

## Strategic Planning Meeting - December 8, 2012

### Fr. Panayiotis' Keynote Address to the Participants

You have been invited to this meeting because you are the lay leaders of this Parish and good Stewards of the gifts which God has given you. You have offered much to the parish and the Church over the years and I pray that God will bless you and your families a hundredfold in health, peace and love, in your material needs, as well as spiritually. Your response to the call to attend this meeting is greatly appreciated and I thank you for being here today.

This is a critical moment in the life of the parish and you have been invited here to exchange ideas and opinions. We need to speak honestly and boldly to each other but with love and kindness.

As your priest, I have been given the responsibility to care for this parish, to be the Head of the Parish, your Spiritual Father, to care for your souls, to help lead you to the **Ultimate GOAL** of salvation, to help you **enter the Kingdom of God**. I take this responsibility very seriously and feel the burden of it on my shoulders. I am responsible for the soul of each one of you and my desire is that you are saved.

Since my calling to the priesthood, I have given every breath that I have to serve God and His people. My natural instinct is to protect the parish when I see anything that is dangerous to the unity and peace, or even to its fiscal stability and its future growth. I see myself as the glue that holds the parish together. For the last six years, I have been serving you in this spirit and I intend to continue to serve you in the same way for a long time, as God gives me strength.

My desire is to protect the parish from anything that will deviate us from the **Ultimate Goal**. Above all I want to make sure the parish is safe from turmoil and division. We have had plenty of turmoil and division in the past and that only delayed the efforts to attain the goals that had been set. We cannot afford any more division. We need to bring everyone to a **consensus of goals** and work together towards them.

During the last six years of my tenure as your priest, I placed **unity and spiritual growth** as the **highest priorities** of my pastoral work. To my delight, we have had the longest period of peace and unity that this parish has ever had. To my delight again, we have had a steady growth in membership of more than 50 new families which have joined the parish in the same period. This year alone we added 15 new families so far.

As the membership grows the parish changes in certain ways, however. New people come in with new ideas and new priorities. We need to integrate together and regroup so that we can retain the unity and our forward movement in growing spiritually as members of Christ's Body. We need to become one body and one mind in Christ!

**This is one of the reasons that we are here today.** We need to meet together and get to know each other. We need to come to a complete understanding of each other and work towards a synergistic existence. Our thoughts need to be harmonized and our GOALS have to become the same, otherwise we will not go anywhere. What is worse is that we will fail to attain the **Ultimate GOAL, the Kingdom of God** if we do not become one as the Body of Christ.

In the last Strategic Planning Meeting we held on February 7, 2009, the number one priority we concluded was to **"Increase the Spirituality of the overall parish" and Create a spiritual culture in the parish.**

My desire is to maintain the unity and continue to cultivate the spiritual culture in the parish. I would like to see us continue moving forward as one. I would like to see the parish **reach a consensus for all major decisions** that affect our lives.

As a church, we are the Body of Christ and each one of us needs to become a holy member of His Body (Eph. 5:30). We are "the light of the world. A city set on a hill, which cannot be hid." (Matt. 5:14). We are a lamp that is not placed "under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." (Matt. 5:15; Luke 11:33; Mark 4:21).

Today, I would like to hear and understand **your** thoughts as to how you see the future of the parish. I would like to know what is in your minds and your hearts with respect to the **Primary Mission** of the parish and how we can attain it. I would like to hear your proposals as to how we should grow spiritually and come closer to God. I want to hear how you see the effort to become holy as God is Holy.

I also ask you to **hear me out** as your spiritual father. Perhaps you can benefit from my many years of theological training and experience as a priest and father confessor. Perhaps you can benefit further from the holistic perspective of the parish which I bring to you, for as the priest, I experience the parish in every conceivable way; I am always present at both the happy as well as the difficult times of the parishioners; I visit them at their homes; I hear their problems and concerns; I receive their confessions and struggles. In short, **"as the priest, I have the pulse of the parish"** better than anyone else.

Let me start this conversation by raising the first question: What is our purpose as a Parish? What is the **ultimate GOAL** of all these efforts that we have undertaken? Why are we making such great investments of Time, Talent and Treasure?

My quick initial **Answer:** Because we have a great Commission from the Lord.

### **The Great Commission of Christ for us after the Resurrection**

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded to you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. Amen." (Matt. 28:19-20)

### **The Mission of the Parish (see handout)**

#### **Main points of the Mission of the Parish:**

1. The Parish is a Eucharistic Community called to practice and proclaim the faith pure and undefiled
2. Sanctify the Faithful through worship and the holy sacraments
3. Enhance the Spiritual life of the parishioners
4. Receive persons into the Church through instruction and the sacraments
5. Establish Educational Activities and
6. Philanthropic Activities for the edification of its parishioners in the Faith and Ethos of the Church and the fostering and promotion of the aims and mission of the Parish.

*The ultimate goal of the Parish is to lead its members into the Kingdom of God.*

As I mentioned before, in the last Strategic Planning Meeting we held on February 7, 2009 the number one priority we concluded was to **"Increase the Spirituality of the overall parish. To create a spiritual culture in the parish."**

Of course, the spirituality of the parish depends on the spirituality of the members of the parish both personally and collectively. I would like for each one of us today to consider how we have fared in that goal.

I would like for you today to consider the **first question**: How did you personally fare in this way. Are you growing spiritually? Are you closer to God today than you were three years ago? If the answer is "Yes", I would like for you to tell us how you accomplished that. Perhaps, what helped you grow will help others, as well. If the answer is "No" you need to find out why. What have you failed to do in order to come closer to God? Seek out the answer to this question? I hope the experiences of the other people around you will help you with that.

**The second question** we need to ask ourselves is "how is the parish faring with respect to the priority we set for us in 2009". Has the parish grown spiritually? Does it have a spiritual culture as we decided we wanted to have.

**Third Question:** How can we continue to measure this spiritual growth?

**Fourth Question:** What else do we need to do in order to further grow spiritually as a parish?

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In order to help begin the discussion, I would like to share with you some basic facts about **growth in parishes**.

### **The Primary Factors for accomplishing the Mission of the Parish and Promoting Growth.**

Research and experience from Orthodox Parishes has shown that there are four Primary Factors that can help Orthodox Parishes grow both spiritually and in membership:

1. **Number of worship services.** Parishes with an abundance of worship services through the year grow both spiritually and also in numbers because the worship services facilitate being with God. They train us to be in the presence of God. They train us to be in the Kingdom of God. Worship services help us become companions with God.
2. **Educational Opportunities.** Parishes with an abundance of educational opportunities grow more because they train the people as to how to be Orthodox Christians by choice. They help the people become Orthodox Christians on purpose. They help the people answer their questions about problems of life. They help the people understand better what their spiritual identity is and embrace it consciously.
3. **Strong preaching and teaching ministries.** Parishes that put an emphasis on preaching and teaching grow both spiritually and also in numbers because the people are inspired to draw closer to God. They are encouraged to invest time, talent and treasures in their parish. They transmit that love and enthusiasm for their Faith and the parish to others around them.

4. **Unity and Peace.** Parishes that have leadership which promotes a culture of unity and peace grow both spiritually and also in numbers because people want to come to a parish that will help them find unity with God and peace with themselves and the world around them. Parishes filled with turmoil tend to lose members.

**Parishes need to invest both in effort and resources in all of these areas in order to reap the results of growth. Buildings and programs are not the goal of the parish. Buildings and programs are the "tools" to get to the ultimate goal, to lead the members of the parish to Salvation, to lead them into the Kingdom of God.**

### **Reflection on the Past - Hope for the Future**

I have to honestly admit to you that the last six and a half years I have been serving as your priest have been enlightening and fulfilling for me in many ways.

This has been the first time in my priesthood that I have been able to spend so many hours of spiritual study with so many of you - Bible Study Groups, Intro to Orthodoxy, Spiritual Book club, Teacher Seminars, Lenten Lectures, Parenting Lectures for Hope & Joy parents, Premarital Counseling sessions with couples preparing for marriage, GOYA sessions, Lenten Retreats. In addition, I have been receiving many people for Confession and spiritual counseling. I have seen the lives of individuals transformed in front of me, as they surrendered and trusted in God. A lot of good things are happening in this parish. The Holy Spirit is working and salvation is accomplished for those who seek it. All of these spiritual and educational activities and experiences have fulfilled me as a priest and I am thankful to God for giving me this opportunity to serve Him and you.

Furthermore, I had the privilege to experience the faith and zeal of many who are already members of the Church but also many who have been joining the Orthodox Church from other faiths.

### **Learning from the past - Vision for the Future**

Having served for the last 25 years as a priest it has become clear to me that the Orthodox Church in America (and our parish in particular) stand at a crossroads today that we have not experienced before.

The first realization is that there are no more immigrants coming from overseas to grow the parishes. This puts more pressure on the parishes to develop in ways which will help them retain their members and also attract more members from the local community.

The second realization is that as a Greek community we have moved from an enclave of immigrants struggling to make it in a strange society to become one of the most successful groups in the country, both socially as well as financially. We now are also becoming more prominent as a religious group attracting more and more people from outside our ethnic boundaries. These newcomers are people who are choosing the Orthodox Faith on their own. They are the ones we call the "converts".

For almost a century, converts came into our parishes mostly through marriage. We are now experiencing a new phenomenon. More and more people are discovering the Orthodox Faith on their own and requesting to join the Church. These are the "Faith Seekers", mostly serious Christians who are looking for authenticity. They are usually people who are tired of Christian groups that are continually shifting in their moral standards, their theology and worship. These people are discovering in the Orthodox

Church the ancient, historic Christian Faith and they are embracing it with their heart. Even our "Greekness" has become attractive to them, because they realize that we are the Church that has preserved the Gospel in its original language. They are delighted to find out that the Orthodox Church enjoys the treasures of the Patristic writings that interpret the Gospel in its historic context. They are amazed to discover that the Creed of Faith they have been reciting for years was originally written in Greek by our bishops (the Holy Fathers) and contains the distillation of the ancient Christian Faith. They find great comfort in the discovery that these beliefs, moral standards and worship are the same today as they were centuries ago and will be the same tomorrow, next year, next century and even in the next millennium. These converts come to us because they feel they have discovered a great treasure.

It is also my experience that our parish at this point of its life has shown a great ability of integrating these "converts" into Orthodoxy, offering them our Hellenic culture along with the Faith. Entire families are converting into the Faith and proceeding to enroll their children in the Hellenic Dance program and in many cases even the Greek School. Even a good number of adults are enrolling in the Modern Greek and New Testament Greek classes. Our Greek Festival stands as a major cultural event for them as much as it is for those of us who are of Greek heritage.

### **We have a "product" that we are not marketing**

Please allow me to borrow a secular business model for this part: You know that Chick-fil-A is a great company because they have a great chicken sandwich, MacDonald's because of their Big Mac, Apple because of their iPhone. The Orthodox Church is the Church because of the Historic Faith and Worship it has preserved and which it offers to those seeking to enter the Kingdom of God. The Orthodox Church, of course, has a far greater and more valuable "product" than any of these secular companies.

Chick-fil-A, MacDonald's and Apple, however, spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year advertising the special products they have. And yet, in our parish we don't even have a single penny allocated in the budget for the promotion of the parish and/or the Faith to the surrounding community. This is totally incongruent with the Commission of Christ and the Mission of the parish as we have discussed in the beginning. We do have the greatest "product" but we are not "marketing" it to the world around us. People are seeking what we have, but we are keeping it a secret.

