

NEW YORK STATE DEANERY
THE DIOCESE OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY
Report to the 2020 Diocesan Assembly

Your Eminence, brother clergy, and lay delegates and observers to the Diocesan Assembly,
Glory be to Jesus Christ!

I would like to begin my report with the comforting and inspiring words of our Archpastor, Archbishop Michael, at the beginning of the pandemic:

"How are we as Orthodox Christians to respond to this crisis? Certainly not with fear! Corona-phobia could be as disastrous for us as the virus itself. How many times in the Scripture do we read the words of Our Lord: "Do not be afraid!" Does He not promise us, "I am with you always... even to the very end of the world"?

"Has He not guided the Church through the Bubonic Plague and the Spanish Influenza, two World Wars and countless other conflicts, the Great Depression and several recessions, persecutions and martyrdoms in every generation? This is a time, my beloved, not for fear ... but for FAITH! Perhaps the best approach to these uncertain days are the words of the second-century bishop and martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, who tells us: "Look to the signs of the times ... but then look to the One Who is beyond time" (Letter to Polycarp 3)."

Our Nation, our economy, our people, our faithful and our parishes are suffering, or as our Chancellor, Mitred Archpriest Joseph Likwar said in his Report: "Across America the United States Government imposed a mandatory system of phases for the reopening of religious institutions and businesses. Churches had to comply with the guidelines for reopening and submit petition to His Eminence for permission to open. The level of contributions to our parishes dropped and fundraising income for our parishes was drastically affected."

An additional concern, amidst the reasonable cautions and precautions, is that there is also the spread of the passion of fear and anger. Passions darken and confuse clarity of mind, and so it is important to not only take reasonable cautions and precautions against threats of physical disease, but also the spiritual disease of impassioned fear and anger. It cannot be overlooked that "erring on the side of caution" is still "erring." It may be wise as a temporary or initial policy, but since experts seem to indicate that we will have this threat for a long time to come, it cannot become a standing policy for the simple fact that no churches will be left to come back to.

In addition to national economic decline during last 9 months of lockdowns during pandemic, there is also the economy of the local church. It is not simply a matter of paying the pastor, for if local closures remain indefinite and extend without objective criteria for reopening, then churches will be unable to reopen. The spiritual harm this would cause is incalculable.

The Church is a necessary entity, and its local parishes cannot simply allow themselves to perish through "erring" on the safe side. A plan must be in place. Currently, the government has defined a working distinction between "essential" and "non-essential" businesses. It is also important to insert the Church into this equation because, although the Church is not a business, it is certainly essential, and so we must treat the Church as essential. We implicitly understand that grocery stores are essential, and do not protest when hundreds of people are together in a single store shopping despite the official restrictions of gatherings being limited to ten or twenty-five people. If grocery stores stay open, then Churches should consider that they likewise remain open. If churches simply remain closed without clear direction for criteria of when to open, not only will they close, but the spiritual service and support they provide will disappear with them.

I am confident to report that we are truly blessed in New York State Deanery during this difficult and challenging year. For clergy and parish councils everywhere, the last 9 months have presented a near-constant array of

complex challenges related to shepherding a church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest complex challenge is perhaps the trickiest yet: how to prudently resume in-person gatherings, as our parishes begin to reopen.

As if the logistical details weren't challenging enough—how to maintain social distance and limit crowd size, whether or not to require masks, to sing or not to sing, what to do with children, how to properly sanitize parish temple and other facilities, and so on—the whole conversation is fraught with potential for division. If a congregation—and within it, a leadership team—is at all a microcosm of our larger society, it will likely contain a broad assortment of strongly held convictions. Some will be eager to meet in person and impatient to wait much longer to get back to normal. Others will insist it's unwise to meet at all until there's a vaccine. Plenty will fall somewhere in between.

