



The Diocese of the West
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
Most Rev. Archbishop BENJAMIN of
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Address to 2023 Diocesan Assembly

Your Grace, Bishop Alexis, Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Monastics and Brothers and Sisters: welcome to our 2023 Diocesan Assembly!

I would note that we are pleased to have Archpriest Alexander Rentel, the chancellor of the OCA, with us today. Welcome Fr. Alexander!

“[Give] thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20).

Hearing the words of the Apostle, I give thanks for each of you and your dedication to the work of the Holy Spirit in our diocese. The image given to us in the Scriptures of the Church is that of a body, a body with different members, each unique having differing gifts, but each one necessary to the healthy working of the whole, Christ being the head of the Body who unites, directs, and governs them all. This is most definitely the case in our diocese, something I see at every Diocesan Assembly, Diocesan Council meeting, in every parish and monastery. Each one of us has a gift to offer Christ: the priests who make Him present as they serve the Liturgy, the deacons who assist them, subdeacons and readers, the parish council members who give counsel to the priests, the church school teachers who feed the souls of our children, the choir directors and singers, the ladies in the sisterhoods, the faithful who support our parishes, yes, and even the children who share their gifts of innocence and what Fr. Schmemmann call “holy noise” with us. The Body would suffer loss and, like our human bodies, be handicapped with the loss of any of its parts.

Speaking of suffering loss, we lost our former bishop, Bishop Tikhon, last January. I knew him for some fifty years and served as his deacon for about ten of those years and his auxiliary bishop for about five. He, like most of us, was not always

an easy person to understand. But he always had the good of our diocese and its parishes as the focus of his ministry. I would like to thank Archpriest Nazari Polataiko and the cathedral parish of Holy Virgin Mary in Los Angeles for their care for him in life and in death. And I would ask you all to stand and Deacon David Greenfield to intone Memory Eternal for him.

[Memory Eternal]

His passing and lack of preparation for it, reminded me to make preparations for my own death and funeral. And I would urge each of you to take just the logical steps to prepare your own wills and make a plan with your families. This is especially important where your families are not Orthodox. If you do not have a plan, your relatives will have the final say on what happens to you and your estate. And the monastics are also encouraged to make wills as the monasteries and abbots and abbesses have no special standing before the law in the event of the death of one of their community members. And let someone know where your will is and with whom you made preparations. It took us about 28 days to locate who Bishop Tikhon's next of kin were and how to contact them before we could even begin preparations to get his body let alone arrange for burial and services!

This past year has been eventful in other ways as well. I have made some 57 visits to parishes and missions other than Holy Trinity Cathedral, 13 visits to monasteries and 11 other trips on diocesan business, since the last Diocesan Assembly in Baltimore last year. Given there are only 52 weeks in a year, you can imagine how frequently I am on the road! When asked where I live, I think I could honestly say: "at the airport." But, visiting the parishes and monasteries of this wonderful diocese is the absolute best part of my job. I am sorry that I am not working 100% due to the advancing of my Parkinsons. It just takes more thought and attention to do what one would think are easy or automatic tasks, like simply walking across a room without falling. Nevertheless, I will continue to do my best to visit the parishes and monasteries of the diocese as long as I can. One of the things that makes my visits still possible is the help of my assistant, Subdeacon Leo Bulannikov, whose title is "schlepnik," as he schleps my luggage. He also does the driving. I have known him since he was a babe as I am his godfather. I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am for him.

You will see I am a bit more wobbly than before and that I have trouble making myself heard and understood. And I beg your indulgence and understanding. I have asked His Beatitude when I might retire. His response was that I would have to

wait my turn. But I would like you all to know that I am thinking about it and will do all I can to make sure there is as smooth a transition as possible.

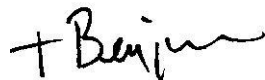
While on the subject of retirement and change, I think it important to share one of the most pressing burdens of diocesan administration with you: the human resources of the diocese, that is the retirement and transfer of clergy. There are some clergy who would like to retire and there are some who should. And there is the additional complication of clergy illness and death which present more urgent problems. For example, many of you are aware of the illness of our brother, Archpriest Anthony Karbo, who cannot be with us today due to the ravages of cancer. We are fortunate in having his son-in-law, Priest Anthony Machnee, in place to help him. But his community is very large, one of the largest in the diocese, and it is almost impossible for one priest to deal with the needs of that parish by himself, especially in the distribution of communion. So, we really need someone else to help there. But there is really no one available right now.

As I mentioned, there are clergy, like myself, who would like to retire or move for other reasons, but cannot because there is no one to replace them. And when one priest moves, for whatever reason, another opening occurs in the parish from which his replacement comes. It is like a huge game of musical chairs, but with priests and their families. One would like to be able to grant every request, but as you can imagine, it is often not possible. This all points to a larger problem in the entire OCA of clergy vocations. There are more openings than there are available clergy. We are fortunate in that we have a number of men in seminary, in the wings, as it were. And I have to tell you that I am very jealously waiting for the return of each of them. Ideally, we would like to give them an opportunity to spend some time as an intern, but that is not always possible. This clergy shortage is not quite as critical here as it is elsewhere, but it will make the establishment of more missions harder to bless, as other parishes and missions experience the need for clergy. Of course, one solution to this growing problem is new vocations. So I would encourage each of you, both clergy and lay, to prayerfully encourage young men and families to consider priestly vocations.

I don't need to tell you the world we live in is in bad shape. There are several places of concern at present, three of them that come to mind involve our Orthodox brethren. There is a continuing brutal civil war in Ethiopia and Eritrea. It has impacted the home for the elderly that we have supported in Tigray. And it is impossible to transfer funds to support the work there. And like most civil wars, it is especially brutal. There is a shameful war in Ukraine. I have asked that three petitions be added to the Augmented Litany at the Divine Liturgy as well as

Vespers and Matins. I have noticed these petitions have been dropped in some parishes and would ask that you not omit them. This war in particular has affected the entire Orthodox Church all over the world and also reflects the continuing strain in relations between the Russian Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The fact the OCA has a representation church in Moscow is a bit of a temptation for some. In fact, one of our parishes asked a resolution from our diocesan assembly be presented to the Metropolitan and Holy Synod that would request the closure of our representation church and the withdrawal of our priest there in protest of the Russian Church's support of this fratricidal war. I have not blessed this request but would assure you all His Beatitude and the Synod are very much aware of the situation. Finally, there is the recent war in Gaza and the Middle East that threatens to expand and involve the whole Middle East. One of our parishioners, in fact one of our auditors, Maha Adranly from St. Christina in Fremont, CA received news that her cousin and his wife were pulled from the rubble of the St. Porphyrios Church in Gaza on Friday morning following an Israeli bombing. We grieve with her for her loss and for the thousands of innocent civilians who are caught up in the violence there, Ethiopia, and Ukraine. As Fr. Luke Uhl so eloquently reminded us in his recent letter, God loves every human being regardless.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to those who are so helpful to me in my work: our very capable chancellor, Archpriest Kirill Sokolov, who has been very helpful in taking some of the burden of administration from off my shoulders, keeping track of what I have done and have yet to do; our treasurer, Matushka Theodora Blom, who so capably manages our finances and advises the parish treasurers; and Priest Andrew Smith who takes care of the day to day operation of my office. I would also be remiss if I did not mention the members of the diocesan council who share their gifts and knowledge with me. And last but not least the priests and deacons who care for the various and diverse parishes and missions of our diocese, making it the best in the Orthodox Church in America.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Benjamin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Benjamin
Archbishop of San Francisco and the West