

ARCHBISHOP'S ADDRESS TO THE 2020 DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

Diocese of New York and New Jersey, Orthodox Church in America

**Thursday, November 5, 2020 –
from Holy Resurrection Church, Wayne, NJ – via ZOOM**

"I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace.

In the world you will have tribulation ...

but be of good courage, I have overcome the world."

(The Words of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in John 16:33)

My beloved concelebrants, the clergy of our Diocese; beloved monastics, deacons, seminarians, and matushki; beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, the faithful of our Diocese; beloved delegates and observers to this Assembly, friends and guests: *Christ is in our midst!*

When we left last year's very successful Diocesan Assembly held at Holy Trinity Church in East Meadow, NY, we went to our respective home parishes with a renewed sense of vitality in our Diocese. We had heard from Orthodox "Stewardship Evangelist" Bill Marianes, "Why Are You Here? Living "the Calling to Which You Have Been Called" as an Engaged Disciple of Jesus Christ." We had workshops on Stewardship and Generosity in the Parish, Parish Ministries Serving People in Need, and Pastoral Care for Families Struggling with Infant Loss.

We learned that our Diocese had grown in membership by 3%. We heard from the Treasurer and the Auditors about another successful financial year in New York and New Jersey, and we adopted an increased budget with expanded plans for the ministries of our Diocese. Our clergy signed up for a full schedule of parish visitations for the Archbishop to make. And we had planned a year full of youth activities – an Altar Servers' Retreat, a Lenten Teen Retreat, six weeks of summer camp at St. Andrew's, another Orthodox Youth Day, and our annual Girls' Retreat. In addition, we had planned Parish Council and Church School Teachers' workshops.

As 2020 began, we received the final reports of another nearly 200-person increase in active diocesan membership, with weekly church attendance averaging 63% of our 4,604 total active members. Baptisms and chrismations were steady; weddings were up, and funerals were down. On Sunday, March 8, I attended the Sunday of Orthodoxy celebration of a concelebrated Assembly of Bishops Hierarchical Liturgy at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, with hierarchs of every jurisdiction serving together. And that evening we had nearly 40 clergy and more than 200 faithful packed into Holy Resurrection Church, this very temple from which I am addressing you, for the celebration of a glorious Pan-Orthodox Vesper Service and wonderful fellowship hour afterwards. Truly, Great Lent 2020 was off to a great start! [[Pause]]

WHO WOULD HAVE IMAGINED THAT WITHIN A MATTER OF JUST A FEW DAYS, ALL OF THIS WOULD CHANGE?

It was the beginning of the Third Week of Great Lent ... and with great force and stunning swiftness, the Coronavirus brought fear and trembling into our hearts, as it attacked the citizens of our land with its deadly intent of destruction of human lives. In a matter of moments, at least so it seemed, our churches were reduced to skeletal crews for divine services; the diocesan calendar of events was cancelled, as our faithful found themselves in “lockdown” mode. For the first time in my episcopacy, I would fail to visit every church in the Diocese in the course of the year, as the canons prescribe. We found it necessary to explore new ways of celebrating divine services together, using the stream of the internet; Scripture studies and catechism classes were offered by Zoom; and we even enjoyed virtual coffee hours!

Churches needed to be sanitized, marked for social distancing; the names of attendees were required to be recorded, and protective masks were necessary. Confessions were heard by telephone, and communion spoons were sanitized. Hospital and nursing home visits were almost completely forbidden, and Unction was offered on disposable Q-tips when possible. Parishes suffered financially – with reduced church attendance and no ability to hold fund-raising projects.

Without Communion and community, loneliness and depression gained momentum. There were tensions within the Church as to how to react to this pandemic, with many unhappy people on both sides of the issue. And, sadly, very sadly, some of those we love passed from this life.

The Church, of course, was not alone in this coronavirus crisis. The pandemic has had the uncanny ability to turn the material paradises of our country into hells. For instance: the cruise ship, a symbol of earthly delights, became an infected prison for passengers who did everything possible to get out. Those who have made sports their god now found empty stadiums and cancelled tournaments. Those who made idols of the stars of stage, screen and television found the lights of Hollywood and Broadway darkened. Those who adored money found their portfolios decimated and their workforces quarantined. Those who glorify education as the pinnacle of human excellence found our schools and universities empty. The devotees of consumerism faced bare supermarket shelves. The very world that some worshipped had come tumbling down, and those things in which they gloried were now in ruins.

