

Report of the Metropolitan
Albanian Archdiocese Annual Assembly
Saint Mary's Assumption Albanian Orthodox Church
September 24, 2021

1. *Welcome.* Christ is in our midst! It is a joy to be with you today for the Annual Assembly of the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese. It has been two years since we gathered in person in Natick and were hosted by **Fr Joseph Gallick** and the faithful of **Annunciation Albanian Orthodox Church**. At that time, none of us knew what would be coming just a few months later with the outbreak of our global health crisis or that this would be our last major in-person event as an Archdiocesan community for the next two years. Nevertheless, we are grateful to Fr Joseph and the parish for their hospitality at that time, which provided us with some good memories of community life to sustain us through the isolation and challenges of the pandemic. Together with the rest of the world, we have, by God's grace, slowly been emerging from that isolation and, though many challenges still remain, we are blessed, and even strengthened, to be able to gather here in Worcester and to see each other face to face. We offer our deep thanks to **Fr. Mark Doku** and **the community of St. Mary's Assumption Albanian Orthodox Church** for their warm welcome during our time here and for providing the sacred and spacious space where we can get back to our common work as an Archdiocese.

2. *The blessing of our gathering.* That work, of course, has continued throughout the pandemic, but many of us, including me, may feel as if we were operating in the midst of a very thick fog, which made it difficult to see the path forward or the faces of our neighbors. In many ways, our pandemic experience has been the most extreme version of the trend in our increasing virtual reality, a reality that, it might be argued, has actually taken us further from reality, that is, further from our life in Christ. When we are enclosed in our own homes, in our own offices, before our own computer screens, interacting with our own

Facebook or Instagram accounts, it is easy to become isolated, lonely, frustrated, perhaps even angry and bitter, even as the technology appears to connect us more with others. The truth is that our Orthodox tradition of prayer of the heart, which to the world seems like a self-centered action, is in fact the most powerful way for us to remain connected—to our Lord, of course, but also to one another. And our physical gathering together in Church for our common worship is the most powerful way that we experience communion with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. A few months ago, when we were taking our first in-person steps out of the fog of the pandemic and its isolation, the clergy of the Albanian Archdiocese met at St Nicholas Church in Jamaica Estates for a clergy retreat. That was one of the first times that I personally and very powerfully experience what a joy it was to see actual persons, to physically give them a blessing, to observe how tall or short they were in person (rather than being just a head inside a square box), and to converse together as human beings were intended to converse together. I am certain that, like me, the delegates of this Assembly who have gathered here can tangibly feel the great blessing we have been given with this opportunity to be together and to see and speak with each other in the flesh, rather than on a computer screen. It is a wonderful reminder, and perhaps a good encouragement, for us to re-focus our minds and our hearts on the needful things of our Christian vocation and on the sacred nature of our work as an Archdiocese.

3. *Vigilance.* At the same time, we also recognize that we must still remain vigilant on a number of levels. We welcome all those who are joining us virtually for this meeting and look forward to your participation. If there is one thing we have acquired over the past eighteen months, it is the ability to make use of the technology that is available to us in order to accomplish the work of the Church and, more broadly, to maintain our personal relations with one another, even virtually. When we recognize the deep value of in-person connections, we do not thereby devalue the opportunities that technology provides to us. Nevertheless, it is good for all of us to cling to the hope that is offered to us in the Church, that is, to experience in a tangible way the force of our Lord's words

to us: that *when two or three are gathered together, there I am in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20)*. So we are all the more strengthened and encouraged when we physically gather as a community and I am confident that our Assembly this year will indeed bear much fruit for the glory of God.

