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DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST
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To the Esteemed Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful in the Diocese of the Midwest:

As usual I greet you with these words of joy, of hope, of exaltation, of encouragement, of confidence. Indeed, as Orthodox Christians, the glory of the Lord must be precious to us and we must at all times strive to do all to the glory of God. Once again I find myself standing before you to give my overview and observations of the life of our beloved Diocese of the Midwest and her place as an integral part of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America. Every year when given the opportunity to report to the Annual Assembly, I find myself, of course, a year older, a bit more weary from the occurrences of the previous year, unfortunately not increased in wisdom, but hopefully not disillusioned or jaded by the many things that occur which are beyond my control as well as by the many things which I have mishandled, or misread or just plain bungled.

One of my greatest fears concerning my episcopal ministry has always been the possibility of illusion – a state of comfort and complacency in thinking that all is well, not necessarily “wonderful and perfect,” but okay, alright, adequate, more than satisfactory, that the Diocese is on an “even keel.” This illusion becomes delusion, and reality gives way to fantasy and distortion, and that, my friends, is most dangerous. I have on other occasions stated that there are other, outside factors that affect the life of our Diocesan Church and these influences are present from year to year, often changing in scope or intensity. All too often I have used these as excuses for my failure to address concerns and real problems in the Diocese that must be addressed.

Certainly the crisis in our Orthodox Church in America has affected the life of our Diocesan Church in many, profound ways. Since the beginning of the crisis in June, 2005, when our Diocesan Council had the audacity to send a letter to the Central Church Administration requesting financial transparency and accountability at the forthcoming All-American Council in Toronto, each Diocesan Assembly, each report, each Diocesan Council meeting, Clergy Convocation, each deanery meeting was virtually preoccupied with the crisis and scandal – precisely because it was a scandal (and, alas, remains a scandal) affecting every man, woman and child counted among the faithful of the Orthodox Church in America, to various extents and in various ways.

With the 15th All American Council in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, last November everything changed. We had witnessed the resignation and retirement of former Metropolitan HERMAN and we participated in the nomination and election of a new leader for our Church, His Beatitude, Metropolitan JONAH, and we gave thanks and continue to give thanks to the All-merciful God for His providence. That Council provided the means for cynicism, disillusionment, frustration, bitterness and despair to be turned into encouragement, hope and joyous anticipation of good things to come. Glory to God for all things!

But does this mean that the crisis is over? The answer is no! The effects and consequences go on – millions of dollars in lawsuits, ongoing investigations and processes in discernment in order to keep the ship known as the OCA not only afloat, but headed in the right direction. Much has been accomplished. The Metropolitan Council is functioning with an effectiveness and sense of responsibility never seen before. The same can be said of the Holy Synod. In the opinion of this observer, a sense of brotherly love and support among the hierarchs for the last year now exists as never before in my experience. My old friend Bishop MELCHISEDEK of Pittsburgh is a tremendous asset to the Synod. I look forward to getting to know and working with the recently consecrated Bishop IRENEE of Canada. Bishop-elect Michael Dahulich, whom I have known since seminary days promises to be a welcome addition to the Synod as well. So my beloved brothers and sisters, good things are happening; and the good things that are accomplished in and for the Orthodox Church in America provide good effects for the Diocese of the Midwest.

The righting of the ship, however, is a difficult and often painful process. Not having a legal mind by any means, I have been frustrated and wearied by listening to hour after hour of legal jargon and case scenarios – enough to cross a rabbi’s eyes, let alone mine. Those who have, in Metropolitan JONAH’s words, “raped and pillaged the Church “ are still raping and pillaging the Church, if not by legal means, then by continuing in their practice of preaching one way but living another, where Holy Scripture, God’s Commandments, the Holy Canons and Orthodox Tradition are discarded for personal agendas, the ways and “wisdom” of the world and in simple terms, “looking out for number one, no matter who it hurts.” This is nothing short of betrayal of the Gospel.

