

Metropolitan Tikhon

Opening Address To Seminarians

*The Orthodox Theological Seminary of
Saint Vladimir
September 8, 2020*

1. *Introduction.* In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in our midst!
2. *A new year.* On behalf of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America and the Board of Trustees of the Orthodox Theological Seminary of Saint Vladimir, I welcome all of you, the new and returning seminarians, as you begin the academic year at this sacred institution. I greet you all with the joy of the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God, the beginning of our salvation and the first great feast of the liturgical new year. My prayer is that each of you will receive the blessing of the renewal of this time of the year, which is the time of harvest and the preparation for the next planting season. The incoming class has been gathered together and now is the time plant yourselves in the earth of humility so that you might be watered by your professors, nurtured by your experience of the ascetical and liturgical life, and suffer the growth pangs of formation and blossom as genuine servants of Jesus Christ.
3. *A daily beginning.* Never forget that each day is a new beginning. The most difficult part of the spiritual struggle is often simply to begin. As the Psalmist says: *Now have I made a beginning; this change hath been wrought by the right hand of the Most High* (76:11). When he was preparing for his own death, Anthony the Great gathered his disciples and told them: “I am going the way of the Fathers, as it is written (Josh 23:14), for I see myself summoned by the Lord. Be watchful and do not destroy your lengthy discipline, but as if you were making a beginning now, strive to preserve your

enthusiasm. You know the treacherous demons -- you know how savage they are, even though weakened in strength. Therefore do not fear them, but rather draw inspiration from Christ always, and trust in Him. And live as though dying daily, paying heed to yourselves and remembering what you heard from my preaching." Saint Anthony rightly points to the unfailing source of our inspiration, whether we are ascetics in the desert or seminarians at a theological school, which is Christ Himself. Our life is short and we must make use of every minute given to us in order to strive for one thing: our eternal salvation. But more than this, we ought to take heed to the constant renewal that must take place within our heart. We can never become satisfied with whatever progress we have made, but must rise higher. And so, as the Apostle Paul also exhorts us, *having made a beginning, and set out already on the way of virtue, let us press forward to what lies ahead* (Phil. 3:13) and let us not turn back as Lot's wife did, for our Lord tells us that *No one who puts his hands to the plow and turns back is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.* (Luke 9:62).

4. *Administration.* I know that you have all spent a few days of orientation and reorientation under the guidance of our President, Archpriest Chad Hatfield, our Academic Dean, Dr Ionuts Alexander Tudorie, and our new Director of Student Life, Fr Nicholas Roth. Together with the members of the Administration and the Staff, you have probably received more than your fill of policies and procedures, rules and regulations. Do not neglect these or think that they are simply things to be heard once and forgotten. All things in the Church must be done decently and in order, and this applies both to lofty canonical principles and to the expectations placed on you for community service, for example. You must look to the President, the Academic Dean, and all who work with them in the administration, as your guides during your journey here at the Seminary. Ultimately, all the rules and regulations of seminary life are there to provide you with a more pleasant and productive experience, that is, to free you up to dedicate your time to the one things

needful, which is in this context, is the offering of yourself as clay to be formed into servants of the Church.

5. *Faculty and Classmates.* This formation will come, not primarily through books and knowledge (although these will certainly be present) but through other people: first of all from your professors on the faculty who are prepared to offer you, not just the knowledge of their research, but more importantly, the wisdom of their experience. Do not be confused by these two concepts: knowledge and wisdom. Both are valuable fruit that you will need to gather here, but the first is more easily plucked than the second. You must allow yourselves the opportunity to digest the knowledge you receive so that it provides you the energy to strive for wisdom and maturity, and not let the knowledge weigh you down with indigestion. Your professors will impart this to you, not only with the words of their lectures, but by the example of their lives, which you should pay attention to.
6. *The Chapel.* Another important place to entrust yourselves in your formation in your time in the chapel, or in our present circumstances, one of several chapels. The church services should remain a central, if not the central, focus point of your studies, which will be useless academic exercises if separated from the living waters of worship and prayer. Do not be overwhelmed by the spiritual energy that emanates from the divine services: at times it will be inspiring and comforting, and at times it will feel heavy and oppressive. The key is to maintain the proper balance so that the moments of grace provide you with the strength to bear the moments of struggle.
7. *The Orthodox Church in America.* I stand before you as the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of this Seminary. Saint Vladimir's is an institution of the Orthodox Church in America and as such, it falls under the authority of the Holy Synod of Bishops. The Metropolitan of the Church is also the president of the Holy Synod and, here at the seminary, this means that all seminarians that come from a diocese of the Orthodox Church in America are, for the time they are here,

