

ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL'S ADDRESS TO THE DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

OCA Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Tuesday, November 1, 2016 – Holy Trinity Church, Yonkers, NY

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!

It is hard to believe that a year has already gone by since we gathered in Saints Peter and Paul Church in South River for the 2015 Diocesan Assembly. On the one hand, it seems as if that gathering was so long ago ... on the other, it seems to have been only yesterday. Nonetheless, in the weeks and months that have ensued, I have been able once again to visit all of the parishes, missions and chapels of our Diocese in that year. This holy opportunity has been and continues to be an incredible experience for me – in fact, the best thing about my work each week. It is my joy – spending time with our children, hearing the stories of our venerable founders and elders, and trying to encourage the parish council and workers “in the middle” to carry the workload for the parish family.

Since we last gathered, I have had the great privilege of consecrating two churches: the newly-erected Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow Church in Princeton, New Jersey; and the newly-refurbished and icon-filled Church of the Holy Trinity in Elmira, New York.

This past year we had numerous parishes celebrating anniversaries: St. Andrew Church in Dix Hills and Mother of God Parish in Mays Landing both marked 50 years! And Holy Trinity Church in Elmira, Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Syracuse, Saint Nicholas Church in Whitestone, Transfiguration Cathedral in Brooklyn, Saint John the Baptist Church in Alpha, and Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Herkimer, all celebrated their 100th Anniversaries!

Our mission parishes continue to grow: Holy Apostles Mission in Lansing, which began with a core group of “12,” has grown to “70” ... and is looking to buy the church they have been renting for the past few years! St. Innocent Mission in Oneonta has a new full-time pastor, and they have bought a piece of property on which to build their own church one day! St. Olympia Mission in Potsdam now has services every weekend of the month and is exploring the purchase of a small church in the heart of the city. And we are in the initial stages of establishing our first African-American parish, St. Simon of Cyrene Mission in New Brunswick, NJ, set to open next month.

We also marked milestones in the careers of our clergy: Archdeacon Michael Suvak celebrated his 20th Anniversary of diaconal service; Igumen Joseph (Hoffman) and Archpriest Gary Breton both marked their Silver Anniversaries of Priestly Ordination; Archpriest Peter Baktis, Archpriest Wiaczeslaw Krawczuk, Archpriest Herman Schick and Archpriest John Shimchick all celebrated 30 years of priestly service; Archpriest James Parsells marked his 40th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination; Archpriest John Chupeck, his Golden Jubilee of priestly service, and Archpriest Joseph Petranin, his 60th Anniversary of Ordination to the Holy Priesthood.

I was privileged to tonsure a number of men as Readers; I was honored to bless Readers to wear the Sub-Deacon's orarion and to ordain married Readers as Sub-Deacons. It was my joy to ordain Sub-Deacon David Donch and Sub-Deacon John Komline to the Diaconate, and to ordain Deacon Theodore Gregory to the Holy Priesthood this past year. And our Diocese was blessed to receive Fr. Vasil Dubee from the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania and Fr. Alexander Revyuk from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia; and we have the blessing to have Fr. Luke Majoros of the Archdiocese of Canada to serve in Potsdam every weekend of each month.

Our Diocese is supporting these fledgling parishes – with love, the love of a mother for her children. To all who have donated to the DDB Fund to realize this support ... our deepest gratitude!

This year we can be grateful to GOD that we have *six* young men studying at St. Tikhon's Seminary: third-year students Andrew Bohush from Dormition Church in Binghamton, Paul Kappanadze from Holy Trinity Church in Elmira, and Veljko Pejovic from Annunciation Church in Brick; and first-year students George Davis from Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral in New York City, Gregory Mariani from Mother of God Church in Princeton, and Robert West from Holy Apostles Mission in Lansing! Our Diocese is providing scholarships for these men who, God willing, will one day be caring for parishioners in our Diocesan churches. We do it, with love for our spiritual sons, being formed and educated to one day become spiritual fathers!

That, my friends, is the *good* news!

On the other side, since our last Assembly, we mourned the passing into eternity of Archpriest John Udics, who was the spiritual father of Saints Peter and Paul Church in Herkimer, and Matushka Cecelia Burdikoff, who was spiritual mother at Christ the Savior Church in Ballston Lake. Eternal be their memory!