In order to deal effectively with the consequences of crisis and scandal as well as the charting of a stable course for the future there have been added meetings of the Holy Synod, Lesser Synod, Synodal retreats and strategic planning sessions, etc. – all that affect the Diocese of the Midwest but also that can be seen as distractions to the immediate task of attending to the life and needs of the Diocese. In the last several months I have been pondering on many things, not the least of which is the need for a return to the basics – the basics of faith, the basics of life, the basics of the role of each of us as Orthodox Christians.

Last week during the Divine Liturgy at Holy Trinity Cathedral in Chicago for the feast of the Protection of the Virgin Mary, workmen were busy putting a new roof on the Cathedral. The litanies, responses and hymns were accompanied by loud hammering sounds – certainly not pleasant, rather distracting, but not enough to disturb the natural “rhythm” of the liturgy. The antiphons were sung, the Gospel lesson was read, the sermon delivered, the Holy Gifts offered and sanctified, and life was imparted in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Thanksgiving was offered and the greeting “Joyous Feast” shared. In short, everything that needed to be done was done amidst the pounding and noise. I thought about this a great deal that day and I continue to wonder why it is that I allow distractions to be so consuming, so disruptive to my primary function of caring for the diocese and faithful entrusted to me. Oh, certainly, there are legitimate “distractions” and concerns that come up which are beyond my control, and all too often I find myself “juggling” time and efforts in the hope that at least a little of the necessities will be accomplished. I’ll provide just one example:

In the middle of July there was scheduled the much awaited Urban Parish Summit, something that I had been looking forward to. It was to be held in Cleveland at the Cathedral. Simultaneously, the FOCA Summer Sports Tournament, (which I still refer to by its former name, “Junior Olympics”) was going on at St Vladimir’s Camp. I had been present for this function for the better part of my sixteen years in the Diocese. My juggling plan included a few days at camp and attendance at most of the summit. But earlier that week I received the sad news that the oldest parishioner of my former parish of St. John the Baptist in Black Lick, PA had fallen asleep in the Lord. “Aunt Louise” as she was know to me helped keep me alive during those lean years of my pastorate with her kibby, grape leaves and Syrian chicken, not to mention love. I had made it a point to attend most of the funerals at St. John’s from the time that I left in 1983 until now, and I certainly could not miss hers. I realized that I could not be there for everything, but at least I could pray and pay my respects at the Panikhida. The way the juggling worked out is that I spent a day at Junior Olympics, spent a few hours the first day of the Urban Parish Summit, drove to Pennsylvania for the Panikhida, went back to camp for another day and then back to Chicago for my weekend parish visitation in Indiana. That is an example, in a nutshell, of what I characterize as “Life in the Midwest.”

Every so often we need reminders or “reality checks” with regard to various aspects of diocesan life. These include census reporting, finances, ministries, growth, attrition and related concerns. If any such area of concern is not visited regularly, change – often not for the better – can result while we remain oblivious to the true condition. Recently, in reading an exercise by the Parish Health ministry entitled “Strategic Vision Review” I received a “wake-up call.” It was time for a reality check. All is not as well as I thought regarding statistics, parish profiles, overview of diocesan life, strengths, weaknesses etc. I realized that the downturn in the world’s economy has been devastating to our parishes, and therefore to the Diocese. But a few days ago I found that over \$200,000.00 is owed in back assessments to the diocese, some parishes being in impossible arrears. Because of this, the proposed budget for 2010 has been drastically reduced with line items incredibly slashed, not merely cut. I face the loss of my Protodeacon and administrative assistant, which in itself will affect adversely the life of the Diocese. Is this a storm on the sea of diocesan life or is it a tempest?

We have heard much about parish life in general over the years with workshops and surveys listing the qualities and attributes that describe and make for a good parish. Granted, we all want a parish, each parish, to be warm and welcoming to the stranger or newcomer. We would hope for a worship space which is truly conducive to fervent worship. We would hope for good iconography and prayerful singing, obvious love of Divine Services and their careful execution, constituting a rich liturgical life. We insist on respect and care, both pastoral and brotherly, for each Christian person of the community with attentiveness to his or her unique situation and needs. We welcome good and inspiring sermons, well thought out and presented. We yearn for an environment that proclaims to all “See how they love one another.” Speaking in terms of the ideal is often very easy; the accepting of reality is not.