The attempts of mankind to manage the coronavirus crisis accept no help from beyond the mind of man. The immense powers of government were mobilized to control much of our lives to prevent its spread. The mighty arm of science continues to scramble to find a vaccine. The worlds of finance and technology have been brought to bear to mitigate the disastrous effects of the pandemic. While all human efforts must be used to solve the problems, they have not produced the desired results. Present attempts have disappointed a frenetically intemperate society addicted to instant, push-button solutions.

The world is again being forced to shut down, with no definite timeline as to when this crisis will end. A minute microbe has toppled the idols that were once thought of as so stable, so powerful, so enduring. And yet we will still spend trillions of dollars in the futile hope of patching up those broken idols.

You see, there have been crises like this before in the world. Humanity survived the Bubonic Plague, found a cure for Yellow Fever and Polio, and overcame the Spanish Influenza. Tireless scientists and doctors continue to discover help and hope against the scourge of AIDS. But it seems to me – there is one striking difference between the overcoming of previous crises and our present problem: we as a nation ... we as a global community ... we as a human family ... HAVE NOT TURNED TO GOD FOR HELP!

The coronavirus has come at a time when most in society feel they do not need God. For them God has been replaced by bread and circuses. The modern pleasures to which we are accustomed point to no need for Heaven. The post-modern vices proclaim no fear of hell. During the influenza, the President ... the Governor ... the Mayor ... the Schools ... the Stars of old ... would tell us to PRAY, TO CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD ... Certainly not so today.

But, if it were not enough that God is replaced or ignored, we have gone one step further. God is banished from the scene; He is forbidden to act. Among the draconian measures decreed, government officials are forbidding public worship. In Italy, they banned masses, stopped communion and confession; now in England, churches will be closed for a month. The Church and its Holy Mysteries are considered by many as an occasion of contagion, treated no different than a sports event or music concert. In their turn, the media mock the Church, claiming that even God “has been self-quarantined.”

This neglect of God – this rejection, even, of the Divine Physician – *this*, my beloved, is what makes the present pandemic so terrifying. There are few mitigating institutions like the Church to make its treatment humane and bearable. We are left alone to face this great danger. The tiny virus isolates and alienates its victims, taking them out of society. In many cases, it is the individual against the State. Technicians in hazmat suits treat men, women, and children as if *they* were the virus. In totalitarian China and other places, officials employ brutal violence to force compliance with drastic directives.

In times of plague, the prayers of whole communities rose to ask God to come to the aid of a sinful society in need of His mercy and love. History gives testimony that these prayers were heard. When the Church acts as she should, she prevents crises like the coronavirus from becoming inhuman and overwhelming. Like a mother, she provides consolation and hope in moments of darkness. She reminds us that we are not alone ... we have recourse to the One Who said, "I am with you always ... even to the very end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). It makes no sense to banish God from the fight against the coronavirus.

Indeed, instead the coronavirus crisis should be a call to reject a godless society. This pandemic threatens to go beyond the health crisis and bring down the American economy.

We must therefore ask why God is replaced, ignored and banished. It is a time to turn to the One Who alone can save us from this disaster.

There are those who would say that it is God Himself Who caused this coronavirus pandemic. He did it, they say, because we have sinned against Him and it is His punishment against us for our sins.

This may have been the theology of the Old Testament ... or the perspective of the Prosperity Gospel, but it is not the teaching of the Fathers and Saints of our Orthodox Church. Our Scripture and Patristic witness affirm that God is NOT the cause or source of evil. In the words of St. John of Damascus, "Just as darkness does not come from the Light, so evil does not come from the Good God."

We know from the book of Job that his miseries came not from God but from the devil, who worked to tempt him to give up his faith in God. We know from the Gospel of Luke that the woman who was bent over for 18 years "had been bound by Satan" (not by God). And we know that if calling down disease and death was God's method, then when Jesus walked this earth, He would have proclaimed leprosy, paralysis, heart attacks, cancer and death upon so many sinful souls, instead of HEALING, HEALING, HEALING.

