

ADDRESS TO THE DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

November 12, 2013

My Beloved Con-celebrants, the Devout Clergy of our Diocese; Beloved Monastics, Deacons, Seminarians and Matushki; Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Faithful of the Diocese; Beloved Delegates and Observers to this Assembly, Friends and Guests: *Glory to Jesus Christ!*

As I was considering a theme for this Diocesan Assembly, I wanted to select one that would be equally as important to our life as a Diocese, and equally as compelling in our spiritual “life in Christ”, as the two previous ones I offered – *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many”* and *“To Know Christ – and To Make Him Known.”* What could I use to define who we are as Orthodox Christians in New York and New Jersey; what ought I to say about what we ought to be doing as the local Church in this part of 21st century America? I have chosen the theme from a well-known song from some time ago: *“WE ARE FAMILY.”*

Evidence from Scripture

In the New Testament, the Church is not referred to as “a building” – never referred to as “a business,” for in fact, having been expelled from the Temple and the synagogues rather early on, Christians didn’t have their own places of worship for three centuries; instead, they met “in the homes” of the faithful.

What the Scriptures and the Tradition of the early Christians present us with as “the Church” are the notions of a “living Body,” a “household,” a “family.” When St. Paul was still the Jewish persecutor of the Church, Saul, he was en route one day to Damascus with authority to have arrested those who were known as Christians – for opposing the Hebrew faith and disrupting the Roman order. On that road, he was struck down and blinded by a great light, and a voice called out from Heaven: *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* In response, Saul replied, *“Who are You, Lord?”* And the Lord said, *“I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting.”* The Son of God identified Himself, equated Himself, with His people – the first Christians – and from that Conversion Experience Paul came to understand in his thinking, and to equate in his writings, the Church, as the Body of Christ, with our Lord as the Head, and we as the members.

In explaining the relationship and the love between the members of the Trinity, our Lord revealed Yahweh as Father ... and Himself as Son. And He showed the Son’s perfect obedience to the Father (something Adam had failed to do), because of His perfect love for the Father. Christ taught His disciples to pray, calling upon God as “Father.” In the Incarnation, God the Son experienced the love of a Mother – the ever-Virgin Mary. In His childhood in Nazareth, He lived in the family of the Theotokos and Joseph the Betrothed. In His ministry He referred to His followers as His “brethren.” The image and language of family.

Carrying forth this imagery, and based on his theology of the Church as the Body of Christ – with the faithful as its members – and with the experience of Christians gathering in people’s homes for worship and the Eucharist, Saint Paul uses the Greek word “oikia” – household – to define the Church ... a word that means those of faith in a given home ... the whole family – often, but not always – the father, the mother, the children, the grandparents and other relatives, and the

servants! The word “ikea”, which we use in modern America for the store where we buy household furnishings, comes from that Greek word.

Based on that Greek word for “household” – “oikia” – are the words “parokia” for parish – a group of households ... and “diokia” for the Diocese – a group of parishes. These are units of faithful, of families – brothers and sisters in Christ, each headed by a spiritual father – a bishop or a presbyter. Paul himself tells the Corinthians, “You have many teachers, but not many fathers ... today I have become your father through the Gospel” (I Corinthians 4:15).

The Family of Faith

It goes without saying that the Scripture presents with great reverence the ideal of “family.” For example, there is only one commandment that evokes a blessing: God tells us from atop Mount Sinai, “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12).

The Christian Scriptures elevate Marriage to a Sacrament, a Mystery of God’s presence, comparing the husband-wife relationship to that of the Lord and His People, i.e. Christ and the Church. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Saint Paul elaborates upon the duties of Christian children to their parents ... and parents to their children: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise) ... that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth ... And ... “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6: 1-4).

And great Saints of the Church, such as John Chrysostom of Constantinople and Theophan the Recluse of Russia, expounded upon the responsibility of raising our children in the faith, keeping our families in the Church: “This, then, is our task: to educate ourselves and our children in Godliness,” the golden-mouthed preacher of Byzantium tells us.

The Saint also encourages us to see the Church as our “home” where we come each Vigil and Liturgy – each weekend and on the feast days – to worship and pray to and have communion with Our Father, the Heavenly God, out of love for Him as His children. And, the Saint continues, each of our homes should be a “little church,” where we pray together, learn the Scriptures, sing the hymns of the day, and read the lives of the Saints, as a family every day.

