

## **State of the Church Address: December 7, 1997**

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, cling to what is good; be devoted to one another in brotherly love; honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:9-16).

St. Paul illustrates the character of a genuine Christian community. Knowing one's identity is key in following and fulfilling the will of God. Assumption Church is not a country club, a social organization, or an ethnic ghetto. We are the body of Christ, and members of one another. We are called with a holy calling to manifest Christ first within and then to bear witness to Him in the world.

Our community shows the signs of being the Church and actualizing our true calling. In reflecting upon events and accomplishments of 1997, St. Paul's words must be found to be living in our community, or we have failed to be the Church. In attempting to actualize a Christian calling, our community bears the marks of success. Acquiring the marks of Christian character must always be placed above all else.

"Let love be genuine . . . share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

When the Parish Council assembled the 1997 budget, \$2,600 was allocated for helping those in need. The "Good Samaritan Fund" was created. The consequences of having this fund have proven a blessing in many diverse ways.

A pregnant mother contacted our Church seeking financial help. Having the good Samaritan fund enabled the Church not to turn her away. This opened a door for the Church to inquire and seek to help in the best way possible. In this case, the mother was seeking money for an abortion. She was refused the money and was counseled to deliver the child. This summer she gave birth to a baby boy.

In another case, emergency aid was given to a struggling couple. This again opened a door and they were counseled to seek help for their marriage. They came back recently to the Church and said that their marriage was saved and were thankful that our Church was there when no other help was to be found.

During the months when the Fund wasn't being used, the Parish Council decided to help a Mission Church in Redding, California. At the end of each month, they sent the unused funds to that church. Liturgy books were also sent, which enabled everyone to participate in worship. The Church was enabled to buy needed outreach materials. Fr. Gregory Jensen, the priest of Redding wrote the following:

"By the grace of and with your parish's assistance we are now able to purchase many of the outreach materials that are so desperately needed here. . . Above all it is through your prayers and example of evangelical generosity that you have most encouraged and helped us."

In addition to the good Samaritan Fund, our community has practiced Christian love on many occasions. Following the Festival of 1997, the Parish Council and the General Assembly approved the allocation of \$2,300 for Orthodox Charities: \$1,000 went to the Diocesan Student Aid endowment Fund for Seminarians, \$1,000 went to the St. Innocent Orphanage of Project Mexico, and the balance went to a local Outreach Center. A special collection for the Whole Life Foundation totaled \$375, and this year's Thanksgiving collection for Vista Del Camino raised over \$700. On the Feast Day Vespers of our Church, we offered hospitality to over two hundred visitors who came to celebrate with us.

These accomplishments and the manner in which parishioners have shown support reflect a Christian spirit. During 1997, twenty-one weeks of Studies in Orthodoxy Seminars were offered. The seminars were well attended and provided a place for non-members and inquirers to be exposed to the Faith of Orthodoxy. A seven week series on Great Lent was offered from March 4 to April 22. From June 19 - July 31, there was a seven week series on the Orthodox Faith, and from September 7- Oct. 29, a seven week study of the book of Genesis.

God is blessed with the reception of three converts. Hopefully, more parishioners will make it a priority to learn about their faith and to be inspired to strengthen their relationship with Christ and His Church. If you have not yet attended a seminar, I urge you to participate!

Taking advantage of every opportunity to educate and edify ourselves is especially important because we have a sacred responsibility to our children to nurture their faith and love for God.

Through the efforts of a very dedicated Sunday School Staff and volunteers, our children are growing in faith. Over one hundred students have enrolled in Sunday School. The responses they give during the children's sermon reflect the lessons they learned last year when the focus of the curriculum was on prayer and praying. This year they are being introduced to the sacred scriptures.

In April the youth participated in a Lenten retreat at McDowell Mountain Park. In July, they attended Vacation Bible School at Assumption, which culminated in an inspiring visit to the St. Anthony Monastery. Thanks to the many volunteers, the children are growing in faith.

