

THE 1907 MAYFIELD CHURCH COUNCIL¹

The Church Council that convened here in Mayfield in 1907 continues to have enormous significance in the life of the Church even today, a century later. The theme of the Council was “*How to Expand the Mission*”. In order to fully appreciate the Council’s importance, we must first look back at the life of the Church leading up to the Council. In particular, let us reflect on the history and vision of the Orthodox Mission in North America prior to the Council of 1907.

Orthodoxy had arrived on the North American continent about a century earlier in 1794. A group of monks, mostly from the famous Valaam Monastery in northwestern Russia, had been sent to distant Alaska, then a colonial outpost of the Russian Empire. In addition to serving the spiritual needs of the Russian colonists, the missionaries began to evangelize the pagan Alaskan Natives and, soon enough, the monks were obliged to protect the Natives from abuse by the Russian colonial administration. Eventually, Herman, a simple monk and initially one of the junior members of the missionary team became the most significant. With great love, he nurtured and evangelized the Alaskan natives until his death in 1837. He was canonized as America’s first saint in 1970.

In the 1820s, Fr. John Veniaminov, a priest from Siberia, came to Alaska as a missionary. He continued the work of the first missionaries and, under the harshest climatic conditions, he expanded the mission to previously unevangelized regions of Alaska. After being widowed, Fr. John took monastic vows, with the new name Innocent, and was consecrated a bishop. With renewed vigor, Bishop Innocent continued his missionary labors and guided his clergy, the foremost being Saint Jacob Netsvetov, the first native Alaskan Orthodox priest. Soon, his diocese was enlarged to include eastern Siberia in addition to Alaska.

When Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, there were those in Russia who suggested that the Orthodox mission in North America should be closed. In response to a rumor that he shared this view, Archbishop Innocent wrote to the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod vehemently opposing such closure and unequivocally stating that he considered the sale of Alaska to be an act of Divine Providence which would enable the expansion of the Orthodox mission throughout North America. In the same letter, he advocated for the transfer of the episcopal see to San Francisco, the appointment of a bishop and clergy who spoke English, the training and ordination of convert clergy and the publication of liturgical and other books in English, all of which came to pass in due time. Even after his elevation to Metropolitan of Moscow in 1868, Saint Innocent continued to actively support missionary endeavors, especially in North America. He died in 1879, and, at the request of the Orthodox Church in America, the Church in Russia proclaimed him a saint in 1977. The glorification services following his later canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia took place right here in Mayfield in 1994.

¹ Banquet address at the 100th anniversary celebration of the First All American Sobor (Council) at Saint John the Baptist Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Mayfield, PA on October 28, 2007.

As Saint Innocent had foreseen, the North American Diocesan See was, in fact, soon moved to San Francisco, and later to New York. Over the next few decades, the Orthodox mission spread from coast to coast and into Canada. In great part this was due to the arrival of immigrants from other lands, most significantly, beginning in the 1880s, of Slavic Uniates from Austro-Hungary. Generations earlier, their ancestors had been Orthodox but had been forced to become Greek-Catholics (popularly called Uniates). In America, under the leadership of Father Alexis Toth, canonized a saint in 1994 for his outstanding missionary efforts, many faithful and parishes - including your own - returned to the Orthodox faith of their forefathers. This movement back to Orthodoxy greatly increased the Orthodox population in the US, especially in the Northeast.

In 1898, a humble, young hierarch was appointed to head the Church on this continent. This was Saint Tikhon, the future Patriarch of Russia. When he became the ruling bishop of the North American Diocese, diocesan administrative authority in the Russian Church was vested largely in the person of its ruling hierarch. However, in his archpastoral ministry in America, Saint Tikhon increasingly sought the participation and input of all clergy and the laity in the governance of the diocese. This remarkable style of diocesan administration engendered various regional gatherings over several years, to discuss and develop Church life. Eventually, this led to the idea of a gathering unprecedented in North America: a Council comprised of clergy and laity, to deliberate a most crucial topic, *"How to Expand the Mission"*.