4. *Archbishop Nikon*. Whenever we gather as Christians, we gather in the name of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. In that sense, it is good to remember that we are gathering as a sacred assembly in order to do the very same thing that we do in the divine services, that is, to glorify God and strengthen the bond of fellowship and cooperation with one another. This is certainly how **His Eminence Archbishop Nikon**, of thrice-blessed memory, would have approached our gathering. He was a true shepherd who was most himself when he was tending to and caring for his sheep, the clergy and faithful of his diocese. Indeed, we gather just a few weeks after the two-year anniversary of his falling asleep in the Lord and, as we continue to pray for his eternal rest in the heavenly mansions, we also acknowledge his prayerful presence in our midst. While we certainly continue to miss Archbishop Nikon's fatherly care, his pastoral guidance, and his heartfelt joy in Christ, we are also mindful of all the contributions he made to the Albanian Archdiocese and to the Orthodox Church in America in his ministry as a priest and as a bishop. His actions, his words, and his love will remain inextricably woven into the fabric of our Church life and in our hearts, which we should always acknowledge as a precious gift. In this way, Archbishop Nikon stands, not only as an honorable successor to Metropolitan Theophan Noli in the history of the Albanian Archdiocese, but also as his spiritual heir. Like Metropolitan Theophan, who said in 1958: "Of all my activities, my first love is Christ and His Church," Archbishop Nikon worked with Christ-like love and Christ-like humility to serve as a fervent advocate and defender of the integrity, patrimony, and life of the Albanian Archdiocese. In many ways, our gathering today as an Archdiocesan Assembly is a testimony to Archbishop Nikon's ministry and an expression of our participation in the very same work accomplished by him and all his predecessors. In accomplishing our work today, we are taking responsibility for carrying forth the legacy given to

us by Archbishop Nikon and all the noble clergy, monastics, and faithful who have labored before us. May his memory be eternal and may he receive blessed rest in the mansions of heaven!

5. *The life of the Archdiocese.* There are many challenges facing us as a Church in North America and as the Albanian Archdiocese. Chief among these challenges, as we all know, is the vacancy in the position of diocesan bishop, a vacancy which has yet to be filled after two years. I will speak to this point shortly and offer this Assembly a concrete path forward as well as a timeline for doing so. But before I do that, I thought it might be helpful for us to reflect on some of the tremendous accomplishments that have taken place in the Archdiocese even during this time that we have not had a diocesan bishop. It is important to remember that, though the bishop must indeed stand as the father, shepherd, and leader of his flock, he does not stand in isolation or as a self-contained unit. In many ways, a bishop is nothing without his flock and, just as he needs subdeacons to help him put on his vestments before the divine services, so he relies on the active participation and collaboration of the clergy and faithful.
6. *Gratitude to Protopresbyter Arthur Liolin.* In the first place, we ought to acknowledge and recognize the amazing ministry of **Protopresbyter Arthur Liolin** who has served for over 50 years of priesthood and as Chancellor of the Albanian Archdiocese. Fr. Arthur has been intimately involved in forming, advising, and guiding not only his brother, Archbishop Nikon, but many of his predecessors in the episcopal rank who have shepherded the Albanian Archdiocese. He has also been a mentor to his brother clergy and a shepherd to those under his care. In all of this, he has revealed himself to be a true apostle of Christ, not only to those of Albanian descent, but to people of all backgrounds. In February of this year, for a number of reasons, including his declining health, I asked Fr Arthur to relinquish his position as Archdiocesan Chancellor and to accept the position of Chancellor Emeritus. He graciously accepted and in June of this year, I was honored to attend the glorious

celebration of Fr Arthur's jubilee which was held at **St George Albanian Orthodox Cathedral** in South Boston. At that beautiful event, which was held outdoors in the Cathedral garden, Fr Arthur was showered with many expressions of gratitude, including a Gramota¹ from the Holy Synod of Bishops which I presented to him. I think it would be fitting for this Assembly to formally recognize Fr. Arthur, together with his Prifteresha Margaret, for his over 50 years of priestly service and for the record to reflect our deep gratitude for his most excellent leadership as Chancellor of the Albanian Archdiocese.

Per shume vjet!