In many parishes, the pandemic has divided members into factions with very different views on how to resume the life of their parish after churches reopen: “The virus is now dividing the parishioners into opening up the churches or to stay in lock down mode. Many believe it is a conspiracy to attack our church, and right to worship. Many think the wearing of face masks, limiting people to come to church, communion spoons, is destroying the church practices. But there are some who are fearful of returning to worship while there is insufficient testing, no vaccine, and no sure cure.”

In such a precarious and polarizing environment, how can church move forward in beautiful unity (Ps. 133) rather than ugly division? It won't be easy. But by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working to unify us in ways our flesh resists, the opportunity is there for us to be a countercultural model for the rest of the world.

Patience is one of the rarest virtues in today's instant-everything world. And yet patience has rarely been more needed, as many of us are antsy to break free of “stay home” isolation and get back to normalcy as soon as possible. To be sure, it is good and right to be eager to gather again as churches. We should take Hebrews 10:25 seriously when it says we ought not neglect meeting together. We should feel the ache of what is lost when we only meet virtually, and every Christian should long for the day when “church on Zoom” gives way to “church in a room.” That day will come.

But we should be careful to not rush it. We should be patient with a timeline that might be slower than we'd prefer; patient with a reopening process that will doubtless be clunky; patient with leaders feeling the pressure of this complex situation; and patient with one another as we figure out the “new normal”. Those who are not comfortable with physical gatherings should be patient with those who *are*, and vice versa. As hard as it will be to practice patience, remember that in the scheme of eternity this season—whether it's months long or years—will be but a moment.

What St. Paul urges the Ephesian church, therefore, should be especially urgent for us today: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3).

The pandemic lockdown cannot separate us from one another!

Currently, every parish, mission and institution in the New York State Deanery is being served by full-time priest or covered on a short and long-term basis, when emergencies arise. While being able to fill all the pastoral needs of New York State Deanery with the help of attached priests and deacons, we must continue our efforts to recruit younger priests aggressively from seminaries, other dioceses, and jurisdictions.

Through the selfless and sacrificial services of Father Timothy Holowatch, Father Vladimir Kantor (Syracuse NY), Fr. John Hutnyan (Buffalo) and Father Nikolay Khalimonov we were able to assist our parishes in Buffalo, Watervliet, Lansing, Elmira Heights, Herkimer, Rochester, Potsdam and Syracuse when priests were ill, moved,

or went on vacations. They also assisted in deanery parishes for hierarchical services when Archbishop Michael made Archpastoral visits: Herkimer, Elmira Heights, Syracuse, Rochester, Watervliet, Cohoes, Buffalo, Potsdam, Lansing, Oneonta and others. Thank-you and God bless you -- Father Timm, Father Vladimir, Fr. John and Father Nikolay – for your love and service to our deanery and diocese.

We are grateful for the ministry of our deanery Deacons, to whom we express our gratitude for their faithful work: Rev. Protodeacons Andrew Boisvert (Binghamton), Stephen Sweet (Rochester), and Deacons Michael Burdikoff (Ballston Lake), Mark Bohush (Binghamton), Demetrios Richards (Herkimer), Sean McNulty (Rochester), Alexander (Scott) Anderson (Syracuse), David Donch (Auburn), Michael Speck (Auburn), Ivan Bazarov (Lansing), Jason Gagnon (Balston Spa), Shawn Karney (Elmira) and Stephan Karlgut (Bronxville).

We welcome in to our deanery Fr. David Cowan who was assigned by His Eminence to our parish in Elmira, as Rector, and we wish Fr. David, Matushka Tamara and their son Gabriel, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

In addition, we welcomed Fr. Ambrose Inlaw in to our deanery and our diocese, as he was assigned by His Eminence to our parish in Syracuse, as Priest-in-Charge, and we wish Fr. Ambrose, Matushka Meghan Juliana and their children, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

Fr. Paul Federoff was assigned by His Eminence to our Mission in Potsdam, as Priest-in-Charge, and we wish Fr. Ambrose, Matushka and their children, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

Fr. Vasil Dubee was transferred from our Mission in Oneonta and was assigned by His Eminence to our parish in Herkimer, as Acting Rector, and we wish Fr. Vasil, Matushka Lesya and their children, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