We said “good-bye” to Archpriest David Vernak, who retired from active ministry and moved to Western Pennsylvania ... and to Archpriest Vladimir Alexeev, who left diocesan service to go home to Russia and care for his seriously ill mother. Fortunately, we were able to fill those parishes by bringing in a new priest into the Diocese and calling another out of retirement.

But now, there are two other priests who, for necessary health reasons, are asking for retirement in the next few months ... and unfortunately, of our three seminarians who will be graduating in May, none is married yet!

And, my beloved, it is not only vocations to the priesthood that we lack, but the vocations of choir directors that we need. There are a number of parishes which do not have individuals who are trained or comfortable in directing the church choir – such an important element in our liturgical worship!

We continue to show an overall decline of about 100 persons a year in the Diocese – that is, about 2 persons per parish. That has been a consistent rate of loss over the past several years. I wonder how many of those are the results of deaths or moving away ... and how many are

individuals who have stopped coming to church, stopped being devoted members of our parishes?

I hear often, “I don’t know what happened to our college kids? They aren’t here!” Statistics show that 60% of Orthodox Christian young people who go off to college do not return to their home church or to their Orthodox faith! Studies also indicate that while college life is challenging to a young person’s faith, many high school graduates have not been properly and strongly enough prepared in Orthodoxy to overcome the challenges of college and to maintain and express our faith while living on campus.

That brings us to the difficulties in Church School programs – inconsistent attendance, fewer years of programs, lack of trained and willing faculty, limited financial support from the parish ... etc.

And that, in turn, brings us to a final area of concern – in preparing for the proposed change in the method of supporting the Diocese, I looked carefully at the finances of each of our parishes – shocked to realize that about half of them are in deficit spending year after year. Some of this is due to decreased membership, some of it to a lack of support congruent with rising costs of insurance, utilities, maintenance of property, etc. ... Few priests are getting raises!

In assessing all of this – the good news and the negative reports – I have come to a conclusion that forms the theme of this Address. And that theme is the thread which runs through all of the challenges we face – one thing to overcome, common to all the things I have reported – a single enemy, if you will, planted by The Enemy, the evil one himself.

And that is APATHY!

We cannot control the numbers of people in our churches who are called by God to the portals of eternity, or those who are transferred out of our parishes because of their careers. These factors certainly impede growth in our census and our financial stability. We have no control over the calling of seminarians or when or to whom they get engaged and married. And we have no power over the health or long life of the clergy who serve our parishes.

All of this could make us depressed or cause us to feel helpless and hopeless.

But the GOOD NEWS is that, with God’s help, there is much that we do have control over ... so long as we fight “the good fight” and do not succumb to what I fear exists among too many Orthodox Christians in our country: a lack of interest, enthusiasm or concern for Christ, for our Holy Faith, and for their own parishes. That “lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern” is APATHY!

It seems to be so easy for Christians ... to reduce their commitment to Church to Sunday morning only (and if they miss, the Church is simply “out of the picture” that week), with so much of the rest of the week going to things of the world. It seems so common for Orthodox to just attend Church on Sundays and not fully participate in the Liturgy, not join in the

singing and the prayers, not receive the Holy Mysteries. It seems so frequent for our faithful to rely on their cradle membership in the Church ... and not attend adult catechism or Bible study.

It seems so easy for parishioners ... to excuse their non-involvement in parish activities with “their already over-loaded busy schedules,” thinking someone else will do it. It seems so common to put “support of the Church” last on the list of expenses for the week or the month ... to keep giving at levels of decades ago ... to let someone else make that needed donation.

It seems so familiar for parents not to do everything possible to bring their children to Church: to Vespers and Liturgy on weekends, divine services on feast days, religious education classes, youth activities, etc., that the local parish offers, using the excuse of their sons’ and daughters’ already over-loaded schedules, committed to doing the “things they want to do” and complaining about the times set by the Church.

It seems so easy for even “pillars of our parishes” to say, “I don’t need to worry about Church Growth and Evangelism – as long as my parish church is there to bury me when I die!” ... or for them to downplay the “new” idea of increased Stewardship and replace it with the age-old formula that says, “cut the budget!”