7. *Archpriest Joseph Gallick.* Another senior clergyman of the Albanian Archdiocese is marking the 52nd anniversary of his priestly ordination and that is **Archpriest Joseph Gallick**. Just within the past few weeks, Fr Joseph has submitted his request to retire from active ministry and, with my blessing, he has informed his parish council about this. I am sure that there will be an appropriate opportunity to honor him with a fitting tribute but I wanted to take time today to personally thank him and to provide an opportunity for us as an Archdiocese to also express our gratitude. Fr. Joseph and Prifteresha Nancy have ministered faithfully at the Church of the Annunciation for many years, providing a model example of pastoral ministry and love for their community. Fr. Joseph has also steadfastly served as the Archdiocese's General Secretary and has been instrumental in the work of the Orthodox Church in America's Office of Military Chaplains where he has served as Assistant Dean, in addition to his recent appointment to the prestigious position of Chaplain of the National VFW organization. Fr. Joseph, we offer our gratitude to you and to Prifteresha Nancy and we know that, even with your retirement, you will

¹ "In recognition of 50 years of faithful priestly service to St George Orthodox Cathedral, the Albanian Archdiocese, and the Orthodox Church in America; for his dedication as advisor to bishops, mentor to clergy, and spiritual father to the faithful; and for steadfastly serving as the cornerstone of the Albanian Archdiocese for over half a century through his Christ-like love and administrative wisdom."

continue to offer your services to the life of the Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America. Many years! *Per shume vjet!*

8. I would also like to express my gratitude for the hard work of our **Archdiocesan Lay Vice-Chair, Michael Gregory**. Michael has served as a key source of institutional memory for me, especially in the initial period of my locum tenency and for providing some continuity between the service of Fr Arthur and Fr Nikodhim, our Interim Chancellor. I am grateful to Michael for his institutional memory and his guidance as we move forward with the growth of the Archdiocese. I would also like to thank our Treasurer and Comptroller **Knida Dilaveri** and **Cindy Vasil Brown** and all those in the Archdiocese who are monitoring our finances during these very uncertain times, as well all the members of the Archdiocesan Council. I would like to express my especial appreciation to **Audra Sullivan** for all her efforts, not only in coordinating this year's Assembly but throughout the year in providing administrative support to the Archdiocese. It is thanks to faithful servants like her that the real work of the Church actually gets accomplished in an efficient manner.

9. *Clergy*. In April of this year, I made a pastoral visit to **St Peter and St Paul** parish in Philadelphia where I was pleased to present the rector, **Fr Nicholas Dellerman**, with the Synodal award of the right to wear the gold cross in recognition of his faithful ministry in and leadership of that community. This visit was also an occasion to elevate **Deacon Gregory Vrato** to the rank of Protodeacon. Last year, I was scheduled to visit this parish here in Worcester, but the pandemic prevent this. One of the reasons for my visit was to formally welcome **Fr Mark Doku** and install him as the rector of this parish. While he has been connected with this parish for most of his life, it only recently that he has taken the step and offered to serve full time as the pastor for this community. We are grateful to him for this and we also offer our congratulations to him for his elevation to the rank of Archpriest, which I will bestow upon him at tomorrow's liturgy.

