

**Rector's Information Report**  
**Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral Annual Parish Meeting.**  
**Los Angeles, CA**  
**Delivered January 30, 2022**

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Once again I have the great honor to present you with my annual report of my activities as the Rector of Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles, California, for the year 2021.

2021 was my sixth full year as Rector of Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles .

I would like to, again, begin with offering my thanks to all of you for your prayers for me and my family, for your patience with me, the unworthy, and for your tireless assistance and support in our endless work of growing this community as a spiritually healthy family, just as we are. As before, our Parish Council has kept busy, and this year, the Council had to make many decisions and work hard to achieve the goals set before us at the Annual Parish Meeting at the beginning of 2021. It is a great joy to work with each of you. Your help to everyone in this God-beloved parish community is a great blessing. Thank you for all you have done this past year. I am counting on your assistance and support in your respective positions in the coming year as we continue to progress with our preparations for our Centennial Celebration and, of course, the fulfillment our Centennial Project.

Having said that, I would like to present you a summary of activities for the year 2021.

**Liturgical Celebrations, Pastoral Visits and Meetings:**

From 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, I was blessed to celebrate the following divine services: approximately 100 Divine Liturgies, 65 Vigils, 17 Vespers, 9 Matins, 65 Baptisms (30 of which were served at/for our neighboring parish, Protection of the Theotokos Church after the repose of Fr. Viktor), 7 Weddings, (2 of which were at/for Protection of the Theotokos Church), 45 Funerals (9 of which were at/for Protection of the Theotokos church), 200 Panikhidas, 50 Akathists, 120 Molebens, 5 Canons, and more than 100 other various blessings and services. At the same time, I

visited and had numerous meetings with our parishioners: more than 300 pastoral, council committees, or parish-related meetings, marriage preparations and counselings, and about 150 pastoral visits.

I was able to visit almost all our shut-ins before the feast of the Nativity. Due to Pandemic recommended restrictions and in order to avoid potential exposure to COVID, some of our parishioners asked me not to visit. I do my best to remember all of them in my unworthy prayers. Regular visitations to parishioners this year were still not as regular as before since I was able to visit people only upon their request.

Our approximate average attendance at Sunday Divine Liturgy from January 2021 through December 2021 was the following: an average attendance of 128 people, with an average of 67 communicants per Liturgy. Vigil participation was approximately 28 people per Vigil. These figures once again represent only our in-person participation, and when compared to last year's numbers, we are showing a modest increase. It is important to keep in mind that we continue streaming services online, and so a number of people have been participating in our services from the comfort of their own home due to the unusual circumstances. I still sincerely hope that these numbers will go up significantly after the pandemic is 100% over, but at the same time, I am very thankful to God for all the people who are praying with us, whether in-person or via the internet.

In 2021, I again had the honor to prepare several adults for the sacrament of Holy Baptism or Chrismation, and they have become new members of our parish family. I would like to encourage all of us to continue to welcome each of them into our family. At the present time, I continue to work with several catechumens and hope to receive them into the Holy Orthodox Faith before Pascha. Just as every year, we also lost several members: some relocated to different cities; some reposed in the Lord. May their memories be eternal!

#### **Office, Telephone, E-Mail and Technological Developments:**

All the 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.

The parish website is up and running, and all the day-to-day web maintenance is now handled by Father Deacon Kirill and a team of volunteers. We have aimed to post as much new content as possible.

Calls to the main office are still redirected to Deacon Kirill's cell to allow for a 24/7 pastoral response. Please do not hesitate to call or share our contact information, but at the same time, I ask everyone to please remember and respect that the church office is closed on Mondays as we usually take that day as our one and only day off. If the matter is not of an urgent nature and can wait to be discussed on Tuesday, there is no need to interrupt our much-needed rest.

The Church and our parish office is open Tuesday through Sunday and we have seen an increasing number of people coming to pray, light candles, and speak with the clergy nearly every day. As a side note, we are the only Orthodox Church in Hollywood that keeps its doors open during the week outside the schedule of liturgical services.

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

### **Media outreach:**

As in previous years, we advertise regularly in the local Russian language newspapers. More and more news has been published and will continue to 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 Facebook and Instagram accounts, including those regarding news, scheduled services/events, and photographs. Our YouTube outreach continues, where our viewers are able to both stream our services live and view them at their convenience.

This past year, I was invited to give several interviews about our parish and the work we do in our Los Angeles Orthodox community. Two of them were for SPAS ("Savior") TV, one for the YouTube channel, "Such is the Service," and one for Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev's) YouTube channel.

