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Keynote Address of His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros at the Archdiocesan Council Meeting



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October 17, 2019

**New York Midtown Hilton
New York, New York**

Your Eminences and Your Graces,

Mr. John Catsimatidis, Vice Chairman of this Archdiocesan Council,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Committee and

Members of the Archdiocesan Council,

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, just four months after my arrival in the United States, and only five months from my election as your Archbishop, I can promise each of you that our beloved Archdiocese of America is back on course and headed to the safe harbor of stability, progress and growth. This is not to say that all the painful repercussions of the past are behind us.

There are challenges all around us. Christianity remains under attack, Americans continue to lose their trust and faith in religion, and our own beloved Archdiocese has suffered from a lack of transparency, a lack of funds and, yes, a lack of trust. We are addressing these challenges head-on, but it requires a long-term solution, not a short-term fix.

It is critical that we maintain our Christian and Hellenic values, traditions, culture and mission, while ensuring that the Archdiocese's administration, operations, communications and ministries function as a modern, transparent and contemporary church, meeting the needs of our faithful. Over the next few weeks, I will be reaching out to many of you to join me in developing a new process and plan that ensures the continued vitality of our Archdiocese and the Greek Orthodox faith in America today. We hope to share with you our findings at the next Archdiocesan Council meeting.

What we genuinely want and need for our Archdiocese is transparency, accountability, and responsibility. As we continue on this stage of our voyage, I am proud to call all of you my co-workers, especially our new Vice-Chairman, John Catsimatidis. Regardless of how we arrived on these shores, whether born in this blessed land or carried here over the sea or in the air, we have all been called to tend the Lord's Vineyard in America, planted by the His own Right Hand, and having its Root and Stem in the Apostolic Vine of our Holy Mother Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Your commitment, your dedication, and your love for Christ and His Holy Church are now more essential than they have ever been. We need your talents to reinforce the walls that support our Archdiocese and Her many ministries, for they have been severely strained and are in need renewal. As a leading Archdiocese of the Ecumenical Throne we need to strengthen and build up the present while at the same time laying the foundations of our future. We all know the problems of our present circumstances and are well aware of the issues that occurred in the past.

For this reason, I ask you, rather, I need you to be committed to speaking up, speaking out, and speaking the truth in love. We must be honest with each other about the state of our Church. Silence on these grave issues is neither respectful nor useful. You are all here because you are leaders, and leaders must communicate. I expect nothing less from all of you, for we have much work to accomplish.

But this is no time for pessimism. Our sights must be fixed on the future, a future that can be glorious for our Holy Orthodox Faith and our Archdiocese; a bright future of nearly limitless potential. In order to make this possible, we must sincerely accept and embrace our roles and responsibilities in the life of this Church as leaders, as we rely on the Grace of God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (*cf. Mark 12:30*).

When I arrived just a few months ago, the timing proved to be a great advantage for me, because, as is the custom in our Churches, summertime is traditionally a season of reduced activity. Therefore, I was afforded opportunities to travel throughout this great Nation, and see for myself the state of our Holy Archdiocese of America. And do you know what I witnessed? Not a passive and vacationing community, but a vibrant and energetic Body of Believers: young people in spiritually-based camping programs; churches filled with hymns of praise and committed Faithful; clergy and laity working together to improve and excel in the life of their local parishes; and parish clergy and lay leaders who want the very best for our Church. I have the utmost confidence in our Faithful who are working for a brighter and more hope-filled future. And this good news is what brings me here today, full of optimism, to my first of many Archdiocesan Councils to come.

All of us here gathered: the Most Reverend Members of the Holy Eparchial Synod, the Executive Committee, the Membership of the Council, clergy and lay alike, the staff of the Archdiocese itself, the staff of the Metropolises and all our Institutions, especially Hellenic College and Holy Cross – all of us bear the duty and responsibility to deliver the ministry of the Church to our faithful members, from the youngest infant to the most venerable senior. We cannot forget even one, for we are all, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, members of the one Body of our Lord Jesus Christ (*cf. I Corinthians 12*).

And I will go further; we are all members of **one** Holy Archdiocese of America. We are not divided into Metropolises, and Parishes, and Departments, and Organizations, and Institutions. This is a false and worldly view that misunderstands the very nature of the Church. Rather, we are **apportioned for service** through all of these organs of the Church that I just mentioned. We are not

and can never be divided. Just as the Breaking of the Holy Eucharist does not divide the Lord Jesus Christ, but apportions Him so that all may partake of the “Banquet of Faith,” as the Holy Chrysostom says, we all have our roles and positions and vocations. But the Archdiocese is One! As the Charter from our Holy Mother Church states:

“The Archdiocese, being the Eparchy of the Ecumenical Throne in the United States of America, is one indivisible entity in its entirety.”

(Article 3, para. a).

We must never forget this undeniable fact of our ecclesial being, which is the very foundation for everything that we do, and everything that we desire to achieve. Without this, we are nothing but a loose alliance of disinterested parties, a factional federation that will never rise above personal agendas and misplaced allegiances. We have a higher calling, one that demands our complete and utter spiritual, ethical, and moral commitment.

Therefore, I come before you today, full of hope in our collective future. And I want to call all of you to help me rebuild our institutions, so that we may be worthy of the trust that the Faithful bestow upon us. There are three distinct areas of concern, ones that I raised in my Enthronement Address, that I wish to re-emphasize with you today.

First: our youth. And I am speaking about those in the cradle all the way to those considering marriage and starting families of their own. We have remarkable and talented youth workers and educators in our Archdiocese, and indeed, across all our Orthodox Brethren in America. We must concentrate and pool our resources on the very best of them so that we cultivate the future leaders of our communities, both clergy and lay. But it is not just about the best programs, it must also be about the best and most basic practices of our Church.

Here, I would mention the most obvious fact about Christian Orthodoxy in America – that all Orthodox Christians together are less than 0.3% of the total American population. Furthermore, while the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America is now about 25% converts – meaning those who were not raised in the Orthodox Faith but choose to practice it as an adult – nearly 50% of all Orthodox Christians in the United States are now converts. Needless to say, we all know that the epoch of immigration from Europe is essentially over. And so, we must be open and welcoming to those who would find a life among us.

With this in mind, I would make this suggestion: instead of calling marriages with

non-Orthodox spouses “mixed marriages,” might we not better refer to them as “miracle marriages?” For these marriages are the main road that ushers converts to the Faith. As the Apostle Paul says:

How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (I Cor. 7:16)

Every faithful marriage is a miracle marriage – a miracle of God’s love and a Mystery to be celebrated with joy and embraced with thanksgiving. Whether or not the spouse joins the Church in a formal way through Chrismation, they are still 100% part of our community, and should be embraced as such. If we are to be a Church that truly serves and embraces our young people who live in a technologically advanced and pluralistic world, we must embrace the strangers in our midst – make them strangers no more, and embrace all the members of our community and our Country.

My second concern: our Hellenic College and Holy Cross Theological School. Since my Enthronement, I have visited our beloved Σχολή once a month. My commitment to fixing the morass of current problems – financial and otherwise – at our School, which is the very womb of our future clergy, is unconditional and absolute.

I will be frank with you: our School has been sinking for a long time. I saw it myself when I taught there fifteen years ago. What is the American expression? “Kicking the can down the road.” No real solutions to the current problems, but rather mortgaging the future of the clergy by virtually bankrupting the School, and ignoring the requirements of the academic accreditation agencies as if they were predatory lenders. I cannot tell you the shock that I felt when I learned how close we had come to losing our accreditation and our ability to even grant a degree! I say these things not in a pessimistic manner, but in a spirit of truth, concern and love, with much hope for the future of our School. I want to thank specifically George Cantonis, the Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the extraordinary efforts he has taken to save Hellenic College and Holy Cross from literally going under, and I must also express my deep gratitude to His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios, who has been willing to act as the interim President during this critical time.

My first act as Chairman of the Board of the School was to appoint a School Chaplain, Archimandrite Athenagoras Ziliaskopoulos, who filled a position that had been vacant for years. Imagine, a Seminary without a chaplain, without spiritual guidance, with no liturgical spirituality! The absurdity of it should challenge our presuppositions about what it is we are trying to achieve at Hellenic College and

Holy Cross. This institution is the *sine qua non* of the future of this sacred Archdiocese. Without trained, competent, and spiritually mature clergy to lead our parishes, we will face the same diminishment of our flocks that every other religious organization in the United States is facing.

My Brothers and Sisters, we need to be clear-eyed about these things. We are not immune to this kind of decline. Just look at the Archdiocese Registry statistics over the past twenty years; every category is falling, except funerals. But we can never accept to be a Church that is dying off. We are a branch of the Apostolic Vine of the Great Church of Christ, joined through the Faith and the Person of the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Successor of the First-Called Disciple Andrew to the True Vine Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ! Even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, we are alive and well, and more than well, because we are the Church of Christ, nourished by His Body and Blood, fully equipped for God's mission of the salvation of the world.

And nothing is more essential to our equipment than our Seminary, our preparatory Σχολή to ready the future generations of priests and lay leaders. We must elevate and build it up our School from its present circumstances to ensure that such dereliction never occurs again.

Finally, as I spoke of the Saint Nicholas National Shrine at Ground Zero in my Enthronement Address: "It is our duty and our responsibility as Orthodox Christians – but also our obligation and commitment to God and His people – to complete and open the doors of the Saint Nicholas National Shrine."

This is our offering to our City, to our Nation, and to the world. The rebuilt Saint Nicholas Church will be much more than the historic and precious parish church that fell among the victims of 9/11. Saint Nicholas is a vision of what is best in all people of faith and religious conviction: love of God and love of neighbor, mutual understanding, and reciprocal respect.

We, the Greek Orthodox Faithful of America, have been given this sacred and noble task, to raise up the Victory Standard to Life Eternal on the field where so much death was dealt without pity. The Unconquered Cross – Τό Ἀήττητον Τρόπαιον – will rise at Ground Zero, a sign that faith endures over doubt; hope dispels despair; and love conquers all!

The Shrine will be a shining City on a Hill, and a beacon of hope for all people of good will, and it will be the most observed and visited Orthodox Church in the world, as long as we are faithful to its mission. We must re-commence the building

of the Church immediately, and open the doors by **September Eleventh, 2021**, as a tribute to those who perished that fateful day, and as a lead off to the centenary year of our Holy Archdiocese.

My Friends, although I do not know all of you so well, I feel that we are friends in Christ. Our challenges are many, but our talents and resources are great. Thank you for embracing this mission with me. May God see all our endeavors rise from glory to glory, bringing eternal glory to His Holy Name. Amen.

- Source: goarch.org