

February 17, 2022 - A Time of Transitions

Dear Parishioners of Saint John Cathedral,

We have a Church Family Meeting scheduled for Sunday, February 27. In this letter I would like to share my perspective on a few issues we will discuss, so that everyone can have an opportunity to think about these things ahead of the time.

In some ways our parish is not a “typical” Orthodox parish. I do not say this to be boastful about ourselves or to be critical of anyone else, as either of these would be utterly foolish. We have a unique geographic setting in beautiful Alaska, we have a parish community surrounding the Cathedral, we have a School and a Saint James House, to name a few atypical things. Nevertheless, we are approaching a critical time in our parish. In the months and years ahead we will face several inevitable transitions. How we fare in these transitions depends on how we discern the will of God and what decisions we make together. All of us have a role in this process, and will also seek the guidance and blessing of Metropolitan Joseph who is our Bishop.

To begin with, I am now 65 years old. I have been pastor of Saint John’s since 1995. Some people ask when I am going to retire. I tell them that I thank God for good health and that I have no immediate plans to retire. If God allows and most agree, I see myself keeping on a few more years. We have also been blessed to have other clergy serving our parish, and this has been of immense benefit. However, these clergy are also getting older. So one of the questions before us is who among us is ready to prepare himself to be a deacon or a priest? This is an inevitable transition we need to think about.

But there are other, more immediate transitions.

First of all there is our School. It is a remarkable effort we have supported for nearly 40 years. What started as a homeschool co-op has grown to be a School with nearly 100 students and 20 staff. The last two years brought especially dramatic change. Since we were able to maintain in-person classes during the first Covid year, we enrolled over 30 new students, none of whom were members of our parish and many of whom had little religious background. This was a great challenge, but also a great blessing. These new families and new students brought positive things to our School, and so far they want to stay with us. A Covid-relief grant from the Federal government allowed us to rent the Howell’s house on Monastery Drive this year to provide two additional classrooms, and that grant will continue for one more year. But very soon we will need to make longer term plans for the future. Our School is blessed to have a core of committed and talented teachers and staff, but these are not adequate to keep us going without a regular influx of new, qualified teachers and also capable substitutes. The highest full-time salary for these teachers is currently \$32,000 per year. Why do they work so hard for so little? Put plainly,

they love what they do and their families have other incomes that allow them to do this. I think it would be wonderful if our whole parish took a healthy pride in this ministry and eagerly supported it. Our School has a large impact on the Chugiak/Eagle River community. Furthermore, the goodness of children laughing on the playground, singing in the Cathedral, and chattering in the basement is immeasurable. To lose this presence would bring a deafening silence to our property. But all of this is far from easy and there are many challenges ahead. Our whole parish, along with our School administrators, the newly-formed School Board, and all our School families, needs to pray and think about the future of Saint John's Community School.

The Saint James House is also in transition. Bryan and Anna Potts have done a wonderful job overseeing the House for the last three years. They have persevered faithfully in spite of Covid challenges that frustrated some of their hopes. They entered the House with one child, and now they are leaving with three. At this moment we have no one to take their place. This House is at the center of our community, and it has a 50-year history of being a home for young adults under the supervision of an overseeing family. Having a "program" for young adults is good, but it is not essential. We have had times when the Saint James House has had other purposes, and I think another such time might be at hand. Still, at a minimum we need a good family or couple or a single person to live there and be good keepers of the House and to host the functions it serves. Who among us is ready to take on this role beginning this summer? Maybe it's you.

There are other vital ministries in our parish.

We have been pioneers in developing an Orthodox adaptation of the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" for our children's Christian education. We have been blessed to have several trained and committed catechists, but the need is ongoing. Are there young parents ready to step up and be trained for the next 10 years? (Shelley Finkler will give a summary report.)

We have our guest rooms at the Maranatha House that allow us to host visitors throughout the year.

We have 50 acres of land adjoining our Cathedral property whose promise for the future is yet to be realized.

We have a Sisterhood of women that serve our Parish in many practical ways. The Leadership Committee of this Sisterhood needs new members. (Jennifer Medders will give a summary report.)

John Marc and Bethany would like to re-start some kind of camp this summer for our teens.

We also have a cemetery as part of our campus, something unusual for a Church in modern times. But cemeteries require upkeep. Right now we absolutely need someone to become a “captain of pallbearers.” This “captain” would oversee all the movements of the coffin, from its arrival at the Cathedral, through the procession to the cemetery, to the lowering into the grave. While this need is only occasional, it is urgent. I am committed to seeing that we fill this role before we have another funeral, God willing. Who among us is ready to take on this role?

We also have our annual Eagle River Institute which we have hosted since 1995. Last summer’s change to shorten classes, make meals for everyone, and provide babysitting was very successful. But this Institute is still in transition as we move away from focusing on adult education for our parish to becoming a forum for Orthodox scholars to address lay Christians on important topics. I personally have great hopes for this and my children have been instrumental in their support.

All of these transitions – and others unnamed and unknown at this time – are challenges our parish faces in the months ahead. I am so grateful and amazed by the service so many are already offering. I am humbled by the financial commitment so many have made to our parish over the years. I believe, and I think you believe, that God has led us this far. But none of these ministries is an absolute given that must go on. Maybe there are old things that need to end and new things we need to begin. Only one thing is indispensable, that is our standing together to worship in the Divine Liturgy, since this is what makes us the people of God and the body of Christ. I am convinced, though, that there is much more we can and should continue to do. As Christ said to us: “To whom much is given, much is required” (Lk 12:48).

One more urgent need remains. We need dedicated, talented, intelligent and committed parish council members to stand at the forefront of our parish and with our clergy help discern God’s will in all these things. In two weeks we need two more members willing to serve a term of 3 years, as David Lindblom and Denise Ray step down. Being on the Parish Council is always an important service, but perhaps never more so than in the time that lies just ahead. Who will offer to serve here? I would like to have several volunteers, from which we will choose two this time around. Submit your name now to the Church office.

Maybe you will find all these things overwhelming, as I sometimes do. But maybe you will also find some of them inspiring. Regardless, please prayerfully consider all of them. Let us ask God for His leading and His guidance. I look forward to gathering together on Sunday afternoon, February 27.

With gratitude for you all,
Fr. Marc

Action items mentioned above:

- Future clergy -- priests and deacons
- School teachers and substitute teachers for Saint John's School
- Host family for the Saint James House
- A "Captain of the Pallbearers"
- New Parish Council Members
- New members for the Leadership Committee of the Sisters of Mary and Martha (Report by Jennifer Medders)
- Atrium coordinators and catechists for Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (Report by Shelley Finkler)