



**His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH
Opening Remarks at the 21st Biennial Clergy
Symposium**

Tuesday, July 19, 2022

Your Eminence Metropolitan Gregory, Your Graces,
and Reverend Clergy of our Archdiocese,

Welcome to our Twenty-First Biennial Clergy Symposium. It is a great blessing to be together this week, after a long and difficult separation. Two years ago, we were forced to cancel this gathering as a result of the Covid pandemic. Of course, there were compelling reasons to avoid travel and large gatherings at that time: many people were dying, this disease was not yet well understood, and medical tools to prevent and manage the disease were still under development. Moreover, governments had severely restricted travel and gatherings. We had to

do it, but we also knew that canceling this and other gatherings that summer would be difficult.

This enforced separation from one another could not have come at a worse time. We were separated from the advice of our mentors and fellow ministers just as we needed to adapt our ministries in the face of new and perplexing challenges. We were separated from our friends and brothers just as fear and loneliness invaded each and every home. We were separated from the bonds of fellowship and corporate prayer just as the spirit of anger, hatred, and divisiveness spread through every part of society, even infiltrating the Church itself. In short, we were separated from one another just as we needed one another most.

Nevertheless, our good and loving God turns even the most terrible difficulties to our benefit, by His grace. "For," as we read in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, those who are called according to His purpose." We have received many unexpected blessings during this pandemic. Most of our parishes not only survived but thrived, as clergy and laity stepped up to meet the challenge. Many new visitors and inquirers flocked to our churches in

search of hope. And our own souls have also unexpectedly benefited, as we have been reminded to be grateful for many things we formerly took for granted—especially the learning, camaraderie, and edification that come from gathering together under one roof as the Body of Christ.

Being together here today is an opportunity we must not let slip by us. It is an opportunity to heal from all the wounds of the past few years. If we are in need of comfort or counsel from those who know the demands of the priesthood, here among us are brothers with deep experience and compassionate hearts. If we have questions about perplexing situations in our parishes, here are hundreds of brains to pick. If we are alienated from any of our brothers because of offenses perceived or real, now is the time to humble ourselves and be reconciled. And if we have in any way grown distant from God, now is the time to humble ourselves in the Sacrament of Confession and be renewed by Him who gives grace to the humble. Learning together, discussing together, eating together, praying together, and receiving communion together this week is a holy moment that can bring us much healing.

When we leave this blessed place, we must be careful to preserve the healing and empowering spirit of unity and fellowship we encounter here. Over the past two years, we have seen how the evil one tries to divide us and turn us against one another. Let us shield ourselves from his schemes and temptations by striving, in the words of Saint Paul, to “be joined together in the same mind” (1 Corinthians 1:10). In our Orthodox Tradition, the unity of the Church is centered around the bishops. We see this in Saint Ignatius of Antioch’s Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, where he urges that nothing be done apart from the bishop and that the priests, deacons, and laypeople follow where the bishop leads. Likewise, today I implore you always to be mindful that everything you do as clergy is part of the larger ministry of this archdiocese. You minister as representatives of the Metropolitan in your parishes, a ministry entrusted to you by Christ through the Metropolitan. Therefore, for the health of your ministry and our parishes, let us all be united by the spirit of true obedience—not the grudging acceptance of demands, but the loving and openhearted desire for guidance. This is the intent of all our directives—loving guidance—and I hope that

you will always receive them as such and preserve the unity of this holy archdiocesan family.

The theme of this year's Symposium is "On the Spiritual Health of Priest and Parish," and we will be blessed to hear edifying words on this subject from His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY each morning. Metropolitan GREGORY presides over the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese and serves as the Secretary of our Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops. – Your Eminence, thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to be with us.

Our choice of this theme was prompted by the difficulties of the past two years. In the midst of so much suffering, loss, disruption, turmoil, and conflict, we all struggled to maintain a healthy balance and spiritual perspective. The diseases of fear, anger, selfishness, faultfinding, and despair proved an even greater threat than the actual virus that gave rise to them. Many souls are still deeply wounded by what we experienced and in need of the healing that is only found in Christ.

The Fathers teach us that the Church is a spiritual hospital. They explain the Lord's Parable of the Good

Samaritan as an image of this teaching: the wounded and half-dead man in the story symbolizes the human race, which was rescued by Christ and entrusted to the Church (symbolized by the inn in the story) in order to be cared for by the clergy (who are symbolized by the innkeeper). Even more than healthcare professionals who heal the body, our ministry of spiritual healing is essential to human wellbeing, our gatherings as Church are essential, and our Faith is essential, though some civil authorities have refused to acknowledge this.

In the hospital of the Church, the clergy are healers. Yet we all know that clergy are also in need of healing. Even as we exercise this exceedingly difficult ministry of caring for others, we ourselves suffer from spiritual wounds and diseases that need the same care. As St. John Chrysostom says, "More billows toss the priest's soul than the gales which trouble the sea." We must not neglect our own spiritual health for the sake of our calling—this would be shortsighted and self-defeating. As we saw among medical professionals at many times during this crisis, the healer cannot heal when he himself is overcome with illness.

So let us listen carefully to His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY's reflections on this theme, and let us take time to reflect on our own spiritual health and that of our parishes. Finally, let us now and at all times seek diligently that healing grace found only in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is alone the cure for all of our deepest infirmities.