It is true according to the Fathers, and according to the Scriptures, the God does allow, does permit suffering. He allowed the devil to tempt Job ... He permitted Lazarus to die the first time (and the second) ... He did not remove the “thorn in the side” with which St. Paul suffered. WHY? In the words of every Saint who has written about sickness and suffering ... so that they would turn to Him for help, for healing, for life -- for eternal life.

What did Our Lord Himself say, “I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation ... but be of good courage, I have overcome the world.” What does the Scripture tell us: God does not desire the death of a sinner, but that he should turn from his ways (repent) and live (Ezekiel 18:23). God is not the author of the coronavirus; the devil is, he who is the author of all dissension and division, disease, destruction, and death. The Lord is the Giver of Life, the Healer of Sickness, the Victor over Death. It is to Him that we must turn in our battle against the pandemic, is our quest for healing and life.

Turning to God does not mean merely offering up a symbolic prayer or holding a procession in the hopes of returning to lives of sin and intemperate pleasures. Instead, it must consist of sincere prayer, true sacrifice and real repentance. Turning to God presupposes amendment of life in the face of a world that hates God’s law and barrels towards its destruction. It means acting as the Church has always done, with commonsense, wisdom, and charity ... but above all, with faith and trust and confidence. All of these Church remedies, full of comfort and healing, are within the grasp of our clergy and faithful.

Turning to God does not mean we deny the role of government in handling public health emergencies. However, Faith must be a major component of any solution in our parish, in the country and in the world. God is with us. We should confide in His Real Presence in the world – the God Who created us, the God Who died upon the Cross for our salvation, the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves.

And we as the Orthodox Church in the world, in America, in our Diocese and in our parishes have, in fact, made our Faith a major component of our efforts to overcome the coronavirus.

While the numbers at our divine services have been significantly reduced, in order to limit the spread of the virus in our communities, our states and our nation ... some of our parishes have celebrated all of the divine services prescribed without interruption – even if with a handful of faithful. Some priests have served with their family members as the choir and the altar servers. Some choir directors or singers have faithfully attended all of the services, lending the gift of their musical talent to the local Church.

Hopefully, the parish families have appreciated that their priest prayed for all of the members of the community, even in their inability to be present at the services.

Most of our parishes have live-streamed their services, while others have tuned in to the services from other communities. Hopefully, those at home have gotten dressed in their Sunday best, stood and prayed with the live-stream ... rather than watching while sitting or lying down, in leisure clothes, with a cup of coffee or other drink, and channel changing. Many of our clergy have recorded their homilies, to be shared in hard copy or on live-stream.

For others, the Diocese has published weekly the Typika Service, to be led at the family icon corner by a reader or the head of the household. Rectors have offered Bible studies (in both English and Russian), Orthodoxy 101 classes, and Church School instruction by Zoom. The Diocese has promoted a new Church School program, for special use at this pivotal time.

As a result of this use of technology, the parishioners – separated from each other by the threat of the virus – are united via the internet to one another ... and many Orthodox and non-Orthodox have come to discover the Faith or a parish because of those divine services or instructional classes being live-streamed. In fact, in one of our parishes 6 new families have joined the community *because* they witnessed the beautiful services by live-stream; and in another, there are now 12 new catechumens who will be chrismated before Nativity!

Parishes continue their outreach efforts and their philanthropic aid to the hungry, the homeless and the marginalized. Others have held blood drives and meals for first responders, working around the clock at the height of the pandemic.

Many of our faithful have returned to divine services as much as possible; some parishes, offering multiple Liturgies each week. Some have attended by Zoom the Bible studies and other classes being offered. Others have boldly and fearlessly, wearing masks, carried on the outreach and philanthropy of the parish in-person. I cannot praise enough those of you who have demonstrated that “you are the Church” in the face of the pandemic, by the yeoman service you continue to render to the Lord by all your efforts at this time.