Our zeal for the Lord has been seen in the support for Evangelism. The Parish Council launched "Come Receive the Light," the first Greek Orthodox radio program of the valley. On Mother's Day, May 11, the first program was aired. Today, six months later, twenty six programs have been broadcast highlighting the Orthodox faith, educating Orthodox faithful, and opening a door to outsiders. The program is sponsored by two parishioner-owned businesses, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, various individuals, and Stewardship. In total, the program costs yearly \$11,180.00; 73% or \$8,200 is being provided for in the form of sponsorships. This show of support is another testimony to our zeal for the Lord .

Zeal for Christ must also seek to fulfill the missionary imperative of the Church. This year the formation of Orthodox Christian Outreach Ministries (O.C.O.M.) was accomplished. O.C.O.M. exists to promote outreach opportunities for all Orthodox Christians in the greater Phoenix area. The Whole Life Foundation, the Christmas drive, and the Agape Canister Program are just a few of the ministries in which O.C.O.M. is participation. Finally, zeal for our Lord finds its expression in our gifts to Him in the form of our Stewardship offerings and pledges. Pledges increased by 9% from 1996 to 1997. This is positive, however, we are still lagging behind in comparison to other Christian traditions. The average pledge at Assumption is \$549. The average pledge in other Christian Churches is \$1,500 per year. Half of the Stewards give twenty percent of the total. As a group, this translates into three dollars a week. A third of the Stewards give a third of the total. As a group, this translates into sixteen dollars per week. Twenty percent of the Stewards give half of the total. This translates into twenty nine dollars per week. This is an average of \$1,500 per year. The highest Steward gives sixty-seven dollars per week.

We need to learn from this last group how to give in a sacrificial manner! From twenty nine dollars to sixty seven dollars per week this is sacrificial giving. Anything less than an offering that truly comes in the form of a sacrifice does not demonstrate love for God, the Church, or the Orthodox Tradition. I challenge everyone to pledge for 1998 sacrificially and to demonstrate how much God and His Church are loved.

"Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation be constant in prayer."

I have chosen this passage to characterize the process of building a Church. On Sunday, February 23, 1997, the General Assembly rejoiced with hope and joy in the approving of a preliminary budget of 1.8 million dollars to proceed with the future building project. In March, the community was invited to participate in Focus Group Workshops. Vital input was received in the design of each of the following specific areas: the Church, Education Facility, and Administration buildings. By June 21, at Taverna Night, the design of the future Church and facilities was presented and received with great enthusiasm.

Through a great deal of research, fact finding, and discussion, the Parish Council, upon the recommendations of the Building Committee, and Fund Raising Committee have

secured Church Fund Raising Services Inc., to manage the Building Fund Campaign. Early in 1998, we can expect the taking of pledges for our future Church. We are indebted to the committee members who have faithfully given of their time, expertise, and talent and have followed through to the end.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." "When joy is shared it is doubled, when sorrow is shared it is cut in half" (Bishop Gerasimos).

We have rejoiced in the Weddings of our community. Also, we have rejoiced in the Baptisms of our community.

As a community, we have prayed memorial services for departed members of our spiritual family and share in the sorrow of their absence. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love."

This year we have come together in fellowship to celebrate our community life. We gathered on Palm Sunday, Pascha Mid-night, and on Agape Sunday to celebrate as a community. In June, a successful Taverna Night was enjoyed by over 175 people. On May 17, over 40 golfers attended the second annual Golf Tournament at Scottsdale Country Club and raised over \$1,300. In August, we gathered once again for a Feast Day Dinner Celebration that was extraordinary. All of these events were made possible by parishioners' giving of their time and talent to serve the Church.

How our community receives newcomers expresses our devotion towards one another. Assumption is enriched with the addition of ten new families. Some of them have come from other parts of the country while others are from Arizona. It is a testimony to the presence of brotherly love when they become active and feel welcomed. Our future is a bright one; many new people have stepped forward in answering God's call to serve in his Church. As we enter into 1998, let us thank God for enabling and inspiring us to accomplish His will, and let us pray that we may remain faithful to His will as we move forward.

+Rev. Andrew J. Barakos