

Grand Banquet Address

Delivered by His Beatitude, Metropolitan HERMAN, during the Grand Banquet at the 14th All-American Council, Thursday, July 21, 2005

Your Eminences, Your Graces, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Monastics, Beloved Faithful, Honorable Representatives of other Churches and of the Ecumenical Community, Distinguished Guests, Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Our 14th All-American Council has completed most of its work. We have been together during the past week, meeting in plenary sessions and in other forums, striving together to discern God's will for the Orthodox Church in America. One of the precious gifts we receive in assembling for our Council is the gift of fellowship with one another. This gift allows us to discern the Church as family, the Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church as the joy of seeing Christ in one another, the Church as the Body of Christ.

The purest expression of the Church as Body of Christ is given to us in the Divine Liturgy, in the Eucharistic gathering. We partook of the joy of the Eucharist during this Council. Yet, as we know well from the life of the parish communities which sustain us through common prayer and through the sacraments, the Orthodox Christian Liturgy does not end with the dismissal. Our liturgical life continues in fellowship, in breaking bread together, in bearing one another's burdens and thus fulfilling the law of Christ, and in witnessing to the Good News of Christ.

Tonight, we are together to share a family meal, to celebrate, to affirm the bonds of peace and joy and unity which hold us together. If we receive all these gifts with gratitude, we will be sustained in the long and difficult journey of Orthodox Christian witness which lies ahead.

To gather for celebration is not to exclude the possibility of some moments of reflection and thoughtfulness. I would like to take the freedom this moment offers to share with you some anxieties about Orthodoxy in today's world, as well as some hopes for Orthodoxy. And I hope you will sense that what I say is rooted in my love for the Orthodox Church, a love which I know you share.

As Orthodox Christians who live and labor in Canada and the United States of America and Mexico, we are well aware of the challenges as well as the opportunities our societies present to us. When we see the secularism, the selfishness, the immorality which permeate our societies, we grieve for the loss of religious and moral values and for the countless distorted and lost lives. When we see the thirst for authentic religious experience, the selfless actions to help the poor and the hungry and the homeless, we rejoice at the presence of religious and moral impulses and values and the holy lives of so many.

As Orthodox Christians living in the Western Hemisphere, we are fully conscious that we live in Western societies. Indeed, we are educated in the schools of our societies, we are informed and influenced by their media, we participate in their culture. It is fair to say that the vast majority of our faithful are Western people in their way of living and thinking. At the same time, we are fully aware that the Orthodox Church represents Eastern Christianity – a Christianity which is distinctive.

The Orthodox Church offers a way of worship and prayer, a way of Christian life and thought which take a different approach than that of Western Christianity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

What we can offer, therefore, if we take up the challenge, is a *critique* of our culture from *within* the culture. To do this, we must find the appropriate and effective ways to engage our culture, acknowledging what is good in it and confronting what is evil in it. We must take our stand in the particular culture in which we live, without being enslaved by it. And we must do so from the Orthodox perspective and worldview.

This is the point at which our criticism must be turned toward Orthodox tendencies and habits. As we know very well, the image of Orthodoxy in our societies is identified with specific and limited areas of the world, with specific cultures and nations. Orthodoxy is seen as Middle Eastern and Eastern European, as Greek or Russian, Romanian or Serbian, Albanian or Bulgarian . . . and so on. Orthodoxy is perceived as a foreign faith, tied to foreign cultures. The fault for this lies not in the way our societies look at us. The problem lies with what they actually see when they look at us.

Orthodoxy fails to live up to its universal, worldwide calling. We have allowed ourselves to be confined to narrow cultural boundaries. On the world level, when heads and representative of Orthodox Churches assemble, we see only Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The so-called “diasporas” found in Western Europe, North America, South America, and Australia are not visible in most pictures or profiles of Orthodoxy.

In many Orthodox settings, the view prevails that Orthodoxy is fully achievable only in the traditional and historic Orthodox contexts. Thus to be fully Orthodox and fully American, or Canadian, or French, or Australian is thought to be a contradiction in terms. The irony – indeed tragedy – is that the traditional and historic Orthodox contexts have all undergone painful histories of domination by atheist communism, or secularism, or Islam. It is most often not *preservation* of the Orthodox tradition which is the real agenda of the day, but rather the *recovery* and *restoration* of the Orthodox tradition after decades of persecution and even genocidal violence.

The end of the twentieth century became a time of a renewal of Orthodox life in formerly communist societies. We welcome this miraculous revival, thanking God for His mercy and power, praising God for the countless martyrs who witnessed to Christ in their lives and by their deaths. We also see in our time the steady and vital witness of Orthodox Churches in Muslim societies. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in other regions of the world.

Yet we must insist that the historic centers of Orthodox life do not have a monopoly on Orthodoxy. In truth, even if the revival and renewal of Orthodoxy in the Middle East and Eastern Europe is fully successful and wonderfully fruitful in the years ahead, Orthodoxy would still be confined to its historic regions, and would still not have a consciousness of its universality.

The universality of Orthodox witness is put to the test today in those regions and countries where the Orthodox Church is relatively new. We freely admit that even in North America, where the Orthodox Church now has a history of more than two hundred years, we are comparatively new – when the comparison is with the ancient Orthodox patriarchates. The newness of Orthodoxy in North America parallels the newness of the Canadian and American societies – when the comparison is with the ancient cultures of the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.

Why is Orthodoxy in North America an important, probably decisive, test for Orthodoxy worldwide? It is here that the Orthodox Church is demonstrating its ability – or inability – to deal with new cultures and to be engaged in a real encounter with modernity. It is here that we Orthodox must move forward in our following of Christ. It is here that we manifestly fail if our orientation is toward nostalgia for empires long-gone and glories long-faded.

And the test for Orthodoxy of which I speak challenges us here in North America, and challenges the Orthodox Churches with whom so many Orthodox Christians in North America are identified. It is a matter of fact that the Orthodox mind is often seduced by nostalgia for the past. This is as true in New York and Toronto as it is in Constantinople and Moscow.

Instead of addressing together, as a fully unified Orthodox Church, the challenges and opportunities our societies offer us, we remain preoccupied with the questions of “self-rule” and “autonomy” of archdioceses in North America, with the “recognition” or “non-recognition” of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America.

The obvious logic of our own ecclesiology – our own understanding of the Church - clearly confronts us with the only authentic model of Orthodox church life and organization, which is full canonical unity, full collaboration for mission and witness. We evade what is obvious by taking a defensive posture, in fear that full unity and collaboration would deprive us of the fullness of our various cultural, linguistic, and historic heritages. Some suggest – or suspect – that the Orthodox Church in America’s “real” goal is the elimination of the cultural and historic identities in the Church and the creation of one homogeneous identity.

The truth is that the model of diversity within unity prophetically seen by Archbishop Tikhon one hundred years ago is the model to which our Church is fully committed today. Within one Orthodox Church in North America it is obvious that the cultural, national, and ecclesial traditions and heritages would be maintained and nourished by the existing archdioceses and dioceses. In a united Orthodox Church in North America diversity would contribute to unity. In a disunited Orthodoxy in North America, diversity is a sign of our spiritual impotence.

Some years ago Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch asserted that the Christ whom we follow walks ahead of us into the future, and that we will not be able to follow Christ if we look for Him in the past.

My hope for Orthodoxy is that we will follow Christ into the future, bearing within us the living Tradition of the Orthodox Church, bearing witness to this Tradition in theology and ecclesiology, in prayer and spirituality, in charity and in mission. If we bear within us the living Tradition of our faith, we will not fear modern culture, but will engage it with the fullness of Christ’s love and truth. If we live up to the living Tradition of our faith, we will, together, give dynamic, credible witness to Christ as a united Orthodoxy whose mission is in each particular society, and is at the same time a universal, worldwide mission.

I invite you to join me in this hope. Let us, together, invite our Orthodox brothers and sisters in North America and around the world to join us in this hope, and in its fulfillment!