For some time I have been aware of a common phenomenon regarding families displaced by work transfers or students away from home who visit the local parish and find it “different” from their familiar experience and somehow lacking. All too often such a family or student will “check out” the new church, see that there are differences – the choir sings different music, there aren’t many people our age, the coffee at coffee hour

isn't as good, and Father Smith's sermon wasn't nearly as good as the one given by Father Minskipinskewicz at home. So they go once or twice and then prefer to spend Sunday mornings in a different way – sleeping or doing different things. Such is a typical example of something wrong – and not something wrong with the parish but very wrong with one's attitude. I will speak more later about this important factor. This is clearly a call for back to basics. After all, in the parish, God is praised, He is worshiped in spirit and truth, the Gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Gifts are consecrated, the Body and Blood of Christ is distributed. These are the essentials – any other things are extras. Back to basics!

I am reminded about an apocryphal story about Archbishop John of blessed memory, much beloved in the Midwest. I heard it long ago. I don't know if it's true, but I'll paraphrase as best as I can. A parish was without a priest. The parish Council requested a meeting with Archbishop John where they proceeded to tell him of the qualities they were looking for in a pastor (one of which, no doubt in those days was whether or not their vestments would fit him well.) Doubtless also, is that their request could be rendered in verse:

*Vladyka,
“ Give us a priest
Who's humble and poor.
You keep him humble,
We'll keep him poor.*

It was reported that the Archbishop then told the committee something like this: “I'll show you the closet were I keep my spare priests. There are tall ones, short ones, skinny ones, fat ones, some with a lot of hair, some with no hair. Then you can take your pick. “

Again, I don't know if the anecdote is true, but it makes a good story, and it serves my purpose.

Back to basics, my friends. It must not be so much about how much we get out of parish life, or the singing, or the teaching or the fellowship, but how much we put in ourselves for the building up of the local parish, the Body of Christ.

There is another, all too common, all too tragic phenomenon, described by St. Paul as “...Holding to the form of faith but denying its power.” It has affected my own relatives and friends. I apologize in advance if my words hit a nerve among you. It is not to cast blame, but rather to point out a common but very real problem among our faithful. Essentially it is in the same spirit as the extraordinary phenomenon that we see today of high churchmen suing the Church for millions of dollars – this is disregard for the things of God. I speak in regard to our young people. I realize, of course, that there are no guarantees as to raising a child, in the language of Proverbs, in the right way, that he may not depart from it. As parents, as priests, as hierarchs, we can do everything right which can include instruction, good example, admonition and utmost care in all things, but there is no guarantee that the child will remain a child of God and a member of His Body, the Church. Departure is always tragic, but I think even more tragic is the way that it is perceived and accepted.

Most of us are acquainted with the example of St. Monica, the mother of the Blessed Augustine who would become Bishop of Hippo. Her life reveals her as a loving, caring,

exemplary mother, who, mortified by her son's loose living begged God in His mercy, day and night with tears, to save her son from himself and bring him into the light of truth and righteousness. We can laud her, speak with admiration for her persistence and sing her praises regarding her genuine love for her son.

But now permit me to illustrate an all-too-often common situation of today.

A son was "raised in the Church," started serving in the Altar at age five, a member of the parish youth groups, the Jr. "O" Club, etc, etc, etc. Then he went away to college, went to his home parish over vacations, got a good job away from home and with regard to the parish, was never seen again.

A friend at church asks the young man's father, "By the way, how is Bobby doing? The man replies, "Oh, he's doing great! You know he's married, the second baby's on the way. He just got a promotion at work and by next year he'll be getting a six-figure salary." Yeah, He's doing great!

