

The Kingdom is at Hand

the December 15, 2004 Enthronement of the Right Reverend Bishop BASIL to the newly-established See of Wichita and Mid-America

Perhaps a thousand of the faithful of the self-ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America came to the enthronement of Bishop Basil for the See of Wichita and Mid-America on the evening of December 15, 2004. They gathered at St. George Cathedral in Wichita, Kansas, to pray Vespers and to witness as Metropolitan Philip conveyed the episcopal staff and throne to the first bishop of the See of Wichita.

During the Vespers, hymns were sung to commemorate the next day's remembrance of the Prophet Haggai. Looking into Holy Scripture, we discern the Prophet's words to come from the Holy Spirit with special meaning for the establishment of a new diocese and the enthronement of her new father and shepherd.

¹⁶For thus saith the Lord of hosts; ... ⁷I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts ... ⁹The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts. ... ¹⁴I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy ... ¹⁶I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts ... ¹⁷My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the Lord shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem ... ²⁵For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her ... ¹⁰Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. ¹¹And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee.



Metropolitan Philip presides at the Enthronement.

These verses from the prophecy of Haggai express the will and work of God in restoring the temple to Israel after the exile in Babylon. But they also express the will and work of God establishing in Wichita, KS, and across Mid-America, the fullness of the New Israel, the Holy Church.

When the faithful arrived at the Cathedral that evening they saw not just three priests, as would be usual there; instead they saw twenty times that number! They met there perhaps sixty priests and deacons from all the parishes of the Diocese of Wichita and from parishes of other Dioceses of the Antiochian Church in North America, together with His Eminence Metropolitan Philip of New York, His Grace Joseph of Los Angeles, and His Grace Basil, titular bishop of Enfeh Al Koura – who was soon to be diocesan bishop of Wichita and Mid-America. Serving that evening were the three ranking priests of the Diocese: Archimandrite Daniel

Griffith (senior priest of the Diocese), Protopresbyter Paul O'Callaghan (dean of the Diocesan Cathedral), and Economos Constantine Nasr (president of the Diocesan Council of Presbyters). They were assisted by Deacon John Timby.

Awaiting the arrival of His Eminence Philip, these priests, deacons and bishops lined both sides of the central aisle of the Cathedral. Many who were present later remarked on how impressive this was. Yet more impressive, according to some, was the arrival of Metropolitan Philip. Vested in full regalia according to the custom of Orthodox bishops, with tall black hat and veil descending down his back over a royal purple mantle, and carrying his *pateritsa* (pastoral staff) he was, even more than usual, the image of leadership and fatherly authority in the grace of the Holy Spirit. He made his way, preceded by the host of clergy, to his episcopal throne, the very throne he would soon deliver to his brother in the Spirit, Bishop Basil.

As Vespers concluded, Metropolitan Philip descended from this throne to give the final blessing of the service. This was also to be his final blessing as the shepherd of the church of Wichita. With the conclusion of Vespers, the service of Enthronement itself immediately began. This brief and matter-of-fact service (by Orthodox standards) consisted of prayers for the grace of God to be with the new bishop of the Diocese and the Metropolitan's handing over of the *pateritsa*, or bishop's staff, saying, "To those who obey, may this be a staff of comfort and guidance. While to those who disobey, may this be a staff of disciplining." Receiving the staff with these words, Bishop Basil was escorted to the throne by the three ranking priests of the new diocese.

After donning new epitrachelion and omophorion, embroidered with images of Christ the Good Shepherd, the Apostles, the Evangelists and Ss Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, His Grace delivered his first archpastoral message to his new flock of lambs in Christ. (See accompanying article.)

The new bishop of Wichita called to remembrance his priestly predecessor in the mission of the Gospel in Mid-America, Fr. Nicola Yanney, the first Antiochian Orthodox priest west of the Mississippi.

Special words of gratitude were reserved for His Eminence Metropolitan Philip: "All which we are today, all which we hope to be tomorrow, is inspired by Your Eminence's faithfulness to God's call and your charge to us that we be nothing but the Church, the very Body of Christ

her Bridegroom – here (in America), and now (the 21st century), the Church of the Apostles Peter and Paul – here and now, the Church of Saint Thekla Peer-of-the-Apostles – here and now, the Church of Saint Ignatius of Antioch – here and now, the Church of Saint John Chrysostom – here and now, the Church of Saints Pelagia the Penitent, John of Damascus, Raphael of Brooklyn – here and now. God grant that we be found worthy of Your Eminence's confidence."

Shortly after this address, Bishop Basil came forward from his episcopal throne to the same place from which Metropolitan Philip had given his final blessing at Vespers. From there, His Grace Basil bestowed his first blessing on his own new flock. He then turned to face the Holy Table, the throne of Christ, as the Cathedral's *protopsaltis* intoned for the first time the *polychronion*, a formal prayer asking God to grant the bishop many years. After the service, many remarked how moving it was to hear in the midst of this solemn and ancient hymn the words "Wichita" and "Mid-America." One person noted how difficult it is to spell or even pronounce "Wichita" in the traditional and widespread languages of the Orthodox world: Russian, Arabic, Greek or others. Truly the ancient faith of the Apostles has been established in the heart of the New World.

As if all this was not enough joy and celebration, those present were invited to partake of "light refreshment" appropriate to the Church's season of pre-Christmas fasting. The table in the Cathedral fellowship hall was well-laden and set for what must have been over one thousand guests. If any went from there hungry they could blame no one but themselves. The hospitality of the Cathedral was, as always, without peer.

As the faithful dined, they listened to the words of those who have been important to Bishop Basil and to what was formerly the Southwest Region. The speakers included the President of the Fellowship of St. John the Divine, Mrs. Joan Farha; the head of the Diocesan Clergy Brotherhood of St. Raphael, Very Reverend Economos Constantine Nasr, who has known Bishop Basil since they first met at St. Vladimir Seminary thirty-four years ago; Dr. George Farha, Vice Chairman of the Archdiocesan Board of Trustees and parishioner at St. George Cathedral; and the Dean of the Cathedral, Fr. Paul O'Callaghan. Both the Fellowship of St. John and the Clergy Brotherhood presented His Grace with gifts: the Fellowship coordinated the gift of a Life Membership in the Archdiocese's Order of St. Ignatius and a check for use at the bishop's pastoral discretion, and the

Clergy Brotherhood likewise presented His Grace with a monetary gift to use as he sees fit for the needs of the Diocese. Fr. Paul O'Callaghan read greetings from those not in attendance, notably Patriarch Ignatius IV, Metropolitan Elias of Beirut, Metropolitan Saba of Hauran, Bishop Demetri of the Antiochian Archdiocese, and Archimandrite Kyrill, Abbot of the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Essex, England (where His Grace was tonsured). Dr. George and Fr. Paul both commented that, if they had been told years ago of the change that would affect the Archdiocese, they both would have said this was just a collection of someone's hallucinations.

When His Eminence stood to make the keynote address, he mused that he had indeed been the one "hallucinating" during the last two decades and that Fr. Paul, Fr. Constantine, Dr. George Farha, Bishop Basil, *et al.*, were all part of this "hallucination." His Eminence went on to relate the life and pastorate of Bishop Basil from his youth up. He connected these events with the broader visions he has had as Metropolitan Archbishop of the Archdiocese, all of which have materialized as the Church has developed from sixty-five parishes in 1966 to over two hundred and fifty today – "and still going strong," in his words. Specially noted by His Eminence was the reception of two thousand seven hundred Evangelical Christians into the flock of Antioch in 1987. This was his example of a fulfillment of the Lord's command to us to, "Go and make disciples of ALL nations,' not just Syrians, Palestinians, Jordanians, Russians, Greeks." He emphasized that he looks forward to the day when fifty bishops, not only two or three, gather on the American Continent to pray to the Triune God. "Why not," he said. "Why not?" With this he turned to highlight the missionary work continuing in the Wichita Diocese, saying that we are not called merely to "preserve" the faith, but to spread it. He earned a hearty laugh from his audience when he said we sometimes are so preoccupied with talk of "preservation" that we are in danger of becoming pickles! He said preserving the faith is not our chief purpose; we preserve the faith so that we may obey the Lord and spread it, "Our Lord did not tell us to preserve the faith, but to spread it!"

Finally, His Eminence displayed for the edification and blessing of the faithful the *engolpion*, or pectoral icon of the Archangel Raphael, which he wore that evening. He told them that it was the very one worn by St. Raphael a century ago, and worn by himself at Bishop Basil's ordination to the priesthood in 1980 and consecration to the episcopacy in 1992.

With that, the benediction was given and the faithful departed with much joy, having participated in an event that was not once-in-a-lifetime, but truly once in history, never to be repeated. We have all been enriched by this gift of grace given to us in the form of a God-fearing bishop who presides over an equally God-protected diocese. So we do well to keep ever in mind the exhortation of the Apostle: "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17)."

To Basil, the most pure and right reverend, chosen by God, Bishop of the See of Wichita and Mid-America, our Father and Chief Shepherd, many years!

by Rev. Fr. Paul Hodge

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Bishop Basil blessing his congregation.