

Rector's Informational Report
Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral General Parish Meeting.
Los Angeles, CA
2020

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

By God's grace, I again have the great joy of presenting you with my annual report of activities as the Rector of Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles, California, for the year 2020.

2020 was my fifth full year as Rector of Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles and it was by far the most difficult to date.

I would like to thank all of you again for your prayers for me and my family, as well as your tireless assistance and support in our mission. First of all, I'd like to thank all our Parish Council members. This year, the Council had to make a lot of difficult decisions, and though some members were not visible due to pandemic restrictions, their assistance and counsel was most valuable. It is a great joy to work with all of you, and your help to everyone in this God-beloved parish community is a great blessing. Thank you for all you have done this past year. We will be counting on your much appreciated help, competent assistance, and firm support in your respective positions in the coming year as well.

Having said that, I would like to present you a summary of my activities in the year 2020.

Liturgical Celebrations, Pastoral Visits and Meetings:

From 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020, I was blessed to celebrate the following Divine services: approximately 100 Divine Liturgies, 64 Vigils, 17 Vespers, 9 Matins, 23 Baptisms, 2 Holy Matrimones, 24 Funerals, 149 Panihidas, 43 Akathists, 118 Molebens, 5 Canons and many other services. At the same time, I visited and had numerous meetings with our parishioners: about 309 pastoral, council committees, or parish-related meetings, marriage preparation and counseling meetings, and about 101 pastoral visits. I love meeting with parishioners. My schedule is available on our webpage and also posted on my office door for your consideration. Please come and visit.

Under normal circumstances, I would visit our shut-ins before the feast of the Nativity. This year, however, due to the pandemic and lock-down, I was unfortunately unable to visit everyone. Regular visitations to parishioners this year was not so regular, since I was able to visit people ONLY upon their request.

Our approximate average attendance at Sunday Divine Liturgy from January 2020 through December 2020 was the following: an average attendance of 100 people, with an average of 64 communicants per Liturgy. Vigil participation was about 23 people per vigil. These figures represent our in-person participation, only, and when compared to last year's numbers, we are showing decline, but it is important to keep in mind that this year we began streaming services online, and so a number of people have been participating in our services from the comfort of their own home due to unusual circumstances. I really hope these numbers will go up significantly after the pandemic, but at the same time, I am very thankful to God for all of the people who are praying with us, whether in-person or via the internet.

In 2020 I again had the honor to prepare several adults for the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and they have become new members of our parish family. I would like to continue to welcome all of them to our family. Just as every year we also lost several members: some relocated to different cities; some reposed in the Lord. May their memory be eternal!

Office, Telephones, E-Mail and Technological Development:

All necessary forms for completing background checks for our teachers and volunteers were submitted, and my annual compliance report to the Diocese of the West was mailed in a timely manner.

Our former Parish Council member Zoe Turton took upon herself the task of developing a new website that is much more advanced but at the same time user-friendly. Zoe has relocated to different state and all web-managing is now handled by Father Deacon Kirill.

This past year, especially, I found myself handling a large volume of my pastoral and administrative duties over the phone or by text. Calls to the main office are still redirected to Deacon Kirill's cell to allow for 24/7 response. Please do not hesitate to call or share our contact information, but at the same time, I ask everyone to please try to remember and respect that on Monday the church office is closed as we usually take

Mondays as our one and only day off. If something is not of an urgent nature and can wait to be discussed on Tuesday, there is no need to interrupt our much-needed rest.

All of our contact information is available on our new web site under the clergy section.

Media outreach:

Just as in the previous years, we advertise regularly in the local Russian language newspapers. More and more news is published and will be published on our web page in both languages, as well as on our parish Facebook page and Instagram.

Fr. Deacon publishes constant updates our FB and Instagram accounts, including news, scheduled services/events, and photographs. The abrupt beginning of the pandemic suddenly brought about many new challenges: how to make our services accessible, how to run meetings, and how to continue our outreach and mission. Our YouTube account was set up, and viewers are able to stream our services as well as our new pastoral production "One on One with Everyone," in which we have made available virtual tours of our parish and other missionary and educational projects.

