

METROPOLITAN COUNCIL MEETING

SPRING 2021

FEBRUARY 24, 2021

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, this meeting is being convened electronically via Zoom and is not taking place in person. At least one more session of the Spring meeting is scheduled (March 3, 2021), with a third under consideration.

REPORT OF THE METROPOLITAN

1. *Welcome.* I welcome all of you to the first session of the Spring Meeting of the Metropolitan Council. It is good to see all of you on my screen as we look forward to the possibility of meeting once again in person.
2. *COVID Update.* While it is not yet time to celebrate the conclusion of the pandemic and the restoration to full and normal life throughout society, there are certainly signs of improvement. This gives me hope for the life of the Church—and not because of the present decline in COVID cases and deaths, or the growing availability of vaccines, though these developments are certainly encouraging. I myself received the first dose of the vaccine two weeks ago and am scheduled for the second dose next Tuesday. Rather, what gives me hope is the fact that, over the past year, the life of the Church has flourished in ways that perhaps she has not flourished in recent decades. I certainly do not want to diminish the reality of the tragedy of the pandemic which has affected us in countless ways. But through all the tragedy, I have been most impressed and moved by the degree of dedication, perseverance, and pastoral initiative taken by our bishops, our clergy, our monastics, and our faithful. In the past month, I have been receiving a steady stream of letters of concern from various quarters urging me to take any number of actions: to abandon my fear of the civil authorities, to stop preventing people from taking communion, to take a stronger political stand against the pandemic restrictions, to overcome my fear of the virus by not wearing a mask myself or by not forcing parishioners to wear them, to stop abusing my priests through onerous directives that demand an unhealthy kind of obedience. While everyone is free to have an opinion, and while I do not exclude the possibility of all of these issues

arising within the life of the Church, I generally find these opinions to be completely out of touch with the reality that I have experienced over the past year. If anything, I have seen an increase in pastoral ministry, in evangelical outreach, in care for the sick, in recognition of the reality of death, in dealing with depression and loneliness. The external expression of our worship may have been slightly altered in terms of glory and attendance, but I am convinced of the internal growth and spiritual development of our clergy and faithful, growing even in the midst of the struggles.

3. *The Church.* So I am grateful to my brothers on the Holy Synod, to all the clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Church for their patience, efforts, and support over the past year—in spite of the heavy emotional, physical, and spiritual toll that this has taken on all of us. I am grateful especially to the members of this Metropolitan Council for your willingness to serve the Church without the grumbling and without the complaining that has been heard, sometimes quite loudly, from other segments of the world and even within the Church. In reflecting on this, the words of the Apostle Paul come to mind, and so I offer to you, and to the rest of the Church, what he writes to the Thessalonians: “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 1:3). Thank you for your faithful efforts on behalf of the Orthodox Church in America.

4. *Publications.* We will hear a more detailed report from our Acting Secretary, Fr. Alessandro, later in this meeting. But I did want to acknowledge his most excellent contributions to the work of the Chancery and make note of a few publications that the Orthodox Church in America has recently issued, in large part through his efforts:

- a. The first is the small booklet issued by the Holy Synod, *We Rejoice Even In Tribulation: An Encyclical of Hope*. This Encyclical was intended to serve as an expression of gratitude from the Holy Synod for the patience, longsuffering, and courage of our clergy, monastics, and faithful during the past difficult year, and as a source of encouragement for all of us to

persevere under the continuing challenges. Certainly, no single document can hope to fully capture the extent of the spiritual, emotional, pastoral, and physical difficulties that each of us have faced in so many complex circumstances. But it stands as a genuine expression of the Holy Synod's appreciation for, and solidarity with, the entire Church and the rest of the world. It is available as a PDF on the website of the Orthodox Church in America; every parish in the Orthodox Church in America received 5 hard copies, and each Diocesan Chancery received a box.

