

Our Apostolic Voyage

PRIMATIAL ADDRESS TO THE TWENTIETH ALL-AMERICAN
COUNCIL

Baltimore, Maryland

July 18, 2022

His Beatitude, The Most Blessed Tikhon

Archbishop of Washington

Metropolitan of All-America and Canada

Welcome

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Your Eminences and Your Graces, my beloved concelebrants and brothers,
Honored Abbots, Abbesses, and Monastics,
Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers and Clergy Wives,
Distinguished Delegates, Retired Clergy, and Observers,
Beloved Youth, Young Adults, and Esteemed Guests,

On behalf of the archdiocesan council, the parishes, the clergy, and the faithful of the Archdiocese of Washington, I warmly welcome each of you to the city of Baltimore for the convening of the twentieth All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America. To receive you, the clergy and lay delegates of the 14 dioceses which cover the three countries of this continent, Canada, Mexico, and the United States, many individuals have faithfully labored over the past two years or more. We will have occasion to recognize them during our time together this week but you should know that a dedicated group has worked tirelessly within the chancery, on the Preconciliar Commission, and on the many subcommittees guided by the

two co-chairs of the local committee, Archpriest Theodore Boback and Lisa Mikhalevsky. All of this activity has been overseen by our hard-working Council Manager, Deacon Peter Ilchuk. On behalf of all of them, and as the Archbishop of Washington, I welcome you with joy and am confident that our time this week will be both inspirational and productive.

I also personally welcome you to the canonical territory of my diocese and my primatial see. As of June 2 of this year, I have physically taken up residence within that territory and now call Falls Church, Virginia, my home. This not only places me within the geographic bounds of the Archdiocese of Washington but means that I am within a thirty-minute drive to half of my eleven parishes and missions and, for our present purposes, within 55 minutes of Saint Andrew's Orthodox Church here in Baltimore, where we are gathering this week. You will hear more details about this particular journey, that is, the chancery relocation project, during the coming days. At the same time, all of us have so journeyed to arrive here and so, once again, I welcome you.

Introduction

If we were asked, we could all think of any number of significant reasons for our gathering this week: to hear reports relating to the life of the Church, to discuss proposed resolutions, to debate statute amendments,

to enjoy fellowship with old friends and make new ones, and to celebrate the appointed divine services. On the surface, the reasons for which we gather are no different than the reasons for which any other business or civic organization or family might likewise gather.

Consider, for example, that a number of years ago, my family on my mother's side, the Packard family, whom I introduced in my address to the All-American Council in Atlanta, held a family reunion to commemorate the arrival of our first ancestor to these shores. There was a growing desire for the different branches of the family to get to know each other. So a preliminary meeting was held at Murray Hall in Brockton, Massachusetts, which brought together a good number of Packards. B.W. Packard of South Boston was chosen to head a committee of correspondence and to report at future meetings. Four months later, another meeting was scheduled in West Bridgewater but the weather was stormy, so nothing was done until the next spring, when yet another meeting was planned to be held at the People's Theatre in Brockton. This meeting also was postponed due to inclement weather and a fourth attempt was made by calling a meeting at the Town Hall in West Bridgewater. Finally, the meeting was called to order and a motion was made by Mr. Bradford Kingman to form an association under the name of "Packard Memorial Association" and Dr. Horace

Packard was chosen as President, with B. Winslow Packard as correspondence secretary and Rufus E. Packard as Recording Secretary. Further, Bradford Kingman and B.W. Packard were chosen as a Committee on Resolutions and Articles of Association. In addition, a large Committee of Arrangements was also elected from among those gathered.

It was decided that a family gathering should be held on August 18th, the date on which Samuel Packard arrived with his wife and daughter to Hingham, Massachusetts. Prior to that, the Resolutions and Articles of Association were adopted and the design for a family seal was accepted. In addition, a Literary Committee and Reception Committee were formed to begin planning for the family gathering. The location of the event was explored, with the original proposal that it be held on the old homestead grounds in West Bridgewater. But on account of the limited accommodations for those coming from a distance, it was deemed advisable to hold it in Brockton. Letters of invitation were sent out and, on the appointed day, parties began to arrive on the evening before and the hotels of the city were soon filled with Packards from every point of the compass.

