

**Diocese of New England - Orthodox Church in America**  
**52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Diocesan Assembly - October 23-24, 2015**  
**Holy Trinity Orthodox Church – Willimantic, CT**

**Opening**

The theme of the All American Council was “Expanding the mission” permit me to open with a quote from an article that appeared in SYNDESMOS NEWS on the subject by Archbishop Anastasios He Wrote:

“How can we distinguish true mission from proselytism?”

Proselytism uses all possible means (gifts, food, money and other privileges) to achieve an aim, to bring followers into a concrete religious community. This contravenes the dignity of the human person and of the Gospel, and I believe it is really not sincere. And what is not sincere, sincere both in purpose and sincere in ways of acting, cannot be Orthodox. For me proselytism starts when other means are used, instead of the Gospel, in order to gain followers.

We do not have anxiety about statistics and followers. The Orthodox martyria must be a free witness of what we believe and what we have. A sharing of the gift that we have received. If the others accept it, fine. If they do not accept it, it is their own responsibility. Is our mission to convert someone to Orthodoxy?

Orthodox mission consists in giving the treasure we have and leaving the other to decide whether he will take it or not. If the other wants to join the Orthodox Church, you will never say "No." Our aim is to transmit the tradition of the Gospel in all its fullness, remaining free from any anxiety to convert anyone. You cannot impose on anyone's freedom. You are there, you give your witness; you are a candle, lighted by paschal joy, and if the other wishes to take from your flame, then of course, you will not refuse him.”

**[Archbishop Anastasios, "Understanding Orthodoxy: How to distinguish true mission from proselytism" SYNDESMOS News, Vol. XV/2, winter 2001/Spring 2002, p 11-13]**

Archbishop Anastasios is not merely theorizing about mission, these words emerge from the experience of a man who has devoted his entire adult life to mission. How can each of us remain “free from any anxiety to convert anyone”? How can each of us be a “candle, lighted by paschal joy”? How can we as a diocese, through our work better live out our vocation to be witnesses to the light of Christ? May the Holy Spirit guide us as we look for answers to these questions during our work over the next two days.

### **Chicago**

Earlier this month at the invitation of Bp Ilia Katre, I served with him at his parish of St. Nicholas in Chicago. Bishop Ilia’s invitation, and the timing of my visit, coincided with my trip to Chicago for the sixth meeting of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America that was being held that week in Chicago. Interviews for Albanian TV were filmed and shown in Albania referring to the occasion as an historical event.

### **St. Louis**

I accepted the invitation of Archbishop Nathaniel to celebrate with him at St. Thomas Church in St. Louis, MO. for their eightieth anniversary. There are a number of Albanian communicants who attend his parish in St. Louis, and the rector of the community Fr. Theofan Kojas was a most gracious host.

### **Metropolitan Joan**

During a visit to his family here in the United States Metropolitan Joan of Korca and I had an informal luncheon where we discussed issues surrounding the anticipated Great Council as well as the progress of the Church in Albania and the current health issues facing Archbishop Anastasios.

I also asked Metropolitan Joan if Archbishop Anastasios could help ensure that the OCA would be present- or at least have observer status- at the Great Council. He was a bit surprised at the request but said he would do so on our behalf as he understood all Orthodox Churches would be present at the council.

The actual representation of autocephalous churches at the council will be heavily influenced by political issues in Europe that may prevent some autocephalous churches from participating.

### **Assembly of Canonical Bishops in America**

In September the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of America met in Chicago for our sixth meeting. The hierarchs serve on various committees such as the committee on youth, pastoral practices, theological education as well as many others. I am on the committee for military chaplains. Reports from the various

committees were presented in written form. Additionally an in- depth report was presented on a proposal for the canonical reorganization of all of the orthodox churches in America. This was the third draft of such a proposal, and it included three, five and ten year plans. The proposal was not met with great enthusiasm by the hierarchs. The canonical reorganization would not occur any time soon as there are many factors that affect the hierarchs and clergy in the different jurisdictions. This project was undertaken as the patriarchs of the Orthodox Church asked the “Orthodox Diaspora” to address the anomalies that exist in various parts of the world. Of course, even the way that the question was phrased is problematic. From the perspective of the OCA we do not represent an “Orthodox Diaspora.”

All of us were asked to send our thoughts on this last proposal to Archbishop Nikolae of the Romanian Patriarchal Church, as he is the chair of the committee on Canonical Regional Planning. In addition, the “first hierarch” of each jurisdiction was asked to make a comment relative the latest proposal. The OCA official response that was delivered by Metropolitan TIKHON is included with a packet of items that I have prepared for our clergy that I will distribute following my report.

