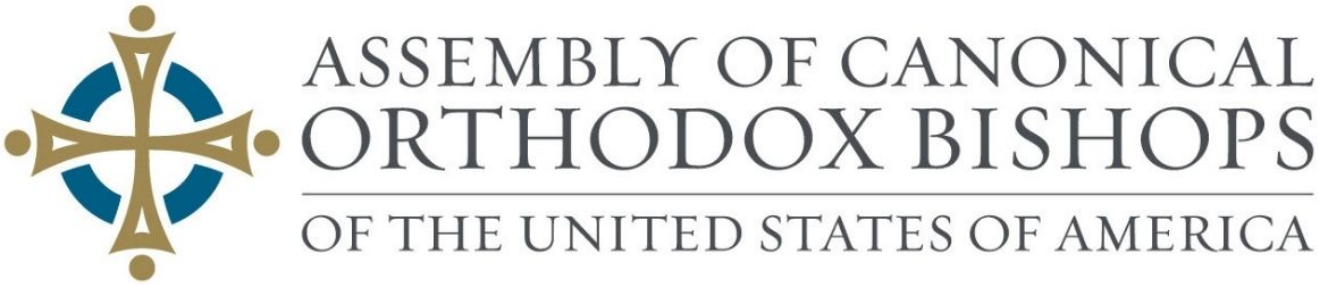
01/10/2024

Opening Address at the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA in Atlanta, GA



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America
Opening Address
Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA
September 30, 2024
Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral – The Carlos Center
Atlanta, Georgia
My Beloved Brothers and Concelebrants in the Holy Spirit,

First and foremost, I want to greet you with a spirit of gratitude for your presence in this Assembly of Bishops, and note – for the record – that we all miss our First Vice-Chairman, His Eminence Metropolitan Saba and we are praying for his good health. It was a last minute decision for him to take care of himself and I know that he wishes he were here. Our supplications and best wishes go with him.

We gather in momentous and even troubling times. Around the world, the war between Russia and Ukraine is still being waged and as it drags out, more innocent lives are lost. We pray for a conclusion to this fratricidal war, but we hear more saber-rattling than constructive proposals. I am happy that this Assembly issued

the statement of concern over the Ukrainian Law directed against its own citizenry in a way that breaches the principle of religious liberty. Let us pray that a solution is quickly found to this internal Ukrainian situation.

In the Middle East, we meet in advance of the one year anniversary of the October Seventh terrorist attack by Hamas against the State of Israel, whose response of overwhelming force and retaliation has caused tens of thousands of unnecessary and innocent deaths. And we are now witnessing an outbreak of violence against Hezbollah in Lebanon, a country which has been abused by other state actors to fight a proxy war against the Israeli people. This has happened even as the current Israeli Government continues a violent and hurtful campaign in the West Bank, and sends disturbing signals around Temple Mount in the Holy City of Jerusalem, upending the delicate balance of the three great Monotheistic Faiths.

I believe that our Assembly has the responsibility to support both the Ancient Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem in their own struggles to maintain peace and calm among their flocks. As horrific as the October Seventh attacks and kidnappings were, the escalation in violent reprisals that have left non-combatants dead, horribly wounded, and deeply traumatized – women, children, and the elderly and infirm – is unacceptable.

I have a statement to propose at the appropriate moment. I hope that we will be able to come together in consensus to support Their Beatitudes, Patriarch John and Patriarch Theophilos, and their respective flocks in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan. All of our jurisdictions possess members whose families are affected, and they rightfully look to us for leadership and guidance. Our statement may have no impact on state actors, but we can be exemplars for our faithful.

Moreover, right here in our country, in less than forty days, we are preparing for a significant national election. All of us are aware of how sharply divided the Nation came seem, especially when the Mass Media and Social Media foment echo chambers where dialogue gives way to solipsistic monologues.

We Orthodox – unlike many of the religious community of the United States – do not take sides in the electoral processes of our Country. We respect the liberty of conscience of the rational sheep of our flocks. We trust our people to be responsible citizens of this Country, and we hold in high regard their ability to exercise their Constitutional Rights in accordance with their Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and in accordance with the Teachings and Tradition of His Holy Church. Therefore, I commend to you this praiseworthy injunction of the Apostle Paul:

So be careful to walk circumspectly, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming this critical time because the days are evil.1

Although our Faithful do not regularly look to the Hierarchy and clergy of the Church to instruct them in such matters, it is nevertheless incumbent upon us all to act and to speak wisely. Our examples of unity, solidarity, and fraternity are models for the People of God. Our communities are neither homogenous, nor are they monolithic. Varieties of opinion and expression abound, but all are welcome in the fellowship of the Church, as long as abide by the commands of the Gospel.

