

My Dear Clergy and faithful,

Glory be to Jesus Christ!

We gather in Assembly to discuss the life of the Diocese and to thank Almighty God for His guidance in all we do in His Name. I am grateful to Him for all that He has given me and for each of you and for all the faithful on this God protected territory. When I say all the faithful on this territory I am including all Orthodox Christians. Alaska is the only place in America where Orthodox Christianity is the largest Christian Faith. It is sad that other Orthodox Churches think they have something more to offer than what was handed to us by the early missionaries, including St. Herman the first saint of America and St. Juvenaly the first martyr. This is where Orthodox administrative unity could shine and the beginnings of canonical order could set an example to our faithful and to one another. There is no need for any other Church in Alaska other than the one planted here 200 years ago! My dear Faithful we have a message to proclaim and we will proclaim it! Our Diocese today has 97 official parishes, over 100 altars and four new missions to be given patrons very shortly. Our mission activity has never died, slowed at times but it is now revitalized with new energy.

Our St. Herman Seminary is alive and well. Our Dean, the Archpriest Chad Hatfield, the faculty and students are all making a difference on Kodiak Island, a difference that will extend to all of Alaska and beyond. Our Board of Trustees just met yesterday to plan and sacrifice of their personal lives and resources to make this living organism even stronger. Can you imagine that we have to rent apartment space away from our campus because we have so many students with families? That's a nice problem.

Yesterday, I made known my proposal to the St. Herman Trustees asking their opinion on bestowing an honor to the Protopresbyter Joseph Kreta. As you all know he was the person who initiated the Seminary first in Kenai and then in Kodiak and the first dean. The support was unanimous and joyful. This writing will be the first announcement that I will bestow the title Dean Emeritus on the Protopresbyter Joseph Kreta. God willing he and his Matushka will make a trip here so that this may properly be done.

His Eminence, Archbishop GREGORY was just released from the hospital but is doing well especially for someone whose life had been filled with trials and tribulation. We extend our greetings to him.

The Loyal Christian Benevolent Association (LCBA), the mother of the OSA, Orthodox Society of America who insures our clergy and families, on the occasion of His Beatitude's 40th Anniversary of ordination to the Holy Priesthood this last month has committed to provide life insurance to each of the students at our three seminaries, their spouses and children as long as they are enrolled. This is a \$2,500,000.00 gesture of sacrifice and love for the Church.

Outreach Alaska under the most capable direction of Mary Ann Khoury provides for stipends to our students each month of the year while they are enrolled in seminary. OA does much work in telling the story of our life here and helps to encourage others to participate in this vision.
We welcome Mary Ann Khoury!

Our St. Yakov Center in Soldotna has just held its first retreat for men. This center began under the leadership and direction of Varvara Larson. Some of you may recall her motor home burning on the Cathedral grounds on Pascha two years ago. It was by the Grace of God and the cries of Benny her faithful dog that she survived. This mission to reach out to others and to our own people by bringing Holy Orthodoxy to the top of the lamp stand is what each of us needs to do.

ROSSIA, the nonprofit corporation that we established two years ago, Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska, is busy with the renovation of two churches in our Diocese. St. Nicholas Church in Juneau and St. Sergius of Radonezh in Chuathbaluk. Most of the members of this organization are non-Orthodox but feel that our Church and presence here in Alaska is so profound that they are willing to work in rebuilding and renovating our sacred sites.

We are struggling to open our Museum and religious supply store in downtown Anchorage. Finally, after a very long process requesting a grant from the Rasmuson Foundation for items in the coffee shop and museum, we are almost there and preparing to open. This facility will give us presence in the downtown area to show some of our history and treasures in the museum and to supply our clergy and parishes with quality goods from Russia.

It is wonderful to see the photos of Ss. Sergius and Herman of Valaam Church on Spruce Island. The Church, which was built to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries from Russia in 1794, has been restored to her original beauty, a real treasure over the grave of St. Herman. The funds for this rehabilitation and most of the work was done by faithful Orthodox who came to Alaska to help us. Today there are many Churches, including St. Innocent Cathedral in which we gather, that are being renovated, refurbished and rebuilt. Our Churches need to be the most beautiful places in the villages and cities in which we live.

Last Year the Spirit of Orthodox Choir came to Alaska for the St. Herman Pilgrimage. Their trip was so moving that they have begun fundraising efforts to continue the work of the first missionaries. Just this last week I received the new CD, entitled Spirit of Orthodoxy in Alaska. You will all have the opportunity to purchase the CD's, for yourselves and for gifts. The proceeds from this sale will

go to the continued work on Spruce Island at Monks Lagoon. The choir will return here in 2006 during Bright Week.

2005 is the 35th Anniversary of the canonization of St. Herman and the 35th Anniversary of the granting of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America. We must never lose sight of these gifts. The right to rule our Church here in America without any interference from any other churches abroad and the canonization of America's first saint go hand in hand. In order for us to really appreciate what has been given we must never forget our first theme; PFA, Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

Our public prayer life must reflect heaven on earth. The Churches where this prayer takes place needs to give the same impression as given to those early emissaries who were sent from Kiev to Constantinople who in the magnificence of the temple of Hagia Sophia said that they didn't know if they were in heaven or on earth.

Our very expression of prayer, standing attentively facing east, hearing music that is pleasant to the ears, smelling incense as it rises as our prayers go heavenward expresses our own desire to become closer to Almighty God – all of these things are part of this journey on earth.

Fasting was almost non existent a few years ago and today we see the faithful struggling to meet the standards of the church as She prescribes -- not as man has modified. Our examples must be clear to one another and obvious as we proclaim our very Orthodoxy to others who are asked to respect what we practice. It is not ours to modify or to comply with the world, rather, by our example to convince the world to become Orthodox.

The responsibility of every Orthodox Christian is to give alms. Tithing is in the Scripture and mandated as we return to God only a small portion of that which He gives to us abundantly. This tithing must become the mainstay of our parishes, our Diocese and our Church. Everyone is expected to return the first portion, his tithe, his tenth of all that he receives, to God. Our 3D or Distinguished Diocesan Donor program has helped us but it has not become what it could and should be. Participate in this program to finance the workings of our Church. Each person is called to give one tenth to his parish, each parish is called to give one tenth to the Diocese and the Diocese is called to give one tenth to our Church. We are keeping the latter but the other two parts need work and only by prayer and fasting can almsgiving be the compliment of what He blesses us to do.

Recently, we have begun the celebration of two Pilgrimages in the summer. Our main celebration on the Feast of St. Herman in Kodiak, August 9 and on the Feast of Ss. Sergius and Herman of Valaam on July 11.

Next year these celebrations will be even more splendid. God willing, the consecration of the newly renovated Ss. Sergius and Herman of Valaam Church, which was built over the grave of St. Herman, will take place on July 11. Our Holy Synod and the entire Episcopate of the Orthodox Church in America is planning to attend the 35th Anniversary this next summer in August.

This last June I was asked to participate in the return of the Tikhvin Mother of God Icon. This wonderworking icon was in America for as many years as I am old. In 1995 in Chicago at the All American Council I took a bus tour of some 'holy sites' in the city. We stopped at our Holy Trinity Cathedral and the magnificent wonder-working icon was there for us to venerate and to pray before. The numbers of faithful in Moscow alone exceeded 250,000 for the day the icon was taken in a three kilometer walking procession to the Kazan Cathedral to prepare for the journey to St. Petersburg and eventually to the Tikhvin Monastery. Even the days before in Latvia there were hundreds of thousands who came to venerate and pray before this icon. I am not going to talk about the history as we have all been given that many times this last year. What came to mind was a request by a priest in Tarzana, California, the Archpriest Nicholas Bolderoff a couple years ago. He asked if I would ever consider bringing the Sitka Mother of God Icon on a pilgrimage to the lower forty-eight. The icon was taken on pilgrimage two times in the past by His Eminence Archbishop GREGORY, once in the 1970's and the last time in the 1980's. This very icon was the first icon at St. Tikhon's Monastery to initiate the five year preparation for the 100th anniversary celebration of the founding of the monastery next year. It was my first pilgrimage at St. Tikhon's a couple weeks after my consecration and just prior to my coming to Alaska.

This journey inspired me to put together a pilgrimage that would begin on September 7, 2005 from Sitka and travel to approximately twenty-seven cities and end at the Holy Synod in October; a pilgrimage of forty days. This proposal was presented to the Holy Synod two weeks ago and the Hierarchs unanimously supported this plan but it has now gotten to be a two month journey with forty parishes, monasteries and missions. Thanks to the Protopresbyter Rodion Kondratich and his capable staff the plans for this pilgrimage are already coming together. Two clergy will travel with the icon for a period of seven to ten days and then rotate serving Akathists, talking about the icon and participating in local worship. Before this pilgrimage can take place anywhere outside my heart tells me that she must travel inside the territory which she protects. Therefore, the Sitka Mother of God, Wonderworking Icon will be brought to Anchorage sometime early next year to begin a journey in our own diocese. God willing we will have the icon in every region for the faithful to make pilgrimage and to venerate this treasure from Almighty God!

Next year is the All American Council to be held in Toronto, Canada, July 16 to 22 and we are called to participate as we have in the past. Budgets must be prepared in every parish and every deanery to make sure that we are

represented in this gathering of the clergy and faithful which occurs only every three years.

One of our agenda items at this Assembly is the adoption of the Diocesan Bylaws. Much work has gone into this and they are ready for discussion and adoption if that is the will of this Assembly. Prayerfully consider what we are doing for the good order of the Church.

This last August our Diocesan Council met and prepared a resolution that I presented to the Holy Synod. It is for the addition of a vicar or auxiliary bishop for this great land. The territory is large and the demands are great and the time has come. You know there was a period when Alaska had two auxiliary bishops? The process for this has begun with the approval of the Holy Synod.

Very soon we will have the sermons of St. Bishop NICHOLAI of Zhicha for distribution in all of our parishes. These sermons have been translated by a priest friend of mine and our hope is to send them out this coming year before the Feast of the Annunciation. These sermons will be read in all the parishes where there are no priests. The clergy may use the sermons for materials on which to preach and in some instances they can also be read. St. Nicholai was a brilliant preacher and hierarch of the Serbian Church. He was the rector of our St. Tikhon Seminary in South Canaan where he also died. We know that he was jailed during the Second World War in one of the German Nazi camps, Dachau, and not allowed to return to his diocese of Zhicha but found solace in our own church. What a tribute to this Theologian, preacher and sufferer in Christ! These sermons will be prepared and distributed for every Sunday and some major Holy Days.

This coming week our clergy, seminarians and leaders in our diocese will participate in a conference that is being sponsored by the South Central Foundation, the largest health care provider in Alaska. This initiative is called the Family Wellness Warrior Initiative and is designed to help leaders help their people. Our participation was asked over a year ago. I looked at the materials and discussed some of them with others and saw that what is being offered is from a Protestant perspective.

It could only work if all the participants are Orthodox Christians and only if we have hands on as to what is proper Orthodox practice and belief. I am hopeful that this time together will bring new efforts in healing and a new initiative in wellness based on Jesus Christ in our villages.

In closing, I want to thank each of you for making the effort and sacrificing to be here. We must be responsible and faithful to Holy Orthodoxy. Imagine what can be accomplished just by each of us being a better example when we leave and return to our homes. May we do as God expects and may He bless us.

AMEN