All of this adds up to that dictionary definition of APATHY – lack of interest, lack of enthusiasm, lack of concern, lack of commitment ... etc. This is a recipe for the devil’s delight!

And so now that I have painted this gruesome picture, how do I propose to overcome it, to replace it with brighter colors, have it result in a happier ending? I propose that together we try DEFYING APATHY step by step, one area at a time:

1) PRAYER: We all need to constantly be revitalizing and renewing our prayer life. Every day, at every turn in life, we need to be in conversation and communion with Christ ... putting Him into every detail of the picture of our life. We need to remember the words of our Lord in the Scripture: “Without Me, you can do nothing.” Let’s put Him in our life in faith and love.

Let’s take a silent poll: How many of you pray every day? And how many of you pray the prescribed 7 times a day: 1) in the morning when you get up, 2) in the evening when you go to bed, 3-5) at each of our 3 meals a day, 6) with our spouses (asking God for blessings on issues our children need not know about – possible loss of a job, or possible re-location, or the possible illness of a grandparent), strengthening our marriage as Ecclesiastes says, “a three-stranded cord (husband, wife and the Lord) is stronger than a two-stranded cord” ... and finally, 7) with our children as a family, perhaps just the Trisagion or the readings of the day ... and then the rite of mutual forgiveness and saying “I love you.” We need to commit to a richer daily prayer life. Let’s consult our spiritual father for guidance, use our prayer book, follow the Church calendar, and re-claim for Christ the rhythm and routine of our daily life.

2) CHURCH ATTENDANCE: No matter what the rest of the world is doing, we need to go back to the Fourth Commandment, “Keep holy the Sabbath day,” and put Christ back into His day, the Lord’s day – and each of His feasts. Given that He gives us 168 hours each week ... is

it too much to give Him back an hour on Saturday evening and two hours on a Sunday? If we really do love Him, we should want to be with Him, in His house, as often as we can.

Isn't that how it is with the people we love (someone we're dating ... our grandchildren ...)? We want to be with them, spend time with them, do things with and for them. We yearn for the presence of the one we love. In this fashion, our hearts ought to be attracted to GOD as the object of our greatest love and devotion.

There are those who say the Liturgy is too long, too boring, too stale. If we feel that way, we surely won't like Heaven. The solution is to get to know Our Lord better. He will help us to see that He is at the center of every Liturgy and Sacrament, offering Himself to us in love. If the Bible doesn't seem like Good News to us, the solution is to get to know Christ better. We will find that the Bible is Christ speaking to us the words of life everlasting.

If we find coming to Church on Sunday a chore, the solution is to get to know the Savior personally. There is no substitute for getting to know Jesus personally and learning to love Him faithfully. When this happens, everything changes; everything comes alive. Those who are the leaders in our parishes, should provide examples of faithful Church attendance for others to follow.

3) SACRAMENTAL LIFE: When I was a child, we went to Communion this way: One Confession, one Communion, once a year. I was terrified of it – of committing a sin between the two Sacraments, of swallowing water if I brushed my teeth – but I took it seriously. Today, I fear, we are too cavalier with Communion. We just get into line with everybody else, and receive the Holy Eucharist. Sacramental reception is a good thing indeed; BUT are we properly prepared to receive the Very Body and Blood of Our Lord? Have we gone to Vespers? Have we read the Canon of Preparation or at least said the prayers of preparation for Holy Communion in the Liturgy book? Have we made a daily confession in our icon corner at home, come to General Confession if it is offered, and given our private Confession in the church at least once each fasting season? Have we fasted properly? I visit some parishes outside of the fasting seasons, and I hardly ever see anyone going to Confession that weekend. Is that the norm? Has it become Casual Communion?

I hope and pray that this is not the case. St. Paul warns us sternly in I Cor. 11:27-29: “Therefore whoever eats this Bread or drinks the Cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the Bread and drink of the Cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's Body.” The Church wants all of us to receive Holy Communion frequently, regularly. That's why She recommends Confession every month to six weeks, and always during each of the fasts. (The idea of going to confession once a year is from the Council of Trent; it is not Orthodox.)

And remember, General Confession is NOT meant to replace private Confession, but only to enhance it. Let us renew our Sacramental way of life, by receiving the Sacraments with proper preparation and greater enthusiasm!

