



**His Eminence's address at the  
Virtual Archdiocesan Convention  
General Assembly Meeting**

**Saturday, July 24, 2021  
12:30 PM – 1:30 PM EST**

Beloved Hierarchs, Reverend Clergy, Esteemed Members of the Archdiocese Board of Trustees, Organization and Department Heads, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is in our midst!

After all that we have endured over the past year and a half, this traditional greeting now means so much more. COVID-19 brought sickness, death, and grief to many families around the world. As we now emerge from the pandemic, God willing, we must not forget the more than four million people who died from this

disease globally, and the multitudes of family and friends who have mourned the loss of loved ones. Others suffered loss of jobs and homes, disruption of their children's education, and a growing emotional burden of loneliness and depression — not to mention the curtailment of our parish life — as a consequence of governmental efforts to control the disease. The resulting social upheaval was compounded by disagreement and discord throughout our cities. Beyond angry words and public demonstrations, violence has become rampant in the public square. Our world has in so many ways been upended and broken by these trying times.

Nevertheless, Christ is in our midst, and He has been with us through all these things. The Ninth Ode of Pascha proclaims: "O Thy divine and beloved and most sweet voice! Thou hast promised that Thou would be with us unto the end of the world, O Christ; and we faithful rejoice, having this as an anchor of hope." And indeed, insofar as we have been able to turn to Him in the midst of this ordeal, we have rejoiced

in the hope of His constant, preserving, and redeeming presence.

Saint Paul expressed the same joyful hope, when he was facing far greater sufferings. He wrote: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:35, 37). Hear again those beautiful words: "Through Him who loved us." The apostle goes on to proclaim the universal triumph of this love over any obstacle we might ever face: "For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth **nor anything else in all creation** will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38–39).

Indeed, nothing can separate us from the love of God, brothers and sisters. This is the constant and enduring hope we have in Christ; nothing can strip it from us if we hold fast to it. This is

the shining beacon that will lead us out of hopelessness. This is the warmth of renewal that will overcome the unfeeling coldness taking hold of our world. This is the Bread of Life that will revitalize souls enfeebled by fear.

The Church has proven the steadfastness of Christ's love through all it has endured over its 2000-year history. Instead of stamping out the gospel, Jewish and Roman persecutions only increased the spread of the Faith, as the blood of martyrs became the seed of the Church. Instead of disfiguring the Faith beyond recognition, the assault of heresies led the Fathers to eloquently articulate it in a way that has inspired every generation since. Instead of stripping our churches of their beauty, iconoclasm provoked an enduring zeal among us who love the beauty of God's House and the holy icons. Instead of crushing the Christian spirit, the Turkish Yoke deepened the resolve of our faithful forebearers, and spread the Faith here to the New World. Instead of extinguishing the Orthodox faith in the Soviet Union and other

Communist nations in the name of a new, idealistic form of an economic and social experiment, in which the government becomes the god and source of all things, our holy Orthodox faith ultimately prevailed and is once again the spiritual anchor of those same nations.

The devil cannot overcome the word of the gospel which has come forth from God. This powerful word will have its saving effect in spite of all adversity, as God Himself proclaimed through the Prophet Isaiah, saying: "As rain comes down, or snow from heaven, and does not return until it saturates the earth, and it brings forth and produces and gives seed to the sower and bread for food, so shall My word be, whatever proceeds from My mouth. It shall not return until it accomplishes whatever I willed" (55:10–11). Only laziness and indifference on our part can stymie the salvation God intends for us, which He sent forth His Word to accomplish for us. Nothing external to us can harm us, except our free choice to reject God's work in our lives. So long as we cooperate with God and

obey His teachings, we will know the love that God has for us, and will abide in that love and be perfected in that love.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is an opportune moment for the Church. We must resist the temptation to withdraw and lick our wounds. Instead, we must redouble our efforts to proclaim this powerful word of the gospel in a world that desperately needs it. We have already seen many new inquirers in our parishes, as this tumultuous time has led people to search for meaning and hope—a spiritual anchor to keep them safe in the chaotic storms of life. The overturning of the status quo has created an opportunity for people to break loose of materialistic and secular preoccupations, in order to find a better path to walk. We know that the Church has what they seek. So, we ought now to proclaim with even more gusto the way of Christ and the wisdom of the Fathers.

This is an opportunity for renewal not just for those outside the Church but also for us within it. Many of us have also been shaken from our

status quo and prompted to dig deeper. Being forced to stay at home, we have spent more time with family and in prayer. We have figured out new ways to reach out in love to hurting people around us. We have been forced to rediscover that the Church is not merely a building but also, and especially, a living spirit within each of us that can worship and pray wherever we are in our daily lives. Don't lose these precious lessons! Continue to apply them, by making prayer, family time, and Christian service the cornerstone of your daily lives.