I would, again, like to ask for your assistance: 1. Please take a minute to leave a personal review about our parish on **Google Maps**. How do you do it? Very simple: just **Google** Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles and write couple of

good word about us. What does this accomplish? By increasing the number of positive reviews, search engine results will continue to attract more and more people. When new people find our church, 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 for 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 a percentage of all purchases from Amazon. Each of these small efforts yields great results: 1. We are the only parish, at least in Hollywood, that is open for people 6 days a week, and people can come during the week to pray, light a candle or talk to a priest. That is a very important service that we offer, and people do come, visit and, more importantly, begin to come back some on a regular basis. 2. The pandemic still forces many people to stay at home, and our YouTube outreach is a great avenue to support them and keep them in the Church's fold. As we have seen, many people who have looked for Orthodoxy have found us via our YouTube channel. Living in Hollywood, we have attempted to adopt Hollywood-like ways to promote our activities: beginning last year, we began producing short films as invitations for our special events like the Parish Feast Day. This year, we also made such a film, and we hope to create more of these types of informative videos, sharing the rich history and current events with the Orthodox community of the Greater Los Angeles.

### **Special projects:**

This year, we were able to complete several large projects that had been started in the previous year. I would like to thank you all for your hard work and participation. As rector I truly feel so blessed by you, my dear parishioners, and by your help. Thank you for being in my life.

We were able to continue with the small repairs in our church, the renovations to the main parish office, the frescos in the main Altar of our Cathedral, and also to install an air conditioning and heating system in two rooms of the school building (thanks to the Saturday School), to replace the 40-year-old roof on our parish hall, to begin the renovation of the old sacristy into a modest studio for our Protodeacon so we can offer the apartment over the garages to our choir director and his new family, and, lastly, to complete a multitude of smaller repairs and maintenance work on our parish campus.

As I said before, Marina Smetanina has almost completed the frescos in our main church sanctuary. Marina and I continue to work very closely to determine the right iconographic composition in order to make our sanctuary not only beautiful but also theologically rich and unique. The next phase of iconography will be an arc over our iconostasis: we already have some of the required funds to complete the frescos but not enough to see this next phase finished. The total cost of this part of the ongoing project will be around \$30,000.00. I hope we will be able to find all the necessary funds to continue the work.

As in recent years, several new icons were added to our church, and we are still seeking donors to replace the remainder of the prints with real hand-painted icons. A list of these remaining icons is available for your consideration on our bulletin board, Facebook, and website. Several icons were donated for our Belltower Church of St. Herman, but again, we are still seeking donors for the rest of the icons of the American saints, which will complete the interior of St. Herman's.

A logical question arises in our minds: how is it possible for us to do all of this? At the risk of appearing proud of what we have so far accomplished together, I would like to call to mind the words of the gospel according to St. Mathew: *"His lord said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."* All of us show our immeasurable love to God through love to our spiritual home and family and by this we become bearers of God's love and become His faithful servants. If we will continue to be good stewards of His most generous gifts, we should not be afraid of receiving His blessing to care for greater assignments as He Himself will help us.

In one of the Anaphora prayers of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, we hear yet another answer to this question: *"Remember, O Lord, those who bring offerings and do good in thy holy churches, and those who remember the poor. Reward them with thy rich and heavenly gifts: grant them heavenly things for earthly, eternal things for temporal, things incorruptible for things corruptible."* Thank you, dear parishioners, as through our selfless offering of gifts, work, and care, we manifest our desire of that which is Heavenly! I thank everyone who by his or her efforts has made a difference.

**Vestry/Sacristy, Sanctuary:**

This past year, our Cathedral again became richer through the addition of several icons and sacred objects. Antique icons of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, the “Three-handed” Mother of God, the Mother of God of Kazan, the Mother of God of Tikhvin, and the Mother of God “The Joy of All Who Sorrow “ were donated to us by an anonymous donor.

An icon of St. Nina was also donated, and the new Table of Oblation and Deaconicon that were ordered several years ago finally arrived. We also received a donation for further furnishings in the Altar and are awaiting the arrival of several other liturgical items soon.

Thank you all for your care and generosity.

### **Choir:**

I would like to thank Reader Serge Liberovsky for his hard work with our parish choir. With Serge’s hard work, we now have a full choir not only for Sunday Liturgy but also for Saturday Vigil.

Even in these difficult times of pandemic, Serge manages to have regular rehearsals and encourage more and more people to serve God through singing.

### **Sunday School, Saturday Parish Russian School, Youth and Young Adult programs:**

We started this year with our youth programs heavily impacted by the pandemic. We were faced with a challenge to adapt to a new reality. A new approach had to be found.

