



**ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE
OF NORTH AMERICA**

**General Report to the Special Convention
of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
by
Metropolitan Antonios of Zahle, Baalbek, and Dependencies,
Patriarchal Vicar
Dallas, Texas • Friday, January 13, 2023**

(This report covers the works and activities of the Patriarchal Vicar from November 17, 2022, until January 12, 2023. From September 23 until November 16, 2022 the Temporary Committee, headed by His Grace Bishop John Abdallah, managed “*the pastoral, administrative, and financial affairs of the Archdiocese*” in coordination with His Beatitude Patriarch John X.)

“All the believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32)

**Beloved brother Hierarchs, reverend Clergy, and Christ-loving Faithful,
Members of the Special Convention of the ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA.**

A. Acknowledgments

Before everything, I thank the Lord for bestowing on me the grace to serve you in this Archdiocese in this very important phase of the life of this blessed Archdiocese.

First, I would like to thank His Beatitude Patriarch John X for his great trust in assigning me as Patriarchal Vicar for this God-protected Archdiocese.

Second, I am grateful to the hierarchs, clergy, Board of Trustees, archdiocese staff, and every parish for their love, cooperation, hospitality, and care.

Third, I acknowledged during my visits to the different parishes that this period of transition was not easy, but the Lord works in mysterious ways to comfort and heal His people.

* * *

B. Preamble

Dear in Christ,

We are gathering today to witness the spirit of unity and proclaim it through living the mystery of being “one in heart and mind” in Christ and seeking the will of God in the service of His Holy Church, in general, and more specifically through serving in this God-protected Archdiocese.

We are here to complete a sacred mission, and thus we need to approach it in a spirit of prayer and piety. Our essential mission is to witness to the love of Christ our God and Savior, in the same spirit He has accomplished His Divine Economy to grant us Eternal Life. This spirit is the spirit of sacrificial love. When we seek nothing but to do His will and to glorify Him, then we are acting according to the spirit of edifying the Body of Christ—the Church—because this means that we are ready to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of what is best for the Church.

Today we meet to seek the experience of acting as an ecclesiastical community in the spirit of unity with our Mother Church and with the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch. This is the experience of the catholicity and internationality of the Antiochian Church and the seal of our mission and witnessing to Christ our God in the New World.

Today we celebrate the joy of unity in Christ through serving His Church in the liturgy (work of the people with the Spirit of the Lord) of nominating three candidates for the office of Metropolitan. This is the offering we will lift up in thanksgiving to the Lord through the Holy Synod, so that the Holy Spirit with the fathers of the Holy Synod will elect for this Archdiocese a lamb for the sacrifice of peace, to carry the cross of love for the Lord and His people.

* * *

C. Visits to the parishes

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

I arrived at the Archdiocese Headquarters in Englewood on Thursday, November 17, and on the 18th I went to Boston and started my visits to the parishes and meetings with the clergy and laity of the Archdiocese.

Unfortunately, I was not able to visit our parishes in Canada, because I am still waiting to receive the visa. I hope I can make up for that later, God willing. My deep apologies to the clergy and faithful in Canada.

Until now, I have visited around forty parishes in the different states, where my meetings with both clergy and laity centered on three main axes:

- (1) the provisions of the constitutions of the Antiochian See and this Archdiocese concerning the election of a new Metropolitan for the Archdiocese;
- (2) the upcoming convention process and preparations; and
- (3) the concerns, needs, challenges of the Archdiocese, the faithful, and the clergy and their aspirations concerning the personal qualifications required for the new Metropolitan to be able to insure the unity, growth, prosperity, and mission of the Archdiocese.

Of course, all questions, thoughts, or reflections that anybody wanted to ask or discuss, on any subject concerning this period of the life of the Archdiocese, were welcomed.

* * *

D. Results of the visits to the parishes

What I can say is that these visits were a great opportunity to meet with the people of God in this blessed Archdiocese. They helped me to assess the current situation and needs of the clergy and faithful, and they had, generally, a blessed return on me personally and, I think, a comforting, relieving, and advantageous result on the clergy and parishes, by the grace of God.

Of course, the discussions, questions, and answers were transparent and in a spirit of peace and sincere dialogue.