I, myself, have learned so much through this time, about myself and my ministry. As some of you have heard me say, I was transformed overnight from a Metropolitan of 300 churches and missions all over the United States and Canada to a "parish" priest of my home chapel, personally serving only four or five parishioners, for more than a year. This was an opportunity for me to minister at a much more intense and personal level and to see my ministry again from this more basic perspective. I have also been

able to take more time to read books, while stuck at home and unable to visit all of you. Although unable to travel as usual, during this time I remained in contact with the hierarchs, clergy and faithful, both here and abroad through zoom meetings and other methods. You have all, no doubt, had similar moments and experiences as you've been forced to slow down and simplify your daily lives. Let us cherish these lessons as gifts from God, so that they will bear the fruit of ongoing spiritual renewal in us, as God intends.

Our parishes have faced the challenge of COVID-19 with courage and creativity, and I want to thank our hierarchs, clergy and lay leaders for all the efforts you have made. Here again, the shaking of the status quo has brought us some unexpected blessings. We have been forced to find new ways to reach people: through Zoom, live-streaming, and other technology, as well as by resorting to lower-tech methods like phone calls and handwritten notes. We have also been forced to realize how important our common worship is, by being forced to be absent



from it. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," they say, and this truth has been proven to us. Let us also cherish these lessons, employing newly learned methods appropriately and attending church at every opportunity, as if it might be our last. I was pleased by the eagerness and great desire to reopen and return to normal by our clergy and faithful, because the Church and the sacraments are indeed, to use a catch phrase of the past year, "essential" to the salvation of our faithful. This exemplifies the Christian attitude we must have going forward.

While many of us have grown closer to God through this refining fire of adversity, others have (unfortunately) drifted away. Now that the challenge of the pandemic is behind us, let us search out those who have lost their way and bring them back into the flock of Christ. Pastors: reach out to those of your parishioners you have not seen; pick up the phone or just send them a loving note of concern. Not just pastors, but all of you: check on your friends and family who are

downtrodden, lost, and confused; show them love and pray for them.

I am especially concerned about our youth. In fact, they have been so much on my mind, that I asked our Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America, of which I am the Vice-Chairman, to declare this year the Orthodox Year of Youth, which the other assembly hierarchs agreed to do. Even before the pandemic, worried clergy, parents, and other laypeople in our parishes often brought me questions like these:

What are we doing for our youth? How can we keep them active in Church School, SOYO, OCF, and Young Adult Ministry? What new programs can we offer? What curricula can we create?

And now, the pandemic has only intensified the pressures and temptations drawing our youth away from the Church. Just as many of them were struggling with an unprecedented degree of isolation and loneliness, it became much more difficult to participate in parish life. The depth of their spiritual resources and commitment to

Christ were tested, and some have fallen away as a result. You will hear some answers to these profound questions after my address.

This spiritual crisis for our youth has led me to reexamine our approach to Christian education and all aspects of youth and young-adult ministry. Although the questions we were asking before were well intentioned, it may be the case that our whole paradigm needs to be refocused. What if we have been asking the wrong questions? What if new programs and curricula are not the panacea we imagine them to be? What if keeping young people engaged in old-fashioned organizations is not enough to keep them engaged in the Faith? What if there is a deeper need that we have taken for granted or perhaps overlooked entirely? Our young people desperately need—not organizations, programs, and curricula—but to know the Crucified and Risen Lord, to include Him in their daily lives, and to participate in the life of His Holy Church.

Later in this meeting, Father Nicholas Belcher will present more details about the thoughtful

work underway to renew our youth and young-adult ministries, bringing these crucial needs into focus. I have assigned Father Nicholas to oversee all aspects of youth ministry (Christian Education, Camping, Teens, Young Adults, etc.), and he is coordinating a committee of clergy and laypeople from across this archdiocese for this purpose. I thank Father Nicholas and his team for their passionate concern for our youth and their work on this effort, and I commend his presentation to you, and ask you to support this work through your prayers and cooperation. The spiritual formation of our youth is a duty we all share as clergy, parents, godparents, and extended parish families; it is not merely the job of a youth director or a few volunteers. It is accomplished through our loving engagement with youth and our modeling an active faith for them to emulate. It is accomplished not just at camps and retreats or in classrooms, but also in prayerful homes, in liturgically active church temples, and in parishes that serve the needy of this world in Christian love.

The most effective strategy for holding onto our youth is for us to intensely live the Faith and to faithfully be the Church of Jesus Christ. Youth can smell hypocrisy a mile away, and they are not interested in simply belonging to an ethnic or social club. They yearn for authenticity and significance. They want to be part of a movement as momentous and transformative as that begun by our Lord and His disciples 2000 years ago. If we are faithful in pursuing that call, they will eagerly jump onto that bandwagon.

This will also be the most effective strategy for weathering every storm of adversity, and for growing our parishes through outreach and evangelism. The world is looking for a spiritual home that transcends the anxiety and depression festering and spreading across the globe, that rises above petty political divisions and human pride, that manifests the otherworldly ideal of life in the Kingdom of God—that is, a life that exudes “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Let us all, therefore, recommit ourselves

to living the Faith we have received, for the sake of ourselves, our youth, and our world.

