



**MEMBERS OF ONE  
ANOTHER IN CHRIST**



**15<sup>th</sup> All-American Council Study Papers**



# **“Members of One Another in Christ”**

## **Study 1: Conflict Resolution**

We in the OCA have not been good at conflict resolution. Without casting blame, we have become a rather closed system of relationships and communication. This holds true not only for the hierarchy/non-hierarchy communication but also for communication at all levels for those who disagree with each other. This closed system makes us prone to stereotype and dehumanize others, in subtle ways.

The pressing questions are: what do we need to do to go forward and how do we begin to work together, creatively, to allow God to form us anew into His own people who love the Orthodox Church and who love each other.

### **Christ in Conflict Resolution**

We always begin and end with Jesus Christ. He is everything, the Way for us to follow, the Truth to embrace and the Life energy prompting us to love. The bottom line is that we cannot, of ourselves, bring unity of spirit, peace and reconciliation from the current mess of disunity and scandals in the OCA. We cannot resolve this huge conflict by ourselves. But we begin with the conviction that Christ can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That is our primary hope and pivot.

### **Disputes and Conflicts**

Disputes can be fleshed out, negotiated and a compromise reached. By contrast, conflicts are deep-rooted differences, which are based on conscious and unconscious identity, especially group identity. Conflicts have all the potential to become violent, albeit a civilized violence we would mask by studied indifference, passive-aggressive thoughts/behaviors, and smooth words that cloak the poison within. Much deep-rooted conflict hardens around group identity and, when threatened, people are tempted to fight. The OCA turmoil is not at the level of dispute or compromise. The OCA is in the midst of a huge conflict of varied issues and scandals.

### **Back to Basics**

The current models of conflict resolution emphasize the tenets we hold dear in Orthodoxy. Real change in systems begins with individual persons, not programs or imagined solutions. Each of us needs to reflect upon our own perceptions of the inner dialogue we have about the current situation. We need to own our attitudes about the issues involved and the expectations we have. We need to examine the mental and verbal language we use in describing the issues.

Contemporary conflict resolution models recognize that there is a mysterious dimension operating, bigger than either party and extremely powerful. Secular literature usually refers to this power as “intuition.” We Orthodox might call it Wisdom, the Ruach, Breath, of the Holy Spirit. This power pierces through conflict and apparent chaos by transcending human reasoning.

## Prayer

We Orthodox pay wonderful lip service to the need for prayer. On this historic moment of the AAC, perhaps second only in importance to the first AAC, we need to simply do the praying we talk about. This seems ever so obvious but is often the most neglected piece in the process. Am I spending some quiet time every day praying for God's will at the AAC? If not, then I might be adding to the problem rather than contributing to the solution.

## Conflict Resolution Skills

Where can we start and what can we do? First and foremost, and it cannot be said often enough, for the AAC we need to take personal prayer seriously. For a new, fresh and creative start we must allow God to enter with His Way and His Solution. God doesn't solve problems. He dissolves them. But, we must get out of His way and allow Him to have His Way with our Church. The following bullets can be starting points for building conflict resolution skills:

### ***a.) Reflect on our own agenda and thought process***

We need to quietly examine our personal agenda for the AAC. We need to look inside to uncover our deepest hopes and fears.

### ***b.) Cleanse our inner and outer language***

Language is a gauge of attitude. If we are using fierce and strident words, or despairing words, then we need to beg the Lord to change our inner and outer language to conform to His love.

### ***c.) Challenge our friends***

Often it is easier to challenge those who differ with us than to challenge those who agree with us. In particular, friendship demands that I speak forthrightly to those who agree with me but are using divisive ideas and language. We have a serious role in holding our friends accountable to a level of discourse that encourages dialogue.

### ***d.) Adjust our expectations***

Once we identify our hopes and expectations we need to put them before the Lord. The process and results of the AAC are not likely to square fully with any one person's expectations. To set our expectations low or high can fuel debate. Better said, we simply need to identify and then surrender our expectations.

### ***e.) Be assertive and then let go***

This is probably the most difficult skill to acquire. We cannot be passively mute, repressing our thoughts and feelings. By contrast, we cannot be aggressively militant by demanding that our solutions be accepted, ratified and implemented. Therefore, we must each speak assertively and firmly. We must state our thoughts, each and every time God provides an opportunity. God needs all of us to be active, involved and articulate members of His solution. But—and this is a big but—after we speak our mind we must let go of the consequences of our thoughts, words and interactions. That can be extremely demanding. Extremely. Letting go after we have done our best is the way to allow God some room to shed light on the current conflict of our Church.

Yes, we each must think and speak assertively. Yes, each of us must then let go of the results, putting the next step into God's hands.

## Loaded Words

The Bible and the Fathers can be quoted on both sides of any issue with equal ferocity and passion.

Some words almost automatically divide persons and groups. In the current OCA, one such word is "tradition." Tradition as a concept means a particular understanding of the past as it pertains to the present, according to the person using the word. The problem is that a selection, a slice of the past, is formatted according to the needs and agenda of the speaker. The emphasis can be more on the speaker than on any objective discussion of the past.

We are not discussing these issues with non-believers. We are discussing these issues with ourselves. We need to assume that others, particularly those who disagree with us, are persons of good will who have an understanding of "tradition," or anything else, which deserves respect. Our use of the word "tradition" has a sub-surface. This can include inner statements like, "I have such and such education, readings, experience, position in the Church and know what I am talking about." This assumes a posture of superiority with can easily put distance between the speaker and others. The Orthodox Church is replete with uneducated saints who had a clearer understanding of "tradition" than those in authority or who were better educated. Words like tradition are based on what has been called "chosen drama" and a "collapse of time." We choose the drama, or era, we want to highlight from the past—whether the Byzantine, pre-revolutionary Russian, or Patristic. As such, the word "tradition," becomes a blunt object used to prod someone else toward a way of thinking. This is not open-minded or helpful.

It is highly unlikely that the word "tradition" will be eliminated from all conversations at the AAC, but we can each decide to be more careful in our use of this word, and resist the temptation to manhandle it by making it the foundation of our position. We need to keep in mind that the way we use the word may differ from that of someone else, and is therefore not precise, or effectual enough to carry an argument forward in the ears and hearts of others. All words have the potential to be misconstrued, but this is especially true for those words which we know to be "loaded." A little humility, care, and creativity in our choice of words will go a long way at the AAC.

## Note of Caution

Conflict resolution among religious people has been notoriously difficult. Religion, it has been said, is a funny thing. The issues bring out the best and the worst in people.

If I think that others, particularly the hierarchy, need these suggestions more than I do, that's probably a clear sign that I am operating out of a deep darkness. If I think I have mastered some of these suggestions, that is probably a signal that I have some serious work to do on myself. All we can say then is, "Lord, have mercy." And, of course, we all need mercy.

## Beyond the Basics

For each of us, the AAC is a God-given grace to stretch ourselves in love and bear each other's burdens. Love has real power. True love confers autonomy and dignity on others.

One exercise that significantly opens doors is to actively attempt to understand the position of those who are diametrically opposed to our position. One-on-one or in groups, we might attempt to "try on" the opinion of others and actually defend their position, if only as an exercise of good will. The purpose of this exercise is not to change our beliefs but to soften our hard hearts. Perhaps there will be an opportunity at the AAC for an attempt at an exercise in empathy.

## **Conclusion**

Christ certainly can do for us what we absolutely cannot do for ourselves. The mess in the OCA is a beautifully disguised opportunity to allow God to do the impossible with our Church.

If we allow God to resolve our conflicts then He can begin to purge us of our collective triumphalism, ethnicity and creeping secularism. We can have much hope that God will separate the wheat from the chaff in our Church, and in our individual hearts.

We can leave the hotel of the AAC with renewed vigor, fresh insights, unexpected respect for the others we marginalized, and have the beginnings of a new stage for the Orthodox Church in America. It is up to each of us personally. Our part in all this is probably more simple and humble than we might imagine, and that is fine. If we open ourselves to God's conflict resolution then we are likely to have our ego crushed, at least a little, and that could be spiritually healthy, for each of us and for the Church.

We gather and work for Christ's glory, not our own, however we might imagine the shape of His Church and His glory.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of my divisive perceptions that I might pray to correct?
2. How might I help those who agree with me to become more open to those who don't agree with us?
3. What are some words which might be inclusive and upbuilding, without being trite or stale?
4. What is one instance in successful conflict resolution I have experienced? What were some of the useful ingredients?

## **“Members of One Another in Christ”**

### **Study 2: The Orthodox Church in America – Vision, Vocation, Mission, Identity<sup>1</sup>**

The Holy Spirit gives the Church her vision, which comes from our identity in Christ as His Body. This vision is identical with the vision of all those who have gone before us precisely because it is the same Body, with the same vocation, mission, and identity: to be the Body of Christ: the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Whenever we add elements to that vision, we distort it, no matter how noble our qualifications and agendas may be. Whenever we subtract from or diminish it, we do likewise. If we change the vision in any way, we exclude ourselves from it and from the Body which it constitutes.