The real story – from the Christian perspective: Bobby hasn't darkened the door of the church in over five years. He spent the first year after college sitting in a tree in Oahu getting in touch with his "true self." He met his partner and was married sitting on a motorcycle at the top of Pike's Peak by a totally with-it, flower-power wiccan practitioner. Their retro-vows, utilizing such terms as "groovy" and "with-it" were lovely. The first baby was not baptized, of course, with the thought of not violating his civil rights and freedom of choice.

When Bobby's parents heard the Gospel lesson where Our Lord Jesus Christ says, "Unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man you have no life in you," that's all very nice but better not to think too much about it. After all, Bobby's got a good job and will soon make a six-figure annual salary. He's doing great!!

My sisters and brothers, have I made my point? We have St. Monica on one hand and Bobby's parents on the other. My illustration might be a bit extreme, but then again is it really? I personally know of several cases that aren't terribly different. Perhaps its unrealistic for Bobby's parents to emulate Monica in beseeching God day and night with tears that Bobby would return like the Prodigal Son to the Father. But then again, why not? At least to share her spirit and acknowledge that Bobby isn't really doing that great and his soul and those of his family are in danger of being lost. What we have here is a tragedy.

Back to basics, my friends. All our assessments about parish life, diocesan life, liturgical participation, strategic planning – everything depends on one ultimate statement – either we believe or we don't believe. Either our faith has consequences or it doesn't. Then those wonderful words about seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and a thousand other messages are more than words – they are life. We have a tendency to create complexities and ignore the basics. Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth and the Life – the same yesterday, today and forever.

THE MIDWEST

The reports of the venerable Deans paint for us a picture of life in our parish communities, life in the Diocese of the Midwest. They tell of late vocations, ordinations, seminarian support, educational programs, charities, parish property beautifications, summer camps for youth, food and clothing drives for the needy, trips to Project Mexico and the Hogar Rafael orphanage in Guatemala, parish bookstores, coffee houses, iconography projects, life in our monasteries, etc. etc. We see that our parishes, missions and monastic communities, for the most part, are doing what they are supposed to be doing – not without difficulties, not without hardships in these challenging times, but not without successes in the best sense of the word. I am sincerely grateful for all the dedicated efforts of our clergy and lay leadership and to all who make these “successes” possible with God’s help, through their faithful labors that require their time, talents, resources, sacrifices and most of all, their love of God and the People of God.

VACATION

It would like to digress for a minute to consider a topic which remains close to my heart and is actually more complex than it would seem – my summer vacation.

A few years ago I learned that some of the faithful of St. Mary’s Cathedral in Minneapolis had established a relationship with a parish in Bardejov, Slovakia, and supported the building program for a new temple. A visit, or perhaps I can even say a pilgrimage to the land of my forebears had always been a dream of mine – one that I shared with my close friend from my former parish of St. John the Baptist in Black Lick, Pennsylvania. When I learned that a group was scheduled to go in 2009, and I might be welcome to join in, it seemed that my dream might just be turned into reality. My friend, George, committed himself immediately to the opportunity.

Then the financial crash occurred. My monthly stipend from the Central Church Administration as a member of the Holy Synod was abruptly cut off without notice or explanation – a stipend upon which I heavily relied, especially during the process of completing the renovations on my retirement home. It was difficult to make ends meet and I found myself getting deeper in debt. Prospects of a vacation in Europe – a real vacation, the likes of which I had not experienced in over thirty years, seemed to be an unaffordable luxury.

Then I received the suggestion that there may be people who would be willing to help in raising the necessary funds for the trip. Reluctantly, I expressed openness to the idea. (I really wanted to go on this trip.) The rest is a matter of good news and bad news. I was humbled to learn that people responded to this “project” by contributing over \$2000.00. The trip was definitely on. I remain profoundly grateful to those who responded for their expression of love and concern. I pray that God will richly bless them for their kindness and generosity.