At last, after a meal, everyone gathered for the program which included speeches from various dignitaries, stories from family members, and poetry readings.

Though this sounds like the logistics of one of our contemporary gatherings, complete with all the protocols and planning involved in such endeavors—and even the delays—this gathering, in fact, was held 134 years ago, on August 18, 1888, in honor of the 250th anniversary of Samuel Packard’s arrival in America in 1638. I mention this in part to remind us that our life today may not be that far removed from the life of our ancestors, wherever they may have hailed from and however much we may know, or not, about their history. I also take advantage of this bit of family lore to share a few words from the speech that Professor Silas Packard addressed to the gathered Packard family near a century and a half ago. He said:

This is the question that I want to leave for the young Packards to answer – these young men and young women into whose faces I now look: What will you do to make lasting and significant this family name in which we all have such just pride? On the tenth of August, 1638, Samuel Packard began the history of the family in this country. On the 10th of August, 1888, was inaugurated the renaissance of that same family, and from this day we are to go forward into a new life, with new purposes, new ambitions, new hopes. And we are to do this, not by resolutions and speeches, not by thinking it over, but by taking hold of the things that come to our hands and utilizing them. Let us accept the wealth that may be ours, and increase it by honest effort, and make it serve the world. Let us take a becoming pride in the family name, and stand by each other in zealously guarding it from bad repute. Let us even perpetuate the name by carefully prepared records which shall be accessible and reliable.

These mannered words from a family gathering in late nineteenth-century New England may at first sound like nothing more than a curiosity from one family's history, but I believe that they can easily be translated to apply to us who gather in the year 2022 here in Baltimore. Each of us is a member of the family that goes by the name of "Christian." And each of us has received great gifts. It is now our turn to take hold of what has been given to us and put it to work, not for personal gain, but in the fulfilling of the apostolic work by which we make ourselves worthy of the name "Christian."

This is the lofty goal that guides us as we travel along whatever path the Lord and his Church call us on our journey towards eternal salvation in the heavenly Kingdom. And one of the surest ways to find that salvation, along with God's grace and mercy, is by taking hold of the things that come to our hands and utilizing them for the life of the world.

This is what distinguishes our gathering this week from all such similar gatherings that might be taking place in similar hotels throughout this continent. Yes, there are similarities in the elaborate plannings committees, the banquets, the speeches, the delays, but this organization, this family, this Assembly, this Body, gathers in the Name of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. We gather as Christians, as individuals of

varied background, culture, and genealogy who yet share one common bond and seal of fellowship: we all bear the Name of Christ.

There is much more that follows from this reality. From our own life in the Church, which is the life in Christ, we know that bearing the Name of the Lord binds us all together through many ties of faith and belief, tradition and common experience. But in our present-day society, where the very name “Christian” is maligned, ridiculed, misunderstood, or simply ignored, it is good for us to find the appropriate boldness and confidence to act, to speak, and to live as genuine Christians in a manner that will strengthen our own communities and offer an honorable witness of what it means to bear the Name of the Savior.

To offer an honorable witness of what it means to bear the Name, we must become worthy bearers of that Name: not worthy on our account, but worthy because of the power of Christ whose Name we bear within. This is the chosen theme for this, the twentieth, All-American Council, “Becoming Vessels of Grace.” On the one hand, in the most obvious sense, this theme reflects the concept of vocation: one’s calling by God to some sacred task or ministry. But in a deeper sense, it is a theme that seeks to address a fundamental question we should all have: what does it mean to bear the Name of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be a Christian? What we do in

life is, of course, important and in many ways defines us. But underlying our external activity, our external work, is the inner reality of who we are as persons, that is, our vocation. And the fullest expression of our personhood is grounded and completed in the divine-human person of the God-man, Our Lord Jesus Christ. As such, as we consider what it means to be a Christian, and thus how to give a good witness to the Name we bear, we must begin by considering the person of Our Lord.