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And to the good news of Gospel I now turn, to express to all of you my appreciation for you spirit of synergy and goodwill. As a result, we have accomplished much in the past years, and especially under the dire circumstances occasioned by the Pandemic.

As you all recall, we joined as brother bishops in this Assembly and formed a Covid Task Force to coordinate responses, and explore options to keep our communities together and engaged in worship.

In the past five years, our Assembly has held three Meetings of all the Hierarchs in America, and an unprecedented fifty-two meetings of its Executive Committee. Last year at our meeting in Los Angeles, we had the largest concelebration of Orthodox Bishops in America.

In addition, we have increased the footprint of this Assembly by creating two new dynamic Agencies: the Orthodox Youth and Young Adult Ministries (OYM) and the Orthodox Volunteer Corps (OVC). We shall hear their reports during our meetings and I believe we have much cause for joy.

We also have formed the Assembly of Bishops Accessibility Ministry, to work on translations of the Divine Liturgy in American Sign Language, Braille, and other forms of accessible languages.

We have established of the Assembly’s Mental Health Ministries, developing a Directory of Orthodox Christian Mental Health Professionals, and the Peace of Mind training program in mental health first-aid, which received a generous $200,000 grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

We have also launched the Assembly of Bishops Inter-Parish Association ministry, which is backed by a 1.25 million dollar grant from the Lilly Endowment, and which

will work to promote communication, camaraderie, and cooperation across all the Orthodox Christian parishes in a given geographical area.

My Brother Hierarchs: these Pan-Orthodox initiatives are imperative to our Oneness in Christ – not only among ourselves, but with all our sisters and brothers from the worldwide Orthodox Church. The unity we seek as Orthodox Christians is defined in the Creed we say at every Divine Liturgy: “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” The Lord has set a very big table for all of us, and there is room for everyone.

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Allow me now to give the traditional update about our brotherhood, Since our last meeting, we have endured the passing of one our own – the late Bishop Hierotheos of Eukarpia, who oversaw the Monastery of Saint Irene Chryssovalantou and her dependencies fell asleep in the Lord on March Eleventh of this year. May he find the reward of a good and faithful servant in the Kingdom of Heaven, and may his memory be eternal.

We also have newly ordained Hierarchs who are serving in various capacities:

Bishop Theophan (Albanian Orthodox Diocese-EP)
Bishop Nektarios (GOA)
Bishop Anthony (GOA)
Bishop Nikodhim (OCA)
And Bishop Benedict (OCA)
We also recognize the retirement of two Hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese: His Eminence Metropolitan Isaiah who served the Denver Metropolis for decades, and Bishop Dimitrios of Mokissos. We wish them both good health and prosperity of the spirit.

The election of our friend, Metropolitan Saba, by the Holy Synod of Antioch to lead the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America has been welcomed with joy by all.

There were also elevations of Hierarchs. His Grace Bishop Longin of the Serbian Orthodox Church was promoted to the rank of Archbishop.

Bishop Apostolos was elected Metropolitan of New Jersey in the GOA.

Bishop Constantine was elected Metropolitan of Denver in the GOA

And of special import to our Assembly, because he was once a member of this

fraternal body, we have a new Patriarch of All Bulgaria, His Holiness Daniil, who once served as a Bishop under Metropolitan Joseph here in the States. In view of his service I America, I would recommend that this Assembly convey a congratulatory letter to His Holiness, to express our good wishes and many prayers for a fruitful patriarchal ministry.

And unto all those who have been elected and those who have been elevated, let us all say: “Many Years!” “Axios!”

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Finally, I am taking a point of personal privilege – but with the support of everyone here! – to recognize a person who has been instrumental in this Assembly’s formation and has given of his time and resources without restraint for our efforts. I am speaking, of course, of our dear brother, Eric Namee, who has been a part of the Secretariat of this Assembly since its inception. We all know Eric and his amazing commitment to our Holy Orthodox Church – not only through his administration of the Virginia H. Farah Foundation for nearly forty years, but his profound involvement with just about every aspect of Church life in America. As a philanthropist, as an outstanding legal mind, and as a faithful laborer in the Vineyard of the Lord. For his service to us and to the Church, I invite him to come forward and receive a small token of our gratitude.

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Beloved Brothers:

Let us be bold in our affirmation of our Holy Faith, and lead our flocks to the verdant pastures of pure and unalloyed Orthodoxy, so that they may be fed with manna from heaven in all their needs.

Thank you again for your presence in these holy days of our meeting. May all our deliberations by blessed; through the intercessions of the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, and all the Saints.

Amen.

1 Ephesians 5: 15,16.

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