10. *Work of the Theological Student Fund.* I want to particularly recognize the work of the **Theological Student Fund**. As you know, we have many vacancies throughout the Archdiocese and the members of the Fund Committee have taken a very proactive approach, not only to trying to fill those vacancies, but in looking at the long-term strategies that we need to be looking at. Fr Nikodhim has energized the Student Fund Committee which now serves as a type of search committee to identify clergy candidates, interview them, and potentially connect them to a parish that might be a good fit. Fr Nikodhim, working closely with the other members of the committee, **Fr. Mark Doku**, and **Jim Liolin**, was instrumental in addressing a good number of our vacancies. We welcome a) **Fr Giorgi Tskitishvili**, a recent graduate of St Vladimir's Seminary, to his new assignment at **St John Chrysostom in Philadelphia**; b) **Archimandrite Theophan Koja**, who is serving St George Cathedral in an on-loan capacity for a period of 9 months, with the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop Nathaniel; and **Fr Paul Waters** who is on loan from the Moscow Patriarchate and will continue to serve at **St Thomas Church in Farmington Hills**. You have also met our seminarians **Ananias Ananievsky** from St Tikhon's Seminary and **Eugene and his wife, Livia**, from St Vladimir's Seminary. All of these developments give us great hope for the future of the Albanian Archdiocese.
11. *Interim Chancellor.* Last but not least, I wanted to recognize the one person who has been instrumental in accomplishing all of the above positive developments in the Albanian Archdiocese. And that is **Igumen Nikodhim Preston**, who, as I reported earlier was appointed as Interim Chancellor for the Albanian Archdiocese. I am pleased to acknowledge the excellent work that Fr Nikodhim has accomplished on a multitude of levels. He and I have been meeting on a weekly basis, every Friday morning, and in advance, Fr Nikodhim prepares a detailed agenda for our discussion. I am grateful for his attention to all of these matters, all of which are very significant, considering the many challenges facing the Archdiocese. He has also worked tirelessly to

strengthen the clergy brotherhood, in offering his support and encouragement to our seminarians, and also to strengthen the bond of unity among our diverse parishes. All of this is crucial work and necessary for the long-term health of the Albanian Archdiocese and I want to express my sincere thanks to Fr Nikodhim for all his efforts, which he is offering in addition to his many responsibilities in his parish. In that light, I am also grateful to the parish community of **St Nicholas in Jamaica Estates** for their support of Fr Nikodhim and their willingness to sacrifice his time with them so that he could attend to the many activities required of him as Interim Chancellor. So my thanks to you, Fr Nikodhim. Many years and *Per shume vjet!*

12. *Diocesan Bishop Search.* I know that the most crucial topic on everyone's minds is the search for a new bishop for the Albanian Archdiocese. Let me get straight to the point: I acknowledge that it has been two years since the repose of Archbishop Nikon and the declaration by the Holy Synod of the vacancy in the see of Boston and the Albanian Archdiocese. At that time, the Archdiocesan Council, following the directives of the Archdiocesan Bylaws, opened up the episcopal search process by calling for qualified individuals to submit their names for consideration. Several factors hindered the speedy resolution of this process: the first is that this entire diocese was mourning the loss of its shepherd and father. Of course, we still mourn that loss, but at that time it was more difficult for us – as it is for any family to move forward at the loss of a loved one. It takes time and reflection to move forward in a healthy way and this is a therapeutic process that all human beings should allow themselves. This natural process was also interrupted by a second challenge to our episcopal search process and that is the pandemic itself, which interrupted a lot of the normal elements of our Church life, including the search process. The third factor was the very limited number of eligible candidates for the episcopacy. This is a concern for this Archdiocese in particular, but it is also a concern for the entire Church. We currently have three vacant dioceses in the Orthodox Church in America: Alaska, New England, and this Archdiocese. One of those, the diocese of Alaska, may be filled as soon as next month. But the

reality remains that there is a lot of work that must be done to nurture vocations to the episcopacy, just as there is much work to be done to nurture priestly, diaconal, and monastic vocations. This work will be the topic of next year's **All-American Council** and in the months leading up to it.