So, as we set the stage for this 20th All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America, I would like to begin with the example of him in whose Name we gather. To borrow a phrase from St. John Climacus, “When speaking to the servants of God, it is always good to begin with our God and King himself” (*Ladder*, step 1).

Considering the example of Our Lord, I would like to speak in particular of his life of travel. During his sojourn on this earth, the Lord was always traveling. He was always moving from one place to another. As an infant, he sojourned in Bethlehem of Judah and the distant land of Egypt before making his childhood home in Nazareth. As an adult, he traveled back and forth from Jerusalem. He went about in Galilee and Judea. He passed through the coasts of Tyre and Sidon and Decapolis. He was always

a step ahead of the crowds—both those who wanted to adore him and those that who wanted to throw him off of a cliff.

Likewise, our own life is one of movement. We may feel that such motion is a consequence of our modern conditions, according to which communication is constant, information is ubiquitous, and life itself can seem more and more “virtual.” But, in many ways, such a life is not that far removed from the life of constant change and travel lived by Our Lord. This element of his life offers us a model for how to live our lives. We should not expect or hope for a static existence in this world; according to the Fathers, this is the world of becoming. Our rest is beyond this world. In this world, the Lord was always moving, and likewise, his Church has been moving.

Thus, as we gather in council to deliberate in common and make decisions concerning our present and future witness to the saving Name of Jesus, we must begin with considering the voyage our Church has undertaken to this point. To become vessels of grace means that we bear the Name of Jesus Christ within ourselves, but vessel has two meanings: it can mean simply a container. But a vessel can also mean a ship—something meant for a journey. Thus we carry the Name of Christ as a treasure inside, but we also carry that Name forward, through space and time, until the final consummation of all things. This is the voyage of each individual

Christian, and the apostolic voyage of our Church as a whole. On this note, I would like to recall something about the voyage of the Orthodox Church in America that has brought us to this point.

Voyage

The year 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of two significant events: the glorification of the venerable Herman of Alaska and the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America. The difficulties of the global health crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic prevented us from properly celebrating those historic events but their significance should not be forgotten. Those anniversaries mark not merely the passage of 50 years of chronological time since 1970 but rather represent what we might call nautical mileposts on the voyage of the North American Mission through the previous 225 years of spiritual growth and ecclesiastical expansion. The prayers and labors of St. Herman and his monastic brothers prepared the ground for the ascetical and liturgical life on this continent, and their missionary zeal inspired the many other laborers for Christ, down to our own times, who would follow after them as preachers, hearers, and doers of the Gospel. Collectively, over these many years, they forged what would eventually become the local autocephalous Orthodox Church in America.

Our apostolic voyage on this land thus began with the prayers and labors of holy men and women, prayers and labors which took root in the hearts of new generations of Orthodox Christians, both those from traditionally Orthodox lands and those who would convert to our holy faith. This spiritual growth in the hearts of human beings also found physical expression in the planting of missions, the building of Churches, and the founding of monasteries and seminaries. All of this spiritual growth and physical expansion, taken together, can be considered the patrimony of the Church, that is, the heritage that we have received from our predecessors, which we are now called to preserve and hand down to our children and their children.

One word for this process of receiving, assimilating, and then handing down and passing onto future generations is tradition; another word is stewardship. While we often think of stewardship as referring narrowly to financial matters, I have elsewhere proposed that it might be better understood as the “application of our spiritual life to the realities of the fallen world.” In a very concrete way, these structures and buildings, our monasteries, our seminaries, our parishes and missions, all form the physical receptacles of the patrimony of our Church, the spaces within which Christian charity, Orthodox prayers, inspiring worship, and deep

repentance come to life. We are all called to be good stewards of both the spiritual and the physical gifts because God has entrusted them to our care and has given us the sacred task of safeguarding all these treasures.