The bad news is that I learned that the funding was run through the diocesan books – not a particularly good thing, given the climate of mistrust in the Church due to the crisis of the past four years and the revelation of years of dishonesty and corruption. I understand that more than a few eyebrows were raised in the Diocese concerning “Project Slovakia.”

Perhaps I am making a mountain out of a molehill concerning the diocesan books, but I hate to be the cause of any potential financial controversy.

But the ongoing story leads us to more good news (for me, anyway). Due to the benevolence of our Diocesan Council and last year's Diocesan Assembly, my salary now includes the equivalent of the lost OCA stipend for the previous year. These additional funds, together with an almost respectable IRS return, have restored fiscal solvency and ended my concerns regarding my pension following retirement. Once again, I am profoundly grateful for your kindness and solicitude.

The trip to Slovakia and the Carpathian homeland was wonderful! It was my personal experience of "back to basics." It was edifying to actually see the village and countryside that my grandmother described to me long ago; to visit the church in which she was baptized; to visit the towns and landmarks about which I had only read. It was wonderful to be in the company of a great bunch of people whose company I enjoyed immensely. It was nice just to be able to stand and pray at Divine Services without having to serve or preach, free from any sort of responsibility at all. I had almost forgotten what that is like. The sixteen days flew by all too quickly, and, having arrived back in Chicago I realized that although perhaps I did not deserve a vacation, I certainly needed it! But also at that time a certain verse from the Wisdom of Sirach jumped out at me from the text:

*"He who builds his house with other people's money is like a man who gathers his stones in a storm."
(Wisdom of Sirach 21:8)*

I must confess that I don't really understand what the second half of that verse is, not ever having gathered stones in a storm, but I think it supports my intentions. I have already expressed my gratitude to the people who contributed to my vacation fund and to our Diocesan council for their understanding, but now I am in a position to illustrate my love and solicitude for this God-protected Diocese of the Midwest and the People of God who are her members. Therefore in gratitude to the donors and in their honor I have donated \$2,250.00 to the Diocese of the Midwest, earmarked for Parish Health Ministry. Glory to God for all things!

DIOCESAN SEMINARIANS

Once again, a couple of weeks ago, I was able to interact, as is my custom, with our diocesan seminarians, by spending an evening with them for a relaxed meal at a nice restaurant. We have 20 seminarians (glory to God), ten at St. Vladimir's and ten at St. Tikhon's. On two consecutive evenings I enjoyed quality time and good food with them, their spouses, children and some friends who became Midwesterners for an evening. Total participation was around 55 people. I fielded a few questions about the Diocese, life in the OCA and the impending Holy Synod / Metropolitan Council meeting, but we engaged mostly in small-talk, pleasantries and an anecdote or two from simpler and happier times. This personal, informal time and contact of a hierarch and his "seminarian family," if you will, is in my estimation extremely important. I regard it as a vital part of my episcopal ministry. I lament the fact that our budget line item for seminarian support has been drastically reduced. The budgeted amount, divided twenty ways won't provide much assistance, and our married seminarians with families will suffer.

In two of our deaneries – Chicago and Minneapolis – fund-raising dinners for our seminarians have been held annually for several years. One very successful dinner was held in the Cleveland deanery several years ago, but unfortunately the “ball was dropped.” Now this added funding is vital. I urge each deanery to undertake a fund-raising project - a dinner if feasible (which also provides good fellowship) or a system of special collections or some other organized project to raise funds. After all, our seminarians are not only our future, they are our “now.” We must show them our love by caring for them adequately.

WEAKNESS

I had commented before about the “successes” in our Diocese, successes in our parish, mission and monastic communities. But the “flip side” also exists, doubtless fostered or exacerbated by the OCA crisis and scandal. Our weaknesses right now include a cynicism, distrust, lack of confidence in leadership on all levels outside the parish, a startling resurgence of parochialism, a “circling of the wagons” and a looking out for number one. I submit that this provides an explanation of why parochial stewardship to The Orthodox Church in America and the Diocese of the Midwest seems in some place to be the lowest priority in regard to parish finances. This must change. An illustration may point out that if the electric bill is not paid, electric service is cut off. If the gas bill is not paid, no gas. But up till now, if the assessments are not paid, nothing happens, no consequences. This also must change, and will change. Stewardship – of a Christian to his or her parish, of a parish to the Diocese is not merely a suggestion. It is a responsibility. I don’t even like to use the term “obligation.” It must be viewed in biblical understanding; “God loves a cheerful giver.” St Irenaeus of Lyons stated:

“...the Jews consecrated tithes of their goods to [God], but those who have received liberty in Christ, set aside all their possessions for the Lord’s purposes.”

Or perhaps in our present climate we should take to heart the words of St. John Chrysostom:

“If there was a danger then, (i.e. under the Old Covenant) in omitting tithes, think how great it must be now.”

My friends, this is a hard saying but one that has to be taken most seriously. If a parish is unable, or worse, unwilling to assume its responsibility of supporting the Diocese from which it derives its life, sacramentally through a duly assigned priest and in terms of its life-giving connection to the greater Church, the Body of Christ, then the parish’s viability must be questioned. Unfortunately, as an aspect of my responsibility as diocesan bishop, for the first time I must mention the possibility of the closing or consolidation of parishes – a phenomenon all too familiar to other Christian confessions. This delicate situation will be thoroughly examined and discussed in the ensuing year.

At this point it might be appropriate to ask the question “Are we having fun yet?” No, in these challenging times diocesan administration is not fun. Preparing budgets is not fun. Squeezing every penny is not fun. We have to work within our means, with what we have, and we have to do our best with it. That begins with love. I truly love our Diocese, our clergy, our lay leadership, all our people, all our kids. It continues with gratitude. I am truly grateful for the counsel, patience and encouragement of our diocesan

Chancellor, Father John Zdinak, also thanks to our venerable Deans. My thanks and a tip of the skufia go to our Diocesan Council Members, our Finance Committee members, our Metropolitan Council representatives who represent us well, to our property manager and also to my Protodeacon, Father Joseph Matusiak who continues to serve me and our Diocese well, as he unfortunately faces an uncertain future. And before you all, I apologize to him for his being placed in this unenviable situation. Thanks to the Kansas City Deanery, especially Fr Tim Sawchak and the other clergy and faithful of Holy Trinity Church for hosting this assembly.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this report, with regard to our diocesan woes, problems, challenges, obstacles and so forth, I had mentioned that it is a matter of attitude. Narrowing that down I think it is a matter of willingness – willingness to “bite the bullet,” willingness to address frankly and thoroughly our present reality and present responsibility, willingness to do what is right for the preaching of the Gospel and the edification of the Body of Christ.

My friends, I ask you to ponder the following statement: “Willingness opens the doors to knowledge, direction and achievement. “ No, this is not a quote from the Book of Proverbs or from the Wisdom of Sirach. In fact, I recently read it in a fortune cookie. But I think Solomon and Jesus ben Sirach would approve and concur. Willingness makes knowledge, direction and achievement accessible and leads us to wisdom and that Wisdom is Christ. Willingness is to be for Christ, with Christ and in Christ.

I am pleased to quote from or actually paraphrase the wise writings of one of our senior archpriests:

“It is up to us to bring Christ to the work of leadership. That is the task of each of us as Christians – to bring Christ to every situation. Christ is not necessarily already there – we have to bring Him to where we are and where we are going. Part of our priesthood (the priesthood of all believers) is to bring Christ to every situation, to transform and transfigure the things we are working with. We have to bring Him there. That is our task. Christ will be present in diocesan life, in parish life, in our deliberations, in the solving of our problems to the extent to which we bring Him. We are responsible for whether or not in our meeting and decisions Christ is present. We must incarnate Him in the present. This is done not just in the Eucharistic offering, but in our lives, our meetings, our assemblies, our ministries and our mission.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth and the Life. To Him be all glory unto ages of ages. Amen.

Thank you.



†Job

Archbishop of Chicago and the Midwest