We still need your help to grow and expand our media outreach in several ways: 1. Please take a minute to leave a personal review about our parish on **Google Maps**. How to do it? It is very simple: just **Google** Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles and write couple of good word about us. What is it for? Well, by doing so our rating on this search engine will continue to go up. When new people search for the parish our rating is friendlier, our reviews are bigger, and there is a better chance people will decide to visit us and make our parish their spiritual home. 2. Please subscribe to our YouTube account so we can use this account more productively. 3. This year especially, a lot of people started to use Amazon to do their basic shopping. If you use Amazon Smile, it will give you an option to choose a nonprofit organization to support. Since we are one of the eligible organizations, you just need to select us as your choice, and our parish will receive percentage of all purchases from Amazon.

Special projects:

Many projects were planned for this year, but due to our special situation, only some of them were able to be completed. I would like to thank you again for your hard work and participation. Despite the difficulties faced last year, it was nevertheless a very

successful year. God helped us to find His strength in our weakness. As rector I truly feel so blessed to be surrounded by you all. Thank you for being in my life.

Last year we were able to continue with the repairs in our temple, renovate the main parish office, complete the frescos in St. Herman's Belltower Church, install an air conditioning and heating system in St Herman's, start installation of an air conditioning system in the school building (thanks to the Saturday School), erect a Memorial Cross and plant a small rose garden in the lower parking lot, finish installation of the veterans monument on our front square, and complete a multitude of smaller repairs and maintenance work on our parish campus.

Marina Smetanina has started frescos in our main church sanctuary. Unfortunately due to the death of her father, Marina had to leave for Russia and could not finish the project this year. Marina and I worked very closely for a long time to determine the composition and style of the iconography. Just as with St. Herman's Church, we were able to pick a medium that allowed Marina to work in a style found in Russian churches dating from the 14-15th centuries in Vladimir, Novgorod and Pskov. The frescos will be completed in this unique style that totally compliments our Cathedral's architectural design and form. The required funds to complete the frescos in the main Altar wall were already collected, and I hope that Marina will return from Russia soon to continue the work.

Several new icons were added to our temple, and we are still seeking donors to replace the rest of the prints with real hand-written icons. A list of these icons is available for your consideration on our announcements board, Facebook, and website.

Some may ask how is it possible for us to do all of this, especially during this difficult year? Well dear brothers and sisters, as we know, God is GOOD and if we have God in our heart, he awakens goodness in us and we live from that point on for Him and His Glory. The Memorial Cross was donated to us by a friend from Moscow, and through the hard work of the Dascalu family, it was erected and the rose garden was planted. The bronze double-headed eagle was donated to us by Cossacks from St. Petersburg, blessed in the Kazan Cathedral, and shipped to us at no cost. Numerous trees and rose bushes were donated by some of our parishioners in memory of their family members. So my answer to this question is as simple as it was last year: *we work together towards one common goal, and that is to make our spiritual home resemble the Heavenly Jerusalem both physically and spiritually.* Thank you, all!

I would like to thank everyone who by their effort made a difference

Vestry/Sacristy, Sanctuary:

This past year, our Cathedral again became richer through the addition of several holy relics, icons and objects. An antique icon of St. George was donated to us by Eugene Solonin.

An icon of St. Silouan of Mt. Athos was donated by friends from Moscow, and particle of the relics of the saint will be installed in it shortly. With the assistance of several parishioners, relics of the following saints were donated to our Cathedral this year: St. Nicholas Archbishop of Myra, St. John the Baptist, St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, St. Joseph of Arimathea, St. Andrew the First-Called, St. Catherine of Alexandria, St. Panteleimon, Sts. Mary, Martha and Lazarus, St. Tatiana, St. Helen, and St. Genevieve.