### **All American Council**

We were well represented at our All American Council held in Atlanta. The main focus and issues for discussion and approval were the methods of funding the OCA and the approval of the revised OCA Statutes. Both proposals were discussed prior to the Council. During the Council the proposals were passed by the clergy and laity and later approved by our Holy Synod.

A video or verbal presentation was presented by each diocese highlighting the ways we are expanding the mission. The Diocese of New England, in conjunction with the Albanian Archdiocese, our sister diocese, produced a twenty minute video presentation which was well received. It is my hope we have the facilities to show it to you sometime during our assembly. The video presentation is already available and posted on our diocesan website.

The passage of the new OCA statutes will require most parishes to revise their parish by-laws. To help our parish communities to be in compliance the diocesan council formed a committee to help in this process.

The committee will be most happy to review your current by laws or send you a sample set of by laws that your parish can use as a guide.

You may forward your current by laws or questions to our chancellor, Fr. John Kreta who chairs this committee. The members of the committee include Fr. James Parnell, David Zavednak, Alexia Tassmer and Mat. Cindy Voytovich.

The Statutes require that these changes be completed within two (2) years. Don't wait until the last minute, be the first in the diocese to complete this process.

### **Holy Synod**

The Holy Synod meets twice per year as the canons prescribe, however due to heavy schedules we also meet via conference call and held an additional retreat/meeting at the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Monastery in Rives Junction, Michigan.

I have just returned from our Fall session that met at St Andrew's Center in Detroit Michigan. We chose that location at the invitation of Archbishop Nathaniel due to the proximity of St. Andrew's to Canada where the spiritual court surrounding the issues relating to Archbishop Seraphim were held. During this session we addressed the full Fall agenda for the Holy Synod.

### **PSP's**

The PSP's, the Policies Standards and Procedures regarding sexual misconduct, are always referred to as a work in progress as changes are necessitated as various laws change.

The complete Policy is about thirty pages long. An abbreviated version is included in the packet I have prepared for our clergy. All parish council members are required to read and understand their responsibilities, as well as sign the documents indicating that they have read the PSP's.

The abbreviated version will help with this process.

### **Parish Highlights and Initiatives**

Following the AAC held in Atlanta, I traveled directly to Boston to participate in the Convention of the Antiochian Archdiocese at the invitation of Metropolitan JOSEPH. His Beatitude JOHN X, Patriarch of Antioch was their guest and I had the opportunity to serve with the Patriarch along with the hierarchs of the Antiochian Archdiocese and extend the greetings of Metropolitan TIKHON.

Bishop John of Worcester was a most gracious host and made sure that a picture was taken with me and Patriarch JOHN X of Antioch.

Bishop John is also in charge of the Western Rite parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese nationwide and I had the pleasure of serving with one of his priests at my parish of St Thomas in Farmington, Hills, MI.

The Diocesan Youth Rally was particularly memorable in that I was able to celebrate a full hierarchal Liturgy for the celebration of the Dormition of the Theotokos. The Rallyers did a stupendous job with the singing for the service. I would like to express our thanks again to Fr John and Matushka Macrina Hopko for their tireless work in the planning and administration of Youth Rally. Again this year, members of our sister parish of St. George in Trumbull, CT took part in the Diocesan Youth Rally. I was happy to see Fr Dennis Rhodes and some of the older members of his parish serve as counselors at Rally.

We wish to express our gratitude to Frs. Timko, Irvin, Halvorsen, Bouteneff and Bacon for covering parishes as pastors take their vacations or as we search for new rectors.

We welcome Fr. Walter Smith to our diocese and he is serving the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Waterbury, CT. and our new deacon Joseph Gall, who is attached to Holy Transfiguration in New Haven. We bid farewell to Fr. Barnabas Fravel and his family as they requested a transfer in order to be closer to family. Fr. Barnabas now serves under the omophor or Bishop Mark of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania.

This was a year of centennial anniversaries. We celebrated the one hundredth Anniversary of the founding of Holy Resurrection Church in Berlin, NH, where at the conclusion of the service the time capsule in the corner stone was opened. The contents of the documents found are being studied by experts in the field.

In addition, parishioners of Holy Resurrection were given the opportunity to sign their names so that that document could be placed back into the corner stone and opened one hundred years from now in 2115.

His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON and I along, with Fr. Michael Westerberg, ten priests and four deacons, an army of sub deacons and altar servers, and scores of faithful, celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Holy Transfiguration in New Haven, CT.

During the Liturgy we tonsured two readers, and Joseph Gall was ordained a sub deacon and then ordained deacon.

Immediately following the celebration in Berlin, NH, we celebrated the 110th anniversary of the founding of Holy Trinity Church in Springfield, VT.

It is interesting to note, just as a way to illustrate how we are all connected, is that St. Alexander (Hotovinsky) was the founder of Holy Trinity in Springfield, VT.

