

“Nurturing Our Relationships in Christ”

Opening Address of Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago
2023 Metropolis of Chicago Clergy-Laity Assembly
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Your Eminence, beloved brother in Christ, Archbishop Elpidophoros of America,
Your Grace, Bishop Timothy of Hexamilion,
Reverend Clergy,
Honored Members of the Metropolis Council
Beloved Women of the Philoptochos,
Esteemed Lay Delegates of our Parish Councils,
Respected Guests at this Assembly,
Beloved Family in Christ, all:

Welcome to the 2023 Clergy-Laity Assembly of the Metropolis of Chicago!

I’m very pleased to see so many amazing people in the same place. In this busy day and age, it’s a rare thing indeed when we can all come together to discuss business, to understand concerns, to share stories, and simply to enjoy each other’s company.

These activities, of course, can happen with any large gathering of people. But our gathering today is *special*. We come together, not for our own sake, but for the sake of others; and above all, for the sake of *One*—our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ promised that where two or three gather in His name, He is there in the midst of them. So, we welcome, first and foremost, our Lord and Savior to this holy Assembly. May His Spirit guide our thoughts and words throughout!

I’ve spent *a great deal of time* reflecting on *why we are here*. When I say a “great deal of time” I literally mean months and years. And when I say “we” I mean – “we” as the members of the Metropolis of Chicago, “we” as Orthodox Christians, and “we” the Body of Christ.

Practically speaking, we’re here to discuss issues and topics important to the life of our Metropolis: proposals to reshape our financial structure; ways to better support our ministries; the search for our Metropolis Center; the larger question of growing the Church here in the heart of the Midwest; and so on.

But, above and beyond the agenda items for this Assembly, we are here because *we want a better future for all people*, we want a **vision** that brings out the best in us, leading to growth and vitality for the Church. I look forward to all the coming discussions—the sublime and the mundane alike—and I pray that our dialogue be meaningful, and our choices be well-considered. But in a sense, the

Lord has already begun to answer that prayer today: by the amazing set of people that He has brought together from near and far to conduct our business. For, I tell you truly, I have deep confidence and faith in *who* is in the room here today.

Who are you? You are leaders in your parishes, to be sure. But more than that, by being here today you demonstrate that you are willing to *sacrifice* for what you believe in. You are my co-workers in Christ who challenge me daily to match your spirit of self-dedication and, wherever I can, to exceed it. You are the kind of “whos” I want to be surrounded by regularly.

I recently read a book that has influenced my thinking on the nature and nurture of our relationships in the Church. It’s called *Who Not How: The Formula to Achieve Bigger Goals Through Accelerating Teamwork* by Dan Sullivan and Dr. Benjamin Hardy. The central theme of the book is simple but transformative: Stop worrying about *how* work gets done and reflect instead on *who* should best do the work. When the “whos” are highly capable, self-motivated, self-managing, trustworthy individuals, they accomplish much more, and with much less effort all around.

Beloved servant-leaders of the Metropolis of Chicago: *You* are the *Whos* that Christ has called to manifest *How* His Church will grow and flourish! May your love for the Lord and His Church inspire one another, just as all of you have inspired me.

There’s a particular quote from the book *Who Not How* that speaks to what we can accomplish through our shared work; and more importantly, *who we can become*.

“Relationships are how you transform as a person. Relationships are how you transcend your current limitations. Relationships are how you produce results. Relationships are the purpose of life.”

Think for a moment about what we can accomplish through relationships. Relationships invite us to cooperate and collaborate rather than to contend and compete. Think now about what we can accomplish *when our relationships are centered in Christ*. Centered in Christ, every one of our relationships take on a new and profound meaning and purpose. The giving and receiving of Christ’s love through our relationships—with our family, with our friends, with our neighbors, with our colleagues, and with our churches—is fundamentally what successful Church life looks like.

These kinds of relationships transform us. “As iron sharpens iron,” Proverbs (27:17) tells us, “So one person sharpens another.” *This* is what our relationships can and should do: hone us, refine us, perfect us ... conform us to the image and likeness of God, the source of life and love.

This is not just theory for me. I have been blessed to know people of faith in this Metropolis who have sharpened and refined me. Many of you are here today. But one question on my mind since becoming a member of the clergy always has been: *How do we find more people like this? How do we create relationships in which “iron sharpens iron”?*

There is an immediate and obvious answer: “the right people always appear when we know what we stand for and can articulate what we desire as a faith community.”

The right people respond when there is a clear sense of **a mission and a vision**. Many of you participated in the process to identify a mission and a vision about five years ago. That was a good process, but it was in some ways premature. At that time, I was just getting to know you. We were just starting to form our relationships and uncover challenges. We were learning what this Metropolis is capable of.

