the Savior in Chicago does a monthly Akathist to the Mother of God, Nurturer of Children where they pray by name for all the youth in the parish. Do our kids have a place in the church besides Sunday liturgy and church school? What can we do to help them believe they are not outside observers but active participants in parish life? Can they read parts of the service, can there be a youth choir, can they pass the collection tray, or hold the communion cloth? Can older kids be assistants to teachers in class? What gifts can they offer in the way of service to the Church to build up her life? Many of our youth live in the public school sphere of life. We need to understand the challenges they encounter. We need to listen with compassion when they speak about their experiences with the realities I have described at the beginning of my address. We need to help them in coping with what they encounter. Last July the Diocese co-sponsored a youth component at the FOCA convention. I would like to see this yearly activity continue; perhaps it is better for it take place outside of summer.

Furthermore, it is important to view the family as an icon of a little church. The bottom line is Christian Formation happens in the home life of our youth. If family life is to be reflective of a little church, that means we should be making time for family meals, prayer, scripture reading etc. Several of our parishes have recently gotten into the practice of doing weekend or weeklong family retreats at campsites or retreat centers. Should parishes consider doing this? I finally can't stress enough the benefit of sending kids to Orthodox Camps. By being in a positive captive environment, I constantly hear wonderful stories of how many kids enjoy this experience and want to come back. They have fun but it is more than that.

I know the biggest concern among parents is when their kids go off to college. This is the time parishes experience the greatest loss of their older teens/young adults. Once they go to college, many don't come back. We need to hook up students with Orthodox Christian Fellowships on university campuses if one exists. Last summer I sent a letter to our rectors and priests-in-charge asking them to forward contact information to OCF of their students starting college this fall. My personal experience with OCF fellowships has been mixed. There are OCF chapters that are doing well and others where there has been no success in getting one started despite numerous efforts to do so. It would be wonderful if we could find a way to learn from healthy OCF chapters as to what has been the key to their growth.

We lay seeds for a good foundation in the development, and building of our temple (the physical plant) and how we beautify and care for it.

In light of the world we live in today, the days of OCA churches with 300+ members are close to gone. Sometimes a membership drop may not be reflective of a church failing. Could it be possible that people leave and don't come back to the Orthodox Church because they simply don't accept church teaching on certain beliefs? As Archbishop Job of blessed memory had told many of his clergy upon ordination, God did not call us to be successful but to be faithful. So when we start looking at church building programs or renovations, we should aim for modest church designs. I never heard of a round dome being built that doesn't leak and becomes an ongoing challenge for parish councils to address. Maybe we should be looking at other styles of domes. Big round domes add a lot to the cost of church construction. Churches of the future should be built for a seating/standing capacity of no more than 200/225. My desire would be that as churches grow close to capacity they would focus on intentional mission planting. Take a number of members who live in an area that would be a good place for a mission and plant one. The answer is not to build bigger barns costing three million plus. Do we want to leave a huge debt to the next generation to pay off? Given the transiency found in parishes today, you can't always be sure you will have much of the next generation stay at the newly built church.

We need to have high standards in the area of temple beautification. When a parish is ready, a program of Orthodox iconography needs to be a necessary part of beautification. It is important to clarify: any plans for building a temple, a hall, rectory purchases, renovations of buildings, or embarking on iconography projects need to be presented to the bishop for approval before embarking on such plans.

But a beautiful temple can be compromised by one that is in disorder and unclean. Altars should be clean, communion cloths regularly washed, and should hold only the items that should be on it! Churches should be cleaned on a weekly basis. During summer, make sure you cut the grass and properly maintain a parking lot. Keep the literature rack up to date! Keep you web site up to date! Finally make sure there is toilet paper and paper towel in a clean bathroom. We can spend all kinds of money on iconography, but when people don't find toilet paper in the bathroom, or see uncut grass full of weeds, or see messy landscaping. That will make a negative impact on them despite the kind of icons or furniture we have in our temples.

Sowing seeds and laying a good foundation with newly arrived immigrants in our country

There is one final area to address concerning newly arrived immigrants who have come to some of our parishes. They may or may not fit the picture I described at the beginning of my address. My concern is the past simplistic solution; we need to do the liturgy in their native language to "meet their needs." I am not necessarily against this but what does it mean, "to meet their needs?" If it means following the same path as in the 1920's when parallel jurisdictions became a reality, and the liturgy was done in ones' native language. Which has continued in some churches until today basically unchanged, I have a problem with that.

I am assuming most who come here from other countries are here for the long haul. It would seem to me that to "meet their needs," our parishes are to help people to adjust to living in this country. That means ESL classes for newly arrived immigrants, helping people to negotiate governing bodies in securing visas, green cards, and if needed help in securing financial assistance, a job, or health care. One of the things Holy Dormition Monastery does with nuns coming from Romania, is they immediately teach them English so that they can begin to chant and sing the services in English.

I would not have a problem with a Liturgy in another language but it needs to be put in the context of an understanding that we are here in America, and eventually, there will be a transition into an English liturgy. St. Joe's in Wheaton, IL has done just that. A number of years ago they began a second liturgy in Slavonic but over the years, as people have become integrated to this country they have introduced more English into the Liturgy. Check with Fr. Joe Kopka but I believe they are at 30%. My expectation is that a gradual transition would take place. St. Mary's Cathedral is also offering a liturgy in Slavonic in their

Cemetery Chapel. It is my hope that those who attend the Slavic liturgy service would eventually attend the all-English liturgy. So this needs to be a dynamic process and not static.

Recently when I attended a session of a Vacation Church School a young child asked the question, "Are you a saint?" My answer to him in short, was, "We are all called to be saints." This brief exchange called to mind something I came to realize about 5 years ago when I was still in Toledo. The Church is in the business of making saints. If we were to use a business model for running a church as some suggest we do, the product we market is sainthood. The business plan for making saints is best summarized in the following words from St. Paul addressed to the church in Ephesus:

*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the **equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come the unity of the faith, and of knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things unto him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does it share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.**(Ephesians 4:11-16).*

These words from St. Paul best summarize all that I have said above. They identify the direction I would like to see the Diocese to continue to become in the years ahead. Good stewardship is needed to equip the saints for the work of ministry to edify the Body of Christ. To sow seeds in the age of the new normal is have churches that are committed to the ongoing process of making saints. I would like to believe that when people come to visit our parishes and experience and see what is described in Paul's words to the Church in Ephesus, that the Lord will "add daily to the number of those being saved." May the Lord bless you in this coming year with the joy of taking up your Cross to follow Him, to sell and give all to the poor, and have treasure in heaven.

With love in Christ,

The unworthy +Paul
Bishop of Chicago