And finally, there are those, just as God has so wanted, who drew closer to Him – face to face – at their Icon corner, without the beautiful trappings and singing of the services in their parish church. They spoke to Him, like the prophets, one to one; they offered themselves in repentance, like the saints; they pledged to continue to support the Church even in their own absence; they enriched their relationship with the Lord, while the church doors were closed to many, and instead so many opened the doors of their heart to the One Who loves us more than we love ourselves. May the One True God in Three Persons bless all of you, clergy and faithful alike, as only He can, with all the good things that come from His hands, in response to your sacrificial love expressed in your good works at this time.

On the Diocesan level, the work of the Church resumed as soon as possible, with my visits resuming beginning with Holy Week and Pascha at the Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Protection, and at services in parishes near to Bronxville in the ensuing weeks, until I renewed my full schedule after Memorial Day. But, for the first time in my 47 years as a priest, I learned what it was like not to serve the Divine Liturgy for two Sundays and for the Feast of the Annunciation in between.

My joy in returning to parish visitations was marked, in particular, by the adding of several men to the ranks of the clergy:

I was able to ordain to the Holy Priesthood: Deacon Paul Fedoroff in Christ the Savior Church in Ballston Lake, NY, on Sunday, July 18, and Deacon Michael Pejovic in the Church of the Annunciation in Brick, NJ, on Saturday, September 19. And Bishop Alexis of Bethesda ordained Deacon Ambrose Inlow to the Priesthood, on my behalf, at St. Tikhon's Monastery Church, on Saturday, August 15.

I ordained to the Holy Diaconate: Sub-deacon John (Keith) Morris in Holy Trinity Church, East Meadow, NY, on Saturday, August 8; Sub-deacon Jason Gagnon, in St. Basil the Great Church, Watervliet, NY, on Sunday, August 9; and Sub-deacon Michael Karney, in Holy Trinity Church, Elmira Heights, NY, on Saturday, September 12.

I ordained to the Sub-diaconate Reader Paul Giokas, at Christ the Savior Church in Ballston Lake, NY, on Sunday, July 18; and tonsured as Readers: David Ferencz in St. Nicholas Church, Cohoes, NY, on Sunday, August 2; and Russell Ricciardi in St. John the Theologian Church, Shirley, NY, on Sunday, October 4.

We received into the Diocese: Archpriest David Mezynski, from His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon; Archpriest Andreja Damjanovski, from Metropolitan Tikhon; and Fr. Ambrose Inlow, a May graduate of St. Tikhon's Seminary, from His Beatitude as well. (No one transferred out of the Diocese).

We celebrated the granting of the following Awards and Elevations:

- **the Miter to Archpriest George Hasenecz;**
- **the Palitza to Archpriest David Cowan;**
- **the dignity of Archpriest to Fr. Terenti Wasielewski and to Fr. Leonid Schmidt;**
- **the Gold Cross to Fr. Nikolai Gulin and Fr. Igor Yakunin;**
- **the Kamilavka to Fr. Volodymyr Chaikivskyi and Fr. Matthew Markewich;**
- **the Nabedrenik to Fr. Joel Brady; and**
- **the Double Orarion to Dn. Michael Burdikoff.**

We marked the anniversaries of the following parishes this year, with Gramotas:

- **SS. Peter and Paul Church, South River, NJ, 115th Anniversary;**
- **Christ the Savior Church, Paramus, NJ, 60th Anniversary;**
- **Annunciation Church, Brick, NJ, 50th Anniversary; and**
- **Holy Apostles Mission, Lansing, NY, 10th Anniversary.**

We presented Gramotas to the following clergy, marking their anniversaries:

- **Archpriest Igor Burdikoff, 55 Years of Priesthood;**
- **Archpriest Kyril Riggs, 40 Years of Priesthood and 90th Birthday;**
- **Archpriest Jason Kappanadze, 35 Years of Priesthood;**
- **Archpriest Sophrony Royer, 30 Years of Priesthood;**
- **Archpriest Terence Baz, 25 Years of Priesthood;**
- **Archpriest Eric Tosi, 25 Years of Priesthood; and**
- **Protodeacon Paul Sokol, 25 Years of Diaconate.**

In addition, the Diocese marked the following occasions:

- **the blessing of a new cupola at St. Andrew's Church in Dix Hills, NY;**
- **the blessing of the Great South Bay, Long Island, NY, on Theophany;**
- **Sunday of Orthodoxy Celebration, Holy Resurrection Church, Wayne, NJ;**
- **the regular broadcasting of homilies and prayer services offered via live-stream;**
- **the weekly publication of service booklets to pray at home, as well as resources for Holy Week and Pascha to be celebrated at home;**
- **two weeks of St. Andrew's Family Camp, Jewell, NY;**

- a 9/11 Memorial Service and the blessing of public safety personnel and vehicles at Holy Spirit Church, Wantage, NJ;
- Diocesan-wide Day of Mourning for the Taking of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia;
- first day of the month: prayers & fasting for racial reconciliation and to end civil strife;
- *Koinonia* Newsletter on Evangelism & Parish Growth: encouragement amid pandemic;
- Two issues of the highly-praised *Jacob's Well*;
- Christian Education continuing to be offered in parishes, in-person where possible or on-line where necessary;
- College Ministry/OCF Activity continues, on-line where necessary and in-person where possible; and
- Celebrations for the 10th Anniversary of Episcopacy & 70th Birthday of the Archbishop.

We also mark the following Transitions in the Diocese:

- Seminary Graduations: Fr. Samuel Davis (STS), female student Shelby Giokas (SVS)
- Seminary Enrollments: Dn. John (Keith) Morris, 3rd year full-time at St. Vladimir's; Fr. Paul Fedoroff, Dn. John Holoduek, & Dn. Gregory Aidinov, part-time at St. Tikhon's; Steven Roberst, 2nd year full-time @ SVS; and Dragan Vujicic, 1st year full-time @ STS.
- Retirements: Archpriest John Chupeck and Archpriest Yakov Ryklin.

And again, we pause to reflect on the passing into eternity of the ever-to-be-remembered:

- **His Beatitude, Metropolitan THEODOSIUS, 10/19/20;**
- **His Grace, Bishop VARLAAM, 2/13/20;**
- **Archpriest Jozef Petranin, 3/10/20;**
- **Archpriest Paul Lazor, 5/09/20;**
- **Matushka Nina Bohush-Stroyen, 4/23/20;**
- **Matushka Nadine Eskoff Brown, 6/04/20;**
- **Matushka Linda Dudash, 6/24/20;**
- **Matushka Anastasia Karlgut, 8/23/20;**
- **Matushka Janet Mihalick, 8/26/20; and**
- **Matushka Elizabeth Kachur, 10/28/20.**

Grant rest eternal in blessed repose with the Saints, O Lord, to the souls of Thy departed servants, who have fallen asleep, and make their memory to be eternal! *“Vechnaya pamyat!”*

My beloved fathers, and brothers and sisters in Christ: I have spent a lot of time in this address looking back on the past year and the pandemic that has haunted it. It is time to look forward to the future!

Our hope is, of course, that by following the guidelines of wearing masks, washing our hands and practicing social distancing, we can re-gain the advantage over the COVID that New York and New Jersey had a few months ago, and we can re-establish our churches as fully open to capacity to the members of our parish families.

I look forward to visiting this coming year all our parishes, seeing you face-to-face and praying with you in-person, offering together the sacred Mystery of the Holy Eucharist that unites us to Christ, to His Holy Orthodox Church, and to one another. I pray that you all can resume coffee hour in person, parish dinners and celebrations, Bible studies, catechism classes and Church School programs face-to-face, and all the life-giving opportunities for fellowship and formation that we miss – and even those tedious meetings of parish councils, building committees, and church organizations, that have been relegated to Zoom for all too long.

But until that time we must remember to continue to support our parish church as generously as we can, giving back the first-fruits of all the blessings that God has given us, even though we might not be able to come to services yet, or to come as regularly as we wish. As I said early on in this pandemic: Even though we cannot be present in person to love our church, we are going to support it so that the Church is still there for us to love when this crisis abates.

As your Archbishop, I yearn to re-establish our diocesan youth programs – an Altar Servers’ Retreat, a Lenten Teen Retreat, six weeks of summer camp at St. Andrew’s, another Orthodox Youth Day, and our annual Girls’ Retreat. I also look forward to planning Parish Council and Church School Teachers’ workshops in the Diocese. And I hope that we can go to the 20th All American Council in Baltimore, and celebrate the 50th Anniversaries of the Granting of Autocephaly to the OCA and the Canonization of St. Herman of Alaska, the First Saint of America.