* * *

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

E. Briefing of the main questions and issues raised and discussed in the visits and the answers given

As a briefing of the main questions and answers raised in these visits, I would like to emphasize the following:

1. How was the list of candidates for the office of Metropolitan for this Archdiocese selected?

First, upon the receipt of the retirement letter of Metropolitan Joseph on September 17 by His Beatitude Patriarch John X, His Beatitude appointed, “*in accordance with the pertinent Antiochian Laws and Regulations,*” on September 23, a Temporary Committee composed of His Grace Bishop John Abdalah (Committee Chairman); Mr. Fawaz El Khoury (Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trustees); Mr. Salim Abboud (Chief Financial Officer); Archdeacon Emile Sayegh (Chancellor); and Archpriest Thomas Zain (Vicar General), to manage “*the pastoral, administrative, and financial affairs of the Archdiocese.*”

Second, when the Holy Synod approved the retirement of Metropolitan Joseph, the Archdiocese was declared officially vacant. The timeframes stated in the Archdiocese constitution were then applicable from October 17.

Third, on October 24, His Beatitude Patriarch John X assigned a Patriarchal Vicar, who assumed his responsibilities actually and effectively starting November 17, 2022.

Timeframes were respected concerning the preparations for the convention and the Board meetings with the Patriarchal Vicar (see Archdiocese Constitution, Article 1, Section 5.A–C) and the issuing of the list of candidates eligible for the office of Metropolitan for the Archdiocese “*as per the list of nominees kept in the records of the Patriarchate and the Holy Synod and including the names of those qualified under Section 4 of this article*” (see Section 5.D). All the preparations and the call for the convention and the Board meetings were in compliance thereof.

Section 4.A states the qualifications required for the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Archdiocese. The problematic points in this issue are the following:

Archdiocese Constitution, Article 1, Section 4.A(2): “*He must be fluent in the English language and have a good working knowledge of the Arabic language*”;

Antiochian See Bylaws, Article 60, Clause (c): “*He must be at least 33 years old and not above 65 years.*”

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

The Archdiocese Constitution, Article 1, Section 4.D(1), states that: *“The patriarchal vicar and the board of trustees shall prepare a list containing all the names of the worthy clergyman who are qualified for nomination as per the list of nominees kept in the records of the patriarchate and the Holy Synod, and including the names of those qualified under Section 4 of this Article.”*

The latest version of the list of nominees from the Holy Synod was issued in October 2022. This list contains all the names of the bishops of this Archdiocese, even those who are above 65 years old. According to Article 6 of the bylaws of the Antiochian See: *“The Holy Synod is the one who decides in all aspects of the faith, the legislative body of the Church and the supreme court of the Church. The decisions of the Holy Synod are mandatory for the clergy, monastics and laypeople.”*

The Archdiocese Constitution, Article 1, Section 4.A(5), states that the candidate *“must have . . . served some time, as a clergyman [pastor] in the Archdiocese.”*

Hence, because of all the previous reasons, the Patriarchal Vicar and the Board of Trustees finalized the list of candidates for the office of Metropolitan from the list approved by the Holy Synod, and this produced the list we have for the ballot for this Special Convention.

2. How were the names of metropolitans added to the list of eligible candidates for the office of Metropolitan for this Archdiocese?

Referring to Article 6 of the Antiochian See bylaws (see above) and Article 67, *“The Holy Synod undertakes selection, nomination and election processes if there is no ‘conference’ in the Archdiocese or if it is not possible to convene it, or if the integrity of the Archdiocese calls for it,”* it is clear that the Holy Synod has the right—in case of need and for the wellbeing, peace, unity, integrity, prosperity, and growth of the Archdiocese—to transfer a metropolitan from one archdiocese to another.

Since a metropolitan is elected for an archdiocese and has the canonical eligibility, wisdom, experience, and knowledge, according to the Antiochian See constitution and the Archdiocese constitution (Article 1. Section 4.A[1–5]), then it is an added reason to have his name on the list of candidates.

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

Furthermore, in the canon laws of the Church and decisions of the ecumenical councils and local synods, the great legislator and interpreter of the Church canons *“Balsamon distinguishes between three types of transfer or auto transfer of bishops. The first is if a bishop known for his knowledge and piety is forced to move from a small archdiocese to a large one so that he can perform a greater and more honorable service to the Church. Of this kind was the transfer of St. Gregory of Nazianzus from Sasimeh to Constantinople. The second type is when a bishop is transferred from an archdiocese whose status has deteriorated as a result of invasions and wars to a vacant archdiocese. The third type is when a bishop, who has an archdiocese or does not have one, takes advantage of the existence of a vacant archdiocese and moves to it on his own. And this third type is the one that was prohibited by the Council of Sardisia and imposed a severe penalty on the violator”* (Archimandrite Hanania Kassab, editor and translator, Arabic version of the *“Encyclopedia of Canon Law”*, Beirut, 1978, pp. 84–85).

Accordingly, due to the special circumstances (and the early retirement of Metropolitan Joseph), during the meeting of the bishops and the Temporary Committee with His Beatitude Patriarch John X in Balamand on November 9–10, 2022, His Beatitude indicated the possibility of considering the transfer of a metropolitan from one archdiocese to another, as a conceivable option.

For all these reasons, the Board of Trustees considered and proposed the addition of the names of metropolitans who served ***“for some time”*** in the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America.

3. Why didn't the Board of Trustees along with the Patriarchal Vicar adhere to the provisions of the Patriarchate and Archdiocese constitutions concerning the age limit and the Arabic- and English-language requirements?

In 2014, the convention **approved unanimously** a list that was prepared by the then Patriarchal Vicar (Met. Silouan) and the Board of Trustees. Both the Board of Trustees and the Special Convention (2014) also approved the report of His Eminence Metropolitan Silouan, the Patriarchal Vicar, in which he discusses and elaborates the legal and canonical arguments behind the existence of candidates who are above 65 years of age and that do not have the “working knowledge of the Arabic language” on the list prepared by himself and the Board of Trustees (for more details please see the minutes of the Board of Trustees on May 14, 2014, and the minutes of the Special Convention on June 5, 2014). So this list included nominees that were

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

above 65 years of age and did not have a “working knowledge” of the Arabic language. That became a precedent due to special circumstances. Fast forward to 2023, the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America is under special circumstances. In order to keep peace and not to exclude bishops who are above 65 years of age or do not have working knowledge of Arabic language, we decided to keep the same principle as an economia. Accordingly, this decision was taken by the Patriarchal Vicar and the Board of Trustees.

4. Why are some names who are potential eligible candidates from this Archdiocese not included on the List of the Holy Synod?

Every year, each metropolitan has to send a list of eligible candidates for the episcopacy to the “Committee of Eligibility for Episcopacy” of the Holy Synod (Bylaws of Antiochian See, Article 22, clause 5). This committee will prepare a list of eligible candidates for episcopacy from all the Antiochian See to be presented to the Holy Synod for approval and issuance accordingly. The names that are not on the nominees list for the election of the Metropolitan for the Archdiocese of North America are names that were not received by the Holy Synod’s committee.

5. Retirement of Metropolitan Joseph and position of the Holy Synod.

Metropolitan Joseph sent his retirement letter on September 17, 2022, to His Beatitude and the Holy Synod. The Holy Synod of Antioch convened on October 17 and decided the following:

First: Consider the retirement submitted by His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH (Zehlaoui) effective from the date of its submission on September 17, 2022...

Second: Consider the Metropolitan See of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America vacant from the date of the issuance of this resolution, with all the effects of this vacancy as provided in the Antiochian rules and regulations;

Third: Consider the retired Metropolitan JOSEPH (Zehlaoui), Former Metropolitan of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America, and no longer a member of the Holy Synod of Antioch;

Fourth: Request from Metropolitan JOSEPH (Zehlaoui), in accordance with the practiced ecclesiastical procedures upon a bishop’s retirement, absolutely not to perform or participate in any clerical ordination, and to determine, in coordination with the Patriarchal Vicar upon his appointment, and with the Metropolitan of the

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

Archdiocese upon his election, the parish church in which he will permanently celebrate the Divine Liturgy; and to request from him absolutely not to perform any liturgical, sacramental, or sanctification service, within the Archdiocese of North America, and in any other Archdiocese, except by obtaining the necessary permission from the Metropolitan of the Archdiocese, in accordance with the known ecclesiastical procedures; provided that he mentions in the divine services the name of the Patriarch of Antioch followed by the name of the Metropolitan of the Archdiocese. Also, it generally applies to the retired arch-pastor whatever applies to arch-pastors in terms of their travel or service in another church and in terms of foreign relations.

As a reminder, Metropolitan Joseph stated in his letter of retirement that he maintained a personal principle throughout his life to “never allow anything to hurt the Church,” and that is why he retired.

In conclusion, the Holy Synod decided to open a new page and look to the future of the Archdiocese.

6. Why didn't the Archdiocese issue any clarifying statements concerning the investigation and retirement of Metropolitan Joseph?

The public-relations firm hired by the Archdiocese ensured that the priority of the Archdiocese is to protect the investigation and respect the privacy of the different concerned parties, especially for such a sensitive topic. All the communications of the Patriarchate were posted immediately. The public statements released by the Archdiocese never responded to misinformation, speculation, or rumors. Rather, they stuck to facts and the timeline of events, which can be seen in previous posts on Antiochian.org.

7. During my visits I heard some comments and skepticism regarding the decisions of the Holy Synod and the Board of Trustees.

First of all, the Holy Synod is the Synod of the Fathers of the Antiochian Church. They are constantly responsible in front of God to preserve the integrity of faith, the faithful, and the Church through the grace of the Holy Trinity. They are entrusted with the Church as the bride of Christ. Their responsibility is to lead the faithful to salvation. The Holy Scriptures state in Ecclesiastes 10:20, “*Don't bad-mouth your leaders, not even under your breath, and don't abuse your betters, even in the privacy*

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

of your home. Loose talk has a way of getting picked up and spread around. Little birds drop the crumbs of your gossip far and wide.”

It is well known that the Holy Synod had and has and will always have Holy Fathers who are revered and praised in the whole Orthodox world. Therefore, the gossip about His Beatitude and the fathers of the Holy Synod will actually and eventually hurt those who are spreading the gossips. This is something against the Spirit of God, the Holy Church, and Christian love. We pray for those who were ensnared by doubts about the soundness and sincerity of the decisions of the Holy Synod, which seeks the best for the Church, and we hope that the Holy Spirit will fill their hearts with His light, love, and peace.

As for the Board of Trustees, especially all the executive committees and the Temporary Committee of the Archdiocese, their actions speak for themselves. We have no doubt that those who know their deeds and everyday activities will realize that they are giving from their family time, leisure, and efforts for the sake of the wellbeing of the Archdiocese.

The Archdiocese sends an Annual Financial Report every year to all the parishes with detailed information about all the activities. During the General Convention, which is held every two years (as you all know), everyone is welcomed to discuss, comment, and share their concerns regarding the financial status of the Archdiocese.

In all cases, board members are present in every area of this Archdiocese and they are practically spread all over the Archdiocese. They can also be of help to you at any time.

Furthermore, you can also send through your pastor and parish council any comments or questions or interrogations to the Archdiocese, as you have been doing.

As you all know, in the last three years, the Archdiocese launched the internal audit procedure on a yearly basis. Actually, there is now an independent external audit that was launched a while ago and will be completed very soon.

* * *

F. Concerns, needs, challenges, and aspirations of the clergy and faithful concerning the Archdiocese and the new Metropolitan

The beloved-in-Christ clergy and faithful of this God-protected Archdiocese expressed in general the concerns, needs, and challenges they are facing and their aspirations for the new Metropolitan.

I may summarize some of the major points raised during these discussions as follows:

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

1. Concerns about the integrity and unity of the Archdiocese were raised, along with questions about any intentions of the Holy Synod to divide the Archdiocese.

Of course, no such intentions or proposals were ever raised in the Holy Synod about this issue. Neither did His Beatitude Patriarch John X bring up this subject in any session.

2. Concerns about the willingness of the Holy Synod to choose a new Metropolitan from the three candidates that will be nominated by the Special Convention.