In her two-thousand-year history, the Church has faced many challenges such as persecution, war, theological controversy, disease, and natural disaster. By the grace of God, though each challenge often brought pain and suffering, the fabric of the Church has never been torn or sundered. The lives, teachings, and writings of the martyrs, confessors, and ascetics offer clear evidence of the triumph of life over death, of healing over illness, and of joy over sorrow. Their witness allows us to look confidently back on our history with gratitude, a disposition of the heart which, as the holy fathers note, draws to it an abundance of God's grace.

The Orthodox Church in America has faced her share of similar challenges over the last 225 years, starting with the challenges that faced the early missionaries in Alaska, the local impact of the Russian Revolution, and successive waves of immigration due to geopolitical upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. By the grace of God and through the labors and efforts of many, our Church has, slowly but confidently, maintained her course, addressed each successive challenge. Amid all of this, we hope that we are growing ever more mindful of our need to rely on

God in all things. It is quite remarkable to observe the amazing journey of our Church from a struggling missionary outpost in Russian Alaska, to an expanding mission on the West Coast, to a multi-ethnic and continent-wide Metropolia striving to establish the foundations for what would eventually become a local autocephalous Church. Each step of that journey has provided concrete opportunities to plant and nurture the seeds of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in these lands, opportunities for which we should always give thanks to God.

Our gratitude is offered above all to the Holy Spirit who has guided and strengthened the clergy, monastic, and faithful of our Church as they faced the challenges of their times. It is also offered to such figures as St. Herman and St. Innocent, St. Tikhon and St. Alexander Hotovitsky, along with all the other well-known and lesser-known saints of our lands, who are themselves a testimony to the guidance of the same Comforter that Christ promised would abide with his disciples and apostles forever (Jn. 14:16). Now is the time for us to draw courage and inspiration from their examples and to carry forward their apostolic labors by maintaining a spirit of gratitude and exercising genuine care for the health, stability, and growth of our Church and her people. With gratitude for all that is past in our hearts, we now must cultivate the virtues of watchfulness, discernment, and

stewardship, and it is to these virtues that I now turn, as we move from the past to the present and future.

Stewardship

Our bountiful God gives us everything as a gift and it is up to us to exercise the proper discernment in using the gifts or talents that he bestows on us. These gifts are many and great, from the very breath which sustains our human existence to the magnificent universe he created out of nothing, from the very life of his Son who was offered up in sacrifice for us to the eternal life of incorruption which Christ grants us by his glorious resurrection. All of this is contained in another gift which he gives to us: the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. With respect to this great gift, we also have a duty to discern the right ways to exercise good stewardship.

To acquire this discernment is not an easy task. We must rely on the experience of those who have travelled the way before us, not only the saints who illumined our lands, but the entire apostolic, canonical, and patristic tradition of the Orthodox Church. We must also learn to rely on each other as we labor together in this process of discernment: to listen to one another, to trust one another, and to be willing to work together for the accomplishment of the apostolic work that lies ahead of us. This also means discerning our vocation as Christians who form the Body of the Church.

This brings us back to “Becoming Vessels of Grace,” and to our vocation. Our fundamental vocation is grounded in the reliance of our personhood on the divine-human personhood of Our Lord: our fundamental vocation is the name “Christian.” But this common vocation is expressed in each of our lives in many different ways, according to the many blessings and gifts that flow from the Source of all good things and which are given to all of us according to the need of each and the need of all.

Thus, there are a multitude of avenues on which we can exercise our vocation and our stewardship. Each of these has a personal component: “What is my vocation?” and “How should I exercise good stewardship?” But each of these also has a communal component: “What is our vocation as a family, as a parish or mission, as a deanery or diocese, as the Orthodox Church in America?” The All-American Council is one forum where we, as the Church gathered together, can undertake the process of discernment that I am speaking of. But we need to undertake this process in every aspect of our Christian life, exercising discernment individually and collectively while never losing sight of the Father’s love for all of us.

