

**Report of the Chancellor of the Diocese of the West
To the 2023 Diocesan Assembly of the Diocese of the West
St. Seraphim Cathedral, Santa Rosa, California
October 25, 2023**

Your Eminence, Archbishop BENJAMIN,

Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Honorable Deacons, Venerable Monastics, Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

GLORY TO JESUS CHRIST!

In the Gospel reading assigned for today, the Lord Jesus says: “If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?” (Luke 11:11-12).

For whatever reason, I’ve been mulling over these words for the last few weeks, long before I knew this was today’s reading, especially that first line, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone?”

Now, *why* I have been thinking about that verse is a more difficult question, probably without an answer. Maybe it has something to do with my first-born going off to college; a milestone that is hitting me *hard* with the reality that I’m a father, not a recent college grad myself. But the more I reflect on this saying of the Lord, the more I realize that one of our experiences in the Diocese, now, in 2023, is that a lot is asked of us, individually and as the Church. It can be anxiety-inducing to realize that I might not be – on my own or as a parish or as a diocese – able to give everyone the bread or the fish or the egg that is asked of us.

We have 62 parishes and missions in Montana, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Washington, Oregon, California, and, yes, Hawaii. That is not including eight monastic habitations. Each of these places needs at least one priest not to mention talented singers, deacons, benefactors,

professionals and tradespeople of all kinds... we have a lot to ask God for.

And in fact, we do need to keep *asking* and not become complacent with the way things are or with human limitations. St. John Chrysostom, writing about this passage, challenges us that if we *receive not, your asking a stone is the cause of your not receiving*. St. John doesn't stop there. He continues that "even though you are a son, this is not enough for you to receive... [if] you ask for what is not profitable."¹

So, let's keep asking God for more!

I'm grateful to God for the establishment by His Eminence this year of St. Sophia Mission in Aberdeen, Washington and St. Sophrony of Essex Mission in Sequim, Washington. Certainly, if we had more priests, and resources, we have enough interest and an expansive enough geography to establish many more outposts of light. Yet we have to be responsible stewards of what we do have. And, we need to keep asking God for more spiritual gifts like more vocations.

I can't speak of the administration of the Diocese of the West without extending the gratitude of the whole Diocese to our Archpastor, His Eminence, Archbishop Benjamin, who bears the responsibility before the altar of the Most High God for the oversight of this flock. We ask God for more health and strength for our Archbishop. Someone counted recently that His Eminence travelled 81 times on church business since the last Assembly. To use a technical term, that is really *something else*. His Eminence has been transparent about his health challenges and that in itself is a great blessing for all of us; that we don't have to tiptoe awkwardly around topics of transition or retirement or the searching out of appropriate episcopal candidates for the future is one of the immense blessings of being part of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church in America. His Eminence speaks freely with his staff, with his deans, with the Diocesan Council, and as we just heard,

¹ St. John Chrysostom, Homily 23 on Matthew. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200123.htm>

with the whole diocese. The immense size of our diocese and His Eminence's workload in this time is re-teaching us how to work with deans and chancellors to try to share the burden. But, of course, the grace of the ordination to the episcopate falls on His Eminence alone at this time and with that the ultimate responsibility for the 70 parishes, missions, and monasteries of the Diocese. Your Eminence, thank you for persevering, and we ask God for every good thing for you as you seek everything good for us.

In addition to the Very Reverend District Deans, I would like to offer my humble appreciation to Father Andrew Smith, who does so much to keep the Diocese moving, and to Matushka Theodora Blom, our devoted Treasurer.

Fr. Stephen Osburn faithfully maintains our web site and social media. Friends, every year Fr. John Dresko stands up and asks us to help feed our communication media. Please, we have a *good story* to tell about what Christ is doing with us and in us and through us. Please tell that story on your own parish communication channels and also on the Diocesan site. I have tried with mixed success to communicate more on our web site with a "Chancellor's Corner" blog. I hope it is helpful in detailing some of my own travels. Some of my travel and work for the Diocese is more in the problem-solving vein and isn't interesting to talk about or share. But I am so grateful to God every time I get to see people around this vast Diocese. And I'm incredibly appreciative to my own cathedral parish for letting me get away for these duties.

Perhaps in the spirit of asking, we have applied for a large grant from an outside philanthropic organization related to parish growth and health. We will hear the results of that application in the coming weeks, I suspect. We are working hard on investigating additional pathways for the calling of qualified men to be priests. His Eminence also continues to be in close touch with our seminarians and visits St. Tikhon's and St. Vladimir's yearly. In addition, Fr. Matthew Tate and I are visiting our two Seminaries next week to meet with our seminarians and consider

with them and their families what might be possible for future assignments, if God wills.

As His Eminence noted in his address, we already have a priest shortage. In 2020, OCA.Org published data related to this showing that 30% of all priests serving in the OCA (church-wide) are already post-retirement age.² The “retired” priests of our Diocese are pivotal in having the full celebration of the Divine Liturgy. And we have many actively working clergy that are post-retirement age. Brothers and Sisters, the most stressful task I have every day is explaining to clergy who wish to retire that “we’re working on it” and to parishes that are hoping for a priest that “we’re working on it.” The *good news* is that many of our parishes are responsibly fulfilling the mandates of the Clergy Compensation Guidelines. This gives me great hope that if young or even not-so-young men prepare for priesthood, there will be places for them and their families after their time of study. But something has to give; we have to be really open to the Holy Spirit’s guidance so that we can courageously and creatively face this need.

Relatedly, the work of the Retired Clergy fellowship is a real support. The Clergy Wives Ministry is making a real impact. You all know by now, I hope, that I think our church camps and other youth and education ministries are key (and the most fun for me, personally). I would like to remind everyone that His Eminence has stated in the past that the normal expectation is that all of our full-time clergy participate in the appropriate regional summer camp as volunteers. And now I run the very real risk that I’ve neglected to note a ministry that is pivotal and dear to my heart. So, in advance, please forgive me if I have.

As this very short Diocesan Assembly unfolds, I must of course thank Fr. Lawrence Margitich and the whole team here at Protection Parish / St. Seraphim Cathedral. I’m very much looking forward to hearing from His Grace, Bishop Alexei especially this afternoon and from the Chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, Archpriest Alexander Rentel. This afternoon, we have two all-too-brief opportunities to talk

² <https://www.oca.org/news/headline-news/vocation-as-a-church-wide-endeavor>

with one another about the challenges and opportunities I've introduced. First, within our own deanery groups; and, second, in a format inspired by our Assembly a few years ago in Colorado Springs where we've assigned ourselves to randomly-generated groups so that we can hear from and talk with brothers and sisters from across this Diocese.

We have a lot to do. If your parish is anything like mine, you're getting new interest and hopefully catechumens and Orthodox Christians turning to active Church life all the time. Let's be ready to offer them the True Bread. Let's do what we can every day and especially ourselves ask the Lord to give us our daily, necessary, supersubstantial Bread. If we ask for good gifts, we will receive, and we can say this confidently, because we have the Lord's words: "how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Archpriest Kirill Sokolov".

Archpriest Kirill Sokolov
Chancellor, Diocese of the West
Orthodox Church in America