4) **PARISH LEADERSHIP:** Throughout salvation history, God has relied upon faithful men and women to be leaders of His chosen people. Think of Abraham and the patriarchs; Moses and Joshua and Samuel; Kings David and Solomon; the Old Testament Prophets; the Evangelists and Apostles; and the Saints of every age. We include here women: Deborah and Hannah; Ruth and Esther; Elizabeth and Anna; the Myrrh-bearing Women; the Women Equal to the Apostles; the Saints of every age ... and of course, the Theotokos – the Virgin Mary. All of them were, in some way, prepared for that role of leadership; trained, if you will, to lead both by teaching and by example ... prepared in some instances by the Lord Himself, and trained in other cases by individuals who were previously prepared and became their teachers.

This is the reason we have Continuing Education for Clergy and Workshops for Parish Council Members – to continue to form them into better “vessels of clay” to serve the Lord and His Church, through further education, through programs developed outside the Diocese, through perspectives from individuals of specific expertise, and through bringing those within the diocesan family into closer co-operation with and mutual support of one another.

In the last few years, our Parish Council Conferences and Clergy Continuing Education gatherings have suffered from lessened interest and diminished attendance – two symptoms of APATHY. We need to renew our personal commitment to ongoing education, continual leadership training and extended service. We can truly make ourselves better leaders with greater enthusiasm to serve Christ.

5) **STEWARDSHIP:** I have already identified the rationalizations that have developed against serious stewardship: “That’s not the way we’ve done it before” ... “Just cut the Budget” ... or, “Let’s get a part-time priest!” Parishes cannot grow in a contraction mode. This is why we hold Parish Council Conferences on Stewardship. This is why we offer *Jacob’s Well* and the publication *First Fruits* – to educate our faithful in Stewardship. Some people think of Stewardship as a scary word – as if it were all about money. Actually, it’s not. It’s about giving of time and talent and treasure – but giving that is rooted in LOVE.

The underlying element in Stewardship is LOVE: How much do I love Christ? How much do I love the Holy Orthodox Church? How much do I love my home parish? Our answers to those questions dictate how much we give, out of love, of our time, talent and treasure to Christ and the extension of His Kingdom here on earth. And we know that we are commanded to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30)

The “love” the Scripture speaks of is “*hesed*” (in Greek, “*agape*”), steadfast love that is SACRIFICIAL, for the other, no matter what. It is sacrificial giving of time, talent and treasure – like the first offering of Abel, the very best he-lamb he had; like the tithe that Malachi speaks of – 10 percent opening up the gates of heaven with blessings; like the sacrifices of the first Christians who gave everything they had for Christ and the Church.

And our answer still pales in comparison to what Our God and Savior did for us: in creating us, in saving us on the Cross, in blessing us every day we draw breath. Can we not give the first offering of each week to Christ: the first hour of wages we earn (before taxes), set aside each

week, whether we go to Church or not? Can we not try to give a little more this year than we did last year, in gratitude for all He has given us? We need to fight the apathetic view by seeing our Stewardship as a gift of love out of gratitude.

6) PARISH GROWTH: Most of us realize that our parishes are numerically smaller than they were decades ago. And we know that some of us are getting older, and we can't do the work we used to – making pirohi and holupki, holding bazaars, etc. I think all of us want our parishes to grow, but too many of us are waiting for the “magic pill” that will make the parish grow by itself. That is not going to happen.

This is why we offer workshops for Parish Council members on Parish Growth and Evangelization and why we publish *Jacob's Well* and the newsletter, *Beyond the Plateau* – to educate our faithful in this effort. The formula of the Church for evangelization is active obedience to the Lord's Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even 'til the very end of the world.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The Apostles show us how that happens: Witnessing to Christ – telling the story of all that He had done for them – to everyone they met (in the synagogue or in prison). They brought in one person, one family, one person, one household, one person at a time (the Ethiopian; Cornelius and his household; the Philippian jailer; Lydia and her family; Crispus). The same is true for the Saints of every age. The same is true for the founders of our parishes – some of them, our grandparents and parents. They told everyone they met about their parish church, about their faith, about their wonderful community. They brought people in, one person at a time, one family at a time – without advertising or up-to-date programs, just simple witnessing.