canonically under my omophorion. This is both for the sake of maintaining proper canonical order and to serve as a reminder that you are members of the Orthodox Church in America. Some of you come from other jurisdictions and churches and, of course, you maintain your formal canonical attachment and obedience to your respective bishop. Nevertheless, you also have voluntarily chosen to come here (or have been sent by your bishop) and as such, we both welcome you to our seminary and ask you to live within the structures and guidelines of the seminary.

8. *The Chancery.* During your time here, you will become familiar with a number of individuals associated with my office, including His Grace, Bishop Alexis, for many years a monk on the Holy Mountain before his election this year as my auxiliary for stavropegial institutions, those institutions, such as this seminary, which lie directly under the omophorion of the Primate. His Grace currently resides at St Tikhon's Monastery, but as the circumstances allow, I will be asking him to represent me in various capacities at St Vladimir's, for example, to ordain some of you at the appropriate time. His Grace represents me as the Metropolitan, together with my Chancellor, Archpriest Alexander Rentel, who is another important person you should become familiar with. Before serving as my Chancellor, he was a long-standing professor of Liturgical Theology and Canon Law here at St Vladimir's, and he continues to teach an occasional course. We are in the process of arranging to have Fr. Alexander come to the Seminary in the next several weeks to speak more concretely to the seminarians of the Orthodox Church in America concerning the responsibilities you have and the privilege and opportunities you are given as members of this Church.

9. *Coronavirus.* What I mentioned earlier about asking you to live within the guidelines and structure of the seminary applies also to our current coronavirus circumstances and the measures that have been taken by the Seminary in response to those circumstances. As the returning seminarians already know, the impact on your seminary studies has been quite significant

and has disrupted the manner in which more or less everything has traditionally been done. I know that you have already received instruction in terms of the mechanics and protocols that have been established for this year, so I will not go into any of those details. However, I commend Fr Chad, Dr Tudorie, and Fr Nicholas for the excellent and details protocols that they have established for the proper and safe functioning of the Seminary for the upcoming semester. As the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, and the President of the Holy Synod of Bishops, I would like to emphasize that all of the measures taken by the Seminary have their source in the directives that have been given by the Synod. In other words, the measures that will be in place during this coming semester are not simply there to place more burdens on you but to create a structure within which you and your families will remain safe but also have the space to enjoy the seminary experience as fully and as normally as possible.

10. *A major disruption of life.* In reflecting on the external aspects of the pandemic that we are passing through, it is clear that it had two major stages. The first stage was one of unity, and the second was one of division. We all faced the pandemic with unity at first. The federal government told us to stay put for 15 days, and we all more or less agreed that this was a good idea. We agreed to stay at home, because we did not know where the virus was, or who might be spreading it. We also did not really know how deadly it might be. Seminarians went home, classes were moved to a virtual platform, and parish assignments and field work ceased. And so we were united, for a time, against the virus, and we all stayed at home. But this brief unity against the virus was gone within a few weeks. We all soon had to change or adapt much of our usual way of existence, not only with respect to our liturgical and communal life in Church, but even in our personal and family life. We had to adjust almost everything in our daily existence, from how we work (if we indeed were still able to work), to how we shop for food and other necessities, to navigating the restrictions we are under in terms of our family life and our Church life. On top of the ecclesiastical directives, which were heavy for us to bear, the

civil restrictions, and the increasing social and political upheaval in our country and in the world have added to the weight. Our deep-rooted political divisions ignited the further politicization of the virus on all sides, while different opinions and theories about the virus began to appear. Our nation found itself unsure, confused, and divided. And in all that we did, including seminary life, we were, and continue to be, unsettled.