- b. The second is the *Desk Calendar* that has been published annually for many years. Fr. Alessandro Margheritino will lead us on a discussion of the value of continuing the printing of the *Desk Calendar*. While it remains a relied-upon resource for many, for others it has been made obsolete by other applications and electronic calendars. We would welcome any direct feedback from the members of this Council on the usefulness of the *Desk Calendar*, or suggestions for expanding or transforming it into a more useful physical resource.
- c. Finally, we were able to produce the updated *Commemorative List of the Departed Servants of Orthodoxy in North America*, which is known as the *Diptychs* of those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. As the title indicates, it contains the names of all the departed bishops, clergy, clergy wives (a newly added category), monastics, and significant laypeople of the Orthodox Church in America, from her beginnings in 1794 until today. This document was painstakingly reviewed and updated, primarily through the efforts of Barry Migyanko. It is organized both by rank and by date, and I personally have found it quite moving to offer up these names in prayer. In the earlier versions of the *Diptychs*, I did not personally know those who had come and gone so many years before me. But now I read the names of my fellow-laborers, those with whom I served, and others whom I ordained or taught in seminary.

5. *Departed Clergy.* In that light, I note with some sorrow that, since the Autumn Metropolitan Council meeting, we have added 20 new names to the *Diptychs*. I thought it would be good to mention their names here:

- Archbishop David
- Protopresbyter Daniel Hubiak
- Mitred Archpriest Daniel Ressetar
- Mitred Archpriest Eugene P. Pianovich
- Archpriest John Tkachuk
- Archpriest John Chupeck
- Archimandrite Alexander [Cutler]
- Archpriest Joseph Gibson
- Archpriest Joseph Irvin
- Archpriest James Doyle
- Archpriest Rodion Pfeiffer
- Archpriest Ernesto Rios
- Archpriest John Horosky
- Protodeacon Benjamin Richards
- Protodeacon John Eby
- Matushka Elizabeth Kachur
- Matushka Eloise Lesko
- Matushka Laura Isakov
- Matushka Olga Govrusik
- Mary Eleanor Trader

Some of these succumbed to complications brought on by COVID, while others were senior clergy who had served for decades, such as the former Chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, Protopresbyter Daniel Hubiak, whose contributions we should particularly acknowledge in the context of our meeting. Whatever their particular trajectory, they each offered a valuable contribution to the life and expansion of the Orthodox Church in America. While we mourn their loss, we are also grateful for their faithful service in so many different areas. As we go through Great Lent, of course, we have several opportunities to remember the departed on the appointed Soul Saturdays. I encourage all of us to offer sincere prayers for our departed loved ones, as we traditionally do, as a reminder of the hope of the resurrection. At this point, I will intone Memory Eternal and ask Fr. Dennis to sing the response.

6. *Prayers for health.* In addition, I would ask for your prayers especially for His Eminence Archbishop Alejo, who has recently been afflicted by COVID but seems to be recovering well, and for their Graces, Bishop Daniel and Bishop Alexis, who also had the virus and are now suffering some of the long-term effects. We continue to ask for prayers for our current Metropolitan Council member, Fr. Antonio, and for Gregory Nescott, a former member of this body.

7. *My travel.* Since our last meeting, I have primarily remained in residence here at the Chancery, but I did travel to St. Tikhon's Monastery for the celebration of the Nativity, to my parents' home in Elizabethtown, PA, through the civil New Year, and to Washington, DC, for a residency of several weeks. This year the Orthodox Church did not send a delegation to the annual March for Life, but several events were held virtually to mark this important date: a) on January 17, I was the main speaker at an event sponsored by Zoe For Life; b) January 24 was the date chosen as Sanctity of Life Sunday, for which I prepared a pastoral letter; c) a virtual march for life was held on January 28, which I presided at in person at St. Vladimir's Three Hierarchs Chapel, and at which several speakers participated virtually, including His Eminence Archbishop Michael and Dr. Anna Iltis; and d) St. Tikhon's Seminary hosted a day-long retreat on January 30. I am currently working on my Lenten schedule, which will include spending the First Week of Great Lent at St. Tikhon's Monastery and then dividing the rest of the time between the other Stavropegial Institutions, the Albanian Archdiocese, the Diocese of New England, and the Archdiocese of Washington, where I will be for Holy Week and Pascha.

