

Diocese of New England Bishop's Report **October 2017**
St. Jacob of Alaska, Northfield Falls, VT.

INTRODUCTION

St. John Chrysostom reminds us of our angelic calling, "On high the armies of the angels are giving praise. Here below in the Church the human choir takes up after them the same doxology. Above us, angels of fire make the thrice Holy hymn resound magnificently. Here below is raised the echo of their hymn. The festival of heaven's citizens is united with the inhabitants of earth in a single thanksgiving, a single upsurge of happiness, a single chorus of joy."

On Ozias, Homily 4,1(PG 56,120)¹

VOCATIONS

Our defining work, our fundamental vocation is to build up the Body of Christ. We plan for the future with programs and strategic plans, with various strategies to meet the challenges of our time. But at the end of the day, it is all about you and me doing the will of God. Those who work in the real estate business are familiar with the saying, "location, location and location." But for us it is, "vocation, vocation, vocation:" priestly vocation, diaconal vocation, server vocation, monastic vocation and most certainly lay-leader vocation. Beautiful, up to date facilities are a blessing, and they are important. But they are important only inasmuch as they serve to nurture and strengthen the Christian vocations of men and women to fulfill our Lord's commandments.

In our diocese we have a number of parishes without pastors and I am most thankful for the clergy and parish administrators who have taken on extra responsibilities to serve these communities. We also have two seminarians, however, they still have two more years of study before possible ordination.

In the words of Archbishop Anastasios, "missionary work cannot be limited to the clergy." By virtue of our baptism, we are all Disciples of Christ; all of us are "newly enlisted warriors of Christ" with a calling to serve and minister in the world.

Evangelization is not about finding the "silver bullet" that will solve every problem, or meet every need. Our witness, our work of building up the Body of Christ begins with the people we see every day, our spouses, our children, fellow parishioners our colleagues at work, our friends and neighbors. As exciting as it may seem to some people, sitting at home on the Internet posting memes, and status updates is not the summit of Christian ministry. We might be called to use these tools, but in the end, God commands us to reveal the light of Christ to real flesh and blood people, the ones we know and interact with on a daily basis. This is the "flock" that Christ has called us to serve. We serve them by following Christ to Golgotha, to be crucified with Him, offering our lives on behalf of those we have been called to serve. May God strengthen us in our calling.

PERSONAL GREETING

It pleases me to see so many participants in our assembly, simply because it is so good for us to be together. I would like to share with you an excerpt from an article on Church Attendance and Health:

People who attend services at a church, synagogue or mosque are less stressed and live longer, according to new research from Vanderbilt University.

"Sometimes in health science we tend to look at those things that are always negative and say, 'Don't do this. Don't do that,'" said Marino Bruce, a social and behavioral scientist and associate director of the Center for Research on Men's Health at Vanderbilt. The new research findings, however, are "encouraging individuals to participate in something," he said.

According to the study, middle-aged (ages 40 to 65) adults — both men and women — who attend church or other houses of worship reduce their risk for mortality by 55 percent. "Our findings support the overall hypothesis that increased religiosity — as determined by attendance at worship services — is associated with less stress and enhanced longevity," said Bruce, a research associate professor of medicine, health and society at Vanderbilt. He is also a Baptist minister.

"We've found that being in a place where you can flex those spiritual muscles is actually beneficial for your health," Bruce said. The effects of attendance at worship services remained after education, poverty,

¹ Olivier Clement, trans. *Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, second edition. (New York: New City Press, 2013), 118.

health insurance and social support status were all taken into consideration, Bruce said.”²
 While reading this article I smiled to myself inasmuch as I feel that I am personally doing everything in my power to keep the medical profession in business. However, I am not alone. Several of our clergy as well as their family members also contributed to the medical profession through surgeries and medical treatments over the past year. With God’s grace all are doing well and serving their communities with renewed strength and vitality.

HOLY SYNOD

Last October our Holy Synod participated in the sixth gathering of the Canonical Orthodox bishops in America, and our seventh meeting was held last month in New Jersey. We continue to make slow, methodical progress towards important decisions, and the simple fact that all of the hierarchs assemble together to discuss the issues facing our jurisdictions is incredibly important. Our recent discussions have often focused on youth ministry and programs aimed at helping our youth participate in the life of the church, such as our Diocese of New England Youth Rally, or Crossroads at Hellenic College/Holy Cross, a program offered to high school and college students. Each summer the Crossroad group visits both our Holy Trinity Cathedral and Saint George Cathedral in Boston. The eighth gathering of the Assembly of Bishops is scheduled for October 2018 in Cleveland Ohio.

