

2019 Diocesan Assembly Address

Beloved Fathers, Deacons, and Laity of the Diocese,

I come before you today to share my perspectives on the state of the Diocese at this time. That is a question I am often asked on my parish visits. “How are things going in the Diocese, Vladyka?” My initial internal response is “Geez, I don’t know. I think things are going OK.” I have to admit I have a hard time answering this question, because there is so much going on in the Diocese. Much of it is good, and some not so good. I have a lot of things to report on that are good for the Diocese and will help to move us forward, in terms of improving our financial condition and making things more efficient in how we operate. I will begin with the good things.

Christ the Savior/Diocesan relationship, and the proposed move of Diocesan offices and Bishop’s residence to the Rectory of Archangel Michael Church in Burbank

The initial move to take on the La Salle property dates back in the late 1990s. Archbishop Job of blessed memory had a vision that was important to him, of what could be done with this property. His desire for this to happen prevailed, and the Diocesan Assembly voted to approve this plan and to proceed. I would have to say that his dream for what was to happen on La Salle Street has been realized and achieved. Christ the Savior Orthodox Church (CTS, also known as the Bishop’s Chapel) has become a viable and thriving parish. Granted, in the earlier years the diocese played a larger role in funding expenses while CTS “got off the ground,” so to speak. But over time, Christ the Savior has stepped up in a major way, especially in the last 5 years, to take on more responsibility for the care and maintenance of various projects in the church and the apartment building next door. Without any diocesan dollars, CTS has raised funds for major iconography that is truly beautiful, enhancing the worship space. They added classrooms downstairs, and remodeled a couple of rooms in the diocesan office area, adding a room for church school use. They have beautified the courtyard with landscaping and retaining brick walls. They added outdoor tables and umbrellas for use outside, to increase space for social hour after liturgy. They have done tuck-pointing on the church, and have added new energy-efficient windows and refinished the exterior stained-glass windows. They have improved the condition of the apartment first-floor social area by laying new carpeting, refinishing floors, and purchasing new tables and chairs. The church is full each Sunday reaching 125+ in attendance. Forgiveness Vespers—on a Sunday evening, mind you—is attended by 90+ people. They have a growing kid population, and also many younger adults in attendance. They have done this with extremely limited parking space. It has now gotten to the place where Christ the Savior now needs all of the space in the property due to their growth. If you want more exact money figures on the above, I am sure Rob Koncel or Fr. John Baker can share those with you. I want to thank Fr. John Baker and the parish of CTS for their faithful work.

CTS have become a viable parish; I believe she is ready to take on the total responsibility for the care and maintenance of both buildings. The parish is willing to take on this responsibility, even with all the major responsibilities they will take on in terms of care of the properties and future major maintenance needs.

Today we will ask the Assembly to approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), drafted by Simeon Morbey with the cooperation of CTS, the Diocese, and the Diocesan Council. You have the plan before you that calls for an eventual transfer of property to Christ the Savior from the Diocese by no later than five years from now. This plan to be presented to this Assembly has been approved thus far by the Diocesan Council (email vote) and the CTS parish assembly held on 9-22-2019.

We are also asking the Assembly to approve a proposed plan to transfer our offices and bishop’s residence to the rectory of Archangel Michael (AM) in Burbank. Fr. John Zdinak, Rob Koncel, Philip Sokolov, and myself have been through the rectory, and we firmly believe it can adequately house the

offices, Bishop's residence, and rooms for meetings of 15 people or less. There is plenty of storage space, parking, a two-car garage, and Midway Airport nearby. There will need to be some improvements done to the building, but nothing of a major nature. The proposal is to pay AM rent while the Diocese pays for utilities and daily maintenance issues. Rob Koncel will be able to speak to all the above in his report.

What are benefits of this plan?

- It is more cost-effective for the Diocese; this will enable us pay down the loan we have on the current property possibly as early as three years from now. Fr. John Zdinak and Rob Koncel will specifically speak on this.
- I have already mentioned the parking space and closeness to Midway Airport.
- The relationship between the Diocese and Archangel Michael is clear with no confusion. We pay rent to AM, and take care of utilities and daily maintenance. AM retains property ownership.
- We are not bound to stay at the AM rectory long term.

What is the downside to this plan?

I can only think of one, which concerns the stability of AM parish. It is a parish that has been in decline for a while. If this trend continues, there is the possibility the parish may need to move or close, and the property may need to be sold. We will cross that bridge if we get there. But this, in my mind, does not constitute a significant roadblock that warrants not approving today's proposal.

I heartily endorse this proposal. As Fr. John Zdinak has often said, this is a "win-win" proposal for both CTS and the Diocese. It also provides some assistance to AM in providing them with some more income.

