

Homily

*Delivered by His Beatitude, Metropolitan HERMAN, on at the Divine Liturgy,
Thursday, July 21, 2005, at the 14th All-American Council*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Your Eminences, Your Graces, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

By God's Mercy, we are able to participate once again in an All-American Council, the 14th All-American Council of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America. We find that most of the things that take place are no different than the first Council. There was concern for the Church, there was concern for every department of the Church, concern for the faithful, and especially concern that the Word of God would be preached to all people so that they may be able to gain eternal salvation and entrance into the heavenly Kingdom.

In the short time of this past week during this Council, we have had the opportunity to review much. We have had the opportunity to review all those things in the life of the Church that have taken place in the last three years. Depending on how we look at things, how we look to the Church and Her hierarchical structure - that is a feeling that comes from within us. If we begin only with a negative thought in our mind, then we really don't see anything that is good or anyone accomplishing anything that is worthwhile. However, if we are willing to look for the good that has taken place, then very quickly anything that did not take place or in the proper manner is overshadowed by the good. And we rejoice knowing that so many good things have taken place.

This Council is no different than any other Council; there are always some disappointments, and that should not be strange to any of us. As we go through life we know, beginning with ourselves - not with anyone else - that there is no one who is perfect. How good it would be if we could be perfect and please our Heavenly Father with every act that we perform, every word that we utter. That, indeed, would be wonderful. However, we know that this does not take place. But our Lord, who is loving, merciful, and compassionate, is very compassionate when we make a mistake, providing that we are willing also to acknowledge our errors, repent of our actions and, most importantly, to make a change within our life.

Probably the greatest disappointment we can have is that we are not bringing more people to Christ. And we should be disappointed. There is no question about it. Because that is our main task - to bring God's children to His Heavenly Kingdom. Unfortunately, when we begin to look at that we want to blame everyone else. Sometimes it gets to the point that we want to turn to the Lord and blame Him, that somehow He has abandoned us - that He has somehow not made it possible for us to do His work. Now perhaps this is so because we look to everyone else and not first to ourselves.

As I said earlier, this Council is no different than the first or the ones that will come after this one. There are imperfections, but we have done many good things. Can we do better? We absolutely can. Will we do much better? We can only answer that individually. No one else can answer for us. I am sure three years ago we were all disappointed - as disappointed as we may have been three years before that - disappointed that the census was going down. Usually the only thing we connect with that census is that there is going to be less money coming into the Church. That must not be our main concern. Our main concern must be that we are not doing our main work. That we are not

leading God's children to His Heavenly Kingdom – that work that was entrusted to us by the Grace of God. Can it change? Yes it can change. However it will only change if the change begins with each and every one of us – the archpastors, the pastors and the faithful.

The very command that our Lord gave to His first disciples is the same commandment that He has given to each and every one of us. To go out and “baptize all nations in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He knew that this would not be a simple task. He knew that it would require work on the part of all of us. It would require sacrifice. But He gave us comfort because He also said to us, “Lo, I am with you always even unto to the very end.” We know that regardless of what trial or tribulation we have gone through in our personal life, in our parish, in our deanery, or in our diocese, we know that the moment we turn to the Lord and offer up our prayer, that there comes to us peace and comfort. And therefore, even now, if we really want to see change come about, if we really want to see more people within our Church, more people walking in the direction of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, it requires that we do something. We must make the examination, not so much of anyone else, but of ourselves. When we go to bed at night, perhaps even before we say our evening prayers, we should ask ourselves, “What have I done today for the building up of Christ's Holy Church?” And that naturally includes our own personal salvation. Have we heard His commandments and His teachings? Are we living in accordance with those commandments and those teachings? Are we a good example to the people we come in contact with – whether it is our spouse and children in the morning or the people we are going to meet out on the street? We need not only to ask ourselves these questions, but also answer and resolve that we are going to change our life. That we are going to change to a life in Christ.