And so, we need to be witnesses to tell the story of our parish, to invite people to our Church, to say what the Lord has done for us to those who are “of the parish” but not “in the church” on Sundays, to those who “left the parish” for whatever reason and are going nowhere now, to those who have no church – theirs was closed, or theirs changed its theology; to those who have never really had a church to call their own. Invite them to church, welcome them to our parish, and give them to Father; it is his job to take care of their education. We need to become zealous witnesses for Christ and our Church.

7) OUR YOUNG PEOPLE: While we are trying to gain new members to our parishes, we have to make sure that we don't lose any of our own faithful – especially our young people. They are not just the future of our Church, they are the present; and it's not just that they need to be the future of our Church ... the Church needs to be their future. To ensure that this becomes reality, we need an all-out effort by everyone – the parents, the rector, the parish council, the Church School, and all the congregation. Our attitude toward youth ministry cannot be apathetic or lackluster ... we must pull out all the stops, and make the Church the spiritual “home of our children.”

That means we as a family must come to services and religious education every week. I know it's difficult with mixed marriages, but if the child was baptized in our Faith, and is communed

in our Church, then he or she needs to be living in the Life of our Parish. I know it's difficult with sports on Sundays ... but I also know that Sandy Koufax never pitched a game on Saturday (he was Jewish) ... *Chariots of Fire* is an Oscar-winning movie about a runner who would not compete in the Olympics on the Lord's Day ... and, three years ago, our Diocese had the undefeated New Jersey state high school wrestling champion, who had to wrestle last at every meet, so he could be sure to attend Liturgy in his home parish, if they were at home, and find a parish to go to for Liturgy, if they were away ... but AT LEAST, there is Vespers every Saturday night ... and weekday feasts they can attend during the sports season, if all else fails.

It also means that we have to re-look at our Youth Ministry programs – Do we have the best religious education classes possible? Do we encourage people to become Church School teachers? Do we provide activities for the kids? Do we participate in pan-Orthodox events with other parishes? Do we send our children to the Altar Servers' Retreat, the Girls' Retreat, the Teen Retreat, Orthodox Youth Day, and the other events the Diocese sponsors? Do we encourage our kids to go to St. Andrew's Camp? Are we working to develop friendships of faith between our parish children? This will help to cement them in these activities.

Each year we sponsor a Church School Conference for parents and teachers to help develop better programs and activities. Though the numbers (both in youngsters and adults) have been down, we continue to provide all these events. There is no alternative here: we must expend our time, we must give of our talent, and money cannot be an excuse in terms of parish priorities. Consider apathy in the light of St. John Chrysostom's words: "This, then, is our task: to educate both ourselves and our children in Godliness."

8) COLLEGE STUDENTS: As I mentioned earlier, if a parish does not know where its college students have gone, it's no wonder we lose 60% of them. When a child is baptized in our Church, he or she is no longer just a child of his or her parents, but an adopted son or daughter of God ... AND a son or daughter of the parish in which that Baptism took place. It takes the Church to raise a Christian; that's why Christ established His Church.

And so we as a Church, in each parish, need to take care of our children – yes, even our college students. Hopefully we have prepared them well enough in Church School ... although I am dismayed that in some parishes, it ends after 8th grade or sometimes 6th grade! I grew up in a program that went through to 12th grade, and I ran both of my parish Church Schools to end with the students' graduation from high school.

When they have been accepted into a college, someone on the Parish Council or in the Church School or PTA, or anyone in the parish, needs to make sure they get connected to a parish near the school they are attending and the local OCF. We need to connect them to the local parish rector, who we ask to get a volunteer family to pick them up for Church and have them over for dinner after services. It might not work every weekend, but we have to try.

Greg Fedorchak, a Ph.D. student at Cornell, told me that freshmen at college don't have advisors or counselors or faculty interested enough in taking them under their wing ... so that if the Church doesn't, they will be mentored by the upperclassmen in their dorm, who will teach them

the schedule of college (which does not include Liturgy), the lifestyle of college (which will not include Church), and the morals of college (which are not Our Lord's teachings). That's why OCF's are so important; that's why we have OCF Conferences. Again the numbers are down, but we continue to try ... we continue to fight a spirit of apathy that would say, "stop trying."

The parish needs to keep tabs on these young people – send them short notes, care packages, invitations to serve in various ways (as choir singers, altar servers, offering basket collectors, etc.) when they are on break. The Manville parish has a parishioner-family "adopt" each college student, keeping in contact with him or her, sending them care packages, letting them know they are loved and missed. We can't be apathetic about the future leaders of our Church; we must be pro-active.

9) SEMINARY VOCATIONS: At every parish I attend, I think – I hope – that I make the time to thank the altar servers (at whatever age or rank) for their help at the Hierarchical Liturgy and all the services of that parish church. I mention to them to think about becoming priests ... or at least deacons (if they want another career) ... because the Church needs more priests and deacons ... the Church needs them. As I said earlier, while we have six students from the Diocese in the Seminary, that isn't enough. There are priests who need to retire; others who want to retire ... I have to urge and beg them to stay on until I have someone to replace them. There are more missions we could open up – there are two requests for Mission Stations in Upstate New York. I can't even think about them, until I have someone I can send them.

If you know someone who loves the Lord, and loves to serve the Church, and loves to be in the Altar, PLEASE encourage him to consider becoming a deacon or a priest. On the one hand, it is a difficult life, to be sure. It does not provide the most lucrative salary, or equity from owning your own house when you go to retire. Contrary to the legend that priests work a couple of hours one day a week (if that were the case, everyone's son should be in seminary), priests are on call 24/7. And they are dealing with people and problems every day, defending a faith that is divinely revealed but not politically correct, and does not have the benefit of a full-time secretary or youth director like some denominations have.

On the other hand, they are following in the footsteps of the Saints of every age in their service to the Lord. They are continuing the work of Christ and His Apostles in the 21st century. They become members of a continuum of truth-bearers across the history of Christ's Church, who proclaim to the world "the faith which was delivered to the Saints once for all." (Jude 3) They have the privilege of doing the work of the Lord: There are children to baptize, couples to marry, the sick to heal, the dying to care for. There is the Word of God to teach, and the Bread of Life to distribute; sins to forgive and charity to be done in His Name.

Saint John Chrysostom tells us: "The office of the priesthood is performed on earth, but it ranks among the heavenly things. And with good reason; for this ministry was set up not by an angel, or an archangel, or by any created power, but by the Holy Spirit Himself ... He commanded that men who are still in the flesh should imitate the actions of angels." And 16 centuries later, St. Nikolai Velimirovich echoes: "There is no greater honor or responsibility on this earth than the calling and service of a priest."

We can't stand by and wait for vocations to "happen". The world, and the evil one, are working too hard to lure young men in other directions. We have to actively pray for vocations, encourage vocations, support vocations. Otherwise, some of our parishes will one day have no priests.

10) CHOIR DIRECTORS: There was a time when Choir Directors were so numerous, some parishes had more than one! Those were the days when they were salaried; some were given homes to live in as part of their compensation. As I said earlier, there are parishes in our Diocese without choir directors, even without someone to give a pitch. This can be very discouraging to those in the parish. They haven't learned to take over this very important ministry in the Church, and there is no one to teach them. To those first visiting the parish, without a good choir director leading the singing, the newcomers are deprived of hearing the rich and beautiful liturgical music tradition of the Orthodox Church – an element that helps to "secure" the visitors returning.

Between beautiful iconography and wonderful liturgical music, the parish church can become a replica of Hagia Sophia, the magnificent ancient Cathedral of Constantinople, of which the envoys of St. Vladimir said, "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth."

Our Commission on Liturgical Music hosts conferences throughout the Diocese a number of times each year to train choir directors and choir members. If you know of anyone with a beautiful voice or an interest in directing, encourage them to serve the Church and direct them to the workshops scheduled on our diocesan website. If you have a choir director and choir members, remember to say "thank you" often, especially on the Sunday nearest October 1, the Feast of St. Romanos the Melodist, when the Diocese honors choir directors and choir members.

Again, there is no time for apathy on this matter. If you have ever attended a service without a choir director, you know at what cost the Liturgy suffers. Pray for choir vocations, encourage them, and appreciate them.