The approaching new ecclesiastical year, on September 1st, is an opportunity for us to make this renewal of Faith our ecclesiastical New-Year's resolution. Let us double and triple our efforts to put our parish life back in order, back to normal—or rather, better than our pre-pandemic normal. Bishops, priests, deacons, trustees, department heads, parish councils, men's and ladies' organizations, young adults, and teens—we all have a role to play in this. Let us undertake it together, each doing his or her part to make our parishes active praying and caring communities that bring the light of the gospel into the world.

I thank you all for working hard to see our archdiocese through the difficult time now behind us. I thank my brother bishops for encouraging and guiding the parishes under their care. In particular, I would like to thank my beloved brother, His Grace Bishop Basil, for his service to this archdiocese over fifty years, as

archdiocesan youth director, as a deacon, as a priest, and as a bishop. Some of you may know that, after writing to me, with my reluctant support, Bishop Basil has written to His Beatitude, our Patriarch, requesting retirement from active ministry by the end of this calendar year. His Beatitude has placed the matter on the Holy Synod's agenda for its meeting this October. We certainly owe much gratitude to Bishop Basil for his ministry over so many years, and we wish him many more healthy years and blessings. Bishop Basil will remain in the Wichita area, and we will continue to benefit from his wisdom and love.

Here I want to draw your attention to the countless hierarchs, clergy and lay leaders who have served this archdiocese for the past 126 years. May their memory be eternal, and we continue to ask for their prayers and supplications, as we continue to pray for the repose of their souls.

Additionally, I want to thank our Archdiocese Board of Trustees and officers, especially

Vice-Chair Fawaz El Khoury, CFO Salim Abboud, Chancellor Archdeacon Emile Sayegh, and Vicar General Archpriest Thomas Zain, who multiplied their already great efforts on behalf of the archdiocese during the pandemic. We had countless meetings about navigating the pandemic, and managing the affairs of the archdiocese during this time, and this was no easy task.

Before turning to some administrative matters, I would like to say a few words about future bishops. This issue has been on many people's minds, and rightfully so. Since my election in 2014, thereby leaving a vacancy in the Diocese of Los Angeles and the West, and other changes in the past few years, we need three or four new bishops. I discussed this issue in a recent meeting with our father in Christ, His Beatitude, Patriarch JOHN X, and hopefully we will work on beginning the process of fulfilling this need in the near future. It is indeed on our minds, and has been for some time, however, as you know, the Church sometimes works slowly and



deliberately, rather than rushing such important matters.

Since this virtual convention is not conducive to voting, I have asked all the trustees whose terms are expiring to continue serving another two years. This means that all our trustees will be up for election or appointment at our next Archdiocese Convention, in 2023. After reading the constitution and the canons, and conferring with our chancellor, we determined this to be acceptable given the limiting circumstances of the pandemic.

Many thanks to the people of Saint George in Pittsburgh, who did much work to prepare this year's convention, before concluding that it would not be possible to meet in person this year. As we move forward, the next two convention host parishes will be Saint George/Phoenix (in 2023) and Saint George/Cicero (Chicago) (in 2025), God willing. The Department of Convention and Conference Planning is already seeking potential host parishes for the 2027 national convention. We

are also very grateful to all those who made this virtual convention possible, something unprecedented in the history of our archdiocese.

I also want to thank the office staff at the archdiocese headquarters, who adapted creatively and diligently to the crisis. On short notice, they figured out how to work from home while continuing to provide all the administrative support needed for our parishes and archdiocesan efforts.

I want to thank the staff of the Antiochian Village and all our diocesan camps, who reacted quickly, carefully, and creatively, to the ever-changing restrictions of the pandemic. They made great efforts to switch gears from in-person to virtual camping last year, providing an amazing service to our children who were stuck at home last summer. This year, they monitored developments day-by-day in order to provide the most normal (while safe) summer-camping experience possible. Thank you to the Village Council, especially their chairman, Dimitri Zeidan, and the new camp director, Father

Christopher Shadid. Thank you also to the former director, Father Anthony Yazge for his work during the early months of the pandemic, and for his many years of service as camp director and overseer of our camping programs throughout the archdiocese.

I would also like to thank Archpriest Joseph Purpura for his decades of service as youth director of the archdiocese. His foundational and transformative work, together with his love and dedication for our youth will be remembered for many years to come. Likewise, I would like to thank Mrs. Carol Buleza who served so many years as chairwoman of the Department of Christian Education. We are grateful for her many contributions in the development of materials for our church school children.

And, last but certainly not least, I want to thank all our parish clergy, who are on the frontlines of ministry in this archdiocese. You have been heroes, adapting to the ever-changing situation, in order to perpetuate the worship of God and to protect and nurture your

spiritual flocks. Others may not have seen your sleepless nights, your secret tears, or your anxious deliberations, but God has seen them, and He will reward your love and faithfulness.

Having such a team around me in this archdiocese gives me great confidence that we can now undertake the work of further renewal which I have outlined today. I pray that our God may strengthen us all to fulfill this good purpose. And to that end, I leave you with this blessing, written by Saint Paul to the Church of the Thessalonians: "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Amen.