This year we received two more new analogia, and a new Panihida table finally arrived.

Thank you all for helping to protect it with your care and generosity.

Choir:

Special thanks this year goes to Reader Serge Liberovsky for his hard work with our parish choir, or now, choirs during this difficult year.

Thanks to his hard work, our services sound harmonious and prayerful, even with the small numbers of the skeleton crew. Regular rehearsals are occurring, and through the support of the choir, we able to serve nearly all planned services, despite the difficult circumstances.

Sunday School, Saturday Parish Russian School, Youth and Young adults programs:

Our youth programs, unfortunately, were heavily impacted by the pandemic this past year.

The **Saturday Russian School** had to switch to online distance learning, and as a result, it seems we have lost a lot of students. Looking to the future, I hope we will be able to use this time to evaluate our current educational program, administration and its needs, and hopefully, with the God's help, develop an even more effective way to educate our youth. This coming academic year, with the support of our parish council resources, I plan to spend a major portion of my time cultivating a plan to improve the existing program, administration, and funding of this most valuable program.

I would like to thank Ms. Irina Usova and her team of volunteers and parents for their hard work with Parish Saturday Russian School, and would also like to assure everyone that I will be doing everything possible to allow our school to flourish and grow. As soon as it becomes possible, I will again begin regularly spending time with the parents and students on Saturdays, teaching classes on the Law of God, and working on involving more and more children and parents in our Parish.

The Little Sisterhood of the Great Martyr Barbara also had to be suspended for the time being. Most of the girls are in church but can not do more than be the first to deliver cappuccino to me right after Liturgy. Thank you, girls, and I really miss seeing your service in the aprons as you help during the Liturgy.

The Children's Choir is, unfortunately, another program that took a real hit this year, but now, under the leadership of Katya Solovskaya, our kids are back to learning new repertoire, and we look forward to hearing them during the Liturgy one day soon. Please share information about our children's programs with everyone, as every child is welcome to become a part of them. All of our children should be involved in parish life. If your children are interested, please do not deprive them of this unique opportunity.

Every Tuesday we continue to serve the Akathist to our Patronal Icon of the All-Holy Theotokos "Rescuer of the Perishing." After each Akathist, I regularly meet with our Catechumens for an educational meeting. I try my best to serve a daily Moleben before our Icon of Mother of God, but due to other commitments, sometimes a day is skipped here or there. We have begun offering a biweekly series of lectures and presentations in the form of online pastoral talks, and I would like to add an adult education program on Sundays after lunch, after lunches have resumed. Please, if anyone has any suggestions for other types of outreach, do not hesitate to let me know.

Bookstore, Coffee shop:

As for the Kiosk and coffee shop, you can see in the Treasurer's Financial Report for last year, that the bookstore again transferred \$8000.00 to the parish. Taking into consideration the fact that the bookstore was closed for 4 months, and that the previous year we received \$9500.00 from this outreach, I would say that we did fairly well. Many thanks to Sister Elisabeth and Cornel Dascalu for their tireless work. We have continued bringing new items to the store, despite the difficulties faced in doing so last year. This coming year I plan like to expand our Russian books section and also have a large discount sale on our existing inventory of select books and CDs.

Our coffee shop continues to gain popularity, showing about \$2500.00 of income even during these difficult times. We are in the process of acquiring a new coffee maker to make our coffee even tastier and the operation even quicker.

As sisterhood lunches had to be suspended, the coffeeshop became a real center of community gathering where our parishioners can meet and grow closer as a Christian family.

Parish Museum:

This year we did not use this space much at all. No tourist groups or students came to visit. But we look forward to coming years. Many more historic artifacts were located in our parish archives and donated by individual parishioners.