A few months ago, on October 20th and 21st of last year, I convened a special joint meeting of the leadership of the Orthodox Church in America to consider concrete ways we might maintain the vision as we move

towards the All-American Council. The task at hand was not only to prepare for the Council but to look beyond, to the next decades of our Church life. This gathering, involving the participation of the members of the Holy Synod, the Metropolitan Council, the chancellors of the dioceses, and select leaders of our monastic and theological institutions, was a microcosm of the collaborative work that is required of all of us in charting the course.

The fundamental question I posed was the following: Jesus Christ first loved us: how now shall we love in return? (1 Jn. 4:19). Thus, when we ask ourselves how to carry forward our vision for the Church, how to turn theory into action, we are also probing the question of our vocation: as leaders in the Church, as Christians, and thus, fundamentally, as human beings. Today, I invite all of you to engage in this process, that is, to continue moving from vision to practice through our collective reflection on the theme of vocation, which takes centerstage this week and which should remain a major concern for our future.

Patrimony, stewardship, discernment, vocation: these themes take us beyond our present moment, and into the future, both the temporal future—the coming times and seasons, until Christ comes again in glory—and also the eternal reward promised to all good and faithful servants of God. It is with both our temporal future and our eternal destiny in mind

that I would like to devote the third part of my address to some of the changes now underway in the life of Church and previewing the work of this week's council. In doing so, I would like to underscore how each step of our work, today and in future, must always be a new beginning.

Beginning

In undertaking any voyage, the launch is only the first step. As the voyage progresses, there is always a need for both perseverance and renewal, for fresh efforts and new exertions. The apostles took the first steps on their apostolic journey when they responded to the Lord's words: "Come, follow me," (Mt. 4:19) but they were continually recommitting themselves to their calling. In our own lives, and especially in our spiritual lives, we often do the same: launching with zeal, falling into temptation, repenting and picking ourselves up again. We do this not because we are gluttons for punishment but because we have voluntarily set sail upon this voyage which leads to salvation and because we place our trust and our hope in the helmsman, Jesus Christ. It is he who provides us with the grace and courage to continue, as the prophet says: "Now I have made a beginning. This is the change that is wrought by the hand of the Most High."

Each of us has been appointed his own journey, starting at a different place and traveling at different speeds, so we must individually be willing to allow ourselves to move at the pace that is beneficial for ourselves. At the same time, when we gather together to discern how to move forward collectively, we must be mindful of the uniqueness of each person even as we try to arrive at solutions that are helpful for all.

At every stage of our voyage, as individuals and as the Church, it is helpful to avoid extremes: on the one hand, rushing into things with an unrealistic expectation of solving every challenge quickly and, on the other hand, becoming paralyzed by the magnitude and complexity of those challenges. If all of us, individually and collectively, are able to begin with confidence and persevere with hope, I am confident that the Lord will bless us abundantly in our apostolic travels.

On our apostolic voyage, it is indisputably our Lord Jesus Christ who is the pilot and captain of the ship of the holy Church. At the same time, each of us who are aboard that ship, whether sailor or passenger, contributes to the progress of the journey by offering our talents and service to the Lord and to our fellow travelers. We accomplish this in a multitude of ways, striving to maintain a spirit of gratitude for what we have inherited and discerning wisely how to tackle the challenges ahead of us. These

challenges are many: loss of faith and trust in divine realities, economic hardship, cultural unrest, and global tensions, among many others. We may rightly wonder how to accomplish what our saintly predecessors accomplished so remarkably: bringing the Orthodox faith from distant lands, planting monasteries, establishing seminaries, building parishes, and missions, and spreading the Orthodox Christian faith throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

In my nearly ten years as primate of the Orthodox Church in America, I have wondered about all of these things. I have wrestled with the question of how best to exercise my on primatial ministry in overseeing my canonical and statutory responsibility to care for the internal and external life of the Church. Likewise, it can be daunting to behold the multitude of challenges that face our dioceses, our parishes, our institutions, and each of us as individual Christians: changing parish demographics, the need to nurture clerical and monastic vocations, difficulties facing theological education, finding ways to engage our youth, maintaining the unity of the Church while preserving the identity of each diocese, and forging good relations with our sister Orthodox Churches throughout the world.

