

Commission on Mission and Evangelism Diocesan Assembly Report 2021
Diocese of New York and New Jersey
Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, DMin - Director

“An Orthodox parish, that is, a local community of Orthodox Christians with one or more priests, has only one God-given reason for being. It exists to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ. Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfill for its members, the parish must be Christ’s one holy Church. If it is not, then it is neither Christian nor Orthodox whatever else it may be or do.”¹

Introduction

This has been an exciting year for the Commission as we were finally able to move forward on many projects that were delayed due to the pandemic. I will relate these projects later but the key to any development in mission or evangelism is to actually do something...anything to bring the Gospel and Christ’s Church to those already in the Church and those who are searching for the Church. We have discovered, and this is for many parishes across the Diocese and North America, that people were looking for precisely what we have to offer and parishes have been able to creatively engage their own parishioners during this time. Many parishes have experienced growth DESPITE the restrictions. The immediate question is why is this happening?

The answer is twofold. First, when you snip away the many distractions of life, people start to think about what really matters. This inevitably leads them to a deepening of their Faith in the Church. Secondly, many parishes have been creative in how they communicate to the wider world, using technology and other means to reach a far wider audience than previously thought possible. The result of these actions is that parishes actually reached out and engaged a wider community.

Rodney Stark examined this phenomenon in his book, “The Triumph of Faith” and his conclusion is fascinating. He concludes that society is actually growing spiritually just in very non-traditional ways. If that is the case then we must tap into this movement by allowing people to have access to the truth of the Church. The search for spirituality needs to lead to the spiritual life in the Church.

Work of the Commission

"This is the true Church: in need she helps everyone, prays for everyone; in joy she rejoices with everyone, gives thanks with everyone. She is always loving, as her God is loving. She would not be overflowing with grace if she were not overflowing with love. Yes, in that church there is no grace of God that does not have love for everyone. Where there is no fire of Christian love, there is no warmth of the Holy Spirit.

Do not forget, listeners, that our Holy Church was there for everyone this summer, and remember that she, as a grace-filled Church, always cares about this: how to comfort everyone, calm everyone, save everyone, make everyone happy. And it really comforts and soothes, saves and pleases everyone who comes and turns to her, for such is the property and such is the power of the grace of Christ, which always abides in her."

Archpriest Rodion Putyatin

“Homily in Thanks to the Lord for End of the Epidemic of Cholera in Rybinskin in 1848”²

As Director, I continue to interact with the four missions on a weekly basis. Some have gone through transitions to new clergy and to new locations. I keep His Eminence Archbishop Michael, the Chancellor, Mitered Archbishop Joseph Lickwar and the two Deans with missions, Archbishop Gary Breton and Archbishop Alexey Karlgut informed and include them in various communications. Some have attended the online meetings and the in-person meetings. I will not recount the details of each of the four missions in the Diocese as you can read about them in their own reports.

1. We continue the monthly online forms that each mission submits for the previous month’s activities. These forms are compiled and evaluated in a quarterly report sent to His Eminence, the Chancellor and the Deans. Each quarterly report highlights specific items that may be of interest or concern. His Eminence reviews these with the Chancellor and Deans at periodic meetings.
2. There are quarterly meetings (currently via Zoom) with the mission clergy in which each share details of their ministry with one another as well as discussing challenges and issues that are of mutual benefit to the life of the missions. These are recorded and a summary is sent to His Eminence. His Eminence, the Chancellor and Deans are invited to attend these meetings and some have participated on an ongoing basis.
3. We were able to have our first in-person meeting at St. Gregory the Theologian Orthodox Church on August 23, 2021. The goal of these meetings is to have an annual gathering and to be able to concentrate on specific topics in-depth and have a detailed discussion. This year’s topic was leadership and management in the mission and we explored various aspects of ministry in parishes and techniques for leading in various circumstances. His Eminence Archbishop Michael and the Fr. Joseph Lickwar also attended the session and shared their experiences as well as facilitated discussions. We will be discussing next year’s topic and setting a date for the early summer.
4. While visitations were not always possible during this time, I was able to visit with a mission priest to look at various options for a new location. I do plan to visit each mission over the coming year and work with the priest, mission council and the mission at the visit. I have a detailed program in place which will assist in their own self-evaluation as well as guide them towards some important decisions for their future.
5. The quarterly newsletter on missions and evangelism entitled “Koinonia” continues to be published and disseminated to the Diocese. The newsletter contain articles on a particular theme as well as reflections and a review of missionary activities of the Diocese. All parishes and clergy in the Diocese receive the electronic newsletter.
6. We were able to gather a number of liturgical items and vestments which were distributed to the missions. This will continue as we assist in the needs of the mission. At some future date we will plan to establish a mission fund for the Diocese to assist with the needs of the current missions, plan future missions and support the work of the CME in activities such as training. More information will follow in the future.

7. I am very thankful to His Eminence and the Diocesan Council for financially supporting a new annual evangelism school for the parishes of the Diocese. This first school will take place next summer. The school will take place over a three-day period and will focus on training both clergy and lay people on basic principles of evangelism. We will have featured speakers and workshops during the school. The goal will be to rotate each year four parishes with one clergy and one lay person representing the parish. More information will be published as we get closer to the event next summer. We are looking to ensure this is fully funded and have minimal costs to the participating parishes. His Eminence and the Deans will decide on the rotation.
8. I will also begin the discussion with His Eminence and the Deans on identifying potential and intentional mission and evangelism opportunities. This will focus the Diocese and the parishes on not only the potential around them but also allow us all to look outside of our parochial responsibilities and see a larger community that surrounds each and every parish.

Conclusion

“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”

1 Corinthians 3:6

I am very thankful to everyone who continues to work in the parishes and the Diocese for the furtherance of missions and evangelism. At last year’s Diocesan Assembly, I reminded everyone that we need to see this time as the greatest evangelistic moment. Many parishes took that to heart and creatively engaged their churches and their community. The results are truly remarkable. While we all have experienced inconveniences and in some cases real difficulties, we must not lose focus on the work that needs to be done. The Commission is there to assist and to offer suggestions so that we can consistently guide people to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. As Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko reminds us, we have one function and that is to be the One Holy Church.

¹ Thomas Hopko, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Education, Mission and Witness in Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2004), 139.

² <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2021/05/homily-in-thanks-to-lord-for-end-of.html>