To understand the vision guiding the 1907 Council in Mayfield, a remarkable document that Saint Tikhon wrote in 1905 must also be considered. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of rejuvenation of theological thought and Church life in Russia, but no Church Council had been held in Russia in almost two-and-a-half centuries. It was projected that an All-Russian Church Council bringing together hierarchs, clergy and laity would soon be convened to deliberate the most crucial issues of Church life. In preparation for the proposed Council, each bishop of the Russian Church was asked to delineate matters of concern that would be considered for its agenda. Saint Tikhon's contribution to the *"Responses of the Diocesan Hierarchs on Issues of Church Reform"*² clearly outlined his missionary vision for the future of Orthodoxy in North America: to maintain the Church's united but ethnically diverse structure and voice, as was then the case, and eventually to be a truly local and united autocephalous Church³. These were the key principles of Church structure that would guide the Council held in Mayfield two years later.

² *Отзывы Епархиальных Архиереев по вопросу о Церковной Реформе* (3 volumes and two additional volumes of appendices) С.-Петербург, Синодальная Типография 1906.

³ Saint Tikhon's response in *Отзывы Епархиальных Архиереев по вопросу о Церковной Реформе* was № 25, преосвященного Тихона, архиепископа Алеутскаго и Северо-Американскаго от 24-го ноября 1905 года, vol. 1, pp. 530-37. It has not been fully translated into English. A translation of the portion of this text dealing with the Church in North America was published in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Volume 19, Number 1/1975 (p. 49-50) and the *1975 Yearbook and Church Directory of the Orthodox Church in America* (p. 8).

The Council in 1907 was a natural outgrowth of the history of the North American Mission that we have reviewed and contributed to the Church's vision that was further developed by the Council.

But how, you might ask, did the Council come to be held in Mayfield?

The Russian Orthodox Catholic Mutual Aid Society (ROCMAS), a federation of brotherhoods founded in 1895 and dedicated to church development, charity, education and mutual help for its members, had scheduled its convention in Scranton for early 1907. Many clergy and lay representatives, who would be traveling far from all corners of North America, would attend the convention. As many of the same priests and laity would also be delegates to the Church Council, it was decided to hold the Council simultaneously, with Council sessions scheduled between the meetings of the convention. Late in 1906, for reasons unknown to us, the location of the upcoming convention and Council was changed to Mayfield. Possible motivating factors for the relocation may have been that the Mayfield parish was already a sizeable and established Church community and that Father Arseny (Chahovtsev), rector of the Mayfield church, had already proven himself a reliable organizer. He had, less than two years earlier, by resolution of the previous ROCMAS convention and by archpastoral directive of Archbishop Tikhon, established Saint Tikhon's Monastery in South Canaan. Indeed, once it was decided that the convention and Council would convene in Mayfield, Father Arseny was charged with all practical arrangements for both.

When the First All-American Council (Sobor) gathered on March 5th through the 7th, 1907, it became the culmination and conclusion of St. Tikhon's archpastoral service in North America. In fact, by the end of March, Saint Tikhon did leave America, never to return again. Several weeks before the Council, it was announced that Saint Tikhon had received news of his transfer to the ancient see of Yaroslavl, and thus, he no longer had the authority to preside over the Council. However, as he had not yet departed to his new assignment in Russia and his successor - Archbishop Platon (Rozhdestvensky) - had not yet arrived in America, auxiliary Bishop Innocent (Pustynsky) of Alaska, who was the temporary administrator of the diocese, asked Saint Tikhon to preside over the Council that his vision had conceived.

Here we must clarify the dates when the Council actually occurred. While many histories indicate February 20-22 as the dates of the Council, careful study of documentation and contemporary publications indicates that those are the dates according to the Church's Julian calendar. Given the 13-day difference between calendars, the civil calendar dates of the Council were March 5-7.

The assembly of clergy and laity gathered in Mayfield was humble yet it was significant for it met under the leadership of its visionary archpastor to address the needs of the Church's continued missionary expansion throughout North America, and to bid a fond farewell to their beloved diocesan hierarch.

At the Council's opening session, Saint Tikhon addressed the assembly and stressed the self-evident importance of the conciliar gathering, in the following words:

*"I welcome you honorable Fathers and delegates to the opening of our first conciliar meetings. Although our Mission has existed for a relatively short time, nothing needs to be said regarding the obvious importance and necessity of conciliar deliberation of its affairs. It seems that many of you have been previously well aware of this or have learned of it here in personal conversations. To say anything further is, I think, superfluous."*⁴

He also offered the following guidance for the success of the Council:

*"For my part, I would just like to say that in order for our work to be truly fruitful – we must be guided not so much by self interest or personal advantage, but rather by what benefits our common work."*⁵

