

## Annual Pastoral Address 2022

My beloved brothers, our parish Clergy, esteemed members of our Parish Council, leaders of our God-directed ministries and fellowship groups, brothers and sisters in Christ. It is my honor to once again stand before you as your Pastor and offer this Annual Pastoral Address, in which it falls to me to offer a shepherd's eye view of the year we recently completed, and this view of the year to come. This past year was full of large accomplishments, some of which were once-in-a-lifetime level occasions which all were blessed to witness. Others were seemingly small and often hidden from the view of most. For some of these, I was the only one there to recognize the momentousness of the occasion, be that a moment of repentance in Confession, a change of heart in the midst of spiritual direction, or a life changed by means of an expression of the Church's love.

We now enter another year in the life of our parish, and in some ways, we do so with unprecedented strength. The elimination of our debt early in 2021 freed us from the shackles of over two decades of debt. This newfound financial freedom has enabled us to bring new strength primarily to two areas of great need. The first and foremost of these is the spiritual growth and support of our youth. When our Parish Council declared 2020 to be the Year of Our Youth, our various youth committees and teams began an intensive study, both of the effectiveness of our existing youth programs and of the best practices in the Orthodox world for supporting the spiritual lives of our young people. You have been hearing much about this in the last two years and I'm

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thankful, so thankful, that you will hear more about this in today's meeting from our full-time youth director, Mykel Giannakakos, whose presence here in this role represents one of our parish's strongest commitments to our youth to date.

The other area that can now be given appropriate attention due to the retirement of our mortgage is the growing list of large-ticket repairs needed on our beautiful facility that is now well into its third decade of service. As all building experts will tell you, this is the very decade in which the costliest of maintenance repairs to buildings tend to be needed. You will hear about this in greater detail when Joe David, our Treasurer presents both the financial report on 2021 and the Proposed Budget for 2022. Both of these—our commitments both to our youth and the repair and upkeep on the Church Temple, building and grounds that we will bequeath to them—represent monumental efforts, facilitated by the monumental effort it took to eliminate our mortgage.

Beyond these, there are a variety of other accomplishments to celebrate. We have seen a steady overall increase in our total stewardship, and what makes this even more remarkable is the timing of this increase. We have shared for years how our parish has historically been over-dependent on a relative few donors who offered the lion's share of the support needed to operate our parish. The fact that our total stewardship grew at the same time that we lost many of those upon whom we depended for many years makes this growth that much more remarkable.

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Another cause of celebration is in the phenomenal influx of those seeking Orthodox Christianity here at St. Nicholas that we are witnessing. The number of inquirers to Orthodoxy is now ten times our normal level, and, God willing, we will enroll over 20 Catechumens this coming Sunday of Orthodoxy. And still one more accomplishment, of the many I could mention, was the gathering of the perspectives on our parish drawn from our entire community as part of our Strategic Planning process. From that data, we have now embarked on an incredibly ambitious agenda, which Sam Bander will soon share with us later in this Assembly.

Any one of these accomplishments alone would be an incredible success to celebrate, but taken together, how can one calculate the value of these accomplishments, let alone celebrate them? On the one hand we could sit back and give ourselves a big pat on the back. We've enjoyed beautiful successes, enabled by beautiful sacrifices. And to be honest, a part of me wishes that I could encourage this, as it would be such an enjoyable and satisfying experience. But as satisfying as that would be, the main message I want to share with you today is that God has something immeasurably better for us than our own self-congratulations.

We meet not just at the beginning of any new year, but a very significant one for our parish. In it we will, God willing, complete the first century of the history of this, our beloved St. Nicholas Church. You will soon hear more about this celebration from Archdeacon David, Chair of our 100 Year Celebration, which will, God willing

