

## Bringing the Church Into the Home

The theme of this year's Clergy-Laity Congress was *"Building Communities of Faith and Love: Orthodox Parishes in Worship and Ministry."* After witnessing Archbishop Demetrios, the Metropolitans, the priests and the lay delegates at the Clergy-Laity Congress, anyone doubtful of our leadership should have experienced a united spirit of deep concern to do the very best for the future of the Orthodox Church.

Our focus at Assumption will continue to be on the ministries we are doing and to develop new ones that address the concerns of the family. In his key note address, Archbishop Demetrios declared the next two years to be dedicated to strengthening ministries to the family. The Archbishop has begun a new ministry called, "The Center for the Care for the Family," which is working to develop a plan for our communities. *"We are going to dedicate the next year to the family, with an elaborate number of specific measures and happenings. But the care for the family should constitute a permanent activity for the Parish, and toward that end we will try to assist our communities by offering all possible means. The goal is to make the families Churches at home, kat' oikon ekklesian (Romans 16:5) (Archbishop Demetrios)."*

He also reminded us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the absolute governing regulations for our Church and everything else is only commentary and secondary to our day-to-day challenge of living faithfully in Christ.

*"After all, the ultimate, absolute and unchanging Charter and Regulations for us is the Gospel of Jesus Christ our God and Lord. All the rest is commentary. It is about time now to engage fully in the real work demanded by the Gospel (Archbishop Demetrios)."* Where there is trust and respect, people can disagree and yet remain united in a spirit of serving the same Lord. People disagreed but were not being disagreeable. Having open discussions and allowing for the free exchange of ideas is educational and allows for creative solutions to come forward in order for the best decisions to be made. Many times I witnessed such dynamism and creativity as part of the process of a Clergy-Laity Congress especially as a member of the administration committee.

At other times, the process strained our sensibilities to the limit. One such moment occurred at the plenary session. I share this in the hope that you may have a glimpse at the dynamics and better understand how the process may not be perfect but trust that those who were at the Congress acted in the best interests of our future. I also pray that the church may learn from these experiences in order to do better in the future.

I was a member of the Administration Committee (353 members in all) which dealt with the new proposed Regulations over a three-day period. A daunting task which heard motions and allowed discussion on each article of the 40 pages of regulations; remarkably, 98% of the material was discussed and agreed upon. I commend the chairman of this committee for allowing everyone to speak and address concerns.

There was unfinished business which was allowed to be addressed not in the small Administration Committee (353 members) but at the plenary session which was attended by at least 750 people. At this session, a vote took place to delete three sub-sections from the Regulations and the situation became very frustrating because there was confusion as to what was being voted upon and its implications.

At issue was an article which required each parish to have a line item in their budget for the Archdiocesan Commitment which is calculated at 15% of the parish's gross income. Three sub-sections followed: "A, B, & C" which clarified how to make the calculation. "A" included all operating revenue, stewardship, candles, tray and other donations. "B" included the net income from festivals used for operating expenses. "C" excluded building funds and endowments. Now the 15% calculation was previously amended at the Administration Committee so that an unspecified percentage was to be determined by each Clergy-Laity Congress based upon the proposed national budget. Some years it could be 5%, other years it could be 18%. If I understood correctly, this was not being amended at the plenary session. There was a motion to only delete "A, B and C." Many thought having point "B," festival income being subject to the calculation as beneficial to the Archdiocese. The other half, I felt, thought that there was a motion to go back to the way it was done previously under the old regulations. Regardless of the outcome, my impression was that the hierarchy, the clergy and laity were united in wanting to do what was best for a financially strong Archdiocese even though looking at the vote (220 for and 200 against) one might conclude the Assembly was divided. This was not the case!

At the Grand Banquet, Metropolitan Philip the head of the Antiochian Archdiocese addressed the Congress and spoke about their "autonomy" or "Self-Ruled Archdiocese." The following day at the clergy breakfast, Archbishop Demetrios clarified the use of the term "autonomy." When the Antiochians elect a new bishop, the Patriarch of Antioch sends three Metropolitans and they meet with the Eparchial Synod of local bishops and elect a new bishop. This is more how our Archdiocese functioned under the old 1977 Charter. Our new Charter states that our Eparchial Synod in America in consultation with the Archdiocesan Council proposes and votes upon three names to be elected as a new Metropolitan. The Patriarch simply selects and declares the one with the highest votes as our next Metropolitan. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has a high degree of independence when it comes to electing future Metropolitans which have the biggest impact upon our local communities.

This Clergy-Laity congress offered excellent workshops which our President Michele Genetos attended. Please read her report in this Oasis. St. Basil the Great taught that we should be like bees who go from flower to flower taking what is good from each. A Congress can be a fruitful flower if one attends it with a positive desire to take what is good back to benefit the local parish. The next Congress will take place in Nashville, Tennessee in 2006.

The future of the Greek Orthodox Church in America is bright and open to numerous possibilities. I have returned inspired to focus my efforts at creating ministries that better serve our families and addressing the challenges facing them. I only ask that families make room for Church activities for their children. Please keep this in mind when signing them up for activities outside the church.

New opportunities are on the horizon for evangelism at our parish. It is time to make the SpiritFest a greater event for our community and reaching out to the surrounding neighbors. There are new tools that will help us utilizing the low cost of the internet to actually continue the radio ministry and make it more available to hundreds of thousands of people. The parish council shares this vision for our future and is dedicated to move in this direction.

*"A Community of Faith and Love, a Parish in Worship and Ministry, cannot be built without having a steady experience of outreach, of evangelism directed lovingly towards those outside the Church. . . It is the parish that has the possibility to reach out to the non-connected with the Church. There are thousands of people, nominally Greek Orthodox, who have been disconnected, who have been lost in the turmoil of modern life, who might have been disappointed. . .Our communities must look for them, extend a helping hand, bring them to the life-giving embrace of the Church of Christ. This is the way we build communities of ministry (Archbishop Demetrios)."*

+ Fr. Andrew