



**His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH's  
opening remarks at the  
Twenty-Fourth Annual Clergy Seminar  
February 7–10, 2022  
Alhambra, CA**

Beloved Brothers in Christ,

Christ is in our midst!

Welcome to this twenty-fourth annual clergy seminar in the Diocese of Los Angeles and the West. I pray that you, your families, and your parishes have found joy, hope, and encouragement in the series of feasts that is now drawing to a close. It began with the celebration of Christ's birth for our salvation, continued with His baptism in the Jordan, and now ends with His Meeting in the Temple. These feasts show forth the wondrous humility of our God, who willed that His Son accept the lowliness of our human condition in order to raise us up to heavenly glories. This is a great encouragement to us as we face trials of many kinds—pandemics, financial stresses,

strained relationships, and the like—since it shows that Christ is with us in everything; He walks with us and upholds us.

Just as Christ upholds us with His presence and care, so also—in Christ—we uphold one another. One of the most beautiful aspects of these clergy gatherings is the camaraderie and fellowship we share with our brother clergy. The ministry we share has particular challenges, joys, and heartbreaks that may be difficult for others to understand, but we can find understanding, support, and help here among our fellow strugglers in the priesthood. I encourage you to take full advantage of this opportunity and thus to recharge your spiritual strength for the coming year of ministry.

The theme of this year's clergy seminar is "Responding to the Fire Bell in the Night: Ministering to Our Youth and Young Adults." Significantly, it comes in the wake of this series of feasts that encompass the youth of our Savior—from His Nativity in the flesh to His Baptism, which represents His coming of age, so to speak, and the beginning of His earthly ministry. As we heard at the Liturgy for the Meeting of the Lord, this was a time when "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom;

and the favor of God was upon Him.” St. Luke goes on to say how, after the child Jesus amazed the teachers in the Temple, He as a youth “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” The Son of God had no need Himself to grow in strength, wisdom, or favor with God, yet He became human in order to give us an example of how humanity can be redeemed and to empower us to pursue righteousness. In the simplest and profoundest terms, these verses from Luke provide a mission statement for our youth and young-adult ministries: that is, helping young people to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men, in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In pursuit of this mission, we face great social headwinds. Surrounded by a post-Christian society, our children are lured away from Christ not just by incidental temptations but by the prevalent worldly mentality that is so contrary to the mind of Christ. The values they absorb from worldly culture lead them to question and oppose the Church and to seek fulfillment in pleasures, possessions, or politics. This is not a situation that should frighten or dismay us; the ancient, persecuted Church thrived in the midst of a contrary culture, proving the power of the Faith.

However, we cannot hope to meet this challenge with an attitude of complacency and laziness.

We must spiritually rise to the occasion. A priest who is merely a businessman, social activist, or community organizer stands no chance of countering the gravitational pull of this worldliness. Now more than ever, the Church needs saints to lead—priests who are like angels in the flesh, doing everything in a godly way, and who imitate our most compassionate Lord by seeking out the lost sheep regardless of the cost in blood, sweat, and tears. We must model the Faith in our lives and authentically care for our youth, being present with them, showing love, and listening.

This is not something any one of us can do alone, which is why it is good for us to be gathered here together. United in faith and ministry, our voice and example are magnified. Joined in a common purpose, we can support one another and share resources. This week you will hear about the wonderful new initiatives coming out of our Archdiocesan Task Force on Youth and Young Adult Ministry, along with those longstanding, fruitful ministries that continue in our Archdiocese: from our many camps to the new Arch Week for older teens at the Antiochian Village; from Bible Bowl to a new Church School curriculum on

Matthew, which helps make Bible Bowl preparation more meaningful and spiritually enriching. We also have youth and young-adult conferences, Orthodox schooling, college ministries, and so much more. In addition to your personal and parish ministry, it is so important for you to be ambassadors for these archdiocesan ministries in your parishes and among your youth. When the Archdiocese sends you information on a program or event, please make sure to share it on your parish website and social media accounts and in your newsletter and bulletin, as well as announcing it at church. We rely on you to spread the word and connect your young people with the resources that are available.

We are blessed this week to have three experts in the field to enlighten us on the challenges and opportunities of youth ministry today. First, Reverend Father Nicholas Belcher is Chairman of our Archdiocesan Task Force on Youth and Young Adult Ministries. He currently serves as pastor of St. George Orthodox Church in Little Falls, New Jersey, after several years as my Hierarchical Assistant at our Archdiocese Headquarters. Previously, he ministered for twelve years at Hellenic College/Holy Cross Seminary—for nine years as Dean of Students and then for three years as Assistant Director of the Office

of Vocation and Ministry. He is a graduate of St. Vladimir's Seminary, where he now serves as a Lecturer in Antiochian Liturgics.

Second, we have Mrs. Erin Ghata, who currently serves as Co-Chair and Ministries Director of our archdiocesan Department of Youth Ministries. Previously, she served as full-time Youth Director at St. Elijah Orthodox Church in Oklahoma City for nine years, as Program Director and Assistant Director of Camp St. Raphael for fifteen years, and as Diocesan Youth Director of the Diocese of Wichita and Mid-America for nearly the same amount of time. Fr. Nicholas and Erin will update us on the renewal of our archdiocesan youth ministries that is currently underway.

Last, but certainly not least, we have Dr. John Mark Reynolds. He received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Rochester and has served as provost of Houston Baptist University and founding director of the Torrey Honors College at Biola University here in California. He attends St. George Orthodox Church in Houston, Texas, and currently serves as President of The Saint Constantine School in Houston. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Orthodox Christian School Association and a professor on the

faculty of St. Vladimir's Seminary. He is the author of numerous books, including *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought*. John Mark will tell us about the growth of Orthodox education in our country. Here in the Diocese of the West, we are blessed to have schools associated with our churches in Eagle River and Yakima, as well as a brand new academy at St. Andrew Church in Riverside. This diocese is also now home to the Antiochian House of Studies and the Institute of St. Maximos the Confessor, which offer advanced theological education and formation. I fully support these educational efforts and hope that they will be replicated throughout the diocese and archdiocese.

This week we will benefit from the knowledge and experience of these speakers as we seek to understand how to prepare our children with a strong personal faith that will sustain them and bind them to the Church throughout their lives. I implore you to take advantage of this opportunity: listen, learn, ask questions, discuss. Most importantly, take what you learn back to your parishes and apply it, so that our youth will learn and embrace their vital role in God's Kingdom.