

Fall Metropolitan Council Session (MC)

September 19-22, 2016

Immaculate Conception Seminary

Huntington, NY

presented by Fr. John Shimchick

James Kornofel and I represented our Diocese at the MC. His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, attended as a member of the Standing Synod. He is also Secretary of the Holy Synod.

The usual practice of the MC over the past few years has been to start its Fall Session with a Retreat. This year's presenters were Protodeacon Peter Danilchick, a retired executive with Exxon, and Charles Ajalat, lawyer, former chancellor of the Antiochian Archdiocese in America, and active visionary in the formation of several Pan Orthodox organizations (IOCC, FOCUS). Protodeacon Peter has been involved in areas of church planning and leadership. He offered reflections from his upcoming book, *Thy Will Be Done: Strategic Leadership, Planning, and Management for Christians* (SVS Press). Most notably, he affirmed that Christian leadership is capable of transforming the inner life of the individual designated as leader, the other leaders with whom he or she comes into contact, and of the community itself. While it is always about influence, it does not desire "anything" for itself or to do things simply in its "own way" or for its own benefit.

In group discussions following his presentation, several comments acknowledged that the work or responsibility of the MC in providing leadership within the OCA was not just about "running an organization" or to fulfill "a statutory requirement." Rather, in an ever-expanding conversation with the Holy Synod, it involves the "explicit" (or at least "implicit" yet "intentional") desire to accomplish God's will for the Church — to seek to determine that whatever is decided would be pleasing to God.

Mr. Ajalat has had a remarkable influence on the establishment of Pan Orthodox projects—an effort that he creatively and courageously continues. The theme of our last issue of *Jacob's Well* explored how those who are searching, might find their way in the discovery or rediscovery of Jesus Christ. A constant theme discussed throughout the MC was how do we as parishes and the Church respond to the growing number of young people, often called "nones," who claim to not have any particular religious affiliation or belong to any religious community, and yet – often remain – in various ways, spiritual. On Monday evening, following the Retreat, we viewed an upcoming full-length film commissioned by the Antiochian Archdiocese (and supported by Mr. Ajalat) entitled, "*Becoming Truly Human*," which was produced and featured, Nathan Jacobs, a professor at the University of Kentucky. He creatively reflected on his own life story and his coming to the Orthodox Church, in the context of discussions with many young people who have struggled or have abandoned their faith, having considered alternative or no other paths. Here are some background links for the film:

<http://www.becomingtrulyhuman.com/>

<http://www.antiochian.org/invitation-become-truly-human>

Ancient faith discussion with Charles Ajalat

https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/features/becoming_truly_human

The regular Sessions of the MC began on Tuesday morning. Basically, throughout the Meetings the entire life of the OCA is reviewed on Administrative and Departmental levels (either in actual presentations or in earlier distributed reports). Since the AAC of 2015, His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon, has been formulating a framework for expanding the mission of the OCA (the theme of the last AAC). He has been developing this framework around the image of four pillars:

- 1) The Spiritual Life,
- 2) Stewardship,
- 3) Missions and Evangelism and
- 4) External Relations

In his opening report, while making references to other aspects of his work, he returned to consideration of these four pillars. Considerable time was spent during this Session in working to define the specific implications and goals that this imagery can represent in unifying a vision that would expand and develop over the next few years. At the end of his sermon during Wednesday morning's Divine Liturgy, His Beatitude offered the following prayer, meant to emphasize and direct our energies upon the first pillar of the spiritual life (he hopes to prepare additional prayers for the other pillars):

Prayer for the First Pillar

O Lord Jesus Christ,

We know that we are weak and frail human beings and are but poor vessels to contain the glory of Thine eternal Kingdom, the beauty of Thy mercy and the fullness of Thy love.

Nevertheless, we are made bold to offer this prayer for the Church sojourning in America, that we might in some small way witness to the truth, and by Thy grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to reveal Thy way of sanctification and eternal salvation to all.

Help us to encourage and support the men and women leading the angelic life in the monastic ranks and foster an appreciation for, and support of, monasteries and monastic vocations; to educate clergy, faithful and the non-Orthodox about the sacred value of life of prayer, purity, repentance and asceticism as lived in our monastic communities;

Strengthen us in renewing our efforts to foster clergy health so that our parishes and institutions may be guided by pastors and lay leaders who have a deep understanding of the therapeutic and pastoral aspects of the Patristic tradition so that the broken people of the world might find healing.

Illumine us, strengthen the role of theological education in the broadest and deepest sense, so that our seminaries, institutions and parishes might share the wealth of the theological, liturgical and spiritual treasures of the Orthodox Church with all people and at all levels;

And that by all these means, we might be blessed with healthy parishes that might serve as beacons for those who are lost, hungry, and confused.

Realizing that all actions voted on by the MC are recommendations that need to be affirmed by the Holy Synod, here are several decisions and discussions of interest:

1) ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICAN PENSION PLAN PROPOSED PLAN AMENDMENTS – IN SERVICE DISTRIBUTIONS

Provide for deemed retirement for Members upon reaching age 75:

CURRENT PLAN PROVISION: A Member may not commence his/her retirement benefit until “**Retirement.**” **Plan subsection 1.28 currently provides the following definition of “Retirement:”**

“The termination of employment of a Member on his Normal, Deferred or Disability Retirement Date.” The Board considered the fairness of the Plan as applied to Bishops who generally serve for life; the result is that a Bishop is unlikely to ever receive a benefit from the Plan. As circumstances were reviewed the Board recognized that the same concern also applies to other Clergy and lay members of the Plan.

PROPOSED CHANGE: The Board recommends amending the Plan to provide that a Retirement also occurs when a Member reaches age 75. The Board has concluded that no Church interest appears to be advanced by requiring long-serving Members to end their service to the OCA in order to commence their retirement benefit. Age 75 has been selected as it appears to be the age at which most Members retire from full-time service.

Recognizing that a Member who continues Employment while receiving a benefit will accrue **additional benefit service, the Plan will adjust such Member’s benefit annually.**

The proposed change has a cost impact upon the Plan. To the extent that these Members forfeit benefits today and would begin to receive a benefit, there is an added cost.

However, the benefit is being funded on the same basis as all other Member benefits. Moreover, even when pay status begins, contributions from both the Member and the Church will continue. An analysis of the cost impact has been prepared by the Plan's actuary.

Plan Section 3.2(c) is added as follows:

3.2(c) A Member who is receiving a Pension benefit and continues as an Employee shall not be required to contribute to the Plan as of the first day of the month coincident with or following his reaching age 80. Nonetheless, the Employer Contribution shall continue with respect to any Compensation paid to such Member.

2) **SITE OF ALL-AMERICAN COUNCIL 2018:** Fr. Eric Tosi, after providing considerable research, recommended that the site of next AAC be St. Louis.

Diocesan parishes will not be individually assessed for the next AAC, rather it will be a Diocesan expense. Diocesan Escrow Accounts should be established.

Parishes were encouraged as well to begin putting aside funds for the AAC.

3) **EXTERNAL AUDITORS** found the Financial Records of the OCA acceptable with no extraordinary recommendations.

4) **FINANCIAL REPORT:** Treasurer Melanie Ringa stated that the "operating surplus" for 2015 resulted in a "break even" status. This year's financial situation, given the new approach to funding, is "coming in very close" as well. While each Diocese has a slightly different method and timetable for when it sends in its funds, the system appears to be working well. It is hoped that the distribution of interest from several endowed funds will be available as additional support for theological education, clergy care, and missions.

A balanced budget for 2017 was presented and approved.

It was affirmed that the meetings which have taken place between the Administration and Diocesan Chancellors and Treasurers continue to advance in cordiality and cooperation.

5) **STEWARDS OF THE OCA (SOCA):** Protodeacon Joseph Matusiak, while serving as the Metropolitan's Secretary, now also coordinates the efforts to generate support for SOCA, which is designated to supplement the Budget in support of departmental work and ministries. He brings great church work experience and enthusiasm.

6) **Cindy Davis, Coordinator of the OCA Office for Review of Sexual Misconduct Allegations,** noted that there has been some confusion in determining which companies to use in providing backgrounds checks.

She is currently recommending, “*Protect My Ministry*”:

<http://protectmyministry.com>

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE FINAL DAY OF THE MC

As mentioned earlier, the Sessions would continually return to the discussion of how to specific develop and implement aspects of the Metropolitan’s vision of the “four pillars” (a presentation of this entitled, “*The Apostolic Work of the Church: A Guiding Framework for the Building of the House of the Lord in our Land*” is attached.) His Beatitude has been encouraged to produce a combination of short videos, podcasts, and written materials. During the final gathering, the MC was divided in four groups that provided concrete suggestions for each of the pillars. While there were probably several hundred ideas listed, a pattern emerged that emphasized support for the encouragement of clergy and lay spiritual and emotional health, catechesis, and training:

- Develop of “peer groups” for clergy that provide opportunities for examination, support, and encouragement (these are currently taking place in the Diocese of Eastern PA)
- Exploration of the catechetical material entitled, “*The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*,” now being used in some Orthodox parishes
- Encourage training and resources in leading a stronger spiritual life
- Support of the Stewards of the OCA (SOCA)
- Encourage a broad view of Stewardship as influencing time, talents, finances
- Begin to prepare for the 50th Anniversary of the OCA’s Autocephaly (2020)

CONCLUSIONS

This is my final Session as our Diocesan clergy representative, having served two terms. I have appreciated the opportunity to observe and participate in the life of our Church on this unique level. The experience has provided both a sense of give and take: It has enabled me to share the concerns of our Diocese, but also to learn from the experiences of those from around the OCA, and to express back to our Diocese the vision and hopefulness that has often emerged (especially most recently) from our gatherings. I am very grateful for these experiences.