

His Grace, Bishop JOSEPH's Remarks at the Southern California Parish Council Seminar

April 9, 2005

St. Luke Antiochian Orthodox Church
Garden Grove, CA

Before I begin, I would like to thank Fr. Michael and the faithful of St. Luke parish for their generosity in hosting this event in their beautiful church. I have always been able to count on Fr. Michael, one of our finest priests, and this community for their support. And, on behalf of the clergy and faithful of the Southern California Deanery, I thank the committee members who put together this important meeting. Finally, I would like to recognize Fr. Jon Braun for his hard work as our local Dean. He has been of tremendous help to me and all the clergy of Southern California, and I especially appreciate his unflagging enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to the growth of this Diocese and our Archdiocese as a whole.

Also, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our speakers for today: The Very Reverend Father Joseph Purpura, the Chairman of the Archdiocesan Department of Youth Ministries, the Very Reverend Father John Reimann, the Assistant Pastor of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Los Angeles, the Reverend Deacon Thomas Nassif of St. Anthony Church in La Jolla, Mr. John Samore, Jr., the Treasurer of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Los Angeles, and Dr. Scott Speier of St. Athanasius Church in Goleta.

I have a number of points I would like to cover, but what I am presenting right now ought only to be the beginning of the discussion. What I would like to share with you is my goals for this meeting. Unless we come up with specific goals and a reasonable plan for achieving them, they do no good. Action begins with thought, but thought in itself is not enough to achieve change. We must look forward and explore new ways of fulfilling the Gospel commandments of evangelization and Church administration in Southern California.

Many of you have honorably served your parishes for many years, and sacrificed a great deal of your time, talents and money for the sake of your communities. However, I have on occasion found that some people do not deeply understand my role and the role of my priests in the Diocese. And, because of this, they fail to properly fulfill their own roles in their own parishes.

According to Orthodox Ecclesiology, the Bishop is, above all else, a father to the people of his Diocese, clergy and laity alike. Being called to lead my flock, I deeply care for my priests, deacons and faithful in this Diocese. Having received the Apostolic succession in my consecration, my calling as a Bishop is:

1. To preside over the sacraments.
2. To preach the Gospel and teach the people the Orthodox Faith.

3. To oversee the administration of this diocese.

The letters of St. Ignatius are very clear that the community of the faithful gather around the Bishop, who acts as the shepherd in the place of Jesus Christ. The priests, in turn, are deputized to act on behalf of their hierarch. Just as the Bishop is the head of his Diocese, so the priests are the heads of their parishes. In the parish, the people are called to obey the priest, and so it should go without saying that Parish Councils are directly answerable to the priest. The priest is not an employee of the parish, and such thinking is totally unorthodox. Rather, the Parish Council supports the priest's pastoral ministry by handling tasks that would otherwise overburden him.

Therefore, if the Parish Council is an extension of the priest's pastoral ministry, it should share in the spirituality of the priesthood. Spirituality, that sense of connectedness to God, must be present in each parish council. For it is out of the council's relationship with God that it acts, and the closer it is to God, the more good things one will be able to do. So, you may now think that qualifying for Parish Council elections has merely to do with one's membership, but I will tell you that only a committed spiritual person is qualified to be on any Church council, and it is left to the Bishop to approve such people who do abide in the peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In my pastoral visitations, I travel in my Diocese to pray, to teach and to oversee the administration of my parishes, not through my own opinions or worldly knowledge, but through the spirituality of the Gospel. Personal opinions have no role in ministry of any kind. When we represent the Church, then we ought only say and do what the Church has asked us to do. All else is wasted energy and an opportunity for sin. It is when we lapse into personal opinions, even when we dress them in the language of the Church, that conflict will arise. It is also my duty to address such situations. I do not enjoy the times when I must correct, but, as the old American saying goes, 'The buck stops here.' I am accountable to God for the proper instruction of the people, and so I cannot ignore situations when any individual begins to stray from the pastoral policies of the Archdiocese and the teachings of the Church.

My goal is to fulfill the promise made to us by our Lord that all the parish council members should know His peace and love. We must be reconciled to one another, as God has reconciled us to Himself. I oversee all the Diocese's committees and organizations not to micromanage or control out of distrust, but to ensure the good order of our ministries and prevent conflicts from arising. I have to know what is going on at all levels, so I can properly support those who are faithful to the intentions of the Church and help guide those who have deviated back to the correct path. This is one of the reasons I have asked the clergy to give me regular reports of their ministry in the parishes. This way, we can be of one mind.

To do this, I have a very hectic travel schedule. It would be easier to sit in the Chancery and answer the phone all day, but I would prefer to drive 800 miles in less than two days or fly eight hours just to be with our clergy and faithful in person. I want to know all

of you as best I can, for through such personal contacts we can build up the bonds of love which petty conflicts cannot break.