I take this opportunity to give thanks to all of you who have made all of these ministries and programs in our Diocese possible over the past decade and, hopefully, will continue to do so in the future:

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 ten years an incredible nearly \$1.5 million to fund the ministries of our Diocese, to the glory of God!

I would be remiss not to personally acknowledge the incomparable efforts of a number of individuals who serve the Diocese and assist the Archbishop:

- **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, NYS Deanery; Fr. Wiaczeslaw Krawczuk, NYC Deanery; and Fr. Gary Breton, NJ Deanery, for their wise counsel and labors in parishes, deaneries and diocese;**
- **Diocesan Treasurer, Jan VanDuyn, for her countless hours of work;**
- **Diocesan Financial Secretary, Stephanie Burk, for assisting Fr. Joseph and Jan;**
- **Diocesan Secretary, Fr. Matthew Brown, assisting in the work of the Chancery;**
- **The Diocesan Council, for their tireless work in helping to govern the Diocese;**
- * **The Council of Presbyters, for their invaluable advice and ground-breaking work;**
- **All the Chairs of the various ministries of the Diocese, for all their efforts;**
- **The editors of *Jacob’s Well*, *First Fruits*, and *Koinonia*, for all their labors;**

- The Archbishop's Subdeacons, Mark Federoff and Matthew Ortiz, without whom he would never travel the breadth of the Diocese, to every parish, almost once a year;
- 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 Archbishop could in no way do the job that needs to be done.

In this time of hopeful transition, when we will move away from on-line to in-person, there is one thing which we must not forget, which we must never abandon: that one-on-one relationship that we were challenged with by the COVID – face-to-face in prayer with the Living God at our Icon Corner, where we told Him we love Him, we asked for forgiveness for our sins, asked for protection and help against the coronavirus, and pledged to serve Him ever more faithfully in return! We must never give up or compromise our personal time with the God Who loves and blesses us! This is the sacred work of the Holy Church ... not all of it ... but much of it. And WE, my beloved, WE are the Church. This is the work that we must be about in the Name of the Lord.

The Covid-19 caught all of us off guard – all of us except GOD. This year we have all been vividly reminded that only GOD knows what lies ahead. We have experienced what we should have known: we are not in control – He is. And that, my beloved, is Good News.

St. Paul tells us in Romans 8:28 that God will bring good out of every circumstance: *"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* Not every circumstance is good, but God's plans for us will not be foiled by anything that happens in life – not even a pandemic. God is going to advance His purposes for His people, for His Church, which WE are ... even during this time.

What is God doing through this pandemic? He is allowing the fire of a virus to refine His Church, to help us evaluate our priorities, and draw closer to Him ... pray more, fast more, come to Church more often when we can, receive the Sacraments more often and more worthily when we are able, read the Bible and the lives of the Saints more faithfully, give more sacrificially, help others more unselfishly, and love Him and our neighbors more steadfastly.

As Bill Marianes told us last year, God seeks us to be “disciples” of His Son. The virus experience is revealing the state of our discipleship. Too many of us have been more deeply “disciplined” by our favorite cable news channel than by the Word of God; too many have been driven more by political passions than by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Through this pandemic, we have been forced to re-envision the Church as something more, something far greater than a once-a-week event, if that.

At some point during this COVID shutdown, we must declare: WE are the Church; we have not shut down, we have never closed. We have opened our homes to be a little Church ... we have opened our hearts to be the throne for the King of Heaven. This coming year we have a chance to show this to the world!

I pray that our Church, our Diocese, each of our parishes, each of us emerges from the pandemic ever stronger, more focused on God’s priorities rather than on human concerns, more deeply dependent upon the Holy Spirit, more effective in making each us true disciples rather than attendees or bystanders. And that, my beloved, would be a good thing to come out of the evil of the coronavirus.

As we look back on the past year, let us recall the words of Our Lord Himself: *“In the world you will have tribulation ... but be of good courage, I have overcome the world.”*

And in looking to the future, let us heed the challenge of Saint Paul: *“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else we need? ... It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Therefore, who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:31-39). – He is the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves.