Graduation Remarks
The Son of Man Came not to be Ministered Unto, but to Minister
Holy Trinity Seminary
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Your Grace, Reverend Fathers, Esteemed Faculty, Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to first thank Bishop Luke, Dean Schidlovsky, and the governing board and faculty of Holy Trinity Seminary for inviting me to address the graduting class of 2026. This is an honor for our Mid-American Diocese and our Pastoral School and I hope to add some small value to all who have gathered here today.

I am pleased to announce that our Pastoral School is merging with Holy Trinity Seminary as of August 1 of this year. This process was undertaken with the blessing of Metropolitan Nicholas and Archbishop Gabriel more than a year ago, and I am thankful to all who have labored quietly and earnestly behind the scenes to see this process to fruitful conclusion.

When offered to speak today I thought immideately: why me? Yes, I've been a priest for 30 years, but certainly not a good one. I don't really have wisdom to offer despite the gray hair. But I have made many mistakes. And I hope to convey some of that experience gleaned from much trial and error to you. Not in an apophatic way, using just the negative perspective. The first suggestion I have for you: do not use the word "apophatic". Or "homousious". Or other such words with your parishioners. These are not bad words, of course. But putting ourselves on a pedestal, any pedestal that could separate us from our parishioners, is bad. We stand before the very altar of God as priests – we do not need to exalt ourselves in any way beyond this, because there is no higher place in the world. We, as priests, must remember the Lord's words:

"...for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.". (Luke 18:14)

I am very aware that at best I am a tangential part of this gathering, because of course we gather here today first and foremost to celebrate and congratulate those who have completed a great undertaking by fulfilling the graduation requirements of our seminary. I too congratulate all of you on your laudable achievement. May it be for God's glory, your salvation, and the salvaiton of the flock entrusted to you.

I was ordained in 1995 in the Holy Trinity Cathedral, just a few steps away from this hall, by the ever-memorable Metropolitan Laurus, at that time Archbishop of Syracuse and Holy Trinity, the small diocese that eventually was merged with the Eastern American Diocese.
One would hope that after 30 years I could essentially lay out a few key quotations that you could patch together to create a fruitful ministry and then sit down and be quiet. But that is not how the priesthood works. Neither the patching together, nor the sitting down and being quiet. At least I've never seen it work that way. Not in my life, nor in the lives of the priests that I have known in my time as a priest in God's Church.

As the Secretary of our Mid-American diocese for more than 25 years I have had the honor to know many priests, and many more outside our diocese besides. For this I am thankful, because I have learned much from these priests. To be sure, I learned MUCH in the four years I was privilaged to be present here. The point is not that I am good because I learned, but that one very big key to a successful

ministry is to listen. Be willing to be corrected. Accept correction, even if you know it is wrong, with humility and thanks. I see this all too rarely in junior priests. But without fail those in whom I see this striving for humility do better over time. Those who cannot be corrected do poorly. We have to at least attempt to be humble if we want to be the servants of the God Who humbled Himself to become man for our salvation.

We have to learn before we can teach. We have to listen before we can speak. This is the way that our Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia has always been – this has always been our paradigm: learn from those who came before you.

Do not fall into the trap that presently ensnares the world around us by thinking you are wiser because you came later. On the contrary, we should consider ourselves as impoverished because we did not know the fathers resting in the cemetery that we passed on the way to graduation today. I thank God I got to meet some of them. I was corrected and guided by them in very important ways. Sometimes without words – just in seeing how they lived. These lessons guide how I live and serve even until today – 30 years after having left Jordnaville to go to my first parish.

But the Lord sends you YOUR fathers to learn from too – and by definition these are the fathers that you need in your time – even as I had those from whom I needed to learn in my time. Embrace what your fathers are teaching you, whether they are teaching you by talking to you, praying in the church, serving the liturgy, or just walking to the trapeza. Listen much, talk little, emulate your fathers, seek humility, do as you are instructed, be thankful that someone cares enough to tell you how to do things correctly.