Improvements related to our Website and Parish reporting

Carrie Sabourin of our Diocesan Council has been overseeing a project to overhaul our Diocesan website. The plan is to make it user-friendlier and ministry oriented. Another feature will be to allow for online donations. Fr Joel Wilson and Fr. John Schroedel have been working on the technical aspect of this. It was the hope that this revision of the website would have been ready by now. However, with the amount of information on our current website, it is taking Fr. Joel longer to work on the new site. Rather than adopting a short cut just to meet a goal, I have directed Fr. Joel to present the new website to the Diocesan Council when all is properly ready. Perhaps Fr. Joel or Carrie can further speak on this when questions are asked after my report. For those not familiar with the current website, I think it is difficult to navigate, and not easy to find things. This is a welcome change.

Secondly the Diocese has established an online site for posting the various reports parishes are required to submit. Mason Baker and Philip Sokolov report more and more parishes are making use of this feature. This will decrease postage and copying costs for parishes. Several communications have been sent out by Philip informing the Diocese of this reporting website. If you have questions, speak with Philip, who is here today.

Finally, we have been working with Holy Trinity Cathedral in Chicago in using auto deposit to the Diocesan checking account for monthly assessments. If this goes well, and we can properly account for things, the plan will be to make this feature available to all of our parishes. I know there have been complaints in the past of assessment checks not deposited in a timely manner. Having this feature of auto deposit will eliminate that.

The addition of Keleinik/Office Assistant

In December of 2018, we hired Mason Baker to fill this position. Mason's presence has been helpful to the

Diocese in many ways. He has taken over responsibility for compliance matters related to the Background checks, and ORSMA guidelines (PSP). He is now tracking reports from parishes as they come in. He sends me regular updates on what parishes have sent in their reports and those that haven't. With that information it is easier for me to contact parish priests and inquire further about this. The response to this has been positive thus far. Expect more forthcoming calls from me through the remainder of year. What I am insisting upon is having 100% compliance on all related reports from 2018 and on. In taking on these duties, Mason has also relieved Philip of a responsibility he initially did not have.

Secondly, in having a Keleunik, it has relieved a lot stress from me in driving responsibilities to and from parish visits. This is especially the case on drives back to Chicago from a visit. I can shut my eyes and not worry about trying to keep them open, now. Mason continues to increasingly become more proficient in hierarchical liturgies, and often does mini-practices with servers in parishes when a hierarchical liturgy will be done on Sunday. I even allow him to pack my vestments after services! Bishops are fussy about such things. Thank you, Mason, for all you have done to make my life easier.

Family and Youth Ministry

Family Website

The diocese continues to operate the Family Ministry website. This consists of weekly notes from me on various aspects of family life. We also have people who submit guest articles about every two months. Finally, I along with Fr. Jacob Van Sickle (rector in Merrillville, IN) do live streams every two months (or as my schedule allows) where I speak to the diocese via YouTube. The livestream allows people who are viewing to submit questions relative to the topic being addressed that day. I think we have done seven of these live streams thus far. Fr. Jacob oversees the content of the website, and Stacy Sennott of St. Luke in Palos Hills is the webmaster, dealing with postings and technical issues. The editorial board consists of myself, Fr. Jacob, Janet Ames of Holy Transfiguration in Livonia, MI, and Adam Lockridge of Holy Trinity in Overland Park. Fr. John Matusiak, of blessed memory, who was a consulting editor, also assisted in editing postings.

I would like to see more people from the Diocese involved in submitting guest articles on themes related to family life and the faith. I would hope to add one more person to the Editorial Board by January 1st. I think this site is developing in the way I envisioned it. We are capable of doing better. I think that will come with time. Finally, I do not receive much feedback from people in the way of comments and questions on my weekly notes. I don't know how to interpret this. If you don't know of this web page, go to: www.midwestfamily.org to learn more.

Youth Life and Ministry

Erin Moulton of Holy Trinity Parish in Overland Park has agreed to take on the role of Youth Liaison in the Diocese. I envision her role as being a link to our parishes to better inform them of what is going in the Diocese from parish to parish relative to our youth. I have asked her to prepare a report for this assembly of what she has done thus far. This should be posted on the website.

The one activity that continues to be a positive thing is the yearly Web-Hook-Up with youth in all of our deaneries. Last year we had about 70 youth participate in this. Technically, things went off without a hitch, as all locations had the proper technical requirements to prevent bad connections from happening. We met in six locations. Fr. Ben Tucci is here to answer any specific questions on last year's event. One of the things we initially hoped would happen with this activity is that it would be an overnight event. That did not pan out. Once we realized that, we decided to move it to Saturday early afternoon, so kids don't get home so late. This year's Web-Hook-Up will be on November 16th; the theme is "Connecting with Christ, Connecting with one's Parish."