And so, I urge all of you involved in the ministry of the Parish Council to remember your love for one another in our Lord, Jesus Christ. The Parish Council is not a secular job, it is a vision-driven ministry to the community. If you do not have Christian love, if you have no long-term vision of evangelization and education, if you cannot see your parish's calling to minister to the spiritually sick and suffering, then you will be slaves to petty arguments and pride. The Parish Councils are responsible not only for the upkeep of facilities, but ensuring the proper support of all the ministries of the parish. When I say a long-term vision, I mean 10 and 20 year plans, not just the next fiscal year.

Squabbling not only drains Parish Councils of energy, but it drives away the youth. Who wants to be on a parish council full of people who fight all the time? Young people want a sense of love and security from their parish communities, not constant dissention and rancor. If we are committed to our Lord, Jesus Christ, then we should be willing to set aside our differences and focus on our common goals. What should these goals be?

1. Our own spiritual growth.
2. Spreading the message of the Church out into our communities.
3. Increasing our budgetary resources by teaching people to tithe.
4. Acquiring land and resources to start schools in every parish.
5. Providing for the material support of Diocesan ministries, such as summer camping programs and deanery youth directors.

Some of you are probably still thinking about tithing. This is a very difficult subject for many, because we all know how difficult it seems to be to meet our basic necessities with our present pledging system. This is why we must emphasize the spiritual benefits of tithing. Ask the people, 'Do you think the Archdiocese would constantly send us letters asking for support if everyone tithed?' I wonder what our Lord would say to us if we told Him we couldn't tithe. Is He not the source of all of our blessings? My beloved, our parishes struggle with money issues because we are waiting for someone else to pay our share. I don't think anyone ought to think of himself or herself as worthy of serving on a parish council unless he or she is willing to lead from the front. And, that means personal tithing. If you are wondering about giving too much to the Church, you are probably not giving enough.

Once the people learn to tithe by the example of the parish council members, you will have enough money to buy the property you need to build schools for your children, so you don't have to leave them to languish in atheistic public schools. Even parochial schools run by other churches have become secularized. This is why so many parents are opting to home-school their children. I don't blame them, so long as it is done in a loving and nurturing way. I ask that parents who home school be given resources by their parish communities to help them train up their children. Parents should be

encouraged to cooperate with one another. Our priests should visit the families and help with religious education.

Most of our priests are overworked. This is another duty for parish communities, which the Northern California Deanery has spoken to me about. They would like me to tell you that we need more clergy in our parishes. There must be at least one fulltime clergyman for every 50 families, and this can be done if those families are taught to tithe. After all, a family making \$50,000 should be able to tithe \$5,000. Even half this amount from each family would double our parish budgets.

Tithing is not just for converts. It is not just for the rich. It is for all of us. It brings us peace, knowing that we have given to God what is rightfully His. It makes our parishes strong by providing the support it needs. It builds up our youth, who see our gratitude to God and are in turn grateful to their parents. Yes, if you really want your children to appreciate what you do for them, try being an example of gratitude.

If all our parishes become communities of tithing families, we will be able to expand our youth camping program to something on the scale of the Antiochian Village. We will also be able to start healthy monasteries, where we can begin to build up healthy spiritual communities to serve our people.

To be very blunt, we need to redouble our efforts in our spiritual life as a community. Many parents feel abandoned to secular concerns because parish communities have no spiritual vision, and remain prisoners to worldly thinking. Parishes should be safe havens and places where the weak can be uplifted by holy people. The question we must ask ourselves is this: am I a holy person? This does not mean that I think that I am perfect, but rather that I aspire to be in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Each of us must set an example of Christian love, first for our own sense of peace, and next for our children. I have declared this year to be the 'Year of the Youth' to draw attention to our children's needs. They need improved camping and youth ministries. They also need us to be better role models. Right now, many parents think that being a good parent means pushing them to do well in school and attain admission to a secular university. Schooling is good, but spirituality is the best. After all, a child committed to following our Lord, Jesus Christ, will find his or her way to the right university or right job. That is because he or she will find the place that God has appointed, and there can be no failure in this. The successful man or woman is not the richest or the most powerful, but the one who is content. We first must be content with ourselves, otherwise the child will despair that there is no happiness in this life.

Many of you realize that our children will leave home, and eventually settle into new parish communities as they attend school or move to find jobs. We must prepare them for such eventualities. This is one reason why I am also directing parishes to conform their liturgical practices to Archdiocese standards. There is more to Orthodoxy than the local practice, and certain parishes have made significant changes to their liturgical practices from what the Archdiocese has decided is to be our common ways. We may

like a local 'custom,' but we must think beyond ourselves and our personal desires. We must trust that God is directing us and will protect us. No one has ever died from conforming to the Archdiocese standards, so I really do not believe that the initial discomfort that change brings will have a lasting negative impact on any of our communities.

I thank you all for attending this very special gathering, and I hope that you all will find useful information in today's meetings. More importantly, I pray that you will appreciate and get to know one another. Build up your common love, and you will be blessed with peace and joy. Remember your calling to serve the Lord, and in it you will find your salvation. May God bless and keep you all in His Heavenly Kingdom.