

A New Bishop for Our Diocese – Some Questions and Answers

The Diocese of New England, under the leadership of our *Locum Tenens*, His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON, is now engaged in the process of nominating a man to be considered for election as our new bishop. What are some questions we might have about this process? And, what might the answers be to those questions?

Where can I find official information concerning the Diocesan Bishop, as that position is understood and carried out in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA)?

When thinking about any matter concerning the official administration of the OCA, the place to begin is the *Statute of the Orthodox Church in America*, which is the official document that legislates how the OCA is organized and operates. That document can be accessed in full at the official website of the OCA, at this link: <https://www.oca.org/statute>. Article VIII of the Statute is specifically about the Diocesan Bishop, but reference to the role of the bishop, and the bishops, as a group, appear in almost every part of the Statute.

What is a *Locum Tenens*?

Locum Tenens is a Latin phrase meaning “placeholder.” In the practice of the OCA, when a diocese does not have in place a duly elected Diocesan bishop, the Holy Synod of Bishops declares “the see” vacant, and the Metropolitan, in his capacity as Primate, appoints a *Locum Tenens*. The role of the *Locum Tenens* is to administer the Diocese until such time as a new, fulltime, Diocesan bishop can be elected. In the case of the Diocese of New England, following the death of our beloved archpastor, His Eminence Archbishop NIKON (Memory Eternal!), His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON appointed himself to serve as our *Locum Tenens*. We are privileged to enjoy such an honor as the Primate of the OCA himself serving us in this significant role.

What is “the see”?

Referring to “the see” is a way in which we can refer to the position of the Diocesan Bishop in his diocese. The term “see” is said to derive from the Latin word for seat (*sedes*), and to refer to the formal seat on which the bishop sits when in his cathedral. The cathedral is the primary church of the Diocese, and the word *cathedra*, from which the word cathedral derives, is both the Latin and Greek word for the large, formal, chair in which the bishop sits. We might, in certain contexts, even use the word “throne” to describe this chair. In any case, all these terms are interconnected.

What is the process by which a new bishop is elected for the Diocese?

The process for electing a new bishop for the diocese is defined and described in Article VIII of the Statute of the Orthodox Church in America. (Article VIII can be viewed at this link: <https://www.oca.org/statute/article-viii>.) In summary that process works as follows:

1. A special Diocesan Assembly is convened at which the gathered delegates (each parish body usually has a clergy and a lay delegate representing them at this special Assembly) nominate a candidate. The candidate must be a celibate (never-married or presently widowed) Orthodox Christian man of at least 35 years of age (in practice, of at least 30 years of age), who has no impediments that would impede his service as a bishop. In the Church, the word “impediment” means a specific condition or situation that might disqualify a person from holding a particular

office, or carrying out a specific role. For example, one impediment to consecration as a bishop would be if the candidate in question was physically unable to perform the rites of the Church. Another impediment to consecration as a bishop would be that there is some circumstance in a given candidate's life that is properly private and confidential, but, which (if by some unfortunate occurrence that matter became publically known) would be a source of serious scandal to the Church. It is incumbent upon any man being considered for election and consecration as a bishop to decline to be considered if he knows he has such a history—he need not be specific about the matter, he just has to indicate that he does not wish to be considered any longer.

2. It is not permissible to nominate a man who is already a Diocesan Bishop elsewhere. That man already has his responsibilities. (The OCA Holy Synod of Bishops has been known in the past to transfer a bishop from one diocese to another, if such an action seems, for weighty reasons, to be proper. Our Diocese of New England has, at least twice, had a bishop transferred away from us to another diocese of the OCA.)
3. At the time of his nomination, the nominee does not have to be an ordained person—pious laymen have been elected as bishops, and subsequently gone through all the steps necessary to be consecrated to the episcopacy. (Saint Ambrose of Milan was famously elected to be a bishop while still a catechumen, not yet a baptized Christian. This took place in 374 AD. He was subsequently baptized, and then, over the course of seven days, went through all the steps necessary to be consecrated a bishop.) The nominee must be willing to take, at least, preliminary monastic vows, and he must be willing to accept consecration to the episcopacy.
4. Consecration of a bishop takes place during the Divine Liturgy. Bishops are consecrated by other bishops. Usually this consecration is accomplished by, at minimum, three other bishops. Before being consecrated a bishop nowadays, one must have been a tonsured Reader, a set-apart Subdeacon, an ordained Deacon, and be, presently, an ordained Priest in good standing. One must, also, as mentioned already, have taken at least preliminary monastic vows—that is why the bishop dresses in a monastic habit. (Bishops are often in the stage of monasticism titled *rasophore*—also sometimes spelled *riasaphor*. This is the stage of monasticism where the candidate receives monastic tonsure, is given the distinctive clothing (“habit”) of a monk, and, in fact, takes on the responsibilities of monastic life, but does not actually pronounce the full, formal vows of a monastic. For further information about the stages of monasticism, as implemented at Saint Tikhon’s Monastery in South Canaan, Pennsylvania, which is the monastery where many of our OCA bishops are enrolled as monks, please see this link: <https://www.stots.edu/article/The+Monastic+Grades.>)
5. Once the Diocese nominates a candidate, that nominated candidate is examined by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), under the chairmanship of the Metropolitan/Primate of the OCA. Once the Synod examines the candidate, they either elect him or refuse to elect him as the new bishop. (If refusal of the nominee occurs, then the Diocese must reconvene an Assembly in order to nominate a different candidate.)
6. If, for whatever reason, the Diocese fails to nominate a candidate, the Holy Synod does have the right and privilege to elect a man as bishop, and then to provide that bishop to the Diocese as the duly elected Diocesan bishop.
7. Once elected by the Holy Synod, the bishop-elect proceeds through whatever steps are necessary for him to serve as bishop, including formal episcopal consecration by his fellow bishops at a Divine Liturgy, and then is formally enthroned as the new Diocesan hierarch. Upon

consecration as a bishop, or if already a bishop, the bishop-elect has all the prerogatives of Diocesan bishop, even if not yet formally enthroned.

8. All the above being said, it should be noted, that in the Orthodox Church generally speaking, bishops are elected by bishops, from among eligible candidates identified by the existing bishops. Thus, strictly speaking, nomination by the Diocese that a newly elected bishop may thereafter serve is not absolutely necessary. The OCA Statute does specify a nomination process, but this is a local procedure of the OCA, not a universal (or even common) Orthodox practice—and, even in the OCA, formal and canonical election of a bishop is accomplished by the Holy Synod of Bishops.

What is the practical role of the Diocesan Bishop?

The exact “competencies” of a Diocesan Bishop are laid out in the OCA Statute. (Competencies, in this context, mean the actions that the Diocesan bishop has the authority to accomplish.) These competencies include such things as the right and responsibility to guide and lead the faithful of the Diocese as Christians, to open and close parishes and institutions in the Diocese, to convene and preside over Diocesan meetings, to have ultimate say about the management of the Diocese’s material possessions, to ordain and assign clergy to their duties, to provide *antimensia* for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, to exercise ecclesiastical discipline over the members of the Diocese as might be necessary, to provide essential and, even, binding guidance in times of difficulty and crisis, to adjudicate difficult issues that might require the application of pastoral mercy (or discipline) as regards the pastoral care of the clergy and faithful, and to visit the people and places of the Diocese at his initiative in order to exercise oversight over the Diocese and its faithful people. This is not an exhaustive list.

What are *antimensia*, and why are they essential to the life of the Church?

The *antimensia* are the special cloths, on which are depicted representations of Our Lord Jesus Christ lying dead in His Tomb, on which the Divine Liturgy must and can only be celebrated. This cloth is consecrated and signed by the bishop himself, indicating his spiritual blessing and spiritual presence among the people when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. A priest cannot serve the Divine Liturgy without an *antimension*, because the *antimension* connects the priest to the bishop, and (as we will explain further in answering the next question) the bishop in turn connects the priest and the local community that he is serving to the whole Church, across space and through time. (The word *antimension* literally means “the instead-of-the-table,” because the *antimension* is, in fact, a portable altar. When an *antimension* is placed on any table, no matter how humble, that table becomes an altar on which the Divine Liturgy can be celebrated.)

In a broader sense, what does the Diocesan Bishop do for the Diocese?

One of the most important things that the Diocesan Bishop does for the Diocese is connect the faithful clergy and people of the Diocese to the entire Church, both over time and through space.

When we see our bishop, we know that we are part of the worldwide communion and fellowship of the entity known most often in the world as “the Eastern Orthodox Church,” but what we, who dwell in this entity, would simply call “the Church.”

In this present time, our Diocesan bishop is in communion and fellowship with the other bishops of the OCA, and our OCA bishop are in communion and fellowship with all the canonical Orthodox bishops in the United States, and all those bishops are in communion and fellowship with all the canonical Orthodox bishops throughout the world. When any one Orthodox bishop formally addresses any other Orthodox bishop, he addresses him as “my brother and concelebrant.” This phrase means that these two men can go to Church together, and celebrate the Divine Liturgy together, and receive Holy Communion together. There is no stronger bond between any two humans than the sacramental bond made perfect in the common reception of Holy Communion. We are made one in Holy Communion with God and with each other, our fellow communicants. Every dividing wall, every division, is overcome in the act of Holy Communion. (We should note here that the word “canonical” means officially recognized and officially operative. The word “canonical” has its roots in the Greek word *kanon* meaning “measuring stick,” so something canonical is something that meets the standards by which it should be measured.)

However, there is, also, another dimension to the communion and fellowship of the Church that is made present in and through our Diocesan bishop. For our Diocesan bishop is not only in communion and fellowship with the other bishops who presently sit on their *cathedras* in their dioceses, as he sits on the *cathedra* in our Diocese of New England. Our bishop is, also, in communion with all the other Orthodox bishops who have ever lived, going back through time two thousand years to the age of the Holy Apostles. The first bishops were consecrated by the Holy Apostles themselves, and then, generation after generation, the bishops of each generation consecrated the bishops that followed them. This reality connects every Orthodox bishop to Jesus Christ Himself, He who called the Apostles to their Apostolic ministry. This reality—often termed in the Church “Apostolic Succession”—unites all of us Orthodox Christians, for we all live “under the *omophorion*” of our bishop, and our bishop connects us to the Church, across space and through time.

What does the phrase “under the *omophorion* of the bishop” mean?

The distinctive vestment of the bishop is the *omophorion*, the broad, scarf-like, vestment that he wears over his shoulders. So, all the faithful clergy and people living under the archpastoral care of any given bishop are said to be living “under his *omophorion*.”

Why do we show the bishop such honor when he is in our presence? Why do we call him Master? Why do we bow before him? Why do we, sometimes quite literally, “place him on a pedestal” in the middle of the Church?

The ways in which we honor the bishop are about the man, for sure, but they are even more so about the office of bishop, which he occupies and makes present among us. Yes, of course, we are meant to honor one another, being the men and women that we are, made in God’s image and likeness. We should be treating each and every fellow human being with the same dignity and honor with which we traditionally treat the bishop. However, the office of bishop—the importance of the bishop in the Church, across time and through space, as we have just described above—is an important part of why we show the bishop such honor when we are in his presence. Also, the bishop in his office, stands in the place of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the present, temporal life of the Church. For the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, is the one and only bishop, the one and only all-seeing overseer (*episkopos*) of the Church. The Lord Jesus Christ is, as we pray during the Divine Liturgy, not only the Offering and the Receiver of the Offering, He is the Offerer. The bishop when he stands among us, leading us—especially when presiding

at the Divine Liturgy and making the Offering that is the central act of the Liturgy—makes present for us Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Great High Priest. (So that we do not miss this connection, sometimes icons are written of Our Lord Jesus Christ in which he is depicted wearing the vestments of a bishop, especially the *omophorion*.)

What, ultimately, is the role of the Diocesan Bishop in the Diocese?

Ultimately, the role of the bishop is to be the man around whom the clergy and the faithful of the Diocese gather, as if at home with their father. Like a father in a family, the bishop is the one who leads us along the right path, following Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our bishop does have the right and responsibility of authority, but that authority is to be exercised, not as a tyrant or dictator, but as one who has the best interests of all as the priority which guides his every decision. The burden of the episcopacy is the burden of living and humble service, the burden of loving each and all, just as Our Lord Jesus Christ loves each of us, and us all. The bishop is not meant to drag his flock along behind him. Nor is the bishop meant to drive the flock ahead of him. Rather, the bishop is to walk alongside his flock, attentive to their every step, supporting them, guiding them, and teaching them.

A wonderful image for the bishop is to be found in the story of Our Lord Jesus Christ's post-resurrectional appearance to Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus (Luke, Chapter 24). In that case, the Lord walks with his disciples, and talks with his disciples, and enlightens his disciples, and makes their hearts burn within them. Then, finally, He reveals Himself fully to them in the blessing and breaking of the bread. This is how the bishop, the archpastor, is to be among the people.