A simple example I have used many times to illustrate this point is the fact that even after the sanctuary was finished we did not have a sign identifying who we are for more than five years. We kept ourselves under the radar, just unconsciously perhaps, but we still remained hidden.

My proposal is that we consider seriously to allocate money for promoting the parish and the Orthodox Faith to the "Faith Seekers" who are looking for authentic Christianity. This will help fulfill the Mission of the Church for the proclamation of the Gospel and offering salvation to those who seek it. It will also grow the parish in membership and provide more resources for the continuation of the work of Mission/Evangelization and the building up of the "tools" of the parish.

### **Philanthropic Presence of the Parish**

It is Christ Himself who said: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). He also said "if you do these things to the least of these my brethren you have done them to



me" (Matt. 25:40-45) (feed them, clothe them, take care of them). And if you failed to do these things for those in need, you have no place in the Kingdom of God. This injunction of the Lord applies on both the personal level as well as the parish level. We need to respond to the call of Christ and get involved in the caring of those in need (the sick, the suffering, the poor) in a more conscious and organized way. We need to get our hands dirty (so to speak) in serving those who are Christ Himself. If we fail to do that, we will not have a place in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 25:40-45).

We need to allocate significant funds as a Parish to fulfill this call of the Lord and make a greater Philanthropic impact on the community around us. We take from the community through our Greek Festival. We need to return back to the community out of Love for Christ and for the people that are the "least of His brethren".

### **A Collective Parish Vision for the next 3-10 years:**

**I would like to share with you my thoughts as we discuss the direction for the future. I ask that you discuss a Vision for the parish with your priest as the catalyst at the center of the implementation of this Vision:**

- A. **Growth:** For the next 3-5 years I would like to see us consider seriously the allocation of significant resources to make the parish visible in the local community through an aggressive outreach program that will include reaching out to the unchurched Orthodox Christians, but also promoting the Orthodox Faith to those outside the Orthodox Church, as well as taking care of those in need. If we truly love God, people around us will recognize it; they will know that we are followers of Christ from our love for God and our good works towards others and many "Faith Seekers" will be added to the Parish. As the parish grows in numbers of faithful, the resources of the parish will also grow to provide for the funding of future buildings and ministries.
  - B. **Faith Training:** This is the training of both existing members and newcomers in the ways of the Faith. An important realization is that we are a young parish with many young families and many children. It seems necessary to me that we focus on these young people who will constitute the core future membership of the parish. I would like to see us build up our youth activities and implement the concept of the "**youth kafenio**", providing teenagers and young adults with a regular "hangout" place where they can have both social and spiritual edification (we renovated the basement of the office with this idea in mind, but have not implemented a plan for its use). I would also like to see a more aggressive effort to organize the **college students** and **young adults** so that they may retain their connection with the parish during those years when they are educating and redefining themselves. **Young couples** have not adequately received our full attention, either. I would like to see the parish focus on young couples and their spiritual needs as they begin to build their new families. In the next three to five years, I suggest that we consider acquiring a **second full-time priest** to assist in offering more worship services, pastoral care, youth work, teaching and preaching for both existing members and "Faith Seekers". I would also like to see us allocate funds to bring in on a regular basis theologically trained **Orthodox professionals** for Marriage Seminars, Parenting Seminars, Youth Worker Seminars, Catechism Teacher Seminars, to help deepen the faith and knowledge of our people.
- Theological Conferences:** I would also like to see us begin to hold an annual theological conference here at our parish on topics which will engage intellectually

our people on contemporary issues, scientific, medical and moral issues. Most of our people have received higher education in secular areas. We need to help them bridge the gap between the secular world and Faith at the highest level by engaging them intellectually in theological dialogue which will inform the issues and concerns of our times from an Orthodox Christian perspective (*see below "Parenthesis on the Intellectual Victory of Christianity"*). **Christian School:** My hope is to see our parish establish in the next 5 to 10 years a Christian School providing children with full immersion in Orthodox theology and way of life. Such a school will provide formation from an early age for young men and women that will hopefully grow and develop to assume positions of leadership in the "Faith Training" of the future generations, as clergy, lay leaders and educators in the Orthodox Church.

- C. **Obtaining Tools for fulfilling the Mission of the Parish:** Certainly, as time passes and as we grow in numbers we need more land, more facilities, more parking. We also need to think of those who are growing older and how to serve them best and help keep them connected to the worship and social life of the parish. We even need a resting place (a place of sleep-κοιμητήριον (cemetery)) for our bodies-the "temples of the Holy Spirit"-as we complete our journey in this world. As we proceed to acquire these tools of ministry, however, we should always be mindful as to how each one of them will serve the Primary Mission of the parish and help lead us to the Kingdom of God. As we consider putting the parish under financial burden, we should be prudent to make sure that this burden will not stifle the growth of the ministries, the outreach efforts and the growth in membership, because the growth of the membership will help finance the future acquisition of land, construction of facilities and development of programs.

As we proceed to discuss the direction of our parish for the next few hours, I plead with you to do it with a prayerful and kind heart. Let's challenge each other always in love so that we may come to the best answers. This is not about satisfying our individual desires. This is about serving God and His people in the best possible way for the long term. It is necessary for us to reach the best answers and formulate the best plans according to the Will of God. We have to do what is necessary so that people may be saved and God may be glorified in this corner of the world for many years to come.

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### **Parenthesis on the intellectual victory of Christianity**

You know that my doctoral work was in Early Christianity, primarily the first six centuries during which Christianity went from a persecuted Faith to a triumphant Church which prevailed over paganism in the Roman Empire.

The graduate program I attended at Catholic University, besides providing the study of history and the social conditions of the time, was also focused on the development of Christian thought during this period from the basic writings of the Gospels to the Apostolic Fathers, the Apologists, Origen and later the Great Theologians of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries (St. Athanasios, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria and others).

This development of intellectual theological thought which transitioned philosophical and religious thinking in the Roman Empire from ancient Greek philosophy to the truths of the teaching of Christ, was at the center of the victory of Christianity. Besides the fact

that the Christians lived exemplary moral and civic lives, took care of those in need and had exemplary families and communities, they were also able to articulate a theology that answered the existential questions of the people and made more sense to the intellectual men and women of the time than the pagan proposals. Once Christianity won over the intellectuals, it won the Empire, it triumphed over paganism and the other religions of the time.

Today in the U.S. (as well as Europe) intellectuals have lost their respect for Christianity. The Christianity they know, of course, has no common voice, but ranges from a watered down Christian humanism to a fundamentalist version promoted mostly by vocal Evangelical Christians who are also turning off many Americans as they struggle to promote their ideas through politics. At the same time, for various historical reasons, such as the 300 years of war between Protestants and Catholics in Europe (1500-1800 AD), the absolutism and authoritarianism offered by various Christian groups over the last 1000 years, but especially because of the visible brokenness of Christianity in the American setting, modern Christians are failing to address the existential questions of the modern person. As a result, many intellectual Americans have rejected Christianity as a whole.

Orthodoxy, however, based on the Patristic thought of the early centuries, is able to provide good answers to many of the issues people are faced with in our times, but these answers are not made available to the people-even our own Orthodox people. Most of our people are more informed by the vocal Christian groups in their vicinity than by their own theological tradition.

We are making ourselves irrelevant because, we either do not know what the great theologians of the Church have taught on the issues at hand, or because we are failing to present the appropriate answers to our people and the general public.

Many a time, we have a "word" to contribute to modern society that makes more sense than anything else available and yet we remain silent.

In Christ's Love,

Fr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, Ph.D.,  
Protopresbyter