Our own Holy Synod met in retreat in Michigan at the Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos last June. These retreats occasionally include formal church business. As previously reported, this was the occasion for a calling of the Synodal Spiritual Court which deposed Bishop Irenieu, the auxiliary to Archbishop Nathaniel, and returned Irenieu to the status of a lay monk. While in Michigan, I also took that opportunity to visit the Albanian parish of St. Thomas, where I served as pastor for twenty-three years.

Due to scheduling conflicts our Holy Synod did not meet this month and the regularly scheduled meeting for the Fall Session is scheduled for next month.

Allow me to remind the assembly that the Holy Synod expects parish by-laws to be updated by the end of December of this year. Our own by-law committee is ready to help in this area and I want to compliment them for their tireless work. Our Metropolitan Council and Judge Ray Lanier, the OCA’s legal council, specifically praised the program that has been developed by our by-law committee.

At the invitation of Bishop John of Worcester of the Antiochian Archdiocese a luncheon was held at his residence with Bishop Ilia (Katre) of the Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America. It was an informal, cordial gathering during Great Lent. During our conversation I voiced some of my frustration at the lack of progress by the Assembly of Bishops to improve jurisdictional cooperation. We all know how challenging it can be for people to lay aside the concerns of pride, power, and prestige in order to follow the humble way of Jesus Christ. Truly, in working towards jurisdictional unity we ask God to work a miracle that can only be achieved by prayer and fasting.

ARCHDIOCESE

While addressing the Albanian assembly last month I reminded the gathered clergy and laity of a number of the challenges that the archdiocese has faced, and how God has blessed us with the courage to continue in His service. On that Saturday morning, prior to our service of thanksgiving, Fr. Nathan Preston was tonsured a riasaphor monk. Fr. Nathan is well known and respected by the members of the Holy Synod; he has led several diocesan programs and retreats for the OCA, including a joint retreat for the Albanian and New England clergy. Fr. Nathan has faithfully ministered in the Albanian Archdiocese, and has established strong ties with the church of Albania and is well respected by hierarchs in Albania. He leads numerous programs on the national church level as well as prison ministry programs. A riasaphor monk, which is the first step of the monastic life, does not include formal monastic vows per se, but the new monastic asks for a life of prayer, is vested in the monastic habit, and given a name by the abbot or the bishop. It is not a rule but customary that when a name is given, the first letter of the baptismal name is used, such as in my case, I was given the name Nikon using the “N” from my baptismal name Nicholas. I was most happy to receive the name Nikon: I liked Bishop Nikon of Brooklyn of blessed memory. (There are, however, other bishops with the name of Nikon who may serve as more of an apophatic example of episcopal ministry.) Fr. Nathan

² Jim Patterson, “Worship is good for your health: Vanderbilt study”
 ResearchNews@Vanderbilt, May 31, 2017,
<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2017/05/31/worship-is-good-for-your-health-vanderbilt-study/> (accessed October 19, 2017).

was given the name Nikodhim, a favorite of Fr. Preston who has visited and venerated the relics of St. Nikodhim in Albania. St. Nikodhim has a fascinating and somewhat tumultuous life story. He was married three times and wanted to marry a fourth time but since the church did not permit it he became a Muslim. During a visit to his son on Mt Athos, he returned to the Orthodox Christian faith. Fr. Preston can give you a more comprehensive account of St. Nikodhim's life. I rejoice with riasophore monk Fr. Nikodhim. It will be good for *us* to have another monastic among our clergy; one who is active in both the Albanian Archdiocese and the New England Diocese and has the respect of our synod and national church leadership.

ORDINATIONS AND PASTORAL CHANGES

On Palm Sunday Jason Green of the Albanian Archdiocese was ordained to the sub-diaconate at Saint George Cathedral. He is currently studying for the diaconal program at Holy Cross.

Sub-deacon Michael Arida is in his second year of the OCA's diaconal program.

I received Fr. Steven McGuigan, a former Roman Catholic priest, into the ranks of the clergy of the Orthodox Church in America through the service of vesting at All Saints Church in Hartford, on behalf of Bishop David of Alaska. The service was performed in New England so that Fr Steven's family, who live in New England, would have the opportunity to attend the service. Receiving someone through the service of vesting was a first for me as a hierarch and I believe a first for us in New England.

Fr. Joseph Gall was transferred to the omophorion of Archbishop Michael.

Fr. Steven Belonick will be retiring the beginning of November.

Fr. Nicholas Timpko received the blessing and honor of wearing a mitre. This is an honor that the Holy Synod recently added to the clergy award program.

Sub-deacon Paul Feeney fell asleep in the Lord this past year, may his memory be eternal.