I am often asked how it is possible to raise a family in the faith, keep them in the Church, in a rhythm of life that is so busy, so involved, so consumed with the things of the world. Certainly, in my time, parents could order their children to Church – this is my house, these are my rules; if you don’t like them, you can leave ... That rule of force might have worked long ago, but too many kids have left the house and the Church ... signifying that it no longer serves as a workable model.

Perhaps a better model would be that of example ... parents setting the tone ... and that of family tradition – keeping together, living together, the teaching of the Church taught in the pages of Scripture, and exemplified in the lives of the Saints. We need to say: this is our family tradition – we pray together before and after every meal; we pray each evening together as a family; we read together as a family from the Scriptures and discuss them; on Wednesdays and Fridays, we eat spaghetti or pirogi or shrimp, etc.; every Saturday, we clean the house or cut the lawn, and go to Vespers; every Sunday, we come to Church School, Liturgy and coffee hour, and then we go to visit

Grandma. That's our family's tradition; they may do something different next door, but this is what we do. But – both parents have to be the example; if one isn't, then the children will learn that they too can do something else.

This of course is an ideal ... but it can also serve as a foundation. Certainly the teen years will be challenging ones, and the college years even more difficult – which is why it is so important for parents to be sure that their children are connected to a parish and an OCF when they go off to college; otherwise, it will be like sending toddlers to play in traffic. And even if our children stray from the ideal, like in the parable, as the loving Father of the prodigal son, we need to keep the door of our home and our hearts ... and our Church ... “open” so that they know they can come “home” to a place where they will still be loved and will still receive the ring and the robe and the banquet. The ideal of family.

The Model of the Parish

This basic unit of “household” or “family” is now multiplied in the membership of the parish. As mentioned above, with God as our Heavenly Father, we are brothers and sisters of Christ, related not by human flesh and blood, but by the Blood of Christ which purchased us as His own ... and which flows through our veins by our reception of the Holy Eucharist. It is in the Church that we are united to Him and to each other – in a communion of love, like the Holy Trinity – by eating the One Bread of Life and drinking of the One Cup of Immortality in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. This is what makes us “members” of His Church – not dues. And the closer we come to Christ, in the words of Abba Dorotheus, the closer we come to each other. The more we love Him, the more we “love one another” as He loves us.

This vision of the parish as a family in Christ continues the image of our theology. The family of the parish is headed by the priest – our spiritual father, our “father in Christ.” And as God's children, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. This language presupposes the basis of the “family” unit – the very basis of the Church – LOVE. For too long, the priest was seen as an employee of the Parish Council, a hired hand of the community, who did his work under the watchful eyes of laypersons, who paid his salary and often chose to cut it if parish giving was down. This is a far cry from the “spiritual father” model where the rector is the head of the household, and we are his spiritual children. In this latter understanding, in the family of the parish, Father's word is sought and respected; his views are taken under serious consideration and most often accepted because they are the teaching of the Church. There may be disappointments and disagreements, but as our father, he would never be thrown out of the family; his children will always provide for the welfare and needs of him and his family, as he provides for their spiritual welfare and needs.

At the same time, adopting this model means the bishop and the priest will not be a despot or dictator, a ruler or controller, but a servant-father, a loving father, a spiritual father – who cares for every one of his children – loves them equally (although not always the same) – and works tirelessly to keep them all in the safe haven of the Ark of Salvation – the Holy Church – the Family of Christ – and seeks endlessly to bring new souls to membership in the Body of Christ, the family of faith – on the path to becoming imitators of the Saints, closer to Christ, more like God – en route to the Kingdom of Heaven. Saint Germanos of Constantinople tells us that every bishop and priest's epitrichilion (stole) used to be made of sheep's wool – to remind them that each fiber

represented one of the flock – every one of whom is always to be close to his heart, always to be in his love.

The model can help us think “outside the box” of our difficult, at best, dues-assessment system for finances. In a family, those members in their prime, who are employed, have the responsibility of paying the mortgage, improving the house, providing human services, maintaining the grounds, etc., not only for themselves, but also for the youngest members of the family who are still students and the elderly who are now in retirement. In our parish family, we (who are in our prime, who are employed) need to joyfully give our “first offering unto the Lord” like Abel, who offered the first gift ever accepted by God. Each of us needs to offer, for instance, Monday’s first hour of wages – each week, every week, toward the expenses needed to keep our parish family afloat. And when we need a new roof, it is we who make the sacrifices to provide for that extraordinary expense. Yes, it is our turn now to be the chief providers for the family ... one day, when we are in retirement, our children will take their rightful place in caring for our needs.