It is not always easy to shoulder these tasks but I am grateful that I have been able to rely, first of all, on the mercy of Almighty God,

worshipped in Trinity, and our entire apostolic tradition, together with the example and prayers of the saints. Additionally, I have also been able to depend on my brother bishops, fellow monastics, and all the clergy and faithful who daily assure me of their prayers and support. The knowledge of this support provides me with a solid foundation upon which to exercise my vocation as primate and has encouraged me to persevere in offering my own small contribution to the mission of our Church in North America.

As we pass the threshold of our fiftieth year of existence as an autocephalous Church and our two hundred and twenty-fifth year of presence in North America, it is evident to me that we stand on the brink of another phase of the existence of the Orthodox Church in America.

Without discounting the challenges and problems facing us, and without wishfully hoping for a rosy future, I am convinced that we are now at a point where we need to take bold action and renew our commitment to the life of the Church, not to radically transform the administration of the Church, but give it the room to operate and fulfill its ministry in the most fruitful way.

Part of this, of course, is the ongoing relocation of the Chancery from Long Island to Washington, D.C. The geographic location of the Chancery offices and operations was historically determined by the changing realities

of Church life, realities which shifted as the Church expanded from Alaska, to the West coast of the United States, and then eastward. Now, we are living in a context where we also have seen expansion to the north (Canada) and the south (the Diocese of the South and Mexico). Each historic physical location of the central administration remains as a concrete testimony to our historical trajectory. In this process, the leadership of the Church has never shied away from contemplating a change in geographic location in order to better reflect and serve the changing administrative and pastoral realities and needs of the Church.

It is just these realities and needs that have prompted our relocation of the offices of the Chancery and the residence of the primate of the Orthodox Church in America to the greater Washington, D.C., area. Now, the Metropolitan, in accord with our canons and statutes, resides in his diocese, and the office that supports him on a daily basis is in the process of moving there with him. Furthermore, the greater Washington, D.C., area provides one of the most effective locations for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the canonical territory of our Church and for reaching out to the wider North American community.

By decision of the Holy Synod, the primatial see of the Orthodox Church in America was transferred from New York to Washington, D.C., in

1981. However, neither the residence of the Metropolitan nor the chancery offices were relocated at that time. It is time to regularize this canonical anomaly and provide for the Metropolitan, who bears the title of Archbishop of Washington, to reside physically in his see and for the administrative offices which he oversees to be likewise located within that same region. The physical move of my residence and the chancery offices will allow for a more robust support system for me and, conversely, allow me to be more actively and pastorally present in my own diocese. Certainly, my responsibilities to the broader Church as Primate will always make it difficult to minister adequately to my local flock. But, until now, my primatial responsibilities have been hindered by my isolation from my flock. This carefully thought-out relocation is one concrete measure that will begin to remedy that situation and that will be spiritually, emotionally, and physically beneficial for the Orthodox Church in America. That said, I know that our monastics, clergy, and faithful will not accept anything less than a glorious, honorable, and dignified solution to every aspect of this transition, which it is my intention to pursue.

But this move of my residence and the chancery operations is only one change that we face today. We will face questions related to the Pension Plan, and we will consider what actions that we might take to ensure the

long-term wellbeing of current participants and retirees as well as future clergy and employees of the Orthodox Church in America. We must confront with hope the situation of the Diocese of Alaska, our oldest diocese, the Northern Holy Land of our local Church. We must recall the special situation of our newest diocese, that of Mexico. Measures both broad and specific regarding the current and future health and stability of our central administration, parishes, dioceses, seminaries, and other institutions will be part of our discussions, both formal and informal, over the coming days. Clergy health, both mental and physical, as well as professionalization and support for all church workers, is yet another concern.

But sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, as the Our Lord teaches us (Matt. 6:34). Now is not the time for a detailed preview of each aspect of the upcoming council or for a preliminary outline of all of our deliberations. It is certainly not the time to vainly list the troubles and worries that face us. As I stated previously, it is important for us to understand our high calling, the great and sacred nature of the tasks before us, and the hazards and opportunities of our moment. And just as important, as I briefly indicated in this talk's first section, is for us to understand that our troubles are not unique. We face changes and challenges, and our world is in

constant motion, but this was the world in which Our Lord worked and traveled; this is the world in which the Church Militant has always sojourned. And as comforting as this is, we have an even greater hope than an aphoristic sigh of “`twas ever thus”: we have a hope in the unconquerable power and providence of Jesus Christ himself. It is with a word about this hope that I would like to conclude this evening’s address.

Conclusion: Beyond Success and Failure

I began my address this evening with the present council’s theme, becoming vessels of grace. I spoke of us becoming worthy vessels of the Name of Christ, of living up to our high calling. This can be inspiring, but it can also contain the seeds of discouragement. After all, what if our efforts don’t turn out as we wish? What if our solutions to problems don’t work as we planned? What if we seem to find ourselves in even more difficult circumstances in one or five or ten years? Have we failed as stewards of our patrimony? Are we unworthy vessels of the grace of God?

I believe the answer to these questions is no. If we set our standards for success in worldly terms—growth in numbers, financial stability, and material prosperity—then perhaps we might find ourselves supposedly failing by those same standards. But God’s standards are not numbers and property, but faith, hope, and love.

As long as we persevere with love in our calling, exercise humble stewardship with faith in the good Provider of all, and seek with hope and good conscience to fulfill our vocation in Christ, then no matter what becomes of our plans and projects on earth, we will nevertheless succeed by the most important measures, the true measures of discipleship. This is the message of the beautiful spiritual letter attributed to St. Seraphim of Vyritsa, the little treatise called “This Was from Me”: whatever difficulties and trials, successes and failures, circumstances and changes we may encounter, we can be sure that everything comes to us for our salvation from the hand of the loving God. The only proper response to this boundless and mysterious generosity is humble-minded endurance and self-offering, leaving all the rest to the Author of our creation and salvation.

To this end, let me end with one small episode from the Alphabetical Collection of the Sayings of the Fathers. In his one saying that comes down to us in this collection, we hear this of Abba Ischyryon:

The holy fathers were making predictions about the last generation. They said, ‘What have we ourselves done?’ One of them, the great Abba Ischyryon, replied: ‘We ourselves have fulfilled the commandments of God.’ The others replied, ‘And those who come after us, what will they do?’ He said, ‘They will struggle to achieve half our works.’ They said, and to those who come after them, what will happen?’ He said, ‘The men of that generation will not accomplish any works at all and temptation will come upon them; and those who will be approved in that day will be greater than either us or our fathers.’

I cannot say whether we have reached those last generations predicted by Abba Ischyron or not. But I do know that as long as we work faithfully, humbly, cheerfully, and sincerely at the tasks set before us, giving all glory to the Name of Jesus Christ, then we can leave everything else up to the loving providence and goodwill of the Lord who rules all things. Ours is the portion of unworthy servants, merely to do what is asked of us, with our only hope and dignity and worthiness being that of the One whom we serve: Jesus Christ, our true God and Savior, together with his holy and heavenly Father and the all-good and life-giving Spirit, the Comforter, one God in Trinity, glorified throughout all time and eternity.

Once again, I welcome all of you to the Twentieth All-American Council. I look forward to our common work for the upbuilding of the Church, the stewardship of our patrimony, and the perfection of our vocations, so that, regardless of what the future may bring, all of us may be found to be worthy vessels of grace in the kingdom that knows no end.

For a final time, welcome, and may God bless us all.