But today: having come to know you, having listened to you, having seen this Metropolis at its best, and now knowing how transformative our relationships in Christ can be, I want to offer to you a vision for what this Metropolis can achieve in the future.

Some of you got a sneak preview of the Metropolis vision a few weeks ago. Before we discuss the vision, let me speak about our mission which is a statement of what we stand for and why we exist. The mission of the Metropolis is:

The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago seeks to share God’s love unconditionally with all people through its parishes and institutions, clergy and laity, and employees and volunteers.

Simply put, our **mission** must be the **Great Commission**: bringing Christ to all people, preaching the Gospel, teaching God’s commandments, and sanctifying the faithful through the Sacraments of the Church. It is incumbent upon us, the Metropolis of Chicago, to bring this mission to life through our everyday practices and by deeds of love and kindness.

With our mission in mind, our 5-year vision focuses on growth through relationships:

Our relationships with family, friends, and neighbors unite us to Christ and produce vital fruit for a vibrant Church.

Our vision focuses on **five key areas**:

1. Developing Clergy
2. Supporting Parishes
3. Expanding Philanthropy
4. Enhancing Engagement
5. Fueling Growth

Developing Clergy: Our vision starts intentionally and relationally with the **clergy** and the **parishes** as the essential bonds to the practice of our faith. I'm proud of what our *Higher Calling* program has achieved so far. By providing support and opportunities for continuing education, workshops, and retreats, 20 clergy have begun developing into more dynamic leaders, teachers, and spiritual fathers. **By 2028, our Metropolis will provide at least 50 of our clergy an opportunity to participate in *Higher Calling* initiatives. Moreover, 3 of the 50 clergy will be trained and prepared to train future clergy leaders.** In the end, we want our clergy to be *servant-leaders who lead by example.*

Support of Parishes: About 90% of what we do as a Church takes place at the parish level. This entails that our vision must crucially be about the parishes. Naturally, the development of strong clergy leaders will have a direct impact on the vitality of our parishes. We are, however, also committed to providing direct resources and tools to our parishes to help them do God's work. We have already noticed the fruits sprouting from our *Strengthen Stewardship Now and Forever* program and from our *Mustard Seed Fund*. These resources have provided parishes with resources to help them express their creativity and make a greater local impact. In the end, we want our people not only to know the Gospel, but we also want the Gospel to live in their hearts. To date, the Metropolis has offered 5 parish stewardship workshops and 9 *Mustard Seed* parish grants. **By 2028, our Metropolis will award 50 grants and host 30 parish stewardship workshops.** All these are examples of how we *nourish the spiritual growth of the faithful within the parish setting.*

Expand Philanthropy: We know our parishes are centered around their churches. *But* we also want our broader communities themselves to be centered around our churches, as the places our neighbors and fellow citizens look towards for hope and the hand of God. The good works of our parishes—our outreach and philanthropy—make an impact because they are tangible demonstrations of the *relevance of our unchanging faith in an ever-changing world.* To date, we have served 1.8M meals, provided 8,000 nights of shelter, and distributed 72,000 personal care kits to those in need. **By 2028 our Metropolis will serve more than 18M meals, provide more than 80,000 nights of shelter, and distribute 700,000 personal care kits to our sisters and brothers in need.**

Increase Engagement: We also know that the good we do in our communities is noticed, appreciated, and embraced, especially by young adults and those seeking to embrace Christ. We know that our work in our communities *reinforces our engagement with our young adults and is crucial to nourishing their practice of our faith.* A vibrant outreach is crucial to a vibrant “in-reach” to the future generations of the Church. Currently, 2,000 youth and young adults participate in Metropolis-wide programs, and 3,000 women are members of local Philoptochos chapters. Moreover, on average across all our parishes, we receive into our faith community 140 adults per year. **By 2028, 50,000 individuals per year will participate in participation in our ministries**

and programs. Also, our renewed love and care for our neighbors will prepare us to receive more than 1,400 new adult members of our church family each year.

Fuel Growth: Our ministries—the work we do in God’s name—cannot and must not be hobbled by debt and other financial liabilities. Currently, our parishes often find themselves stuck choosing between immediate financial obligations and unclear long-term growth. We all know what usually happens next. Long-term opportunities are sacrificed for immediate needs.