Likewise, using this model, we can think of the great joy we experience in our own personal household, when each new person joins our family – our eldest child’s fiancée, their marriage, the birth of their children, their baptism, new neighbors we “adopt”, the orphan we adopt, etc. These are great moments of our life ... We should seek this same joy by inviting others we know and who are our friends, especially those who have no parish they belong to, to join our family in Christ – to share in the Marriage Feast of our Savior and His Bride, the Church. Parish growth is a labor of love, because it ensures the future of our family in Christ, until He comes again. After all, there will be those who are called, before us, to the portals of eternity; their work, their example, their faith need to live on in the generations to come. New members need to take their place. Life going on ... the true joy of a parish family.

The Diocese – The Extended Family

This model of “family” has one final component – the “Diocese” – the Diocese. For too long the Diocese and the Central Church have been looked upon as always wanting from the faithful ... taking from the parishes. The real model, and the one I hope to build upon, is where the Diocese gives, provides, and cares for the whole family – like a parent, or better, a Godparent. I would like the bishop to be seen as an elder, not only because of age but hopefully also because of wisdom, and servanthood, and sacrificing, and love. The Diocese, in the person of the bishop, is there to lovingly and carefully oversee the work of the local Vineyard of Christ, where all the parishes and all their clergy and faithful are working hard to serve the Lord and provide for a harvest for the Savior and His Church, bearing fruit unto salvation.

That is why we have been promoting vocations to the Priesthood and the Diaconate among the members of our Diocesan Family. That is why we are providing scholarships for those who are attending Seminary – right now, we have two full-time students – and helping some of the eight diaconal students we have in total in Endicott and in Philadelphia. This valuable support has resulted in two priestly Ordinations for the Diocese over the past year, Fr. Matthew Markewich and Fr. Matthew Brown, and four Ordinations to the Diaconate since our Assembly last December: Dn. Theodore Gregory, Dn. Gregory Aidinov, Dn. Demetrios Richards and Dn. Mark Hoeplinger.

This is why we are working on establishing new communities in New York and New Jersey ... with financial assistance from the Diocese. Our mission in Lansing, NY, has received a renewal of its grant from the national Church ... the Worthington family has moved into a new rental rectory ... and the parish will have its new Icon Screen blessed, the day after tomorrow! Earlier this fall I visited Potsdam, NY, for the first time, where more than 30 people welcomed me, individuals who before we opened this mission station had to travel to Canada for divine services. I was encouraged by their zeal to have a church in that far northern outpost of NY State, and I will be visiting there again the evening of December 6, with the miraculous Icon of Saint Anna, for a healing service.

This is why we have worked to help our established parishes that have run into difficulties ... We had “Operation: Buffalo” which has helped put SS. Peter and Paul Church back on its feet; the young priest and his wife there have been raising funds through their culinary skills and have opened a Soup Kitchen for the less fortunate. Just yesterday I was told that Fr. Vlad got a call from the Food Channel’s program, “Chopped” – they want to film him making his famous sourdough bread, with a chance to win \$10,000 for the parish in their competition!

This year we had “Operation: Princeton” in which some 100 persons from across New Jersey came out to literally “move a mountain” of 100 tons of rock and build a retaining wall for the new temple. The work on this, the only new church building being built in the Diocese in a number of years, needs our continued assistance both labor wise and financially ... And we continue to bask in the progress of “Operation: Oneonta” where Fr. David has now moved into the community full time, and more and more services and outreach programs are being held in the chapel we renovated in the city’s Episcopal Church ... And we continue to assist Fr. Herman Schick, no longer able to serve as a rector, as he still awaits a heart transplant. The Diocese is a family of parishes ... helping each other ... in the love of Christ Jesus.

Helping Each Other

This year our Diocese has again shared experience and resources in helping our parishes grow stronger. The Parish Council conferences this year focused on Mission and Evangelism, with Fr. Constantine Nasr, hugely successful in growing his parish, sharing his wisdom and experience, teaching us to do things in our communities to renew the commitment of our own members and to reach out to others and invite them to our services. Earlier this fall, Fr. Andrew Damick, who has doubled the size of his parish, explained how to approach non-Orthodox and to speak to them about our faith, with confidence, but not with criticism. And today we will also hear from Fr. Timothy Hojnicky, who has shepherded the phenomenal growth of his parish – an OCA church, in eastern Pennsylvania. Why are we seeking the wisdom and the insights of these successful pastors? Because we care.

We have continued to share information with one another about stewardship – a Biblical, and more successful method of funding the Church. I am happy to report that a number of parishes have established Stewardship Committees to work on this transition – and already at least five parishes that I know of have successfully begun that step of commitment. I of course have heard genuinely sincere people express their concern: “we didn’t do it that way before ... we keep the church going through food sales!” But when the parish runs out of people to run the pirogi sale, what then? It is not the job of our neighbors, or our visitors, or our “customers” to sustain our

Church. It is the job of our parish family. It is our job. We need to grow our parishes ... and encourage our faithful to give according to the family model.

We know that the future of our Church is our children. That is why the Diocese continues to hold youth retreats, in upstate New York and in New Jersey ... the altar servers' retreat at St. Basil's Academy in Garrison, NY ... and Orthodox Youth Day in Jackson and Six Flags. That is why this year we introduced Children's Choir Workshops to train our future choir directors and choir singers – at the youngest of ages – to learn and to love to sing – from the simple “Alleluias” to the joyous “Christ is Risen!” to the troparia for the first Saint of America, Herman of Alaska, and the beloved Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker. Would that all of us had the joy and the zeal of these children in offering praises to God! And that is why, continuing that effort, our Commission on Liturgical Music also hosts conferences and workshops for adult choir masters and singers – in an attempt to fill a desperate need in several parishes ... to prepare the leaders of our liturgical music – and to hone the God-given talents of those who have accepted such a call to “make a joyful sound unto the Lord.”

That is why we have held Church School Teachers Conferences this year again in every Deanery to help our teachers and parents “think out of the box” and re-tailor our education program to keep our young people engaged and in the Church through the high school years ... And we are also working to strengthen the OCF's in colleges throughout the Diocese – so that these young people are not lost to the faith in the busy-ness of college life – to connect them to a local OCF chapter and a local Orthodox parish, where they can continue to learn about and live the Orthodox Christian life ... so that they remain secure in our faith and in our Church.

As I have said, so many times before, our councils need to have one person in charge of making that connection for high school graduates in the parish. Why? Because through Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist, every child in our parish is our son and our daughter. We need to care for them because they are our family ... and we love them all.

Finally, this year we have had seminars to protect our parishes from possible tragedy and legal consequences ... with guidance on Sexual Misconduct Prevention, first offered in each Deanery by Michael Herzak, whose company insures many of our churches ... and now today by Cindy Davis, the Director of the Office of Review of Sexual Misconduct Allegations for our OCA, who is here to answer questions about the new PSPs and the procedure for getting background checks for parish personnel. Why? Because we care.

Most of this work of the Diocesan Family has been funded by the generosity of the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors Program – which provides resources for the ministries of our Diocese and our Vision for the Future – through the generosity of hundreds of faithful across New York and New Jersey who have shared their blessings from God as stewards of our Diocese. Why? Because they care for our parishes and for the faithful of our Diocesan Family. I thank God for them and their gifts, and I encourage others to join this stewardship of love. Why? Because it is the right thing to do, and because there is so much more work yet to be done.

A Final Note

In the few years that I have as your Bishop, I hope to re-build our understanding of “diocese,” “parish,” and “church.” I would like them to be seen as one family – united in love – the love of the

Holy Trinity ... the love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ... and our love for one another ... because WE ARE FAMILY.

Love ... is the greatest force in the universe ... they tried to nail Love to a Cross ... they tried to bury Love in a tomb ... but Love rose from the dead, and through the Cross brought joy to all the world. That is the Love of God Incarnate ... the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us all try to embrace this model – of selfless giving and caring, loving and sharing – out of love – and in imitation of our Savior.

The Scripture is steeped in that love: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Greater love than this has no one ... that he lay down His life for His friends ... and you are My friends” (John 15:13).

“A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

To the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves, be all glory, honor and worship – to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

-- Bishop Michael of New York