Fr. Timothy Holowatch was assigned by His Eminence to our Mission in Oneonta, as Priest-in-Charge, and we wish Fr. Timothy, Matushka Michele and their children, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

We welcome in to our deanery and our diocese Fr. David Mezynski, who was accepted to our diocese by His Eminence from Stavropigial status and attached to our parish in Rochester. We wish Fr. David the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

We welcome to our deanery Fr. Andreja Damjanovski who was accepted to our diocese by His Eminence from Metropolitan Tikhon and attached to our St. George parish in Buffalo. We wish Fr. Andreja, his Matushka and children, the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

We welcome to our deanery (on loan) Fr. John (Peter) Hutnyan who was assigned by His Eminence to our SS. Peter and Paul Church in Buffalo, as Priest-in-Charge, and we wish Fr. John and Matushka Nancy the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

Three Diaconate Ordinations took place in our deanery, and we welcome Fr. Dn. Michael Speck (Auburn), Fr. Dn. Jason Gagnon (Balston Spa) and Fr. Dn. Shawn Karney (Elmira) into the ranks of Clergy and wish them and their families the fullness of God's blessings and Many Years!

Our Deanery clergy and lay representatives participated monthly in a meeting of Diocesan Council (Via Zoom Conferences), assisting His Eminence in implementing his vision for our diocese, as well as meetings of Council of Presbyters, Diocesan Court, and meetings of the Chancellors and Deans with Archbishop Michael, to facilitate

clergy transfers, filling vacancies, and resolving other administrative, canonical, and legal issues. In spite of challenges of pandemic and closure and slow reopening of our parishes, the deanery continues to be very active and focused on the growth of parishes and missions through ministries, outreach, education and evangelization, though adopting to new tools and methods.

In large measure, we owe our successes (and even survival through pandemic) to selfless sacrifices and financial stewardship of Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors (DDBs), whose monetary offerings make many of Diocesan ministries and outreach that benefit every one of our parishes possible. Thank-you to all our DDB contributors! May our loving Lord bless you and return your generosity a hundred-fold. If you have not yet joined in the support of this excellent program, please consider doing it as soon as possible. For a listing of the ever-growing number of Distinguished Diocesan Benefactors, as well as projects that are funded by them, please check our diocesan website -- nynjoca.org

As we struggle during this pandemic, it is good to remember that we are all united as one. We Christians have endured pandemics before, and like our forebears, we will survive this one. Remembering that nothing is allowed by God that is without salvific benefits, we will find ourselves, once again, standing next to our friends, relatives, and fellow believers, celebrating the Divine Liturgy, perhaps even experiencing it as never before.

No one should feel, or be, shamed by being absent from the church services whether because of physical health or because of anxiety. No one is to be coerced or compelled to come to the services before they are comfortable doing so. (Diocese of New York and New Jersey Diocesan Directives on the Gradual Re-Opening of Diocesan Churches Issued May 8, 2020)

Nor should anyone be judged for being eager to gather again as the church, to celebrate Lifegiving Sacraments and to live in accord with Four Marks of the Church, given to us in the Acts Ch. 2, in 49AD: “⁴² They (Christians) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

We must be united with our Diocesan Bishop, Priests and each other, whether in-person or in our prayers and thoughts! We are The Church! We are People of Hope and we have reason to rejoice!

We want to offer our gratitude to numerous volunteers in our parishes, deanery, and diocese, whose selfless and often unrecognized labors makes all the difference in the life of our communities. Thank-you, and may God bless you!

We want to acknowledge and thank our deanery clergy wives for their quiet support and service, that almost always goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Thank you Matushki and may our loving Lord reward you bountifully for your faith, love, and sacrifices!

Ultimately, we thank His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, for his love, humility, service, and for providing an icon of a true servant leader, during these most challenging times:

“Axios! Many years, Vladyko!”. Eis polla, eti Despota!

//signed//

Father Alexey Karlgut, Dean
New York State Deanery