05/10/2021

Opening Address Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America

My Beloved Brothers and Concelebrants in the Holy Spirit,

I greet each and every one of you in the beauty and glory of our Holy Orthodox Christian Faith. I feel so very blessed that we are able to gather in person this year, even though we yet face many challenges from this unrelenting pandemic. This is, therefore, a continuation of our Tenth Anniversary celebration, which had to be in a virtual setting last year.

We are gathered today as the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of America – brothers in Christ who have been called to serve His Body, the Church, and all the members thereof, from the greatest to the least.

Each of us brings a unique perspective to the work of this Assembly, perspectives that come from our own life experience and our years of service within the Church. We represent diverse backgrounds, and often divergent points of view. But what binds us together is greater than any opinion or position which might differentiate us. Because we are called – all of us – to serve. And to serve all the Faithful.

When the starving, the parched, the naked, and homeless – whether in body or spirit – come to our door, we are not called to judge them, but to minister to them without reservation, based on the unconditional love of God for all His creatures.

And so it is with us, dear brothers. Our ministries may diverge in style and even substance (at least on the surface), but they are united in the singular love of Christ for his Church. There is no other possibility for a bishop of the Church.

Therefore, even though our Russian Brethren do not join us today, we cannot exclude them from our prayers, our thoughts, and above all else, our love. They are full members of this Assembly and we pray for their speedy return, because as Orthodox Christians, we are people of dialogue.

Orthodoxy, as we all know, is not a federation of Churches, but a family – a very large global family. As the Prophet Malachi asks:

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?[*]

Here is the most basic truth that we must never forget. We are all children of our Heavenly Father, and He created us to live lives of love, of compassion, of mercy, of forgiveness, of peace, and of righteousness. These are the values that are eternal, and these are the values that determine and guide our daily lives, as well as the ephemeral decisions that we make as Bishops.

At this moment, I would like to pause and officially welcome the new members of our Assembly, starting with Metropolitan Tarasios, Director of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, in Berkeley, California, and then in order of their episcopal ordinations:

- Bishop Spyridon, an Assistant Bishop assigned to the Metropolis of San Francisco
- Bishop Timothy, an Assistant Bishop assigned to the Metropolis of Chicago, and serving there as Chancellor
- Bishop John, an Assistant Bishop assigned to the Metropolis of San Francisco
- Bishop Gerasim, and Auxiliary to the OCA Diocese of the South

- Bishop Athenagoras, an Assistant Bishop of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, assigned to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese.

And even as we welcome these brothers, let remember in prayer and supplication our brethren who have fallen asleep in the hope of the Resurrection.

- Metropolitan Theodosius, former Primate of the OCA
- Metropolitan Maximos, formerly of Pittsburgh
- Archbishop David, of the OCA Diocese of Alaska, OCA.

May they find the reward of good and faithful servants in the Kingdom of Heaven, and may their memory be eternal.

My friends, as an Assembly of brother Bishops, we are all called to shepherd our respective flocks the best that we can. And in this current climate of our country, this has not been without difficulty.

I do not speak only about the pandemic, because if we look around the surrounding culture, there is much evidence that we are at an inflection point for our society, and therefore for the Church as well.

We must stand ready to support all efforts that sustain the ethical and moral teachings of the Church, even when they are put forward by those we might privately disagree with. Our Faithful live in a world where technology has long outstripped the wisdom to employ it. Just because we can do something; does that mean we should?

Our Assembly has a deep and abiding responsibility to be a unified voice defending the traditions of the Church, and not give in to extremes that would steer the People of God away from the path to the Promised Land. Just as Moses guided Israel with the message:

“We will go by the king’s highway; we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left….” [†]

We also must be balanced, reasonable, and above all pastoral, as we seek to inspire our Faithful to hold to the path of God, and not be moved by the prevailing winds, and occasional storms, of the culture that surrounds us. We do not seek to escape from the world in which God has placed us; rather, employing Constantinian optimism, we seek to transform the culture and society that surround us. Although we are sojourners in this world, we are still called to bring about the Kingdom, “on earth as it is in Heaven,” as we say in the Lord’s prayer, and as Saint Constantine

sought to do.

It is for this very reason that I was so grateful to Metropolitan Joseph for the idea to dedicate this year of 2021 as the Year of the Youth. This was unanimously embraced by all, and as a result, we are approving today the creation of a new Agency for Youth and Young Adults. This official Agency of the Assembly will support and unify our efforts around young people and young adults, so that we inspire an Orthodox Christian mindset, or phronema, across all our communities. As part of this effort, many of you participated in the town hall meetings promoting ongoing conversations between young people and the Hierarchs. We must listen as well as we preach! Also, an additional benefit of this new Agency will be putting an end to the duplication of efforts that consume our resources and the time of our dedicated youth ministers.

We will also be officially authorizing the Orthodox Volunteer Corps, as a way to bring opportunities for service to more and more of the Faithful. These two initiatives can be tremendous energizers for our People and they will enhance the life of our Parishes.

All of these advances would not have been possible, without the cooperation and attention to detail that has emerged from our committee structure. I would like to thank the Most Reverend Members of the Executive Committee, who have met an extraordinary nineteen times since our last Assembly in October of 2020, as well as nineteen times in the year prior. I am so very grateful to the Executive Committee for their commitment, dedication, and devotion to the work of the Assembly.

But it is not only the Executive Committee that has excelled – all the Committees of the Assembly have been hard at work through this past year. I will not steal anyone’s thunder, but I do think it is important to acknowledge the substantive engagements that our Assembly is pursuing through all our committees.

For example, the Legal Committee, under the able chairmanship of Archbishop Michael, has filed two amicus briefs on behalf of the Assembly in two important cases. One defends the hierarchical nature of the Church; the other supports a pro-life stance. While many of us, as individual ecclesiastical entities, have done such filings before, this is the first time we have moved as an Assembly. I credit the Legal Committee and their consultants for this excellent work, and I thank – once again – the Executive Committee for its positive and frequent engagement that allows for this activity.

I also want to point out the extraordinary and detailed work of the Committee for

Agencies and Commissions, Affiliates and Associations, chaired by Bishop Irinej. Their report is extremely important, because the endorsement of this body gives an “imprimatur” – if you will allow me the Latin phrase – to the activities of entities that are outside the immediate purview and jurisdiction of the Church. The Agencies and Commissions are directly under this Assembly, but the Affiliates and Associations are perfectly acceptable ancillary organizations.

We must avoid, to the extent we can in a free society, what we call, in Greek, παρασυναγωγή, or para-church. The difference between them is the difference between a right-ordered ministry, in other words, “Orthodox,” and rogue, personality-driven chaos. The oversight work performed by this committee led by Bishop Irinej has been extraordinary and much needed.

Beloved Brothers:

As Hierarchs, we are called to “rightly divide the word of truth,” and our flocks depend on us for this very thing. Therefore, we must employ the utmost discretion and spiritual discrimination in any and all endorsements or sanctions that we grant. I thank this committee for their careful and methodical work, which will benefit all Orthodox of our land and beyond, through Agencies like IOCC and OCPM.

Other committees are moving forward with their work as informed by the Strategic Vision that we adopted in 2020, and we will hear reports of their progress in our meetings today and tomorrow. Through such work, we now have a unified Directory of Orthodox Christian Mental Health Professionals, which was launched just under a year ago. We also just concluded our needs assessment survey, on August 31, 2021. This and other tools will inform our work going forward, and bring to us the kind of conciliarity that should be our hallmark. I want to say a special word about our Director of Operations, Nicholas Anton, who has applied himself vigorously to the tasks of coordination and organization. He merits the thanks of us all.

Dear Brothers in Christ: Our Nation and our world are facing many uncertainties and many problems, not the least of which is the ongoing pandemic. As Bishops, we must steer our flocks through these crises with steady hands and clear vision. God has not only given us this responsibility, but He has granted us the grace of the Holy Spirit, which as the Prophet says, is replete with:

the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord… [‡]

Therefore, we must be optimistic, as I said before, with the vision of Saint

Constantine for a society transformed by the Gospel. A society in which our voice is not simply crying aloud in the wilderness, but being heard in the public square, and in the highways and byways, calling all to the Banquet of Faith.

In this spirit of optimism, I am pleased to relate the upcoming visit of His Beatitude Patriarch Porfirije to the Chicago area beginning on October 12th, which will be his first visit to America as the Serbian Patriarch.

I am also delighted to inform you that the visit of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is confirmed for later this month – October 23rd to be exact, through a special ceremonial Opening of the Doors of the Saint Nicholas National Shrine at the World Trade Center on November 2nd.

I hope that many of you will be able to receive his blessing during these days, and join us for the Pan-Orthodox Patriarchal Chorostasia at the same Cathedral where we worshipped yesterday, on Sunday, October 24th. I especially want to thank His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph for hosting the Ecumenical Patriarch on Monday, November 1st. I hope that the visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch, the first in twelve years, will be an inspirational moment for all Orthodox in United States.

In closing, it is my heartfelt prayer that our Lord Jesus Christ may grant unto us all, that we may ever employ His manifold spiritual gifts, for the edification of His Holy Church, and for the salvation of our souls.

May it always be so. Amen.


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Saint Joseph the Hesychast
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