Further, I want to suggest strongly to you: seek God's will and seek to bend your will to God's will. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven…" (Matthew 6:10) We should understand this as a charge to us – to be an example to our flock of striving zealously to do God's will. How many great plans we have when we go to our first parish! The new church we will build! The school we will found! The improved hymnography we will introduce! The superstition we will uproot! The perfect community we will lead! But if this is not God's will, there is no chance that it will happen. And if it is God's will, there is no way we will keep it from happening.

It is true that St. Paul said "Let all thing be done decently and in order". (I Corinthians 14:40). He also wrote just a few sentences later: "Let all that you do be done with love." (I Corinthians 16:14). To be clear, the imposition of good order is not the institution of the dictatorship of the new parish priest. It is good to have plans. It is good to identify problems. It is good to create solutions. It is good to strive for order and to eschew chaos. And in many ways we MUST do these things as priests. And challenge our parishioners too, for without challenge there is no growth. We must be, as the Lord noted, "...wise as serpents and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) But all this must be done with love, as must everything in our priestly ministry. St. John Chrysostom wrote that the Church "is a hospital, not a courtroom; not the demand for punishment of sins, but there is the forgiveness of sins." (Volume 49 of Patrologia Graeca, Third Homily on Penitence – source: https://notesbyjv.substack.com/p/where-does-chrysostom-say-the-church)

Love is the key piece. Love is the power of a priest. Not the new plans, not the new utopian community that we secretly suspect in our pride that only we can build. The key is to serve the people that are given to us by our bishop with love. The Lord forgives our sins out of love. We must serve out of love. To truly and sincerely desire the people's salvation, and to do all we can to help facilitate this. If we have this as our paradigm we cannot be far from God's will, at least as a safe surrogate to begin with,

since clearly we can agree that the Lord desires “all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” (I Timothy 2:4)

Please note that there are two key aspects emerging here as necessary for a priest: to love and to serve. I will take for granted that we will not have any disgreements about the necessity to do all things with love. The other issue that we must examine then, is “to serve”. Or in the King James, “to minister”. This passage from Matthew’s twentieth chapter is extremly instructive for us in this regard, and it mirrors essentially the same instruction in Mark’s tenth chapter:

“Jesus called them unto Him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

I often make the argument to my parishioners that these words of the Lord provide us important clairty: if we will bear the name of Christ, that is, call ourselves Christians, we must emulate our Teacher. Christ came to serve. Therefore we also need to serve others. But if this is true for every Christian, how much more is it true of the leader of those Christians who will answer for each of their souls in his parish, and ideally inspire them to Christian service by his own good example?

This is a rhetorical question of course. As priests we must serve and be an example of service. And for us priests, this happens first and foremost in the Divine Services of the Church.

You were, or will be, ordained for what? To serve the Divine Liturgy. Yes of course our priests have other responsibilities. Many of them to be honest. And we need to serve people in various ways. To be all things to all men so that by all means some may be saved. (ref. I Corinthians 9:22)

But no serivce is more important than serving the Divine Liturgy. And none is more powerful than serving the Divine Liturgy. And none affords the instruction and inspiration for us as priests that seving the Divine Liturgy provides. If you want a thriving parish – having a thriving liturgical schedule. If you want to work collaboratively with God, work with Him by serving the Divine Liturgy. And the preparatory services of Vespers and Matins too – this is our tradition in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia – to be diligent in serving the full cycle of services – not just Liturgy. This is a great school of instruction in the spiritual life for us as clergymen. And for the faithful as well. But if WE will not serve the services, it is unlikely the faithful will break into the church to do so without us.

I urge you not to take my word for it – here is St. John of Kronstadt on the Divine Services:

“The Church and its divine services are an embodiment and realization of everything in Christianity. Here, in words and actions, are told the entire economy of our salvation, all of Sacred and Church history, all the goodness, wisdom, faithfulness and immutability of God in His deeds and promises, His truth, holiness and eternal might. Here we encounter a wonderful harmony in everything and an amazing logic both in the whole and in the parts. It is the divine wisdom, accessible to simple, loving hearts.” (ST. JOHN OF KRONSTADT (VOL. 1, St. Petersburg, 1905, p. 185))

Further, from St. Theophan the Recluse:

