

Comments on the 2013 Lenten Pastoral Retreat

Diocese of Chicago and Middle America ROCOR

Mar 20/April 2 - Mar 22/ April 3 2013

It is our custom in our diocese for the clergy to gather around our bishop twice a year in the cathedral of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God, Des Plaines, IL. One of these times is during Great Lent, and the other is for the Patronal feast of the Cathedral, in the Fall.

I hate to travel - I am a nervous and sometimes confused traveler, but I love having traveled and seeing my brothers again. I regret that Fr Nicholas could not come due to his work obligations. He would have loved it. He is in the same boat I was once in, having a young family and a full time job, and juggling time off to include important days such as Good Friday, and Holy Thursday, and trying to have a little bit left for his family time.

We are a poor diocese, but we are very rich. I have been around a little, especially because of the Internet, and I do not know of a more peaceful diocese anywhere. I truly enjoy being around my brother clergy, and it is always warms my soul to see how freely and easily we interact with our chief shepherd, Bishop Peter. We are truly free to say anything, in public or private, and there is a sense in our gatherings of acceptance, support and calm.

It is not like this all over the Orthodox landscape. I am always *consciously* aware of how grateful I am that we have this peace and unity amongst ourselves. Our small diocese is growing, and although poor, is quite healthy financially. It is a privilege to be a part of this growth.

This is not to say that we do not have opinions, and disagreements in our deliberations. We are a mix of shy and open, quiet and not so quiet, opinionated and taciturn, but our disagreements are always accomplished "agreeably". We all collaborated on an excellent Resolution, so to be published, which we will read to our parishes. We also had an important mutual pastoral concern, and came up with an important step towards addressing it. I think we did important work this week. May God's blessing descend upon our humble pastoral outreach, and have it be received in the same prayerful and pastoral spirit in which it was conceived.

Of course the focus of our gathering is our concelebrating of the Divine Liturgy together. We celebrated Vespers and Matins the evening before, with The usage of English and Slavonic split approximately 50% each. As an Anglophone, I much appreciate this, but in the beautiful candlelit cathedral, when the Slavonic was read quite beautifully by the parish Cantor (who is equally adept in Slavonic and English) and others, I would usually look upon one of the icons and pray the Jesus prayer, and in some way, the moments felt very holy and pure. I do not want to insinuate that I prayed in a holy way or with much attention, because I am a jumble of sins and thoughts, but I will boldly say that my soul was enlarged by the experience and I treasure these moments. One of the Fathers the following morning asked me if I wanted to stand in the cliros, which was full of clergy chanting and singing in English and Slavonic (when we had the 3rd, 6th and 9th hour and Typika before the Presanctified Liturgy), and I answered no, because it is rare for a priest to be able to stand in the church, and just pray. I appreciate those moments. Perhaps I take advantage, with good attention to 10% of these moments, but this is still a great blessing for my soul, and I hope, for those whom I remember during these holy times. My flock and my family may be assured that my heart is with you very much during these times.

Something always happens at some point during the Divine Liturgy, usually around the time of the Great Entrance. This is always the highlight of my trip, but talking about it cannot convey the experience. I become overwhelmed with a kind of certainty deep within my soul that we are surrounded by holiness, - the saints and the angels, and the Holy Spirit in all of us, and we are doing something holy - together, as brothers. It always seems to me that if I fully understood at that moment the enormity of our brotherly love, expressed by our solidarity and sobriety in gathering around our chief shepherd to partake of the Holy body and Blood Of our Lord together, I would fully understand love, and be able to love fully, and therefore to know God, and act as God. This is a comforting feeling, but always, in that peculiar way that we who are Orthodox, (if we love and understand our prayers) understand - it is distressing too. I am in the presence of holiness and I am barely aware of it, and yet, I am filled with the sure hope that my brothers and I, and those whom we touch in our pastoral administrations - will understand it fully, someday. I have heard the term "bright sadness" used to describe Great Lent, and it does, but it also describes these moments, an all moments of deep prayer, and, if we are not lazy and dissolute, every day of our lives.

Priest Seraphim Holland 2013 [St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas](#)

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seraphim@orthodox.net