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culminate in a weekend celebration this coming October, presided over by His Eminence, Metropolitan JOSEPH, who will gather all our archdiocesan bishops and the Archdiocesan Board of Trustees once again here in Grand Rapids, to lead this glorious celebration. But as we begin this year of celebration, I would like to encourage you to see it not just as a celebration of our past accomplishments, be that the purchase of our first church building on Cass Avenue in downtown Grand Rapids, or the building of the next St. Nicholas on Boston Street, or the planning, construction and over two decades of worship, education and fellowship we have enjoyed in this beautiful facility, or even the recent successful effort to retire the multi-million dollar debt we took on to establish it. If we were to celebrate all of those as the culmination of our combined efforts and sacrifices, that might be nice, but we would be missing the real one. All of these accomplishments involved many of us, and some of them involved all of us, but what makes them truly extraordinary—miraculous, actually, is that they all—every one of them—not only involved God, they were wrought by His mighty hand. He was the one who empowered our forefathers in our earliest days to establish this Holy Community. He provided the growth and strength to move from our first small building on Cass Avenue to construct the much larger facility on Boston Street. And when He presented the opportunity to build this facility and provide a church for our children not yet born and those whom God would lead here from all walks of life, He was one that provided the strength and the resources to make this a reality.

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We, who have so many successes for which we could give ourselves credit, have a greater opportunity to now see something so much more powerful and true. That truth is the same truth proclaimed by those who bodily encountered Jesus in the Gospels: that God has visited His people. Look around you. Think of this beautiful place, from the subtle elegance of the very room we sit in today, to the classrooms, newly-expanded library and well-stocked bookstore in which young and old gather to encounter and wrestle with the truths of the eternal and the perfect. Down the hall is a temple dedicated to the glory of God and the memory of St. Nicholas, that humble bishop who lived a millennium and a half ago yet who still in our day provides inspiration for faith. In the glorious space of our church, faithful of all backgrounds encounter the God who can seem so very hard to find in today's loud and busy world. Self-proclaimed atheists enter and are challenged by the beauty of a God they were so sure did not exist. At the other end of this building is a suite of offices, built ready to handle a growing staff that has been brought together to support a growing parish whose ministries are reaching deep and wide. Love flows from this place and heads in all directions, from our new-found friends on the west side of Grand Rapids at Shepherd of Independence to a woman in Antioch, Tennessee of all places, who woke up today and walked on a new floor in her previously-flooded home. So much accomplishment, so much growth, so much love.

But God-forbid we should give in to the temptation to claim credit for any of the countless miracles that God has performed right in front of our eyes. He has indeed visited His people; He has visited us. In the same way as we look back on a century of miracles, we can look forward to the next century—or as many days as God gives each of us. Let us look forward, not with pride and excitement to a bright future that we will create with all that we could accomplish. We look and move forward with our eyes searching for the next way God’s hand will move and work among us: the same hand of God that has always been guiding us, that has always been strengthening us, and that has always provided everything that we would need to do His holy will. The only success that will truly be our own would be to see clearly all that God is doing in our midst, and blessing us to witness and participate with Him in these mighty works.

Let me conclude my remarks by once again inviting you to join me in thanking just some of the folks who work to allow God to make our parish what it is, and facilitate it becoming what God is calling us to be. To our dedicated staff, Keith, Kim, Dan and Mykel, who work daily to support all of our parishioners. To each and every faithful volunteer leader of our many Fellowship Groups and Ministry Teams who work tirelessly to further the kingdom of God here at St. Nicholas. To all of our volunteers who selflessly and sacrificially offer their time and talents to those groups and teams, in these many and varied ministries of our parish. To our Parish Council, who work hard at every meeting to discern the will of God in leading our community.

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To my wonderful wife and your Khouia, Vicky, and my beautiful children, Maria, Joshua and Elena, all of whom sacrifice much to allow me to fulfill my ministry to you.

Lastly, before I hand over the gavel to Mike Simon for the next segment of our Assembly, allow me to share a few words about his service, as he today concludes six years as the Chair of our Parish Council. That position is not an enviable one. To be effective in that position, you have to take your own imperfections and apply them to expectations of perfection from an often-demanding community, who expect unparalleled financial management, inscrutable crisis management, unrelenting control of us wild and wily priests, all while heading up the complaint department about all of those and a hundred other areas. Mike has served with distinction and sacrifice known only to God and maybe Lynn. I have witnessed a good chunk of it, and for all that you have done for this parish—and for me and my ministry—I offer my sincere appreciation and love. Thanks, Mike. God bless you and God bless our beautiful parish.