8. *The Chancery.* This past week, I took the whole week off for some personal time, though I remained in residence at the Chancery. I was able to do this in large part because of the solid support that is offered to me by the Chancery Staff, both those who are working here in person and those who are working remotely. Under the direction of the Chancellor, Fr. Alexander Rentel, there has been a tremendous increase in efficiency of my Office and communication throughout the Church on many levels. I am grateful to Fr. Alexander and to all those who work with him on

monitoring all of these matters, especially Fr. Alessandro, Fr. Thomas Soroka, Dn. John Thetford, and Barry Migyanko.

9. *External Relations.* As is to be expected, there has been very little physical activity in the area of external relations. In terms of the larger pan-Orthodox situation, I think that the past year has provided, or perhaps forced, a healthy pause in inter-Orthodox relations, relations which have been strained of late. Whether or not such a pause can bring about a closer collaboration between the worldwide Orthodox Churches remains to be seen. However, there has been some positive direction on the local level, particularly in the work of the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Bishops of the United States. It was not until very recently that the Orthodox Church in America was even present at that table, but the pandemic has even more directly provided an opportunity for more regular meetings of the Executive Committee. Throughout 2020, these meetings were held on a weekly basis and now will be held every two weeks. But regardless of the frequency, a tangible fruit of these meetings has been not only the opportunity to get to know one another better, but to do so in a forum that allows us to at least try to hold a united position on particular subjects, such as our common response to the pandemic, which was the genesis of these weekly meetings. However, this has also translated into opportunities to discuss other ecclesiastical matters of mutual interest and, perhaps more significantly, to express real disagreements.

As you know, the Executive Committee is comprised of the heads of all Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States, but presently the Moscow Patriarchate has elected to not participate. This is reflective of a broader scenario with which all of us are familiar, and about which many of us have strong opinions. Our own Holy Synod has expressed her formal position on this matter, and it is not my intention to discuss that here. However, I will note that, even in this tense global context, I have maintained personal contact with both His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill during the pandemic. I spoke with each of them at the beginning of Holy Week last year and again more recently around the time of the Feast of the Nativity. Such contacts are certainly limited in

that they do not produce immediate ecclesiastical resolution to pan-Orthodox issues, but they do allow for the Churches to maintain a degree of human and brotherly relations, which is not insignificant.

I mention this, in part, because it pains me to see the level of strife that sometimes exists among our own clergy. I don't mean to imply that this is a systemic problem, nor does it deny that there are extremely inspiring examples of clergy brotherhood and clergy cooperation throughout the Orthodox Church in America. Nor does it negate what I spoke about earlier in terms of the tremendous efforts and growth made by our clergy and faithful. What troubles me is that there seems to be an increasing infiltration of those good and blessed efforts by a kind of "spiritual fog." I don't know how to define this fog, but it finds expression in many ways, primarily those based on caricatures of ecclesiastical, political, and ideological positions to the exclusion of any real or productive dialogue. I hope that we can maintain a real clergy brotherhood and community life which are founded on a common witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and service to the Church through the Holy Mysteries. I am not saying that this is absent, but I am saying that it is being threatened by a tendency to align ourselves as clergy and as faithful with one party or another, whether this be a political party or particular website or blog. This results not just in polarization, but in fragmentation, which is deadly for our Christian witness.

10. Property Committee. Before we hear from the Committee, I thought it would be good for me to emphasize a few points:

- a. This is a question of stewardship, understood not simply in financial terms but in terms of the patrimony of the Church.
- b. As such, I am finishing up a 10-part podcast series on the subject of stewardship. In 2-3 minute audio segments, I outline my own thoughts on stewardship as it relates to the Orthodox Church in America, to the Chancery Office, and to the proposed relocation we are contemplating.
- c. We are close to finalizing the Landing Committee, which will be tasked with assessing the various options for a new location for the Chancery Offices.

11. *Clergy Health Synaxes*. I would like to signal my full support for this project, which is part of my emphasis on clergy health. My hope would be that, starting from this particular project, we might even move towards a more permanent endowment for clergy health.

12. *Concluding remarks*. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.