

STATE OF THE DIOCESE

July 2012

Your Grace, Beloved Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today we give thanks to the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, Who has granted us this holy and historic Convention of our Diocese in the USA, Canada and Australia.

I am humbled that God has brought me to all of you to serve as your Diocesan Metropolitan.

I have been seated on this throne to proclaim the Gospel and minister to the suffering in this Diocese through the love and mercy of the Holy Spirit. Today's gathering is accomplished by the economy of the Holy Spirit. The unction of the Holy Spirit flows down from Christ our Savior over my human weakness and over all of you in our Holy Eparchy. The Holy Spirit dwells here and envelops this Diocese with His perfume. We share in this grace, as we are One Body in Christ. Where the Spirit is, there the Bulgarian Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia is.

I am enthroned to shepherd not individual human beings alone, but a vast and diverse Diocese. The Grace of the Holy Spirit makes the pilot skilled in navigation, and gives those who sit at the helm of the Diocese, myself and our Vicar Bishop, the knowledge of how to bring the souls of those who sail with them safe into the haven of God.

This Convention is of great importance, for it shall increase and perfect the ministries as a Diocese for many years. For many, this Convention brings with it new life. The Holy Bible says: "...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Today we are called to continue to choose life over death. You have been counted worthy to become living temples of God, and not sepulchers of the dead spirit of this world. Materialism, contentiousness, selfishness, schism and other such sins are of this world, bringing only death. Instead, we are offered a life of love, compassion, patience, selflessness and joy beyond measure. It is an immeasurable blessing to work diligently with the grace of the Holy Spirit, Which the living God has bestowed upon us in our Diocese.

We were made to be a living Diocese, without blemish, beautiful, and not adorned with gold or pearls but with a Spirit that is more precious than these. We are called today to go about carrying a living temple in which the fragrance of the Holy Spirit pours out in abundance. By doing so, our Diocese will be filled with the aroma of life unto life, as you give yourselves up to God, an offering to God for a perfume of a sweet smell of holiness. This glorious incense drives away sinfulness and heals every wound. It brings us together, as one people, a holy nation. The Spirit of God brings unity and concord, things that the world does not comprehend.

On Sunday mornings we travel to church because we believe certain things about our Lord Jesus Christ – that He is God and that He died on a cross and rose from the dead, saving us all. We want to be part of this believing body of Orthodox Christians.

From the Great Litany at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy to the very end, when the priest says: "Glory to Thee, O Christ our God and our Hope, glory to Thee!" we have many different streams of dialogue between the clergy and people, each affording us an opportunity to unify as a community, as the Body of Christ.

On Sunday mornings we experience conciliarity as we celebrate the Divine Liturgy. As you know, the liturgical prayers and hymns are written in the plural: we praise, we bless, we give thanks. Likewise, the services include cantor or choir director together with choir members and readers who chant and sing the services. There is usually a person who takes up the collection, while others lead with Church school programs and youth group activities. Still others greet and welcome newcomers or engage in the ministry of hospitality by serving at the coffee hour. So, when we look at the "big picture", there are a multitude of tasks to be accomplished on a Sunday morning as the People of God gather as a community of faith and share in worship and fellowship with one another.

Our conciliar Diocesan Church is one that can engage openly in debate and discussion in brotherly love, yet with full respect and freedom in Christ.

Our clergy are not called to have power and authority over the laity, nor are the laity called to increase their power or authority over and against the clergy; rather, all are called to work together for the common good of the entire Diocesan membership.

In this environment, I am called to lead you humbly to enthrone the spiritual over the material, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. "You ought not to think that which is divine to be like gold or silver or stone, the graven form of man's art and imagination" (Acts 17:29). Do not look at the outside of things, but peer through the material and see the spiritual truth behind it. As your Metropolitan, on the outside I look like a worldly leader, but if you allow your vision to penetrate more deeply, you will see the self sacrificial calling of the Diocesan Metropolitan. I am a servant, one who is called to give my life for the healing of the spiritually sick and the unity of the flock. I must chase after the lost sheep, and guard the flock against the snares of the devil.

You ought, therefore, to entrust your souls to your Diocesan Metropolitan, to soften them by the fervent warmth of the Holy Spirit. Do not believe this world, which tells you that you must be hardened to avoid the pain and suffering of life. The truth is that, if we patiently endure all suffering with hands outstretched to God, He will turn our curses into blessings, and our afflictions into mighty gifts. Be zealous to work with your Diocesan Metropolitan and the Vicar Bishop, earnestly desiring the spiritual things, that this promise might become yours. A softened heart, a mind full of love for God and all people, is filled with light and purity.

We must all use this light of the Spirit for teaching and preaching. I am commanded to preach and speak authoritatively, so that those who hear may also attain this light. The Apostles were

commanded to share this light with the world, through the preaching of the Good News, the sharing of the sacraments and the instruction of the faithful. For this purpose, the Apostles established the episcopacy, which exists to this very moment.

He who is "nourished up in the words of sound doctrine," first receives the benefit of it himself and then from teaching his flock. From teaching others, the bishop is blessed in return with the people's edification. You see, bishops do not live to receive blessing from others or try to take what they want, but rather they are blessed by blessing and receive by giving. Our Lord Jesus Christ shows the duty of teachers, when He says: "The kingdom of Heaven is like unto a householder, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (Matthew 13:52). And the blessed St. Paul said that the believers had received a law, "not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Cor. 3:3).

Beloved in Christ, you are the pillars of the Holy Orthodox Church throughout this Diocese, who drink the cup of Christ, and were baptized with His baptism. You have "put on Christ" (Romans 13:14), having "feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15). In Him you live, and move, and have your being, through the repentance and humility with which you approach God.

From this point forward, great diligence and fervent desire on the part of all is needed for teaching the Orthodox Faith to the USA, Canada and Australia. Great challenges lie ahead of us, as we move forward towards the goal of bringing the light of Christ to our Diocese.

All the un-churched people within our Diocese are your responsibility. As Apostles sent from above, you are called to reach out to them. If you approach them with love, in the beauty of your souls and from the bottom of your hearts, that virtue that God promises to those who earnestly seek Him will flow to them. If you have made ready your souls through prayer, study and good works, you will speak to them from the depths of the Spirit. You are friends of the King Himself, and you will speak of the love and light you have been given by God. "I have called you friends," He says, "for all things I have heard of My Father, I have made known unto you" (John 15:15).

This is the Orthodox message we have received from Christ through His Gospel and proclaim to you, that God is light, and you are the light of the world. The glory of His kingdom has been given unto you; and you are established in His kingdom, and excellent greatness has been added unto you. I pray that the Spirit of God shall rest upon you, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of God, so that you may continue to grow and bring hope to this Diocese. By seeking God's will, the grace of the Holy Spirit shall work even more miracles in our midst.

What a great moment! This has been a very busy Convention! We have seen history being made in the worship of God and the blessings He has bestowed on us. We are here now enjoying the fruit of the labors of those before us, and we work now to prepare for the future. Is our future bright? I say "yes" as I look at all of you, remembering the many sacrifices so many of you have made for the sake of this Diocese, for your parishes, missions and monasteries and for the people you have served.

We are so very honored to have all of you, who have served with selfless love and honor for many years. By yielding yourselves to the Gospel, and tirelessly working for the preaching of the Orthodox Faith, you have seen God grow this Diocese from a small immigrant community to a rich and diverse family that is expanding almost beyond our ability to keep up.

These are times of change, as we try to adjust to the constant growth we experience each day. This is not easy, as we must continue to serve the faithful flock, go after the lost sheep and proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven to those looking for the true Diocese. As we struggle in our daily lives, we are constantly reminded that there is so much more to life rather than worldly cares.

If we lift up our hearts from the daily grind, we can experience the joy of life in Jesus Christ. If we realize God's protection and care for us, we can abandon fear and live in total freedom. If we courageously move out from our tiny world of material comfort, we can experience the mysteries of God's infinite mercies.

Through the eyes of faith, we see the possibilities of goodness in all things. No longer do we have to live in insecurity and shame. The universe is transformed by our own vision of God's love for us all. The people we think are our enemies or have done us wrong are seen with love, and we can forgive them and be at peace with all.

Unity is the key. If we refuse to be united, then we reject the love and forgiveness that our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated on the Cross. Our Lord was so committed to the unity of mankind that He died even for those who hated Him. His outstretched arms embraced all people. He draws all mankind to Himself, and by restoring our communion with God, He restores our communion with one another. This is unity: to be patient, forgiving and tolerant of all people. With God's love, we can look past conflict and see the things we share with others. We may not always agree, but that does not scare us. We see something more: the Heavenly Kingdom.

So, we must build up what has been given to us, not as tombs for the dead, but as centers from which the powerful seed of the Gospel may be scattered.

We must share the Orthodox Faith as widely as possible and live that faith as deeply as possible, transforming the Diocese in which we live as we are transformed ourselves.

The Convention is exactly time for Diocesan renewal. The Diocese is reborn every time someone enters our community. This is true even when the new member comes from another Orthodox church. Our Diocesan community is changed to make room for the new member who will build relationship and assume responsibility.

We also rediscover our roots with our new members. I hope every parish is aware that our Diocese is growing and that God is calling people to Himself in our Orthodox parishes. We are a Bulgarian Diocese, but we are not ethnic ghettos with inferior customs; we are the Diocese of Jesus Christ. We pray for the building up of it and for those who are entering into our Diocesan community. We commit ourselves to accepting that the Diocese is God's and that all whom God

calls are welcome. We are grateful to God for all He has done for us. We build relationship with those who enter the Diocese. Truly to say, every Convention is a gift of the Diocese for renewal and growth.

During the Convention time we share insights which help all of us in attendance to better understand our role and function in the life of the Diocese. The Convention encourages us to remember that we are all one in the Diocese, working together for the glory of God. All of us – the Metropolitan, the Vicar Bishop, priests, deacons, and the people labor in unison. We do not follow an externally congregational model in which the laymen dominate. Nor do we follow a completely pastoral model, where the clergy make all decisions. Our model for Diocesan parishes follows the advice we receive in 2 Corinthians 6:1: "We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain."

At this moment we have 1 Metropolitan, 1 Vicar Bishop, 2 Archimandrites, 1 Igumen, 36 priests, 15 deacons, 1 monk and 1 nun at your service. In 1982 we had six priests and six parishes. Thanks be to God we now have 1 Diocesan Cathedral, 26 parishes, 3 missions, and 2 monasteries in the USA; 6 parishes in Canada and 2 in Australia. We have 5 retired priests. In addition we have three seminarians currently studying in Holy Cross School of Theology in Boston, MA, and every seminarian receives a full scholarship from the Diocese. Michael Tishel also graduated in Greece, completing his theological studies at the Aristotle University of Thessalonika this spring.

So, 30 years ago God entrusted me with this vineyard, this ship, and commissioned me to lead it to a safe harbor. For 30 years we have been sailing, sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against the wind, but we kept sailing. If I leave you before we reach this safe harbor, I beg you to keep the torch burning and the dream alive.

Finally, I want to thank all of you, my coworkers in this vineyard, Your Grace and all faithful clergy, who continue to serve whether in large parishes, small parishes or missions, dedicating your love to Christ and His people.

I ask for the continuation of your prayers and support, as I pledge to work with you for the glory of God and for the common good of the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia.

Thank you for your attention!

+ Metropolitan JOSEPH