YOUTH and RETREATS

Again this year participants from both the Diocese of New England and the Albanian Archdiocese participated in the DNE Youth Rally. Please read the full report on Youth Rally in your assembly booklet. I would particularly like to note that our Youth Rally serves as an example of inter-diocesan cooperation. Seven campers at the Youth Rally were from the Albanian Archdiocese, and in addition a camp leader came from St. George Albanian Parish in Trumbull, CT for the third consecutive year.

INTER-DIOCESAN ACTIVITIES

Close relationship continues between our two cathedrals, Holy Trinity Cathedral and Saint George Cathedral in Boston. I alternate during Holy Week between the two and annually alternate for Pascal celebrations. This year I will be at Holy Trinity Cathedral for Pascha.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Background checks are an important part of our ministry and our commitment to protecting those we are called to serve. David Zavednak chairs the department of background checks for the diocese of New England and Fr. Mark Doku chairs the department for the Albanian Archdiocese. You will find Dave's report in your assembly booklet.

DIOCESAN COUNCIL

We are fortunate to have a very active diocesan council composed of committed members who serve on a number of sub-committees such as: the parish grant program; ONE Stewards; communications and financial committees; and a youth department. The reports from all of our committees should be in your assembly booklet.

Our Secretary Alexia Tassmer, tirelessly serves the Diocese and is always on top of the many responsibilities in what appears to be a 24/7 volunteer position. On behalf of everyone in the Diocese I would like to thank her for her dedication to the Council and to the Diocese. Please convey information and announcements about parish work and events, including reports on recent activities, to our communications committee to ensure that our ONE Newspaper and diocesan website are up to date.

COLA

According to a vote of the Diocesan Assembly the COLA adjustment for 2018 would be the highest of three indexes from the Board of Labor Statistics=

The US City average, the Northeastern Urban average and the Boston, Brocton, Nashua CPI.

- US City average is 1.9

- Northeastern Urban average is 1.6

- Boston, Brocton, Nashua CPI is 2.2

Therefore the COLA adjustment for the Diocese of New England 2018 is 2.2

HIGHLIGHTS

I was asked to visit Holy Ascension Church in Charleston SC for their parish feast day, and to elevate a deacon to the rank of protodeacon on behalf of Bishop Alexander, who was unable to attend. It was a pleasure for me to back in the South for this occasion, but stormy weather and flight delays made for a rather challenging return trip to meet a pressing obligation to be in Salem MA for the consecration of a new Altar table in that parish. By God's providence I was greeted at Logan airport by both the Albanian and New England Chancellors from a late flight and driven to Salem for the solemn celebration.

At the end of September we were blessed with the consecration of another new Altar table in Holy Trinity Church in Willimantic, CT with numerous clergy and laity participating including a number of college students from UCONN. Holy Annunciation Church in Maynard, MA celebrated their 100th anniversary throughout the year.

THANKS AND RECOGNITION

Fr. Joseph Gallick and Audra Sullivan have been invaluable assets to the smooth operation of the Albanian Archdiocese. One does not realize how much responsibility is involved in the operation of a diocese while maintaining confidentiality in sometimes very sensitive matters. I more than appreciate their dedication along with that of our chancellors, Fr John Kreta and Fr Arthur Liolin. By definition a chancellor's responsibility is to act in the absence of the bishop. Whenever my responsibilities take me away for long periods of time our chancellors are usually the contact persons for our clergy especially when dealing with sensitive matters. I am most appreciative of their attention to these issues in my absence.

In New England I would be at a loss without the expertise and experience of Fr. John Kreta our Chancellor, along with our deans Fr. Vasily Likwar in the Boston Deanery, Fr. John Hopko in the Connecticut Deanery and Fr. Peter Carmichael in the Northern Deanery. I sometimes feel that I lead a sheltered life since our diocese is run so smoothly. This is not so much a result of my efforts but it is more because our clergy are dedicated mentors to new clergy, and our deans, and chancellors are seasoned pastors with many years of experience who are responsive to the various needs of parishes, clergy and faithful. They serve the Church and our clergy and their families with experience and sensitivity.

I am in contact on a daily basis with Fr. John Kreta who has years of experience serving our mission of All Saints of America and has served as our chancellor for the last decade with expertise and compassion. Fr. John keeps me abreast of important issues that arise while simultaneously sparing me from some of the mundane responsibilities that come across his desk.

CLOSING

Today we come together as a community, as a family, as the Body of Christ to reflect on the work we have done, and to plan for the work that is yet to come. All the questions and matters that we discuss boil down to one simple question: how can we more perfectly love God and love our neighbor? May God strengthen us in this work. In the words of St. Isaac of Nineveh, "Brother, I recommend this to you. 'Let the weight of compassion in you weigh the scales down until you feel in your heart the same compassion that God has for the world'"

Isaac of Nineveh Ascetic Treatises, 34 (Spanos p.151)