Of course, the Holy Synod respects the voting of the convention, and it will choose from the names that will be submitted to it by the Patriarchal Vicar as the result of the voting process. However, the Holy Synod has the authority, as the governing body of the Holy Church of Antioch, to make nomination and have elections from names that were not on the convention's ballot, if there is a very serious and essential reason to do so, with regard to the unity and integrity, peace and wellbeing of the Archdiocese.

3. Concerns about the future Metropolitan and the need that he be a spiritual father both to clergy and laity, be approachable, humble, and meek, visionary and missionary, a man of courage and administration, who can speed up the healing of the souls—this is from one side. From the other side, the new Metropolitan needs to be a bridge between Antioch and this Archdiocese, filled with the spirit of Antioch and able to transmit it. He needs to unite in himself the Antiochian See and this Archdiocese, so that in his presence in this Archdiocese he reveals the presence of the Church of Antioch and its legacy and spiritual inheritance and, in his presence in the Antiochian See, he bears the truth of this Archdiocese and its unity with the Mother Church.
4. There is a need for a Metropolitan who will face the internal and external challenges that are confronting this Archdiocese concerning its mission and witness to the truth of the faith against the moral, ethical, and social realities, regulations, and legislation that oppose the Church, the faithful, and the faith conscience in the Archdiocese—this is on one hand. On the other hand, challenges are facing the Archdiocese concerning preserving the unity and integrity of its faithful against what seems to be the establishment and emergence of new ethnic parishes through encouraging division. Of course,

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

this is related to the common pan-Orthodox witness (in the geographical space of this Archdiocese) of the different Orthodox jurisdictions for Orthodox unity, through the Assembly of Bishops and the other ways in which the different Orthodox Churches interact.

5. The need is for a Metropolitan that can be a spiritual leader for the Archdiocese and in the pan-Orthodox space, who, by God's grace, is able to reinforce the internal unity and integrity of the Archdiocese and the unity of the Archdiocese with the Mother Church and to grow its mission.

F. Conclusion

In general, I tried to summarize the most important points of my work and visits since my arrival in Englewood until now. It was a great period of time for me, as I enjoyed the love of the Lord and His divine grace, through your love to God and to me and your longing to be in the presence of the Lord in His Church, in liturgical services and in spiritual words. Your yearning for unity with your Mother Church and your eagerness to live in the spiritual inheritance and Holy Tradition of the Antiochian Church were a great source of strength and empowerment to me. You taught me to serve you with more divine joy through your welcoming and loving meetings, discussions, and receptions, and through your kind generosity.

Beloved in Christ, I thank the Lord for giving me the chance to be with you and for endowing us with the blessings of being together and preparing with the Board of Trustees and the Temporary Committee this very important Special Convention.

I thank His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch JOHN X for trusting me with the present task and for appointing me as Patriarchal Vicar to serve you in this period of time.

I thank the Lord for every one of you, those whom I met and got to know and those whom I didn't meet yet, clergy and laity.

I thank all those who carried me in their prayers from everywhere in the Antiochian See, because without them I wouldn't be able to fulfill this responsibility and bear both the spiritual and physical endeavor.

I thank my brothers and concelebrants, the hierarchs of this Archdiocese, for their support and cooperation and for their help and prayers with which they embraced me.

"The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11: 26)

I thank the clergy for their loving witness.

I thank the Board of Trustees for their diligence.

I thank the whole body of this Archdiocese for its beautiful witness.

I thank all those who prepared for this convention practically and logistically, especially the members of the Temporary Committee and the staff of the Archdiocese.

I thank all the delegates of this Special Convention for travelling and expressing their commitment to make manifest the unity of this Archdiocese.

Wishing you and your families, in the name of His Beatitude Patriarch John X and on my own behalf, a blessed Special Convention, for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Antiochian See and this God blessed Archdiocese, I remain,

Yours in Christ,

✠ Metropolitan ANTONIOS

Metropolitan of Zahle, Baalbek, and Dependencies
Patriarchal Vicar of New York and All North America

“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)

358 Mountain Road, P.O. Box 5238, Englewood, NJ 07631-5238
(201) 871-1355 T na.patvicar@gmail.com (201) 871-7954 F