11. *Polarization.* Our physical isolation from one another and our spiritual isolation from the divine services and our community of fellow Christians also added to this tension. Such divisions should trouble us as Orthodox Christians, because unity in the one Body of Christ is what we are trying to bring to the world. Unity in Christ is our mission so we should be concerned by the divisions in our society, and we should do what we can to prevent them from getting worse. As His Grace, Bishop Alexis has said in response to a specific form of this challenge, “trying to hold a middle sensible ground between opposing forces of faithless reason on the one hand and spiritualized folly on the other is the challenge of our time.” We see this expressed in various opinions expressed by some scientists, on the one hand, who may have opinions on the risks of transmission of the virus through the Body and Blood of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, and by some within the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, “who propose that the entire Church is a magical haven in a thoroughly demonic world. Adopting either position, one thoroughly secular, the other thoroughly fanciful, is extremely dangerous for the Church.”

12. *Synodal balance.* The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America has not approached these matters carelessly or superficially. We wrestled with the many pastoral and liturgical scenarios that the coronavirus presented; we consulted with numerous Orthodox physicians, health care workers, bioethicists, lawyers, insurance agents, and even a senior official at the White House. The decision to suspend, either completely or in part, liturgical services was not taken lightly; neither was it taken with joy but rather with the

sober realization that rational and sensible human response was required, not in the spirit of the secular world, but in the spirit of the rational worship that we offer as Orthodox Christians. It was common sense that was called for, but this was difficult for all of us to arrive at because there was little that was common and not much that made sense.

13. *Obedience.* Some early directives from the Holy Synod were later altered; some were removed, others were added, as the situation developed; we have now come to a place where, perhaps with a sense of resignation, and perhaps still with some sense of unease or uncertainty, we have adjusted to our circumstances and are dealing with the implications on ourselves and on our families. One of my main motivations, and one of the main motivations of the Holy Synod, in responding to Covid-19 has been to maintain fidelity to the received tradition and experience of the Holy Orthodox Church and, at the same time, maintain the health, safety, and life of our clergy, our monastics, and our faithful. In this, we acted as bishops always should act, which is to rightly divide the word of truth and then, relying on the Holy Spirit, provide a clear word to guide the Church. In some cases, a clear decision, and even disciplinary action was required. Even this week, one of our bishops has suspended a priest and removed the antimimension from his parish for disobeying the directives he had given to all his parishes concerning the wearing of masks.

14. The bishop reminded the priest that we are a hierarchical church. He writes: "You are there in my place. And I am here to re-present Christ, to make Him present. The antimimension is a sign of this relationship. And, as you know, my name is lifted up during the divine services for that reason as well." He also spoke about the value of obedience: "The great thing about obedience is that, if you obey, the burden falls on my shoulders and not yours. You have not been asked to do anything immoral. The Holy Synod (whom, by the way, I swore to obey) and the Metropolitan have carefully weighed the information and together issued these same instructions throughout the church." He then

spoke of the further possible implications, not only for the priest, but for himself, if something were to happen as it happened in another Orthodox parish where the directives were disregarded and the parish became infected: “Were I to find out that you, disobeying me, had something similar happen in your parish and, God forbid, someone died, you would not only be suspended, but defrocked as the one responsible for that death. If you follow the restrictions I have put in place, the burden is shifted to me. That is the beauty of obedience.”

15. My purpose in sharing this is not to shame the priest in question or to threaten any of you with disciplinary action for disobedience. Rather, it is to remind you that we are not a corporate or civil entity but the Church, and in the Church, all things are done decently and in good order according to the divine order revealed to us by the Holy Trinity and by the theology and experience of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. When we conform ourselves to the order of the Church, then the disorder of the world becomes more manageable, and even in the midst of chaos, good things can happen.