13. But, to keep ourselves focused on this Archdiocese, the end result of all of this has been that, over the last two years, only one candidate has nominated himself. That candidate has been, admittedly slowly, been going through the internal vetting process used by the Holy Synod to evaluate candidates. That process calls for three bishops to review each candidate and recommend whether or not the process should proceed. In this particular case, the three bishops recommended to me that this candidacy not proceed. Through a letter to the Interim Chancellor and the Lay Vice-chair, I have informed the Archdiocesan Council of this development.
14. *The path forward.* In my letter, I also recommended a path forward. Given the difficulties of the past two years and given the reality that there are, at this point, no candidates for the position of bishop for the Albanian Archdiocese, I am proposing the following to this Archdiocesan Assembly for action today:
 - A. That this Archdiocesan Assembly declare that the previous search process be formally closed and that the vacancy in the office of bishop be announced one more time.
 - B. That this Archdiocesan Assembly empower the Archdiocesan Council to carry this process forward in accordance with all the stipulations of the bylaws, that is, to invite those desiring to become candidates to present their credentials to the Council within three months of today's announcement (Article I, Section I of the Bylaws), that is, by December 24th, 2021.
 - C. That the Diocesan Council forward any names that it receives to the Metropolitan for the purpose of canonical examination by the Holy Synod. I would add here that I would encourage the Council to forward

each name as it is submitted, that is, that it does not need to wait until the conclusion of the three months to submit those names.

- D. That I, as the Metropolitan, will commit to initiating the vetting process for each candidate immediately upon receipt of those names and will inform the Archdiocesan Council when those names have been either approved or disapproved by the Holy Synod.
- E. Finally, that once all approved and vetted candidates have been provided to them, that the Archdiocesan Council call for a special Nominating Assembly to nominate one of those candidates.

15. I would hope that someone today would make a motion to this effect. I would also add the following points:

- A. In the intervening months since the original declaration of vacancy, I have intentionally been seeking for and preparing potential episcopal candidates for service in the Orthodox Church in America. I am currently aware of up to three new candidates who have begun, or will shortly begin, the process of Synodal vetting. While not everyone may be a fit for this Archdiocese, it is my hope and expectation that one or more of these will respond to the announcement of the Archdiocesan Council within the stated time-frame.
- B. *The Synodal Vetting Process.* I should also take some time and explain a little about the Synodal vetting process. First, I would emphasize that this is an internal process for the Holy Synod. It is not a public process. The reason for this is two-fold: 1) to preserve the canonical integrity of the Holy Synod's authority to elect bishops and 2) to protect the privacy of any potential candidates. With respect to the first point, I should further clarify that a special nominating assembly does not elect a bishop, it only nominates one or more candidates. Only the Holy Synod elects a bishop, and in order to prevent any awkwardness, the Holy Synod has decided to follow a vetting process by which candidates are approved before, not after, the nominating assembly. We arrived at this decision precisely as the result of the awkwardness and sometimes

embarrassment caused to candidates in the past who were nominated by an assembly but then not elected by the Holy Synod.

- C. *Role of the Archdiocese.* Finally, I would also remind this body that the task of identifying candidates does not rest solely with the bishops. Just as it is your God-given responsibility to raise up and nurture priests, deacons, monastics, choir directors and singers, iconographers, and church leaders, it also is your responsibility to nurture episcopal vocations. This is, of course, a life-long task and there are no quick solutions. But it is important to remember that we are all working together on this task, as we work together on every aspect of our Church life.

16. *Final Word.* As a final pastoral word, I would bring us back to St Raphael and to recall his connection to the Albanian Archdiocese. As Fr Mark reminded us this morning, we are not disconnected from one another and it was, in fact, the vision of St Tikhon, my patron saint, that there would be a single Orthodox Church and administrative structure here in North America that would embrace all ethnic backgrounds, as well as being open to new converts to the Orthodox faith. As we head in the akathist this morning, St Raphael was appointed to minister to the the Syrians, St Sebastian Dabovich to the Serbian community, and Archpriest Michael Andreades for the Greek. In our case, we know that Archbishop Platon of the Russian Orthodox Metropolia ordained Theophan Noli as a priest and Bishop Alexander later raised him to the rank of Archimandrite and appointed him administrator of the Albanian Archdiocese. Today, we have the responsibility to carry forward this work of cooperation as we seek to expand the life of the Church in North America.