



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF CHICAGO

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΣΙΚΑΓΟΥ

August 12, 2025

ON THE FUTURE OF THE SAINT IAKOVOS RETREAT CENTER

To the stewards, beloved friends, and generous supporters of the Metropolis of Chicago,

Our core values—Service, Candor, Adaptability, Humility, Christ-Centeredness, and Love—have guided us through countless challenges and opportunities. Today, those same values call us into a season of honest and prayerful dialogue about a matter of great consequence: the future of The Saint Iakovos Retreat Center (the SIRC/the Retreat Center).

Why Are We Discussing This Now?

In practical terms, the conversation is prompted by an approaching reality: by 2027, when our current loan matures, the SIRC will still carry a debt of approximately \$2.3 million. To refinance, the Metropolis will almost certainly be required to guarantee the loan—our single largest financial liability.

But let us be clear: this discernment process cannot and must not be reduced to simply figuring out how to pay off a debt or how to make use of a piece of property. Yes, the weight of the debt and the pressure of a maturing loan may feel overwhelming. Yet these challenges present us with something far greater: an opportunity to pause, to take a clear-eyed look at ourselves, and to ask whether we are living faithfully according to our purpose, mission, vision, and values.

The opportunity before us is not simply to solve a financial problem, but to ensure that our decisions advance the sacred mission entrusted to us and also present us as members of the Body of Christ.

How We Got Here, a Brief Overview

In 2006, the Metropolis of Chicago acquired property in Kansasville, Wisconsin, establishing the SIRC. While the Clergy-Laity Assembly officially authorized the purchase, the process was not without controversy. We do not seek to relitigate past decisions; however, it is important to be candid: the decision to acquire this property was not the result of an authentic, uninhibited, and open debate. Many of our faithful felt there was no alternative but to “toe the line.” This is a painful truth we must acknowledge—not to assign blame, but to understand the unvarnished facts and take responsibility for where we stand today.

When I began my ministry as your Metropolitan in 2018, I was strongly advised by some leaders to divest the SIRC quickly. They warned it would become a financial burden on the Metropolis

and our parishes. While I took these concerns seriously, I also recognized that the Saint Iakovos Retreat Center was more than a piece of real estate, an asset, or a liability—it was a place of ministry, personal investment, and the home of our beloved Fanari Camp. Out of respect for its history and for those who sacrificed to establish it, I was not prepared to act hastily.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would have made different decisions related to the SIRC. One could say that this discernment process should have started immediately upon assuming my responsibilities as your Hierarch. As a new Metropolitan, however, I was learning and growing in my leadership. My lack of experience and, looking back, my fear of failure made me excessively cautious. I did not want to make rash decisions that could harm the faithful or the ministries entrusted to my care. I thus sought ways to avoid shuttering a facility we desired to utilize as a center of community, ministry, and Orthodox Christian formation in our Metropolis.

Instead of divesting, I commissioned a review to understand the Retreat Center’s strengths and weaknesses. After receiving this report, I remained convinced that it was important to continue supporting the SIRC, recognizing the unique role it plays in the life of our Church. We made every effort to sustain the Center, nurture its ministries, and explore pathways toward long-term stability. As part of this commitment, the Metropolis also chose to forgive approximately \$373,000 in past legacy debt owed by the SIRC, in the hope of giving it a stronger foundation for the future.

Friends, I must also acknowledge that early in my tenure, I made the decision—which I have since recognized as a mistake—to eliminate the longstanding mandatory parish assessment for the SIRC. My desire was to ease the financial burden many parishes felt and alleviate the burden that many of my priests quietly raised to me. I had hoped that, as parishes understood and embraced the mission of the SIRC, voluntary parish support would surpass funds raised in the past through compulsory giving. Sadly, this desired scenario did not come to pass. Where the mandatory annual assessment peaked at approximately \$215,000 in 2013, voluntary contributions since 2018 have averaged approximately \$55,000 per year (not including the 2020/2021 COVID years).

Recent Steps Taken

In our continuing effort to find solutions, we recently engaged the expertise of a dedicated steward of the Metropolis who has significant experience in helping institutions assess their stability and long-term sustainability. At my request, he has worked closely with the Metropolis Council, as well as with the SIRC board and staff to conduct a fresh evaluation and to discern potential paths to move forward. This provides us with valuable insights as we embark on this next phase of discernment and action.

Lessons Learned

We have come to understand an important truth: loving the Retreat Center is not the same as

having the capacity—or the willingness—to fund it at a level that secures its long-term sustainability and growth. Increased usage alone cannot solve the challenge. Even if we were to eliminate the burden of debt service, operational costs continue to rise each year, and significant deferred maintenance expenses loom on the horizon. As the facilities age, they will require substantial capital investment simply to remain safe, functional, and welcoming for ministry—let alone to complete and enhance the campus so it can fulfill its intended potential.