The **Saturday Russian School** had to switch to online distance learning, and as a result, we lost a lot of students. After reopening before Pascha, the majority of students who returned to class were not our parishioners, and some were even openly not interested in the ecclesiastical aspect of the school. Parents were unwilling to bring children to church on Sundays and were mostly interested in the ethnic and cultural aspects of the education, which is not in alignment with the vision of our school program. Also, some of the children of our regular parishioners stopped attending Saturday School for other reasons. Ahead of the beginning of the new school year, with the blessing of His Eminence, Archbishop Benjamin, the parish council agreed to reform the existing school programs and combine the Saturday Russian School and Sunday School into one program with the curriculum reflecting the vision of our Parochial school established by Fr. Dimitri and Matushka Margarita Gisetti, where children learn the Orthodox Faith through other subjects, like literature, history and others.

At last year's Annual Parish Meeting, I assured everyone of my devotion to do everything possible to make our school flourish and grow. In order to actualize this initiative, we had to accomplish this reform and make changes to the Parochial School personnel. The active group of young professional educators from our parish volunteered to assist me, and at the present time we have one Parochial School that operates on Sunday following the Divine Liturgy. Children and parents actively participate in the Divine Liturgy, and after receiving Holy Communion, pupils begin their school with the "Law of God" lesson. After lunch, the rest of the subjects are taught. At the present time, we have about 30 students. I would like to thank Julia Handzii, Ekaterina Solovskaia, Maria Goncharova, Svetlana Kornienko, Julia Emelin, Lynn McEntire, Pdn Kirill, and our newest teacher, Marianna Haratynian. As for me, I do my best to spend time with the parents and students during lunch time and to continue to work 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, but since September most of the girls are in church helping with collections, and most importantly, they continue to be the first to deliver my cappuccino right after Liturgy. Thank you, girls, and I really would like to see your back in your aprons as you help during the Liturgy.

**The Children's Choir** under the leadership of Katya Solovskaia, returned to action in church, bringing us joy every Divine Liturgy with their angelic singing. Thanks to Katya's creativity and love for this project, the kids are constantly learning new repertoire, and practice via Zoom every Saturday and in person every Sunday during and after the Divine Liturgy. Together with reader Serge, Katya is working to integrate the Children's Choir more fully into the Liturgy on a more permanent basis, so I look forward to hearing more of their singing.

Please continue sharing 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.

Every Tuesday, we continue to serve the Akathist before 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. You can see that the number of baptisms last year was much higher than the year before, and good portion of this baptisms were

our adult new members who were received into the Orthodox Faith through our catechetical program. If anyone has suggestions for other types of outreach, please 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 \$10,000.00 to the parish. Our total sales almost doubled from the previous highest sales from years past. This year we had \$29,900.00 in sales. Many thanks to Sister Elizabeth and Cornel Dascalu for their tireless work. We have continued bringing new items to the store despite the ongoing difficulties with receiving packages reliably. We expanded our Russian books section and icon sections. We have found Icons to be difficult to keep in stock, so we plan to order icons in larger quantities and varieties. With the help of our volunteers, we were able to launch our modest Logos Bookstore internet page and advertise on Instagram.

Our coffee shop continues to gain popularity, showing about \$7,950.00 of income in 2021 versus \$2,500.00 of income in the year prior. Thanks to this income, we were able to invest in a professional grade espresso machine, making our coffee even tastier and the operation even quicker. The sales of Church Brand coffee packages are also doing well, and we are gaining clients outside of our parish. I hope we are able to promote our coffee on an even larger scale in the future.

### **Parish Museum:**

This year we started using this space again. Several tourist groups and students came to visit our museum. Many more historic artifacts were found in our parish archives and donated by individual parishioners. During our Annual Slavic Festival, the museum became a big attraction, and even many non-orthodox people interested in the history of Hollywood came to the museum to hear the presentations organized by Mr. Ivan Podvalov.

Preparation for our Centennial celebration are underway. Maybe these are not yet very visible, but many projects are in motion. Ivan Podvalov is actively working on preparing a documentary film dedicated to the history of our parish. Several important interviews were conducted by Ivan and a significant amount of materials have been collected. I would like to ask you for assistance, especially from those parishioners who

have been in our parish a long time. If you any photographs, videos, or publications in your possession connected to our parish life, please share them with me so that they can be scanned and preserved in our parish archives, and perhaps even used to write a historical note in preparation for the 100th anniversary booklet and documentary film.

**Other:**

Our property management committee held a strategic meeting, again setting priorities for future repairs, and establishing a priority list. Last year we repaired the roof over the parish hall. Partial funds were allocated for the renovation of a new studio for our Protodeacon and total reconstruction of the stairs on the apartment over the garages. These projects should be completed this year. On behalf of the Parish Council, I again appeal to your generosity. We collected quotes, and as expected, the project to repair the stairs will cost close to \$25,000.