Again, I would like to address the issue of preparation for our Centennial celebration. As I began organizing our parish historical archives containing documents, photographs, publications, etc, I discovered that, sadly, for the last few decades, not many documents and photographs were preserved, especially after everyone moved to digital technology. Therefore, I am asking you for assistance, especially from those parishioners who have been in our parish a long time. If you have in your possession any photographs, videos, or publications connected with our parish life, please share them with me so that they can be scanned and preserved in our parish archives, and perhaps used to write a historical note in preparation for the 100th anniversary booklet.

Other:

Our property management committee had a strategic meeting to set our priorities for future repairs, and a priority list was established. This last year we were supposed to repair the roof over the parish hall, but due to this year's setbacks, we were faced with the same problem as last every year but amplified. With the lack of funds in the budget, we were unable to begin the necessary work. On behalf of the Parish Council, I again appeal to your generosity. We collected quotes, and as expected, this project will cost close to \$30,000. At the beginning of this new year we received what I was hoping would be great news: a COVID testing clinic was interested in renting our parking lot for an extended period of time. My hope was that would help us tremendously and that the roof would surely be repaired, but due to some unanticipated issues, the Clinic had to close their operation in our parking lot and relocate to a different location. The good news is that they payed us \$7000.00, which we will be able to use for the roof repair, however, that still leaves us a deficit of \$23000.00 for this project. Dear brothers and

sisters, again I turn to you and ask you to consider making a generous donation toward this important cause.

As rector, I also participate in other aspects of the life of Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral. This year, due to travel restrictions, the Diocese of the West annual conference took place on Zoom, no pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain or any other holy sites were conducted, and no relics or distinguished guests came to visit us in Southern California.

I tried to occupy my time mostly in service to our community and to faithfully fulfilling my obedience as rector of this Cathedral to the best of my abilities.

At this point I would like to address a few words to you, my beloved parishioners and newly elected Parish Council.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, with God's love towards us His children and through your prayers, so much has been done in our parish during this year.

Last year was especially difficult pastorally, but at the same time and mostly because it was difficult, it was especially successful.

Last year I wrote in my report: *"As a Christian, on an intellectual level I know that every spiritual success is followed by temptations..."* We were blessed with several very great years, years of growth, peace and even relevant economic stability. Last year we were faced with new issues not only in our community of HVM but also in our larger communities of Los Angeles, as citizens and residents of the United States of America and as people of planet Earth.

"Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." (G.K. Chesterton) Until March of last year, many people took their faith lightly: we thought that Church would always be there. "If I don't go to church this Sunday I can go next Sunday or the one after that." I will never forget the moment when I received the notice from the Archbishop directing us to suspend divine services right in the middle of the Great and Holy Fast. Feelings of confusion, unrest, hopelessness, and loneliness came over me. Suddenly I was struck with the thought that the Divine Liturgy that I had served last Sunday could have been the last one in my life, that the words of the Holy Fathers concerning the last days, when christians will need to travel thousands of miles in order to find another christian with whom to pray or attend the Divine Liturgy may have come to pass. All of the sudden unpleasant issues and differences of opinion became non-issues as a real problem was at hand: would we be

able to pray together or commune of the Holy Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior from the same cup ever again? But God is Great, and just as the devil was rejoicing at the closure of hundreds of churches God, millions of houses of prayer opened in our homes. We remembered ancient ways of offering the Holy Gifts and, once again, the Apostolic mission continued.

We have to remember that our strength lies in our weakness, and that God is always with us when we seek His Kingdom with our whole heart.

This year was also difficult because of social unrest, riots, violent protests, and differences of opinion over the presidential election. Dear family, we have to remember the words of the Holy Gospel: *"The Lord said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."* (Luke 18:27). Let us trust God and make Him part of our daily life. Let us trust Him not only on Sunday but every moment of our lives, and we will realize that all of this unrest is not of His making. Social justice will prevail if we will be just like Christ: violence can be overcome only by kindness and hate by love.

Theodore Roosevelt said *"PATRIOTISM means to stand by the country."* Our patriotism is to our Faith and our Faith is not of this world. We are called to be citizens of God's Kingdom and this Kingdom starts here in our hearts. So "let us put aside all early cares" and trust God in His Divine Wisdom.