It was the then Fr. Alexander who was the chancellor at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, in New York, where Theofan Noli was ordained priest.

It was Fr Alexander who gave the then Fr.Noli, vestments, chalice, etc. All the items needed for the celebration of the first liturgy in the Albanian language in Boston in 1908. I include this simply to reiterate how we are connected, not only through the chalice but from the very beginning of our missionary efforts in this country.

Early in the year we also celebrated the twenty-fifth (25) Anniversary of All Saints of America Mission in Salisbury, CT.

Strong relationships continue between parishes of the Albanian Archdiocese and the Diocese of New England, such as the strong ties that exist between Holy Annunciation in Natick, MA and Holy Annunciation in Maynard, MA. Fr. Robert Dick and Fr. Joseph Gallick often travel together to Metropolitan Council meetings. Fr. Dennis Rhodes is always a welcome guest and participant in our Connecticut Deanery meetings.

We were especially blessed with the visit of the Kurskt Root Icon. Bishop Nicholas of ROCOR brought the icon to Holy Dormition Parish in Cumberland, RI where we celebrated the Akathist to the Mother of God and many of our faithful were able to attend.

Our mission in Maine is still struggling to really get off the ground but there are regular scheduled services for a small but dedicated group of parishioners.

Although the closing of our parish and sale of property in Chelsea was sad, we are most joyful that the Romanian community that was sharing the facility, bought the property and the building continues to be used by a parish community of the Romanian Episcopate of the OCA. In addition, just last month the closing on the rectory was completed. Our thanks to the committee for their tireless efforts in executing the sale of both properties.

The Diocesan Council was deliberating how to best use the funds realized from the sale of the Chelsea properties in order to enhance the missionary efforts of our parishes in the Diocese. Some ideas were to establish an interest bearing fund and use the proceeds to support parish outreach programs. Another idea was to hire a parish growth facilitator to assist our parishes.

The Diocesan Council is open to, and would welcome all ideas from you in the hope that a proposal from the council may be presented at next year's assembly.

### **COLA**

According to a vote of our Diocesan Assembly the COLA adjustment for 2016 would be the highest of three indexes from the Board of Labor Statistics for September 2015.

US City average is 2.2%

Northeastern Urban average is 2.2%

Boston CPI is, 3.0%

Therefore the COLA adjustment for the diocese for this year is 3.0

### **Thanks and Recognition**

Again I wish to express my sincere thanks for the committee who worked on the sale of our Chelsea properties. A great deal of time and effort went into the execution and completion of the sale. My special thanks to John Skrobat as our diocesan treasurer and Dn. Paul Nimchek for his work with O-N-E Stewards and our Parish Grant program.

Our webpage is professionally engineered by Frs. Steven Hosking and David Koles, as is our O.N.E newspaper, published by Fr. Joshua Mosher.

Alexia Tassmer, our secretary, does an exemplary job as do all of the dedicated members of the Diocesan Council.

Our Deans, Fr. Vasili Likwar, Fr. Peter Charmichael and Fr. David Koles are dedicated men that all of us can count on. I am most appreciative that our Chancellor Fr John. Kreta whom I am in contact with on a daily basis always shows concern not only for our diocese, our clergy but for my personal well being as well.

### **Conclusion**

Permit me to conclude again with a quote from the same article by Archbishop Anastasios.

“Sometimes we find ourselves thinking that missionary activity is reserved for the clergy only. Is this true?”

It is very easy to say: 'This is for monks or priests and since I am not a monk or a priest, I do not have any obligation to do this,' but this is a mistake.

And here I insist on a theological understanding of mission: every person who is incorporated into the Church, into the mystical body of Christ, bears a responsibility for the Church. Every person has a vocation and of course, he or she must see in his/her heart how this will be expressed and experienced.

Of course there are different ways of participating in a missionary effort. Not all of us shall leave our countries and go somewhere in Asia or in Africa. This was a western romantic vision of mission in the 19th century. Sometimes even in the old Syndesmos gatherings we had the impression that a missionary is a person that takes a cross, and goes to the forest announcing the Gospel. This is not the style of missionary work today.

To take a concrete example: Albania is a missionary field, at least for us who are not from Albania. Our excellent collaborators are not only priests but also lay people. Our team is very small, in all - twenty people; half of it is lay people: professors, teachers, nurses, administrators, catechists, translators.

For every person today there is a possibility to do missionary work. Mission is not only for priests or monks. It is for everybody. But it is also for priests and monks.”

**[Archbishop Anastasios, "Understanding Orthodoxy: How to distinguish true mission from proselytism" SYNDESMOS News, Vol. XV/2, Winter 2001/Spring 2002, p 11-13]**