At the same time, our primary source of revenue—usage of the facility—does not come close to covering operational costs. This leaves us with significant shortfalls each year (this year, we estimate a \$500,000 shortage). We are forced to exert tremendous effort to close this gap each year through special fundraisers, sponsorships, and outside grants. We are deeply grateful to the present and past members of the SIRC Board who, despite these ongoing challenges, have labored faithfully to operate and maintain the Center with dedication and love for the Church. Their commitment has been a constant source of strength for this ministry. Yet, the reality remains that this effort is strenuous, unsustainable, and diverts energy and resources from other vital ministries of the Metropolis. Compounding the challenge is the reality that since 2015, only 19 of our 58 parishes have regularly used the SIRC for their programs, underscoring the difficulty of sustaining a facility that is not consistently engaged by all our communities.

The Work Before Us

Faithful leadership cannot cling to the status quo out of sentiment, habit, or fear. Nor can it act rashly without first listening attentively to the people of God. As we approach the next Clergy-Laity Assembly, we are being called to answer two essential questions through the guidance of our purpose, mission, vision, and core values.

With these as our compass, we must prayerfully consider:

1. ***Question of Alignment:*** Does owning and operating a retreat center—any retreat center—fit within our mission, vision, and core values, and does it meaningfully advance the purpose for which our Metropolis exists?
2. ***Question of Commitment:*** If we discern that the answer to the first question is “yes,” are we truly prepared to provide the sustained financial resources needed not only to keep the SIRC open but to make it thrive for years to come?

These are the questions that must guide our work. ***If***, through this process, we discern that owning and operating the SIRC does not meaningfully advance our mission, vision, and values, then our path becomes clear: we must begin the difficult process of divestment and seek new ways to fulfill our ministries. However, if we determine that the SIRC is indeed an essential part of our mission, then we must face the stark reality before us: we will need to intensify our commitment by reinstating mandatory parish support—or an equivalent long-term funding mechanism—so that the Center can be sustained and strengthened for the future.

For this reason, we are initiating an open, transparent, and inclusive discernment process. This has

already included ongoing discussions at both the Metropolis Council and the SIRC Board levels. We have also established a Metropolis-wide Treasurers Commission to help shape a realistic and responsible budget for the Metropolis, which will include support for the SIRC and other Metropolis programs. In the coming weeks, we will also hold special Town Hall meetings to provide all of you an opportunity to better understand potential challenges and opportunities, and to offer your perspectives.

Friends, the question before us is not whether we love the Saint Iakovos Retreat Center—our love for it is beyond question. The deeper question is whether our capacity to take responsibility matches the depth of that love. If it does, then I have no doubt that we can not only sustain but also advance the mission of the SIRC, offering a stable and fruitful foundation for a growing, thriving Church for generations to come.

Next Steps

To lead this process with transparency and integrity, we will take the following steps:

1. **Establish a Working Group to Determine Paths to Financial Stability:** Financial experts from within our community will evaluate and determine the capital requirements needed to stabilize the SIRC over the next ten years.
2. **Conduct Virtual Town Hall Meetings:** Multiple virtual Town Hall meetings will be held to present information, answer questions, and listen to the concerns and hopes of the faithful across all regions of our six-state Metropolis.
3. **Engage Parish Leadership in Budget Consultation:** We have already begun inviting parish treasurers and presidents to participate in our Treasurers Commission, where they receive full access into the financial operations of the Metropolis—including matters related to the Retreat Center. This dialogue will continue and expand.
4. **Assess Parish Financial Commitment:** Every parish will be asked to prayerfully assess its willingness and ability to contribute toward a special assessment for the next two-year budget period to sustain the SIRC.
5. **Assess Long-term Parish Support:** In addition to immediate, short-term parish support of the SIRC, we will also assess our parishes' ability to provide ongoing, long-term support, which is necessary for addressing regular deferred maintenance costs and potential future development of the grounds and facilities.
6. **Report Findings and Make Recommendations:** The findings of these committees and consultations will be compiled and shared with the entire Metropolis, with clear recommendations for the path forward.
7. **Explore Future Options for Fanari Camp:** To prepare prudently for the possibility that the Saint Iakovos Retreat Center may no longer serve as the home of our camping ministry

in the future, a dedicated team will identify and evaluate alternative sites and potential partnerships to ensure that Fanari Camp continues to thrive.

8. **Remain Rooted in Prayer and Unity:** Most importantly, throughout the process we will remain grounded in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to grant us the humility to discern and the courage to follow God's will.

Our Enduring Commitment to our Youth

As we celebrate yet another fruitful summer camp season, I want to reassure you: the ministry of Fanari Camp will continue to flourish, no matter where it is housed. Owning, maintaining, and developing property has never been our mission; rather, our mission is to form our youth in Christ, nurturing them in faith, hope, and love. Whatever path we discern in the years ahead, we remain steadfast in our commitment to this sacred work, which will continue—faithfully, vibrantly, and fruitfully.

This is a defining moment for our Metropolis—a moment that calls for mature, responsible, and prayerful leadership. It invites us to act with Christ-centered love, humility, candor, service, and adaptability. If we walk this path together, grounded in truth and faithful to the mission entrusted to us, I am confident that we will emerge stronger, more united, and better prepared to fulfill our sacred calling: to usher all people to God.

Expressing to you my enduring gratitude for your commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ, I seek your prayers and partnership as we begin this journey together.



†NATHANAEL
Metropolitan of Chicago