There is always disappointment. Remember that when Christ called His first disciples to become “fishers of men” they were disappointed because they didn't catch any fish. But what did the Lord tell them? He didn't say to them go out and find someone else to fish for you. He said “Go out into the deep.” And that is exactly what they did. They went out into the deep waters and there they caught many fish. So it is with each and every one of us. Too often we are preaching and talking to the wrong people. The people we should be talking to we hesitate to talk to. Instead, we are talking to the people who are already obedient to the Lord – those who have heard His commandments and teachings, maybe not perfectly, but they are trying to live in accordance with those commandments. But what about those people who were baptized and confirmed into the Orthodox Faith but have gone astray for one reason or another? Regardless of what or who they were disappointed in, they walked away from the faith. It is better that we go out and preach to those people - those people who if we look out into our church we see the empty spaces, those are the people who we must bring back. It can be done only by example. And the most perfect example has been given to us already by none other than our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. It must be done by taking upon ourselves His humility, His Love – His Love for all of mankind that will permit us to fulfill our love for each other and to continue to do the work of the Lord.

In today's Epistle reading the Apostle Paul tells us very clearly that, even though they wanted him to come to Rome and even though he himself wanted to go to Rome, he said to them, “No I am not going to go there” because he wanted to go somewhere where Christ had not yet been preached. He knew that Christ was being preached in Rome but he also knew that not everyone was true to Christ our Savior there. But it was his desire to go elsewhere. And so, it must be with each and every one of us – we must be willing to go out and look for those people. We have an obligation as the Orthodox Church here in North America to be able to go out and bring people to eternal salvation. We have the opportunity and the obligation to offer them the True Faith. That regardless of what their life is on this earth; in the end they will gain eternal life of joy in His Heavenly Kingdom.

It is easy to pass judgment on someone else. But for there to be a change in our own spiritual life, for there to be a change in our leading people to Christ, there must be that change, that transfiguration, that transformation, in our own life. That must come first. The moment we are going to do that is the same moment that the Lord sees that we love Him and that we are obedient to Him. Just as the Lord gave us that very first commandment and everyone else that followed Him within the Church has given us the very same commandment. We know that Saint Patriarch Tikhon didn't say anything different. He didn't say anything different at all. He told us that it is our obligation spread the faith of Jesus Christ. And in order to do that it first of all must be foremost in our own heart. And we must not hesitate. We must be willing to go out to preach boldly – no differently than the Holy Apostle Paul did. But, unfortunately, those who have fallen, those who at one time were part of the Orthodox faith and no longer are there, it seems that we don't want to say a word, we don't want to “hurt their feelings.” Their feelings mean absolutely nothing here upon this earth. What is most important is that in the end they will not be disappointed but rather will gain for themselves eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom. That is the challenge that is given to each and every one of us. We must go out and preach His Word and lead people to His Heavenly Kingdom.

We must go out and give sight and understanding to everyone who wants to be one with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Of course it is not a simple task. But at least we need to have that satisfaction that we are attempting to do the right thing. At the same time, we know that there is always disappointment – even already in these few days I have heard so much conversation and many times it is upsetting to hear of the finances and the support of the Church. And again we try and put blame on this one or that one. But our thoughts should rather be how much more could we add to the Church in order that more of God's work will be done. To think positively and not negatively. We always think that someone else needs to do the work. Can you imagine what could be accomplished if even those of us who are here today and this week would fulfill the obligation of tithing 10 percent? There would be no problem whatsoever. We can't ask others to do what we ourselves are not willing to do. It is almost impossible for the words to even come out of our mouths. Therefore today and this week, as we seriously discuss the life of the Church, we must also make sure that we are going to be a part of that serious discussion. That the very same enthusiasm that we have today, we are going to take back to our parishes. That we are going to be willing to share with others – those within our households, those within our communities – and that we are going to work every day of our life so that when that next All-American Council comes - if God blesses us to be able to participate in that Council – we will not be disappointed in ourselves. It is our Book of Life that we take before the Lord. And there, before the Lord, with every page of our Book of Life opened, the Lord tells us whether or not we were good and faithful servants. Whether we will gain eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom.

May the Lord look favorably upon us today. May He strengthen us every day, every moment of our life, so that we may go out and imitate Him only – by thought, by word, and by deed – in humility and filled with love. Knowing that through that process we will indeed bring many of His lost children to His Heavenly Kingdom. But most importantly we will gain for ourselves that eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom both now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.