Alongside Saint Tikhon, the Council was graced by the key participation of three priests who are now also canonized saints: Alexis Toth, Alexander Hotovitzky and John Kochurov, who would later be the first clergy martyr during the Russian Revolution, as well as Fr. Leonid Turkevich, who decades later would become Metropolitan Leonty and who is fondly remembered by many as a saintly elder. In preparation for the Council, Mayfield's pastor, Fr. Arseny and other diocesan leaders actively participated in formulating the Council's agenda and goals through lively debate in the diocesan periodical on a variety of key issues. After the Council, Fr. Arseny would soon be transferred to Canada, where as a missionary priest and bishop, he was known as "*the Canadian Chrysostom*" for his eloquent preaching. Returning many years later to Saint Tikhon's monastery in South Canaan, he was entrusted in 1938 with the establishment of a Pastoral School. Under his leadership as its first rector, it was soon upgraded to the status of a seminary. In recent years, his missionary legacy has been rediscovered in the Canadian Archdiocese of the Orthodox Church in America, where he is informally venerated as a saint.

Among the highlights of its deliberations, the Council recognized that to further the Church's mission, it was essential to create a permanent and orderly administrative structure in the diocese. To enact this, it was decided that a statute should be drafted. Furthermore, the Council realized that the regular convocation of Councils was vital to the development of the Church's mission. Additionally, the Council sought to create a solid and equitable financial infrastructure for the diocese and its parishes. Such a system, that would among other things provide subsidies for smaller parishes and uniform clergy compensation, was deemed indispensable for missionary expansion. In addressing the issue of differences in liturgical practice across the North American Diocese, the Council's consensus was to follow St. Tikhon's wise conclusion that these

⁴ Author's translation of text published in *Американский Православный Вестник* (subtitled in English as *Russian Orthodox American Messenger*), Vol. XI, No. 7, 1-14 April, 1907, p. 121

⁵ Ibid.

are to be accepted as, in part, a reflection of the various ethnicities of the clergy and faithful and that they do not contravene the essence of the Orthodox faith. As the Council's meetings, taking place between sessions of the ROCMAS convention, lasted only a few short hours, the Council was not able to deliberate in great detail. However, the Council did delineate a decisive course of action on several issues as outlined above. The foremost significance of the 1907 Council was the precedent it set by its very convocation for the future All-American Councils, which continue to this day.

Fr. Leonid Turkevich was appointed chairman of the Council after Fr. Alexander Hotovitzky, due to responsibilities at the ROCMAS convention, declined his election as Council chairman but agreed to serve as its secretary. In concluding remarks at the Council's closing session, these were Fr. Leonid's prophetic words:

*"May the Lord God, who is glorified in the Holy Trinity, be praised for deigning this! May He be praised for allowing us to come together at this Council, to get to know one another, and by the measure of our strength and discernment to come to the needed decisions. Any betterment of these decisions, to strengthen them, will be worked on by our future Orthodox Councils, which, as all of us can see, are a necessity to meet at regular intervals again and again."*⁶

The life of the North American Church was further stabilized and fortified by the Mayfield Council, which resulted in remarkable continued growth over the next decade.

Just after the czarist regime was overthrown in Russia in 1917, the long awaited All-Russian Church Council finally convened in Moscow. Perhaps the Mayfield Council in America a decade earlier played a part in paving the way for the Moscow Council. In any case, the influence of the Mayfield Council is clear. Saint Tikhon, formerly Archbishop of North America, was elected the first Patriarch of the Russian Church in more than two centuries. Father Leonid Turkevich was one of two clergy delegates from America. His brother, Fr. Benedict Turkevich, who had also served in America and had attended the 1907 Council, but by then was serving in Poland, was a clergy delegate from the Diocese of Volhynia. Fr. Alexander Hotovitzky, who had served in America for 18 years as the closest collaborator of Saint Tikhon and other hierarchs and would be martyred for the faith in 1937, was dean of the Cathedral in Helsinki at the time of the All-Russian Council and likewise a clergy delegate.

The Moscow Council adopted many far-reaching innovative transformations for incorporation into the life of the Russian Church. Among them was a highly acclaimed parish statute. This document was clearly influenced by the Church statute drafted in America by decision of the Mayfield Council. While the spirit of the Moscow Council continued to linger in the Russian Church in the Soviet Union, the devastating consequences of the 1917 Revolution prevented the implementation of most of its decisions. It is only now, in post-communist Russia, that the Russian Church has become free to revisit the decisions of the Council of 1917-18 and to begin implementing them as

⁶ Ibid. p. 122

appropriate in the current situation. Various factors will make this a long and gradual process.