My beloved fathers, brothers and sisters, this has been a long list of challenges our Church faces, and we cannot afford even a smidgen of apathy in overcoming them ... there is just so much work that needs to be done. As we approach another year of diocesan life, let us embrace these challenges and all our work with concern, enthusiasm and commitment, focusing our efforts on the only One who can help us achieve our goals, Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. As I have preached or written to some of you already, I say:

This Diocesan Assembly is not simply a time to exult in the past; it also beckons us to look forward and heavenward. In the days ahead, new and different challenges must be faced by our Church. The future will be bright for us only if we are willing to devote our time and efforts to bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a society that has strayed from His path. Our Lord must be the object of our worship, the theme of our sermons, the pattern of our lives, and the inspiration of our ideals. Others must experience His presence when they visit our church.

For this to happen, every member of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey and all our parishes, clergy and lay persons alike, must be totally dedicated to serving the Lord and His Holy Church. It is our task to build upon the foundation set for us by generations past. It is our

responsibility to leave a similar legacy to the next generation of faithful who will call our parishes their home. May God help us in this most important task – and may He bless each of you richly for all that you have labored to accomplish in His Name and for His glory.

I take this opportunity to say “thank you” to all of you who have made each of these ministries and programs in our Diocese possible. To all our clergy for their tireless labors “in the trenches,” fighting for the salvation of souls against the forces of the evil one. I love all our priests: each of them has his own gifts and talents, and it is my privilege and joy to stand at the altar with them when I visit their parishes. To all our parish council officers who faithfully take upon themselves the sacred task of being leaders in our parishes – helping their spiritual father lead others on the journey to the Kingdom of Heaven.

To all our faithful across the Diocese, for all that they do in Christ’s Name, out of love, for their parish church, and for the Diocese – especially by their contributions to the DDB Fund – which has raised over the past six years an incredible \$775,000 to fund the ministries of our Diocese, to the glory of God!

I wish to personally acknowledge the incomparable efforts of a number of individuals:

- First and foremost, our Chancellor, Archpriest Joseph Lickwar, who serves as my mentor and chief advisor; the greatest gift my predecessor gave me was Father Joseph as Diocesan Chancellor;
- Our Deans: Fr. Alexey Karlgut, New York State Deanery; Fr. Wiaczeslaw Krawczuk, New York City Deanery; and Fr. Gary Breton, New Jersey Deanery, for their wise counsel and labors in parishes, deaneries and diocese;
- Diocesan Treasurer, Matushka Mary Breton, for her countless hours of work;
- Diocesan Financial Secretary, Stephanie Burk, for assisting Fr. Joseph and Mat. Mary;
- Diocesan Secretary, Fr. Matthew Brown, for assisting me in the work of the Chancery;
- The Council of Presbyters, for their invaluable advice and ground-breaking work;
- All the Chairmen of the various ministries of the Diocese, for all their efforts;
- The editors of *Jacob’s Well*, *First Fruits*, and *Beyond the Plateau*, for all their labors;
- The Archbishop’s Sub-Deacons, Mark Federoff and Nilus Klingel, without whom he would never get across the breadth of the Diocese, to every parish, at least once a year; and
- The Vice-Chancellor of the Diocese and Personal Secretary to the Archbishop, Fr. David Cowan, for all his work, known only to God;

Without all of you, the Bishop could in no way do the job that needs to be done.

Once again, as the Diocese, all that we do, we must do in love and we must do for love. In love, there is no room for apathy. We support youth ministries, because we love our kids. We support our seminarians because they are our future pastors who are going to love us one day. We support our elders, because for so many years they have provided for us out of love. We want more people in our churches, and we want financial stability for our parishes – because we love our communities.

All that we do, we do it because we love. We are in this together – the Bishop, our clergy, our people – because we love the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

It is hard to believe it is already seven years. Thank you for the privilege of serving in the Diocese of New York and New Jersey. Thank you for accepting me into the family of this Diocese, its parishes, its clergy and its faithful. Thank you for the joy of getting to know you and love you. And thank you for your love and your many kindnesses over the years.

To any one of you and to all of you whom I have hurt or upset or disappointed or failed to help in any way, I ask for your forgiveness. And, of course, I ask for your prayers. Be assured of my prayers: May God bless you; may God keep you; may God ever love you.

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

-- Archbishop Michael of New York; Diocese of New York and New Jersey