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# First Fruits

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## What Is Our Church?

*(and How Are We To Support It?)*

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA (OCA) IS AN AUTOCEPHALOUS (self-governing) Church, and is composed of territorial and ethnic Dioceses located within the geographical boundaries of the North American continent. Our Diocese, the Diocese of New York and New Jersey (DNYNJ), is made up of all OCA parishes within the state boundaries of New York and New Jersey.

Each Diocese relies on the financial and prayerful support of its parishes to do its work. In turn, the Dioceses support the OCA's Central Church Administration (CCA) and its work.

For many years, the financial support by parishes has been in the form of annual per-capita assessments. Each parish, based on its reported census, has borne the responsibility of annually remitting to the Diocese a determined amount (\$145, in recent years) per parishioner. Of that amount, a designated portion (determined at the triennial All-American Council) has been remitted by the Diocese to the OCA's CCA for support of its ongoing work. The designated portion was last set at \$90. This has left the Diocese with \$55 per Diocesan parishioner to fund its operations.

After being installed as our Diocesan Hierarchy, Archbishop MICHAEL established the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors (DDB) program to supplement Diocesan income, in order to fund ministries essential to the vitality of the Diocese. These include assistance for struggling parishes, planting of new mission parishes in parts of the Diocese where there is no Orthodox presence, scholarship assistance for seminary students pursuing vocations in Church leadership, and special events and programs focused on young people, Church School teachers, Church music leaders, and Parish Council members. The DDB program encourages individuals or institutions both within and outside the Diocese to prayerfully and joyfully share with the Diocese whatever funds they desire to share from the abundance of God's blessings. The promise is that *all* money given to the Diocese through the program will be spent *only* on Diocesan programs and departments. A full description of the DDB program may be found on the Diocesan website

([www.nynjoca.org](http://www.nynjoca.org)). Likewise, the 2015 annual financial report of the Diocese may be found on the Diocesan website under the heading titled "Financial Reports".

Wishing to lay aside the un-Scriptural and inequitable per-capita "head tax" assessment system of years past, the hierarchs, clergy, and laypersons assembled at the 18th All-American Council of the OCA in 2015, adopted a Proportional Giving model, whereby each Diocese will contribute an agreed-upon percentage of its unrestricted operating income to the OCA Central Church Administration to fund its operations. The clergy and faithful of the DNYNJ now have the same opportunity – on a diocesan level – to prayerfully and joyfully commit a percentage of their unrestricted income to support the operations and ministries of our Diocese.

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## We are being given the opportunity to be a part of a faith-filled transition to a new way of supporting the Church.

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What is more, a few of the parishes in the Diocese have taken the initiative to abandon the head-tax, or "dues", system as the means of funding parish operations. Instead, they have made the transition to a Pledging or Stewardship system, in which every member, or member household, privately determines the percentage of their own income that they can contribute to the parish – in gratitude for what God has entrusted to them – and then pledges that dollar amount as their total contribution for the coming budget year.

Ideally, this new way of funding will transform the way we think about giving, and the essential role of "first-fruits stewardship" in financially empowering the Church to do its work.

*(Continued on next page...)*

## The Holy Martyr and Archdeacon Laurence

WHEN THE HOLY ARCHDEACON LAURENCE visited Pope Sixtus, whom they held in prison, he cried out with tears: "Whither art thou gone, father? Why hast thou forsaken thine archdeacon, with whom always thou hast offered the Bloodless Sacrifice?..." Saint Sixtus answered him: "I have not forsaken thee, my son. I am old and go to an easy death, but yet greater sufferings await thee. Know, that after three days upon our death thou shalt follow after me. And now go, take the church treasury and distribute it to the poor and needy Christians." Saint Laurence zealously did the bidding of the holy hierarch.

Having heard that Pope Sixtus had been taken to trial with the deacons, Saint Laurence went there so as to witness their deed, and he said to the holy bishop: "Father, I have already fulfilled thy command, and distributed by hand thine treasury; forsake me not!" Hearing something about treasure, soldiers put him under guard, and the other martyrs were beheaded (†6 August 258). The emperor locked up Saint Laurence in prison and ordered the chief jailer Hyppolitus to keep watch over him. In prison Saint Laurence with prayer healed the sick gathered together with him and he baptized many.

Astonished by this, Hyppolitus himself believed and accepted Baptism together with all his household. Soon Laurence was again brought to the emperor and commanded to produce the hidden treasure. Saint Laurence answered: "Give me a period of three days, and I shalt show thee this treasure." During this time the saint gathered up a crowd of the poor and the sick, who ate only because of the charity of the Church, and bringing them he explained: "Here are the vessels in which is contained the treasure. And everyone, who puts their treasure in these vessels, will receive them in abundance in the Heavenly Kingdom."

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**"IF YOU DESIRE TO BECOME EQUAL TO THE APOSTLES, THERE IS NOTHING TO HINDER YOU..."**

WHEREFORE, IF YOU DESIRE TO BECOME EQUAL TO THE APOSTLES, there is nothing to hinder you. For to have arrived at this virtue only suffices for your not at all falling short of them. Let no one therefore wait for miracles. For though the evil spirit is grieved, when he is driven out of a body, yet much more so, when he sees a soul delivered from sin. For indeed this is his great power. (Acts 8:10) This power caused Christ to die, that He might put an end to it. Yea, for this brought in death; by reason of this all things have been turned upside down. If then thou remove this, you have cut out the nerves of the devil...

The saying is not mine, but the blessed Paul's. For when he had said, "*Covet earnestly the best gifts,*" and "*yet show I unto you a more excellent way*" (1 Corinthians 12:31), he did not speak next of a sign, but of charity, the root of all our good things. If then we practice this, and all the self-denial that flows from it, we shall have no need of signs; even as on the other hand, if we do not practice it, we shall gain nothing by the signs.

Bearing in mind then all this, let us imitate those things whereby the apostles became great. And whereby did they become great? Hear Peter, saying, "*Behold we have forsaken all, and followed You; what shall we have therefore?*" (Matthew 19:27) Hear also Christ saying to them, "*You shall sit upon twelve thrones, and, every one that has forsaken houses, or brethren, or father, or mother, shall receive an hundredfold in this world, and shall inherit everlasting life.*" **From all worldly things, therefore, let us withdraw ourselves,** and dedicate ourselves to Christ, that we may both be made equal to the apostles according to His declaration, and may enjoy eternal life; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom be glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

—ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 46 On Matthew*



*What Is Our Church?* continued...

Hopefully, this "change of mind" in how we give will inspire individuals and Diocesan parishes to joyfully and willingly assist the Diocese in doing God's work so that we would have an abundance of funding to support even more efforts to bring the Gospel to the world around us.

During the month of June, our Diocesan Treasurer, Matushka Mary Buletza-Breton, made presentations on the concept of Proportional Giving to Parish Council members throughout the Diocese. Hopefully, this information has trickled down into every parish of the Diocese. If it hasn't, then the opportunity to view a video of the presentations will soon exist on our Diocesan website.

Very shortly, each Diocesan parish will receive more detailed information that will outline procedures for migrating from the Assessment method to the Proportional Giving method. The goal is to begin the implementation of Proportional Giving at the beginning of 2017.

As Diocesan faithful, we will be challenged to move away from old and ingrained ways. We will also be given the opportunity to be a part of an historic, positive, and faith-filled transition to a new way of financially supporting the Church. May we all seek to understand and implement this concept, so that our parishes, our Diocese, and our oca may all do God's work at each and every level of the Church.

—Archpriest Gary Joseph Breton