“All of our liturgical hymns are instructive, profound and sublime. They contain the whole of our theology and moral teaching, give us Christian consolation, and instill in us a fear of the Judgment. He who listens to them attentively has no need of other books on the Faith.” (http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/12/1.aspx)

Finally, from St. John of Shanghai & San Francisco:

“The Divine Services in their composition contain all the fullness of the dogmatic teaching of the Church and set forth the path to salvation. They present invaluable spiritual wealth. The more fully and precisely they are fulfilled, the more benefit the participants receive from them. Those who perform them carelessly and who shorten them by their laziness rob their flock, depriving them of their very daily bread, stealing from them a most valuable treasure. The shortening of the services which comes about through lack of strength must be done wisely and performed circumspectly in order not to touch that which should not be tampered with.” (http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/typicon.aspx)

Brothers, on one had it is obvious: we are ordained to serve. But how many districtions, temptations, self-justifcations the Devil offers us to keep us from serving the Divine Services – and from serving others! St. Theophan the Recluse wrote: “Self-pity is the root of all our stumblings into sin. He who does not indulge himself is always steadfast in good.” (source: https://www.orthodoxroad.com/self-pity-a-quiet-snare/)

THAT IS HARD! But I would submit that we consistently underestimate our abilities in this regard. No one is being, or should be asked, to do more than is possible or reasonable. At the same time, we can do SO MUCH if we trust God and remember two things:

ONE: “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)

TWO: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9)

You can read in books and tracts on prayer, that prayer will teach you to pray. That is: do the work, try, ask God’s help, and it will all come together and you will learn to pray. I would submit here that the same is true in this regard: serving will teach you to serve. I mean that in all aspects of that word. If you serve the Divine Services you will learn to serve God’s people and bring the Grace of the Divine Services to the people in a way that will make you a better priest than you otherwise would be without such zelous service at the altar of God. Certainly anything I have *“accomplished”* in my 30 years as a priest can be chalked up only to God’s Grace, and I simply do not know how I could do any of what I do now without the Divine Services to stengthen me. Especially the daily Divine Services. Of course, Sundays are wonderful, triumphant, busy, amazing. But maybe not as prayerful as a Wednesday morning with 10 people in church and one or two people singing. I now am speaking from my experience and the experience of the priests I know and work with rather closely.

There is more to say. So much more to say. But I trust that this is enough for now. And hopefully not too much.

The whole rest of your lives are ahead of you. You feel young, inexperienced, and unsure of what will be. Looking back on that time in my life and the life of my family I would say to that: thank God! Enjoy what the Lord has and will give you. It will be hard sometimes. Actually – it will be hard a good amount of the time. But if you decide that you will accept what the Lord is sending you for your

salvation with love and trust in Him, then you will come to peace. And your life and ministry will be fruitful, both in what you consider to be the best of times and the worst of times. For God, I would submit, it is all the same. God ONLY sends us what is good. WE interpret that as good or bad, but the Lord means it only for good. That is, He sends it only for our salvation.

I will conclude with the following: St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco wrote in one of his sermons that the Lord used the horror of the Russian Revolution to scoop up the remnant of faithful from the former Russian Empire and scatter them across the world like wheat that is sown by a farmer. That is, to plant Orthodox Christianity in every land across the globe. We have been entrusted with this great responsibility: to till the soil on which that wheat was scattered. I would submit that this is an almost perfect metaphor for the priesthood. Every farmer knows that he sows in hope. That is, he can throw out the seed into the field, but the Lord must water it, shine the sun on it, et cetera. We too must work colaboratively with God to have hope for a fruitful harvest – for a fruitful ministry. But in this case, GOD IS THE FARMER. He has sown the wheat. Now it is up to us simply not to kill it. To not mistake the wheat for tares. To harvest the bountiful crop that the Lord is growing in our society today. And to gather that harvest into the Lord's barns, that is, the Holy Church.

Again I congratulate the graduates and their families. May the Lord grant you to be a truly wise and faithful harvester of His crop. To harvest His wheat into the Heavenly Kingdom, and to attain the Kingdom for yourself as well by your zealous efforts as a priest of God and servant of His Church and people. Thank you for your attention and patience.