In America, the spirit of both the Mayfield Council and the Moscow Council began to bear fruit immediately, especially through people like Metropolitan Leonty who had experienced both.

Both Councils soon became, by necessity, the template for conciliar gatherings in North America. The Revolution in Russia in a multitude of ways created great turmoil for Orthodoxy on this continent. The most devastating consequence was the destruction of structural Church unity and the splintering into various jurisdictions. But, whenever the Church was confronted by crises or difficult decisions, the All-American Councils met to face the most crucial issues affecting the life of the Church and, therefore, many significant historical developments have evolved through the Councils. Hence, these Councils, at which representatives of the entire territorial Church gather together for deliberation, legislation, elections and fellowship in prayer and the Eucharist, have been the lifeline of the Church and have marked some of the most important transitions in the Church's growth in North America. Over the years, the All-American Councils have become an essential feature of Church life and are now convened regularly, generally every three years. According to the Statute of the Orthodox Church in America, the All-America Council is "*the highest legislative and administrative authority within the Church.*"⁷ The historical path of the North American Church since the early 20th century is reflected in the twenty-seven All-American Councils⁸ which have taken place to date.

A spirit of unity in Church life is achieved through conciliarity (in Russian: sobornost), embodied in the regular convocation of All-American Councils. The Councils have to a great extent shaped the historical destiny and direction of the Church. Council decisions have paved the way to autocephaly, initially envisioned by Saint Tikhon, and to further historical developments. These conciliar gatherings also allow representatives of the local Church communities throughout the North American continent to gather in fellowship to develop consensus on crucial issues and to gain strength from unity in the Eucharist celebrated together. The All-American Councils are the very expression of the reality that the Church is both hierarchal and conciliar. The Councils allow the local communities that participate in them through their delegated representatives to surmount a congregationalist mindset and the inherent dangers of isolation from each other and the Church as a whole.

The Church is fortified by her Councils and, through the prayers of all the saints of North America, strives to be faithful to Christ and the Holy Tradition of the universal Orthodox

⁷ The Statute of the Orthodox Church in America, Article III, Section 1 <http://www.oca.org/DOCstatute.asp?SID=12&ID=3>

⁸ In order to differentiate between the Councils before and after the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America in 1970, up to that point, they are called by the Russian term "sobor," and from that point, the equivalent English term "Council" has been used. Therefore, the 14th All-American Sobor in 1970 became the 1st All-American Council. The most recent of these assemblies was the 14th All-American Council in 2005.

Church. She must seek to worthily serve and witness in the difficult circumstances of a non-Orthodox culture and the increasingly anti-Christian spirit of the contemporary world. As the Church in North America faces new challenges in the 21st century and the new millennium, future All-American Councils should derive wise inspiration from the historical legacy and rich experience of the Councils of the past, beginning with first one here in Mayfield, for discerning the Church's course for the future.

I would like to end with another quote from Fr. Leonid Turkevich. These are the final words of his concluding remarks at the Mayfield Council, which are today perhaps even more timely and meaningful for all Orthodox Christians in North America than they were a century ago:

“Renewed in spirit, with faith and hope in God, may our Church grow and be courageous, pure, loving and strong in her unity; may she draw unto her bosom not only the Uniates, who are our brothers by blood, but advancing beyond the Russian race, may all those who live in America be drawn to the Holy Apostolic Church, so that here, there would be one flock and one Shepherd, Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and majesty with the Father and the Holy Spirit unto ages of ages.”⁹

Through the prayers of all our holy fathers of North America, especially those whose vision or participation shaped the historic Council here in Mayfield a century ago, Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us and save us.

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For further reading, see:

<https://secure.oca.org/ocpc/scripts/prodView.asp?idproduct=286>
<http://www.oca.org/MVorthchristiansnamericaTOC.asp?SID=1&Chap=OCNA>
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<http://www.oca.org/DOCindex-councils.asp?SID=12>
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<http://www.oca.org/PDF/DOC-PUB/TOC/2007/toc-pascha-pentecost.pdf> (p.21)

⁹ Author's translation, op. cit., pp. 122-3