Again I would like to remind everyone that in a few short years we will celebrate 100 years of our mission in Los Angeles, and that last year at our meeting we agreed to begin working towards the great project of our church expansion. We are seeking to bring to life the vision of one of our great rectors, Fr. Dmitri Gisetti, that was envisioned by this extraordinary pastor in 1969. Our architect, Vladimir Elmanovich, with his team of assistants, is working on the final drawings for this project. Contractors are preparing their bids, and it will be up to us, through the generosity of our community and hard work, to see this plan to its completion.

Again at the last year's meeting I said: *"You might ask how can we do this as we still run a deficit budget; where will the resources come from? ..."* Well it will come from God through us. Last year was supposed to be a year to begin fundraising efforts for this magnificent project, but due to the pandemic and the host of other difficulties, we had to shift our priorities to learning how to work in the new reality, and no fundraisers were possible. Truly, I began to worry, but then I remembered the words Christ; *"Why are you fearful, O you of little faith."* And today I would like to inform you that even without major fundraising efforts, we already have \$110,000.00 donated towards this Centennial

project. I believe that with our efforts we will be able to see the legacy of Fr. Dimitri's vision become a reality.

Dear parishioners, as many of you know, this is my first parish as rector, and perhaps I lack a previous parish or some or another experience, but one thing I know, is that I love this parish, I love its history, and I love every one of parishioners whom God has entrusted to me, a sinner. I am here to build, not to destroy, and I hope that in the 5.5 years of my rectorship here, most of you are able to see that and to realize that I came here not to divide parishioners by nationality, culture or other label or personal qualities. This year, while dealing with the difficulties of our abnormal circumstances, I had to make difficult, and perhaps unpopular, decisions like suspending our sisterhood lunches, not allowing people to enter the church building for the duration of the service, communing the faithful with liturgical tongs instead of the spoon, suspending in-person instruction for the Saturday School, and perhaps others. I made these decisions not because I do not like the Sisterhood and somehow want their invaluable parish outreach to cease, but rather I worry about every person who potentially might get ill if we do not keep social distance and not partake of the delicious food for the time being, so that we can resume this beloved fellowship when it is safe. I have asked everyone to remain outside of the church as I would like our parish to remain open and to not be shut down by authorities or for our community to be forced to pay fines. I commune people by tongs not because I do not believe that we commune of the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, but because I do not dare to tempt any one who might blame that they got infected through communion. I suspended in-person classes not because I am Ukrainian and I do not love Russians, but because I love everyone who comes to our school and I believe that Russian School should grow develop and bring the riches of the Russian language, culture and history responsibly, at the highest academic level, and with love and respect to every pupil, teacher and parent that comes to us.

St. Paul writes: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they

will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

My dear parishioners, my dear spiritual children, as your pastor, sometimes I am faced with difficult decisions. One thing that I would like you to know is that no decision has been made lightly and without prayer; no decision has been made for my own profit or personal gain; no decision has been made to hurt someone.

Right after my ordination my spiritual father and ordaining hierarch gave me some valuable advice : *"Be strict to yourself and merciful to others."* I remember this often, and employing my pastoral care, I would rather use *Economia* before I consider *Acrivia*. I ask your forgiveness if I have failed to follow this lesson from my spiritual father, but please be assured that I work hard to make every decision not out of envy, nor to somehow parade or puff myself up. I try hard not to behave rudely, nor to seek my own nor to be provoked, nor think or do evil. I truly wish to rejoice in truth, and I ask you to pray for me, so that, in the image of love, I can "bear all things, believe all thing, hope all things, and endure" even the most difficult things. I truly love all off you with my whole heart, even as I feel how much love I receive from you, unworthy of it as I am.

May God continue blessing all of you individually, all of us collectively and all of our work for the benefit of His Holy Church, in this God-beloved community of The Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles.