

## Report to the 2024 parish assembly, for 2023

Fr. Silviu

### **We have a decision to make!**

Right now we are at a critical crossroads and things cannot continue as they have been for the last 40 years. I say “for the last 40 years” because we have made little progress since the very beginning of our parish and to this day we still look like a mission. Yet, these days we are at a crucial moment, because we cannot continue like this, we can stay stagnant no longer. We will either grow or we will die. We have lots of maintenance and repairs to do as our buildings are getting old. In other words, the earth itself will be pulled from underneath our feet and it is on us to regain our balance.

Yet, this crossroads is an opportunity, and an extraordinary opportunity at that! The challenge finds us at a good time, through God’s mercy. There are more and more of us. But this is not the solution to our problem, this is not our actual growth, it is only an opportunity. If we choose not to change, there will simply be more of us who will carry and perpetuate our problem. Here is the decision or choice which will ensure our growth: we identify and get rid of the thing which has kept us so stagnant for so long; *that* is our problem! In other words, we should ask ourselves: why do we look now the same way we looked 20 years ago, 30 years ago?

And it seems to me that the answer to this, or our problem, comes down to one thing: a culture which has taken over our minds and which comes down to developing strategies of deflecting responsibility and justifying inaction. I have seen it in many places, and much of it has to do with deep-seated human shortcomings. Yet, nowhere else have I witnessed so much of it. Indeed, this area is particularly poor and many of us are poor. But poverty is one thing, and inaction and lack of seriousness are another. To varying degrees and in waves we have fallen prey to thoughts which encourage us to be more active in the parish on WhatsApp rather than in person, to be more generous with heart emojis rather than with our feet and hands. To wait for doctors to take care of our financial needs. To run to God like beggars when he is needed, while at the slightest wound to our frail ego choosing without hesitation our ego over him, in other words, while living all along in a world centered in us. These thoughts are the same thoughts which make our psychological and spiritual life immature and fragile, of perpetual inaction and irresponsibility, of deflection and concealment, of packing things in an already cluttered, wounded, and needy soul, rather than cleaning up one’s life.

And let me finish this point by emphasizing that this problem of ours is first and foremost spiritual before it is financial. The financial crisis we have been in for decades is only a consequence of a spiritual shortcoming. This is the lack of an essential Christian quality which St. Paisios the Aghiorite called with a word which he borrowed from St. Paul—*filotimo*. I would translate it as “nobility.” Here is what the blessed apostle is saying about it:

Strive with nobility to live quietly and to attend to your own things, and to work with your own hands, just as we commanded you. (1 Thessalonians 4:11)

To live quietly is many things: not wanting to stand out, not busybodying, not desiring to fix others, not generating tensions and strives, but letting go of one's ego and minding one's own salvation. To work with our own hands is not just an employment statement or a statement about the body, it is tied to the previous phrase and it means something more: a spiritual attitude in which we do not justify inaction, nor lay our burdens on others (any sort of burdens), but rather we try to take on their burdens—a spiritual attitude in which we strive and we do not run away from struggles. We are thus mindful of what the other needs, of what the church needs, of what the Lord asks of us.

So, in front of us is a critical crossroads, on our choice depends our very survival, and depends even our continuation into the kingdom. Will we opt for nobility or will we continue to live the same inept life? We choose between our future, on the one hand, and dying away, on the other. What will it be?

Now, here is my report to you. Because you never received a report for my part-time role in 2022, the following will also include that time, the time since I first arrived here in May 2022 and we immediately started cleaning up the church and the hall.

#### **Liturgical work:**

1. Receptions into the church: 3 baptisms.
2. Receptions into the catechumenate. I am distinguishing here between a new cohort and an old one. Part of the new cohort are the ones received after January 1, 2023, which are 7. The old cohort includes 3 catechumens received before my time here and 2 whom I made catechumens in October 2022.
3. Catechumenate participation. The program that I started with the old catechumens was very poorly attended due to my lack of firmness. The new program with the new cohort has a near perfect attendance. I am working on balancing my lax attitude, which is clearly not working, with firmness.
4. We have 12 inquirers who may be made catechumens this year.
5. Special services: 4 burials (2 full funerals, and 2 Trisaghia), many Trisaghia (memorial services), 15 house blessings. No crownings or other special services.
6. Other liturgical work:
  - Ongoing upgrade in liturgical language to contemporary English from old English (thee, thou, doest, vouchsafe, beseech, harken, etc.). Why did I think this change necessary? So that all of us, especially younger people, understand what we say and what happens.
  - All services have been conformed to the books; we no longer serve anything in an “abbreviated form” or a hybrid form, nor do we have our own idiosyncrasies (and several things were done here that I have seen nowhere else). These were not radical changes and it did not affect all services, because services by and large were done well. But you may still perceive a change.

- We now have a fuller service schedule for Lent and Holy Week, with services twice a day during Holy Week.
- The adoption of Byzantine chant is still ongoing. We will not adopt it fully, but to approximately 80%. Why did I think this necessary? In order so that the chanting in our parish reflects us, the people. We are blessed for being the only Orthodox parish in the entire valley, so in this position we should not reflect only one Orthodox tradition, but all, we should be sort of pan-Orthodox. This is why our chanting should be predominantly Byzantine: most of our people come from traditions of Byzantine chant. Only the northern Slavs would have what we are doing right now, but we are not of that tradition more than 20%. We are also Greeks, Palestinians, Romanians, Turks, Serbs, etc., and all these come from a Byzantine chant background. This is also why I have introduced an Athonite manner of worship (which is truly pan-Orthodox).
- New services have been introduced, so that we have a fuller liturgical life:
  - Matins before Sunday Liturgy, which is not yet very well attended, but attendance is growing (usually at 10 people right now);
  - Ninth Hour before each Vespers and vesperal Liturgy;
  - Vesperal Liturgy on the eve of each of the 12 Great Feasts when they fall on a weekday;
  - Paraklisis during Dormition fast;
  - Unction (unabridged) on Holy Wednesday and the last Wednesday of Advent (very well attended). It was served, but in an “abridged form.”
  - Also, we now offer kollyva for saints, a tradition which was not done at St. George before. Everyone is welcome to offer kollyva for their patron saint, if we have a service on their feast (and our regular service schedule covers Sundays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays).

Still to be done is to develop a liturgical coherence, where we know what to do during our services. I am using the “liturgical word” to help us in this.

### **Other work done since the beginning of my service to you:**

1. We purchased new liturgical vessels (\$3,500), all paid through the generosity of four sponsors: Doc and Jackie, Ovidiu, and Presv. Maria. The previous vessels were in a pretty bad condition. The ones beyond use were buried, according to church customs, and the ones still usable were sent to parishes and missions which needed them.
2. We did lots of decluttering and cleaning. I found the entire space—church, hall, and grounds—extremely cluttered and dirty. We cleaned and decluttered especially with the help of (in alphabetical order) Andra and Juan, Connie, Cristina, Evangelia, Jackie and Doc, Presv. Maria, Melissa and Annabelle, Oleksandra, and Vlad and Oleksandra. Specifically we decluttered and cleaned the following:

- Sanctuary. In the side room I found very old vestments, even in plastic bags on the floor. The ones still usable were donated to other parishes and missions. But many were beyond use, even chewed by rodents or critters, and these were burned and their ashes buried, according to church practice. Also the cabinets were full of stuff, even very old q-tips already used in anointing, very old and melted incense, old book clippings, etc.
  - Nave. We moved St. George's icon stand and the cross with their candle holders into narthix, in order to turn the narthix into a liturgical space and to declutter the church and to extend the space all the way to the front icons. Also, we removed the candle stands on the north wall and placed chairs there, hoping to find a matching bench one day.
  - Narthix. We removed the glass table and some other items, so that it is less of an umbrella-room and it is fully church, as it should be. I also started serving some services in there, for this purpose.
  - Siderooms off the narthix. It is an ongoing project, because empty boxes and other stuff is still put in there instead of being thrown away.
  - Hall. The ones who were here in May 2022 will remember this clutter and the ones listed below. I won't go into details.
  - The two storage rooms, which were so cluttered that one could not step in them.
  - Kitchen.
  - The bookstore.
  - School rooms, which were also repainted.
  - Kids' corner.
  - The priest's office, which was also repainted.
  - The old choir office.
  - Shed.
7. Cleaning up and file transfer of old computer. Many files were on Fr. Antonio's personal account and they could not be retrieved. Mat. Elizabeth and I tried all sorts of combinations for the password, but we could not get in. All files recovered were saved on an external drive. The others were lost.
  8. Decluttering of paper documents from the new office and the old office. We probably shredded and recycled 15-20 boxes worth of paper. Since I went over every single sheet of paper, I could tell that nothing was ever thrown away in our parish, probably since its very beginning. I found personal correspondence, general mail, unopened flyers, old calendars, etc., going back to the 80's.
  9. For a while I will be taking charge of the music folders. The clutter and mess is the same there, so I will use this opportunity to put some order in them.
  10. Pruning and removal of trees and bushes: we downed and piled 3 whole trees and many branches at no cost to us, but only through volunteering. We had only one tree removed by

professionals at a cost of \$1,600. Yes, this work which we could do ourselves with nobility is very expensive.

11. Removal of the playground, which was in a terrible state. What a pleasant surprise this was: on the Friday before the festival a group of volunteers took it down and had it mostly in the dumpster by the time I got there at 10:30! Thank you!
12. We installed most of the big pile of mulch from behind the shed. There is very little left and it too will be installed this year.
13. As we were decluttering and cleaning, we discovered that we had a rat infestation, which explained the peculiar poignant sweet smell in the hall and kitchen. Once we cleaned and decluttered, a pest company had access to the entire space to put traps and treat, which finally got rid of the rats (at a cost of \$700).
14. We started Sunday school a year ago, with three teachers, the same we have today: Andra, Elena, and Elizabeth. We have two classrooms: non-readers (ages 3-6) and readers (ages 7-12). I am hoping for a third classroom for teenagers in the future, but for now we don't even have space for it.
15. We started the "baffle the priest" Sunday also a year ago, which is the first Sunday of every month; after the Divine Liturgy I am having an open discussion with the teenagers and young adults of the parish. Fr. Kyril wanted to give sermons and the best way seemed to be for him to do so on a regular basis, so he preaches on these Sundays.
16. Fr. Kyril also offered to teach and oversee the adult ed in the parish, and he is teaching almost every Saturday before vespers. I am hoping his classes will be better attended.
17. Choir practice on Saturdays after Vespers is not yet regular.
18. The old restroom in the back of the kitchen was transformed into a utility closet (at a cost of \$300), in which we now keep the step-ladder, dolly, etc. These were kept out in the kitchen or in the storage rooms.
19. The washer and dryer room was transformed into another utility closet for washing and cleaning supplies. These items were kept behind the door between the kitchen and hall. The work was done through volunteering, at no cost to us. The washer and dryer, which were not working and were even rusted, were taken to a scrap yard.
20. We have new internet service, now digital from the previous analog.
21. New wifi.
22. New alarm, which is now wireless. We also have installed cameras all around the property, which record all activity. This past year we had a theft on the property and one attempt at getting in.
23. Some of the exit signs in the hall were replaced.
24. The AC unit in the kitchen was from 1978, it was replaced in November 2023 with a unit from 2018 at no cost to us, through a donation.
25. Replaced the roof over the old gable off the kitchen. Much of the wood in the gable was rotten.

26. We have a new website, updated and changed in June-July 2023, done in-house at no cost to us. Ever since the website has been updated and changed the number of visitors has gone up every month, from 2,146 in June, to 2,658 in July, then 3,244 in August, 3,664 in September, 4,072 in October, and 4,086 in November. On some pages the old website was still listing Fr. Antonio as the parish priest, God rest his soul, causing lots of confusion.
27. We have weekly bulletins, placed on the new website every Saturday morning, and also available in the narthex in limited prints for visitors (usually 10-15), for people who are not familiar with our website.
28. Sign-up lists (one general and on paper for the recurring needs of the parish, and one through whatsapp for fellowship food), with very limited success for the former.
29. We paid off our hall mortgage in November 2023. When I took over the ministry of the parish, in January 2023, the balance was still \$63,830, which was slightly more than 50% of the original loan of \$120,000 (again, taken for the hall). We paid it off as follows:
- We recovered \$31,000 from a fund improperly set up with the diocese (that is, without proper parish council approval) as earmarked for other purposes.
  - The rest was paid with the campaign we had in October-November:
    - We received \$5,500 initial matching donations for the mortgage campaign.
    - We had three major donations at the very end (Doc, Jacki, and someone desiring to remain anonymous).
    - But a good majority of us have donated nothing or very little.
30. I found the previous finances of the parish to have been handled very discretionarily, without the proper oversight of the parish council. The money was always reported to the council and to the parish as a whole, but the council had no direct access to the accounts and had no direct oversight of them. The access and oversight were handed over to the council only once Fr. Antonio died. Yet, the rules of the OCA make it clear that it is the parish council which holds the purse of a parish and it should have direct oversight of it. When I became your priest, I also insisted that we have two treasurers instead of one and that everything financial is handled with full transparency and under the direct supervision of the parish council. Therefore, I do not handle any money at all without council pre-approval. Also, I do not keep any money even if it is given to me for my own use (such as recompense for special services or Christmas gifts), and do not receive from the parish any extra payments for anything beyond my salary. I hope this practice will give the parish a bit of respite in order to get its finances in order, but do keep in mind that this is only a courtesy I am extending to you; you cannot hold your future priests to it. They are certainly entitled to keep all or some of the money given to them for their own use.
31. We had a ramp to the church installed (\$4,019), replacing the old steps, with new railings paid by an anonymous donor.
32. The flower garden was extended to the new ramp.
33. We had two festivals, on Dec 10, and on Dec 9, 2023, which both brought net financial benefit, but put a lot of strain on the parish, spiritual and psychological. For this reason we

will table the festival for now until the level of volunteering grows in the parish and people don't burn out.

**Work which needs to be done soon (hopefully in 2024):**

1. The greatest possession a parish has is the people, specifically the human heart, and not any of the walls, not even the walls of the church. Therefore, in my opinion we need to cherish our people, especially our youth and our young adults, in order to help them. And all the people of the parish. Here is what I would like to do starting with this year, 2024:
  - a. Begin forums on different topics, first using our own resources, our own people. I would like the first to be during this upcoming Lent, a conversation on the mental health of the young from spiritual perspectives;
  - b. Organize group trips to our Nativity monastery in Dallas. I am thinking of having a first trip in late summer, before school begins.
  - c. Host public talks with invited guests, first with our own people (Archbp. Alexander, Bp. Gerasim, Mother Barbara, etc.), then with others from around the country.
2. In terms of things, this year, or rather as soon as possible, we need:
  - a. A new roof over church and over the old office, which will require a repair of the subs, a cleaning of the dome, patching of the cracks in exterior walls, etc: \$30,000-50,000.
  - b. A new holy table. The holy table is the holiest place in the world. Yet, our current one is made of plywood. Those before us may not have had the time and money to build anything else, but the time has come to replace it. It must be made of special hardwood. The Bible requires acacia, hopefully we can afford it.
3. As I said at the beginning of my report, we are not yet in a place where we could get anything else done through another loan, even though there are many other needs. As far as I can tell we should:
  - a. Patch up the ceiling and inside walls of the church, repaint.
  - b. Clean (and maybe repair or replace) air vents in the church.
  - c. Replace carpet in the church, ideally with hardwood floor, the same already used in the sanctuary.
  - d. Redo the kitchen: replace walls and ceiling (probably have asbestos), replace floors, and replace outside doors (2) and windows (2 very small, 3 large).
  - e. Resurface the hall tiles.
  - f. Redo the driveway, which right now consists of a half-inch layer of asphalt placed directly over dirt, without any foundation. Also, we should extend the parking lot, which is too small for our growing community. With this opportunity, we should also move the driveway west by three feet, away from the church ramp. Also, I think we should have a third handicapped spot.

As soon as I see us taking more care of our parish, I will revisit these and bring them again to your attention.

4. Finally, I need to say a few things about finances. Our annual budget is around \$120,000. At least this is how much we would need to cover all our expenses and to pay a priest a full and proper salary and all required benefits (for example, the OCA requires a contribution to retirement equal to 14% of the priest's salary). We always collect under this budget by \$40,000 or even \$50,000 a year. If we stay in this situation, we will get another priest only if the Lord sends us someone retired who can work part time or someone independently wealthy. Let me remind you that for almost two years you offered a salary of \$69,000 and had not even one interest. You forget that this is the valley and people don't want to come here, so, like all employers, you bring people here only by paying more than other places, not less.