In our vision, fostering relationships will help us experience new freedoms—including financial freedom—to do God’s work with greater boldness. Discussions describing this in detail will take place during today’s plenaries; however, allow me to state that **by 2028 the Metropolis will invest 100% of the Archdiocesan National Ministries funds it receives back to our parishes. As a result, by 2028 all long-term debt of our parishes (\$15M) will be eliminated. By 2028, instead of carrying debt and being “slave to master,” as Proverbs teaches, our parishes will be free to offer the fruit of our relationships for the growth of the Church and for the glory of God.**

The cycle as described doesn’t conclude once we have harvested the first fruits of our relationships. The cycle never ends. It repeats again and again, allowing our Christ-centered relationships with family, friends, and neighbors to ripen over time and proceed from glory to glory.

By 2028, we will fulfill our mission by cultivating relationships. We will do this by:

- a. Developing our **clergy** into stronger spiritual leaders for their flocks.
- b. Serving our **parishes** so they can thrive and remain institutions society turns to for hope and support.
- c. Shining the Light of Christ as we serve people through our **philanthropy and outreach**.
- d. Increasing engagement and participation in our ministries and programs so that our **youth, emerging leaders, adults, and families** have an enriching experience of Christ.
- e. **Fueling the growth** of the Church through newfound freedoms.

Brothers and sisters, if all of this resonates with you, it’s no accident. These priorities, focus areas, and outcomes are fundamentally what you’ve shared with me over the past five years. So, essentially, you are all the authors of this vision for our Holy Metropolis, whether you knew it or not. I thank you all for your patience, for allowing me the time and space to make mistakes and grow as your leader. Forging a vision has truly been one of the greatest challenges in my life. But, with a vision for our Metropolis now established, all future decisions—whether administrative or programmatic; tactical or strategic—become far easier to make for us all.

I want to thank the Metropolis Council, our 9 clergy vicars, our clergy brotherhood, the Philoptochos Board, and the more than 100 people who helped shape this vision when it was still wet cement. This process has been a journey and, in some ways, a struggle—a very necessary struggle. As Aristotle reminds us, “Learning is not child's play; we cannot learn without pain.” I have peace of mind that this is the way forward, and I invite all of you to do your part in helping to pursue this vision for the future.

In the coming months, I will work with our clergy and encourage them to begin the process of casting a vision for their parish. As the principal leaders of our parishes, developing a vision is the primary responsibility of the clergy; however, they will depend upon you—their parishioners and lay leaders—to help refine and shape their vision. Together, you will identify *familiar relationships* that you wish to enhance; the *expanded relationships* that you wish to foster, and the *fruits of those relationships* that you wish to enjoy. And as the cycle repeats and teamwork accelerates, we are all brought into a closer and closer relationship of love with our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this undertaking, the Metropolis will help you craft parish visions that will work in harmony with those of all levels of the Church: Patriarchate, Archdiocese, and Metropolis. We intend *always* and *only* to work within the global vision of our Ecumenical Patriarchate and the national vision of our Archdiocese, cooperating on all levels for the mutual building up of the whole Church. And yet we all cast the nets of the Gospel in different ways in our different localities. Our diversity in unity is what makes the Church truly ecumenical, and our respect for individual uniqueness is what makes the Church truly universal.

Let me close now by sharing a bit about our keynote speaker for this Clergy-Laity Assembly, Mr. Marc Polymeropoulos. Marc is a retired officer of the Senior Intelligence Service who served at the Central Intelligence Agency for 26 years in field assignments and in leadership positions. I first was introduced to Marc by a mutual friend. Later, after reading his book, “Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the CIA,” I got to know Marc as a person, an image of God, and a very special “who” in all our lives.

Marc will share his own experiences of how highly effective, self-managing groups of “whos” at the CIA served this nation by warding off threats of death and destruction. He has much to teach us about the dynamics of effective relationships within a team. In his work, Marc speaks about his role in the CIA as follows:

“This role is a calling and a lifestyle. It is *not* a 9-5 job for the faint of heart. It involves having immense intestinal fortitude and a willingness to engage in personal risk and sacrifice, with an ultimate belief that *what we do* in this gray and confused world is ultimately designed to protect those we love.”

My friends, like Marc's work in the CIA, *all of us* in this room partake in high-stakes/high-impact work. Marc and his team were saving lives; we're trying to save souls. All people, whether they know it or not, are counting on us. I believe from the bottom of my heart that the more we pursue our vision, the more we will help all those people around us who are seeking hope, meaning, and purpose in their lives. I hope you feel the same sense of urgency and excitement about the future of our Metropolis and our Church!

May the Triune God bless the work of this Clergy-Laity Assembly, and may the Lord clarify our vision and strengthen the relationships within the Metropolis of Chicago, for the glory of His Name and for the salvation of the world. Amen!