50th Anniversary of our Autocephaly

On October 1st of this year, a letter was posted to our website and sent to all Rectors and Priests-in-Charge of our parishes introducing the activities our Diocese will be involved with next year. There is no need to rehash that. I would only encourage all of our parishes to participate in these events next year. I would like to see our Youth Liaison work with our Deans in finding ways we can inform our kids of these events and encourage their participation. I am looking forward to it. There will also be celebrations sponsored by the National Church that involve participation of the Holy Synod in such places as Kodiak, St. Tikhon's, and the Washington Cathedral. This information will be published on the OCA web page as it becomes available.

Parish Visitations

This continues to be my favorite reason for being a bishop. I do enjoy my visitations and what I learn from them. Having Mason with me on many of the visits even makes it better. It is wonderful to see our youth as involved as they are, and among them potential candidates for seminary. I can think of several teens and a few children as young as 4 or 5 leaving me thinking, yep, they are going to end up being a priest one day. I have had wonderful meetings with church councils and our youth during my visits that are encouraging.

St Macrina Program

This past spring, the Holy Synod approved nine people from the Diocese for ordination to the Diaconate. Seven of the nine went through the St. Macrina Diaconal and Catechetical Program. I have been busy since May of this year ordaining Deacons, and will do so through the end of the year. Fr. Elijah has presented his report available for your review. Thank you, Fr. Elijah and the faculty of St. Macrina for your dedicated work.

What are my concerns at this point?

Percentage giving plan

All in all, I think this has gone well. But I have heard some reports about how the increased giving to the diocese has adversely affected a parish's ability to do certain things. This year we have had 11 of our parishes apply for hardship relief. It is on the agenda today to further discuss this. It will be interesting to have this discussion once we hear from Rob Koncel on the financial state of the Diocese.

Recruitment for candidates for seminaries

In my recent seminary appeal letter, I mentioned with possible anticipated parish openings next year, there are just not enough students coming out of seminary to fill this need. We need to do a better job of identifying future candidates for seminary and connect with those people. We discussed this in our Bishop's Council Meeting yesterday. I would like to see each Deanery form a small work group that could focus on this above task. This is so important. If we can't fill existing parish openings, how can we then recruit priests to do mission work?

Vision for Missions

Our mission group has been meeting regularly four times a year to discuss various topics. We identified two areas for future consideration of mission development. One is Farmington, MO, and the other is

Aurora, IL. After trying an open house activity and a 4-week inquirer outreach in Farmington, it doesn't look as if efforts to establish a mission there will work out. Aurora I think is more promising. The Chicago Deanery clergy appear to be open to the idea, but a plan has yet to be formed. There are other possibilities to consider in the future such as Muncie, IN, where a Facebook inquiry group has been started. Port Huron, MI is another possibility. We have had several priests submit reflections on the topic of "What it means to be a healthy tent-making priest in a mission or small parish. The mission committee needs to further discuss these to see how we can proceed in this area. It is clear to me in most missions and small parishes, priests will need to be tent making priests for the short term. Again, the major challenge is recruitment of candidates to fill these openings. It is also my expectation that the extra funds that have been pulled out of the Development Fund can be used to supplement salaries of mission priests. Joe Kormos, our parish development consultant, has submitted his report for Missions.

The Recent Falling Asleep of the Father John Matusiak

We recently lost our beloved brother and concelebrant in the Lord, the Archpriest John Matusiak. We all know what a huge role he played in the life of the Orthodox Church in America and in this Diocese over the last 50 years. Just take a look at the obit on our website to see just what he did. Even in his retirement from parish ministry, Father John continued as Director of Communications for the Diocese and the Orthodox Church in America. He also continued as Diocesan Secretary. We need to find replacements for the roles of Diocesan Secretary and Director of Communications for the Diocese. This can be two different people. Appointing a Diocesan Secretary is easier to address. I would welcome any feedback from the Assembly of who you think would be a good replacement.

As to Director of Communications, I think the person appointed for this needs to be well tuned to and in sync with the new web page redesign. Familiarity with social media is important. For now, Fr. Paul Wesche is the contact for receiving requests for web postings. He does the write up of an event and sends that along with photos to Philip for posting. Once the new web site is up and running, then I will appoint a Director of Communications. Before I end my report, I think it would be good at this point to intone "Memory Eternal!" for Fr. John.

So, I began with the question asked of me, "How is the Diocese doing, Vladyka?" by answering that I believe we are doing well. Thanks be to God for all of you, for your love for His Holy Church and your commitment to this Diocese and the Orthodox Church in America. Please forgive me for the ways I have failed you due to my sinfulness and ineptitude. The Lord's blessing be upon you.

With Love in Christ,

The unworthy +Paul