16. *Positive Effects.* So, for example, at the same time that we witnessed an increase in confusion and division, we also witnessed, in a strange and paradoxical manner, some positive effects of the pandemic, especially as they relate to our life in the Church. In many places, parishes successfully expanded their ministries in new ways. For example, online bible studies allowed for parishioners who had never attended before to participate. Likewise, there are many people with health concerns who now have access to streaming services in their parishes. Parishioners began to reach out to one another more than ever by phone and text and by providing various services. And our clergy are now more comfortable using technology as part of their ministry. In general, our homes, which were too often separated and divided from Church life, have now become “little Churches”. All of these good things inspire me, and I hope that they will also inspire all those involved in the

enterprise of theological education to approach the present difficulties with courage and with hope.

17. *Good coming through evil.* In the end, what we have seen, and what we continue to see, is the important spiritual truth that good can come through evil. We see this in the example of Joseph who was betrayed by his older brothers. When they reported to their father he had died, and sold him as a slave into Egypt, good came out of their evil deed. Because when the famine struck some years later, those same brothers came down to Egypt, where Joseph had become a ruler under Pharaoh. They needed food, and Joseph was able to provide it for them. Joseph forgave his brothers, and said to them: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph, of course, is a type of Christ, and his life prefigures in many ways the passion and resurrection of our Lord.
18. *Spiritual training.* It is in this light that we ought to primarily evaluate the pandemic that is upon us, a pandemic that indeed has brought disease and death, as well as division and isolation, none of which we should call "good", that is, none of it to be considered as "sent" by God. Nevertheless, God allowed it and used it for good. And, as in all things relating to our Christian life, a key component to weathering this storm is our own response, as individuals and as communities, to the challenges we are facing. This is because, in the Orthodox Church, we have already been "trained" to deal with division: we have some sense of the struggle with the passions in our own heart, we know that if we want to approach the chalice, we need to prepare ourselves, we know that, for 40 days during Great Lent, we live more ascetically, both personally and communally. On Pascha, we enjoy the great banquet that is laid out for us precisely because we have passed through the ascetical days of the fast.
19. We have passed through, as it were, an external trial (the pandemic and its impact on society, on our parishes, and on our families and children) but also

an internal maturing and spiritual growth. Both of these were taking place at the same time, and often one or the other has been more prevalent. I am sure that, like me, all of you had moments of sorrow and feeling the impact of the isolation, but also moments when you were energized and inspired by the grace of God. It is not easy to bear both of these realities in ourselves at the same time, but I encourage you to continue to make this effort and to support one another as fellow citizens of this seminary community.

20. *Exhortation.* And so, as you begin this new academic year at Seminary, I would like to take a moment here to give thanks to God for all of you and for all those who have offered often impressive and inspiring responses to these circumstances. By remaining constant in prayer, and through their ongoing support of the clergy, our monasteries and parishes have, on the whole, remained thriving communities, despite the lockdowns and social distancing. The monastics, the parish priests, the deacons, and the subdeacons deserve our thanks. The singers, the wardens, the council members, and all others who minister and help also deserve our thanks. Chanters and singers should be acknowledged for offering the holy services on behalf of all in very restrictive circumstances, and for streaming those services so that others could have at least some participation in church life. And I would like to thank all of you here at the seminary, both those who have worked very hard to allow our school to open its doors this Fall and those who have made the additional effort, on top of the sacrifice of coming to seminary to begin with, of shouldering the complexity of the unusual semester you will be navigating.

21. In the end, I would just remind you that it's the Gospel of Jesus Christ that will save us and our task here is to foster faith in our own hearts and to strengthen it in other people. Let other people provide social services and education. Let others speak about politics, medical, and bioethical matters. Those things have their place, but only as specific components of the broader goal you have taken up, which is to be seminarians being formed to be servants of Christ. You are not students but seminarians and the difference is

simple: if you want your focus to be studies, you should leave now and go off to a religious school at a university or college, and be a student. If you want to be changed, and challenged, and formed, and be obedient, then be a seminarian. It's as simple as that. The elements of being a student—classes, study, professors, grades, assignments, methods, etc., all these academic things are necessary, and all are important. But we, as Churchmen, as seminarians, have to push forward and enter further into the mystery of faith. We don't study simply to learn, but to be formed.

22. I thank you for your attention and will gladly answer any questions you may have.