**An Open Letter To The Parish Council Of**

**St Michael The Archangel Ukrainian Catholic Church**

# *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”*

# *Matthew 18:20*

**Founding Principles**

As we prepare to celebrate the holiday of our parish patron saint, St. Michael the Archangel, it may be a good opportunity to reflect on our parish journey since 1975. Not everyone is aware of our parish’s active and engaged laity history. I’d like to focus, for a moment, on how this dynamic participation of our laity in parish leadership has been the key to growing St. Michael’s into one of the strongest parishes in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

As a founding member of our parish and son of one of the founders Roman “Munio” Lewyckyj, I have witnessed the history that created the principles, which guide our parish today. As our clergy have changed hands and laity grew in size, I often heard my father patiently explain the unique foundation of our parish and our leadership ecosystem, which required a democratically transparent system of governance. The laity was actively engaged in the management of the physical health of our parish, while our clergy focused on deepening our spiritual health.

My father passed away 2018. Sadly, most of our founders have passed. But we have been blessed with a new generation of laity and clergy that are inspired to work based on our founding principles. This work does not come without challenges and it is often criticized and seldom thanked.

**How did our laity come together? Form follows function.**

St. Michaels founding principles are directly shaped by its history. In the early 1970’s our active Ukrainian community in the US was shrinking in size, as were our parishes. Some in our archdiocese believed that assimilating with the Roman Catholic church could stimulate growth. As a result many parishes stopped celebrating the Julian calendar and Ukrainian language liturgies.

At that time a portion of the Philadelphia laity felt strongly that, as a Ukrainian émigré community, they should remain united in faith with Ukraine. The hope was that if someday the Iron Curtain would fall, our community would be in step with our faithful brothers and sisters in Ukraine. This hope inspired this group to organized Julian calendar services in several Ukrainian Catholic churches.

But soon these Julian calendar services were deemed unacceptable by the archdiocese and our laity was left without a Ukrainian catholic church for services. Generously, the Ukrainian Orthodox laity of Saint Mary the Protectress Church on N.12th St. stepped in to support our catholic laity. Our parish held services for several years, sharing this Ukrainian Orthodox church. Fr. Zlochovski, an elderly retired priest, agreed to serve this laity despite the disapproval of the archdiocese.

The first Parish Council was elected and St. Michael’s Ukrainian Catholic parish was born. But at that time, the Philadelphia Archdiocese did not recognize St. Michael’s, so one of the first challenges for the Parish Council was to create a registered nonprofit organization to maintain a religious tax-exempt status.

**Mychailivka is born.**

After a few years at the orthodox church, the Parish Council organized the purchase of the property at 1013 Fox Chase Road. And so, Mychailivka was born. The archdiocese still had difficulty recognizing this new parish and would not bless the new property. But a blessing came directly from Patriarch Josef Slipyj, who personally came from Rome to bless the new parish and property with his words, “A great Ukrainian Catholic parish will grow here". That year St. Michael’s created our first church in the converted four-car garage.

In 1982, Metropolitan Archbishop Myroslav Ivan Lubachivsky officially recognized St. Michael’s Parish as part of the archdiocese. (Later, from 1984-2000 Cardinal Lubachivsky served as Patriarch of our Ukrainian Catholic Church)

In 1985, our Parish Council created a plan to design and build what is today’s church. The new church was designed to house the modest congregation of about 150 parishioners.

**A New Generation of Laity**

In 1991, Ukraine declared independence, the Iron Curtain fell and our small parish quickly grew with an influx of Ukrainian immigrants. The newly arrived faithful immediately felt at home, celebrating their familiar Julian calendar with Ukrainian-language services.

St. Michael’s laity was invigorated with the growing arrival of Ukrainian immigrants. This new generation was invited to participate in parish life and was eventually elected to the Parish Council. The spirit of voluntary service to our parish was passed to this new generation of parishioners. With this new generation, in 2017 our Parish Council led our laity on a major design and construction of our new Parish Hall and Catechism Center.

**Reflections on a journey**

St. Michael’s Founding Principles have placed a real responsibility upon our laity to care for the physical and financial health of our “Mychailivka”. This is not a symbolic responsibility… the potential for success and risk of failure are real. Yet, this reality has inspired so many of us to volunteer our skills, including contractors, architects, legal and financial professionals and many more. I too was proud to create our iconostas when I returned from my studies in Rome.

Our history shows how our volunteer Parish Council was a catalyst for success and organizational stability. Over the years, this parish stability allowed our clergy the freedom to focus on the most important mission of our parish: *to care for and expand the spiritual health of our community*. Providing this spiritual leadership is a complex full-time responsibility.

St. Michael’s history and chain-of-events are often misunderstood. St. Michael’s laity did not create a Parish Council as an afterthought for an established parish.  In fact, a wandering united laity elected a Parish Council which led to the creation of St. Michael’s Parish. These are our Founding Principles.

We have come a long way from what was once a shunned parish. In 1975, our parish was challenged to explore our faith and stand for our core values. We see that the archdiocese and our laity faced important challenges together. Both clergy and laity did their human best to serve our faith.

In hindsight, it is clear that we traveled this challenging path with the Lord’s help. We should all very proud of this history and learn from it, as we will certainly face more challenges in the future.

**Pride and Humility**

It was my pride and joy to show the success of our parish to my Plast childhood friend, Metropolitan Archbishop Boris Gudziak. Both Archbishop Gudziak and Bishop Rabij have expressed their high regard for our parish achievements and the work of our Parish Council. Today, St. Michael’s is often referred to as the model of a successful vibrant parish.

While it warms my heart when our parishioners remember the past work of our Parish Councils and volunteers, I would like to take time today, while you are still among us, to sincerely thank you, my brothers and sisters, who continue to volunteer your time and professional skills.

I humbly thank the Lord and pray that He continues to guide St. Michael’s parish.