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

I would like to inform you about my other activities as the Rector of this God-Beloved Parish. The Diocese of the West Annual Assembly took place in Las Vegas and Fr. Protodeacon and I took part in this important assembly. Due to the pandemic 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 instead occupied my time in service to our community and and attempted to fulfill my obedience as rector of this Cathedral to the best of my abilities.

At this point I would like to address you, my beloved parishioners and Parish Council.

My dear family in Christ, with God's mercy toward us, His unprofitable servants and through your prayers and assistance, so much has been done in our parish during this year.

Last year was very successful.

It was especially great that, after a long time of not being able to worship normally in our church, we are once again praying inside and with a full choir. Yes, we are still required to wear masks, but we can be in our beautiful church together with our

beloved brothers and sisters, we can venerate our beloved icons, and we can say our prayers before them while lighting a candle any time we like. Yes, Father Nazari still disinfects the communion spoon, but we do not have to make an appointment for communion, and we can go to confession in the usual fashion any time we need.

The year was successful even as a degree of social unrest, riots, violent protests, and differences of opinion over the presidential election came down around us. Yes, new challenges and worries are upon us, but we continue to pray the words of the Great Litany: *"For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls and for the peace of the whole world, for the good estate of the holy churches of God and for the union of all men"* with the assurance that God will arrange everything as it needs to be, just as He did in the previous year when we were worried and troubled about many things while only one thing was needed: to pray, trust Him and do our part. The Gospel of St. Luke reminds us: *"The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."* (Luke 18:27).

What is that mean to do our part? To understand this, we must determine for ourselves the goal of our life. In the beginning of the Second World War, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said in his address to Parliament: *"Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival."* The goal of the people at that time was physical survival during a physical war against evil. Our goal is first and foremost spiritual survival in the unseen warfare between Good and Evil. Our part is to remain faithful and good servants of our Lord. Our part is to choose LOVE. Martin Luther King wrote: *"I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."* And Ancient Greek thinker Aesop said: *No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.* So what is our part? Our part is to *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."* And the second is like it: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* 'As On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'

This year we begin to celebrate 100 years of our mission in Los Angeles. We made certain plans for this celebration, and as long as those plans reflect our love toward God and neighbor, our celebration promises to be joyous, spiritually beneficial, and uplifting.

We seek to bring to life the vision of one of our great rectors, Fr. Dmitri Gisetti, which this extraordinary pastor first envisioned in 1969. Much of my time the last year was spent with our architect, Vladimir Elmanovich, and his team of assistants. After many

hours of work on the final drawings for this project, after collecting all the necessary documents, and completing all the necessary forms, we submitted our portfolio to City Hall.

Based on preliminary contractor estimates, we launched our fundraiser and it already seen great results.

2022 began with taking the next steps toward our Centennial Project with the City Council and our local neighborhood community. A public hearing has been scheduled to talk about our project on February 9, and I ask all of you to pray and consider attending the hearing to help us present our case.

A considerable amount of work still lies before us, and even though I would like to inform you that we already have around \$300,000.00 in donations and pledges toward the Centennial project, we still need to raise at least another \$200,000.00. Additional work, like preparing our church for construction, filing additional documents, and meeting with officials and contractors will have to take place before we are able to see the legacy of Fr. Dimitri's vision become a reality.

Dear brothers and sisters, as I have said in last year's report: *"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"*. And as you can already see: *"I am here to build, not to destroy, and I hope that in the 6.5 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, again, I had to make difficult, and for some, unpopular, decisions, like limiting sisterhood activities, not allowing people to enter the church building for the duration of the service, disinfecting or not disinfecting the Communion spoon, suspending in-person instruction for the Saturday School, making a change in the school's administration, merging Saturday and Sunday schools into one entity, and perhaps others. All of these decisions were made first of all in consultation with our Parish Council and with it united in support. All of these decisions were made with only one goal in mind, to make our parish an even better place to worship, to make our community an even closer family, and to bring all of us even closer to Christ.

My dear family, my dear spiritual children, as your priest, I ask your forgiveness if I have failed at times, but please be assured that I truly try to work for the benefit of our

parish before I consider working for the benefit of some other goal. I look forward to the work that we TOGETHER will do in 2022 , and I ask you to pray for me, so that, in the image of love, I can become a priest in the image of St. Paul's writings, *"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."* (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23)

*"Be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry"* (2 Tim. 4:5) and above all *"Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity"*. (1 Tim 4:7)

I truly love all of 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 to bestow His blessings on all of us 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.