

ADDRESS TO THE DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

December 11, 2012

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!

We gather at a moment of immense potential...a new beginning for our Orthodox Church in America... with the election of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon... a faithful, humble monk and a patient, loving pastor, whom I have known since his days as a novice in the monastery and a student at St. Tikhon's Seminary. I believe that Metropolitan Tikhon embodies the gentle spirit of the saintly Metropolitan Leonty – a gentleness that will be needed as we endeavor to love our Church back into healing from the wounds wrought by these recent years of struggle.

I ask that we all – bishop, clergy and faithful – offer our prayers, give our support and extend our love for His Beatitude on this day and in the many years to come ... as he leads our Orthodox Church in America and all of us in serving the Lord, working out our salvation in fear and trembling, seeking to take our rightful place in the Kingdom of God. Many years to His Beatitude! *“Eis polla eti, Despota!”*

The theme of my address to you this year is a simple goal – one that each of us can work for in our personal spiritual lives, and one that all of us can work for, together, as a Diocese. It is this: “To Know Christ and to Make Him Known.”

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It is a simple-sounding goal, but it is twofold. The second part requires the first. In order to make Christ known, we have to know Him. As the maxim goes, “one cannot give what one does not have.”

John, the beloved disciple, wrote: “And this is eternal life, that they know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (John17:3). To Know Christ – not know about Him intellectually, from the pages of a book, but know Him, experientially, in the pages of our lives.

We are called to know Him in prayer. What is at the root of a healthy marriage... what is the core ingredient of a lifelong friendship? Communication, conversation. Christ prayed to His Father... we pray also. What possible foundation can exist in a relationship of knowing Christ that is more fundamental than a habit of daily prayer? It has been said, “The soul of Orthodoxy consists in prayer,” and Abba Agathon tells us, “There is no greater labor than praying to God.”

If we can commit the first five, or ten minutes at least of our morning ... the last ten minutes before sleep ... to that conversation, we will find that bond growing noticeably stronger. Or, if the demands on us as parents or caregivers simply pre-empt such a pattern, then if we can train ourselves to pray through our daily struggles – bringing our burdens to the Lord, His Mother, and the Saints during the course of a difficult day – then indeed, we will come to know Christ in a way that will empower us to make Him known.

We are called to know Christ through the Scripture. Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk says, "If an earthly king ... wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly [you would], with great rejoicing and careful attention. ... You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him."

The world bombards us with bad news... from the moment we turn on the television or log on to our computers each day. The Saints exhort us to begin our day instead, with the Good News of their experience with God... of sins forgiven... burdens loosened... and death defeated. Let us thirst for that news, for that knowledge, for that love letter placed before us every day by the Author of our life ... the King of Heaven.

We are called to know Christ by being present in His house, the Church – when we come to enter into the stories of His birth, His life, His miracles, His passion, His death, and His Pascha. We are invited to know Him through the witness of His Mother on her feasts, and through the lessons of His Saints, on the days we devote to them. True, the world competes for our time... other demands and distractions draw us away from the Divine Services. But what investment is more fruitful than an hour or two spent in an evening Vespers or the glorious Divine Liturgy, where we shut down the noise of the world, and open ourselves to the Lord's life-giving word – that we might live like He lived... speak like He spoke... and love like He loves?

Our Lord has set the example for us – on every Sabbath, He was found to be in the synagogue; on every feast day, in the Temple. His Church must be our home every Sunday, His Day, and every feast day dedicated to Him or His Mother or His Saints. And on those other days when we are not at divine services, our home must be a "little church" where we pray before our Icon Corner, read the Scripture and the lives of the saints, light our candle, offer our incense – worship Him as a family together.

We are invited to know Christ through following His Commandments. So often we are faced with the temptation to say something we shouldn't... take something we shouldn't... want something that isn't ours to want... or keep back a smile, or a kind word, or a few dollars that God has given us to share with someone else. When we turn away from those temptations – then we turn away from the evil one ... and we turn toward Christ ... we come to know Him.

In our quest to know Christ, to experience Him, He Himself reminds us, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My commands, and My Father will love Him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's Who sent Me" (John 14:23-24).

And we are called to know the Lord most intimately in the Sacraments – those Mysteries, those moments, when we hear the precious words of forgiveness in Confession ... when we feel the cool, soothing touch of anointing oil in sickness ... when we "taste and see how good the Lord is" in Holy Communion. If you are like me, then in your medicine cabinet there is a bottle – maybe more than one – with medicine that offers temporary relief for our body... and at least most of the time, we take them as our doctor prescribes. And we come to rely on that medicine. In our church, there is a

chalice... with medicine that offers the healing of soul AND body... the provision for the journey of eternal life.

Christ promises us that if we eat His Body and drink His Blood, we will live in Him, and He will live in us. And we need to come to rely on that Heavenly medicine, to take away our anger and our angst ... to heal our resentments and regrets. It is in the Sacraments, that we come most deeply and completely, to know Christ – in confession, we receive the same forgiveness from HIM that Peter and the adulteress and the thief on the cross received; in the Eucharist, we receive HIS same Presence, the same Communion that Peter and James and John received at the Mystical Supper ... and that all the Saints have received throughout the centuries; in Unction, we receive that same healing from Our Lord that the man who was paralyzed, the woman with the bended back, and the ten who were leprous all received. In these Mysteries – we come to experience that in every movement, in every moment, He is there, inviting us to come and know Him better.

And once we have come to know the difference that the presence of Christ makes in our life – we want that, for our self and for everyone around us. We want that for our children and grandchildren. We want that for our spouses. We want that for our co-workers. We want that, when we're watching the news and when we see someone being taken off to prison for some crime. Yes, we even want that for the strangers we see for the first time, whose faces and voices betray deep pain and longing.

So, having come to know Christ, and wanting others to know Him as we do... how do we make Him known? What does this mean for each of us, personally? Saint Paul gives us a clue: "To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery (of faith) among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

First, foremost, and always, we make Christ known by living the Orthodox Christian experience daily. My job is to make Christ known by being a public example of His life, in front of everyone in my life. Your job, also, is to make Christ known by being a public example of His life, in front of everyone in your life.

Our face, our countenance, our tone of voice, our choice of words, the way in which we interact with other persons – especially those persons with whom we find it difficult to interact – all of these are moments of choice, when we are called to be that example of compassion, patience, truthfulness, "speaking the truth in love" yet "restoring [each other] in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

We must be an example of all that we have been gifted with by the Lord – persons of a rule of prayer, Orthodox Christians who read the Scripture daily, faithful participants in the divine services each week and every feast day, sons and daughters obedient to the commandments of our Father, frequent recipients of the Holy Mysteries. If this Orthodox way of life is what we practice and demonstrate to others, then we will be, by example, helping them to come to know Christ as we already know Him.

And to whom do we reach out in our effort "to make Christ known"?

We begin at home – and at Church. We make Christ known by teaching the Orthodox Christian way of life to those persons whom God has given us to teach – in particular, our children, our grandchildren, our godchildren, and the children in our parishes. All too often we have focused on giving children what we didn't have – material things, educational opportunities, traveling the country or the world. This is fine and good ... BUT we must also, and perhaps more importantly, give them what we have – OUR FAITH, the gift of our Church ... the love of God in Jesus Christ.

From the Exodus Event, when the Hebrews experienced God's deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt and they became His Chosen People, He commanded them clearly: "You shall tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt with the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 10: 2). And the prophet Joel, hundreds of years later, reiterated that message: "Tell (all that God has done) to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children from generation to generation" (Joel 1:3). The Tradition of our Church continues in the same way: from parent to child ... from generation to generation.

As a Diocese, this means that we must create opportunities for children to learn the Faith – through our diocesan training programs for Church School leaders, through retreats for youth and altar servers, as well as through social gatherings where friendships and maybe even future marriages can be nourished when Orthodox kids get to know one another ... and, together, get to know Christ.

We make Christ known when we witness to others, in our words and in our works. At my first Assembly, I presented each delegate who was there, each member of every one of our parishes, with a serious and real five-year challenge: to bring one new person to Church. Each one, reach one; each one, touch one – either someone who used to belong to the parish and needs to return home; someone who has stopped going to their church because of the closing of their temple or the liberality of their teaching; or someone who simply is unchurched. Thus far, only a few have stepped up to the plate. I have no intention of letting this "go by the wayside" – it is the command of Our Lord, His Great Commission before His Ascension, to each of us: "Go and make disciples of all nations... You are My witnesses... to the very ends of the earth."

People are starving for meaning in their lives. They are starving for love. They are starving for Christ. It's not hard to find a chance to talk to them. There are people in your life whom you know, who have no faith. Those are the people who need Christ. There are going to be opportunities that you have, to tell the story of what the Lord has done in your life, like the Hebrews so long ago ... How? Someone you know may say to you, "Christmas is coming. It's going to be a lonely time for me. My kids aren't going to be around." "Are you going to go to church?" "No – I don't have a church." There's your chance ... Someone says, "You know, I'm really afraid; I'm going to the hospital, I'm going to have surgery." You say, "Is your minister coming to pray with you?" "I don't have one." There's your chance. "We have a great priest – he'll come and say a prayer with you." ... Someone may say to you, "You know, I'm having trouble with my marriage; I'm having trouble with my son; I'm having trouble with my neighbors." "Well, you know, have you talked to your pastor?" "I don't really have one." There's your chance ... Please, each one of us bring one new person to our parishes! Each one, reach one! Each one, touch one! To help us in this effort, it is my plan that our Parish Council Workshops in

2013 will deal with this issue – Church Growth, Outreach, Evangelization – making our parishes stronger, by making Christ known to those who presently are not practicing the Faith.

There is another way of making Christ known – reaching out to those in need. And I have been humbled to see the love in the hearts of so many of you and your fellow parishioners, serving soup and sandwiches in the middle of Manhattan or growing the incredible soup-kitchen ministries that have taken root around the Diocese ... and most recently, raising thousands of dollars to support those in our parishes who sustained devastating losses in Hurricane Sandy. That is making Christ known ... in His own words: “In as much as you did it to one of the least of My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40).

We make Christ known when we give like He gives – the first, the best, as much as we are able, of what we have been given. That mindset of giving out of love, is the mindset of Stewardship that has been the theme of our Diocesan conferences this past year. In my first address as your Diocesan Bishop I stated that our system of dues is really unable to support our parishes in the 21st century ... and that I hoped we would move to a practice of proportionate giving. The convening of our Parish Council Conferences in 2012, with the theme of Stewardship as a Matter of Spiritual Growth, took us in decisive steps toward that needed, fundamental change.

Today you will hear a presentation about a parish in a sister diocese, a parish founded 90 years ago by Slavic immigrants, a community in the midst of the Rust Belt of Ohio ... how they made that transition. You also will receive a packet of “stewardship highlights” from various parishes. I pray that these resources will inform and inspire each of you to tell the story of stewardship in your parishes – and to share the message that giving in the church is not about money...it is about love: the love of Christ, and making Him known by our sacrificing to fund the ministries of His Church, to keep the legacy alive of the founders and builders of our parishes decades ago ... keeping our churches flourishing until He comes again.

And we make Him known as a Diocese by caring for each other within the Diocese. Woven through St. Paul’s Epistles is the Apostle’s insistence that the faithful of each local church community tend to the needs of the Christians in other communities, both near and far away. We are urged to do the same. And what a joy it has been for me to see the people of this Diocese rise to that challenge, time and time again.

Over the two years since the institution of the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactor initiative, nearly a quarter of a million dollars has been raised:

- to support the seminarians who are the future priests, deacons, and leaders in the Church...**
- to help sustain parishes that are working hard to grow and to share the Faith while dealing with serious financial challenges...**
- and to plant new missions, new spiritual lighthouses in places where, often, no other Orthodox church exists within an hour’s drive.**

You have just seen, in pictures, the success stories of the DDB initiative as well as the many other ministries that your stewardship in this Diocese has made possible in 2012. In the new year I am confident that this good work will continue. It is my hope that during 2013 we can, for example, gather both the dollars and the “doers” to help with plastering and painting at the new church being built for the Mother of God Mission in Rocky Hill, New Jersey. I am also keenly focused on the need to promote priestly and diaconal vocations among the men of this Diocese. Right now, there is only one Diocesan man attending seminary full-time. That number needs to grow, if our churches are to grow. Seminary scholarships will certainly help to encourage that growth. And I hope that we will be able to continue sharing the funds offered by our DDB donors with those parishes that demonstrate a genuine need for assistance, so that they may provide for their priests, and maintain their churches and properties in keeping with the vision of our ancestors who sacrificed so much to build them ... as we did so successfully with Operation: Buffalo.

I am humbled and proud of what the Diocese has done these past three years; and I pray we continue to do that in greater solidarity with one another – to make the Christ we know, known to others.

In conclusion, I wish to share one brief personal reflection. There were a few brief moments last month, when I thought about what it would mean if I wasn't the Bishop of New York and New Jersey anymore...

Then I saw the faces of the priests of our Diocese, whose efforts to “know Christ and make Him known” have been so admirable, so valiant, so valuable ... priests in the trenches fighting to save souls ... priests, each with their own talents, all of whom I love /.../ and I saw the faces of parishioners I have come to know and love, whose efforts to “know Christ and to make Him known” – to preserve and to grow the legacies of the founders, benefactors, and beautifiers of our diocesan churches have so inspired me to do the work that I have been called to do.

I realized in that moment, as I do so often when I stand at an altar with one of our priests or leave a parish community I have been visiting over a weekend ... what a joy and honor and blessing from God it is for me ... to be a part of this family of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey.

All I can say, in return, is I what said on the day of my consecration. I renew my pledge, by the grace of God, to do my best to fight the good fight, to run the race of salvation, by working as hard as I can, as fast as I can, for as long as I can, until the Lord calls me to pass the baton on to someone else (II Timothy 4)... working alongside all of you, my beloved Diocesan family, “to know Christ and to make Him known.”

To Him be all glory unto ages of ages.

- Bishop Michael of New York