#### **Taking Responsibility and Repenting**

There is a lot of interest in the sad scandals that have plagued the Orthodox Church in America, in the East and in the North. Dire warnings of doom, betrayals, and speculations of perverse motives are all over the Internet and discussed widely. In particular, much is being said and written to the effect that the OCA lacks vision and that this, in turn, is due to a lack of good leadership.

Such talk points to a truth: it is certainly the task of our ecclesiastical leaders constantly to announce and renew the Church’s vision. But how, exactly, is this to happen? Is there a specifically churchly way to go about this task? For we are not a corporation or secular organization, and in this instance we cannot take recourse to secular models. Our identity, vocation, and mission – both as individual members of the Church and together as the one Body of the Church – derive from the Church’s vision. Her vision is not that of any particular leader but is shared by the whole Body of the faithful.

Our task is to turn away from our own petty individual worlds, causes, and dreams – the delusions of our own reasonings. And our leaders’ task is constantly to call us back to this repentance. This they must do so that we can share the vision given by the grace of the Holy Spirit and accept our calling from Christ to be the Church, His Body, which constitutes the very core of our personal and corporate identity.

But when this leadership fails to occur – when our leaders do not call us to repentance by word and example, but instead cause scandal, sorrow, and pain – what then? For undoubtedly there has been egregious wrongdoing, and these matters are serious and profoundly affect the lives of many. Thus there is a tremendous need for healing and for restoration of confidence.

When one is suffering, all suffer together. When one member is honored, all rejoice (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26). This is the basic principle of our communion in Christ. The bishops have a particular kind of responsibility, but they are not the Church by themselves; nor are the clergy, nor the rest of the laity. How do we support our bishops so that they can bear their portion of responsibility for the life of the whole Body? Christ is calling us to take the responsibility for the Church that is already ours by virtue of our baptism and chrismation. It’s not about how “they” deal with it. It’s about us. It’s our life, our union in Christ with one another.

If there is a lack of accountability and transparency in the hierarchy, is it not our responsibility to

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in “Divine Ascent,” the annual journal the Monastery of Saint John of Shanghai and San Francisco, Manton, CA, No. 11, Lent 2008

correct it? How would it have arisen, had we not abrogated our responsibility to demand integrity from the very leaders we put into office?

If we judge those in positions of authority who have fallen, we only accuse and judge ourselves. It is easier to blame hypocritically than simply to accept the responsibility of cleaning up the mess. We should grieve over our brothers' sins, not judge them. And in so doing, we come together in compassion. This strengthens our unity and welds us together in a common task: to take responsibility for the life of our Church.

Authority is responsibility. When authority degenerates into power, egoism, and position, it destroys the image of Christ which those positions of responsibility are meant to depict. "Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44). The chief pastors of the Church are called to be that image of Christ, as are all of us the faithful. They fall short; we fall short. But we must constantly return in repentance, and encourage our fathers and brethren in that same repentance, supporting those who bear the responsibility for our souls. It is a heavy burden. But if we all bear it together, in a synergy of love and communion, it becomes the easy yoke and light burden of Christ, in Christ, by Christ. When we try to bear it by ourselves in isolation, we will inevitably fall, because it becomes something outside of Christ, about our own ego.

Thus, we must not become despondent or fearful. Instead, we must repent as a body. We must turn towards God and away from the abstractions of petty personal agendas, which can include a vindictive and worldly desire for the punishment of those who have offended us. We must not be blind to our own sin and corruption. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8 : 7). We must open our minds and hearts to Jesus Christ and to one another. Then we will see with great clarity the vision of the Church of Christ, and this will show us how to set our house in order, cleaning up the mess that we as a body have allowed.

## **The Vision of the Kingdom**

So, what is the vision of the Orthodox Church in America, and thus her identity, vocation, and mission? It is nothing other than Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. This vision is revealed to us when we celebrate the Eucharist, and the Eucharist, in turn, sends us on our mission: to bring Christ's Gospel to America in all its Orthodox integrity. We do not need the ways of the corporate world (vision- and mission-brainstorming, etc.) to determine this. Rather, we need prayer and discernment – together as the body of the Church, and in particular on the part of our Holy Synod of archbishops and bishops – in order to renew the vision of the Kingdom and to preach and proclaim the unity that exists in Christ by the Holy Spirit and constitutes us as the Church.

This vision is not about programs, institutions, administrations, budgets, or bureaucrats. Even less is it about the personal ambitions, agendas, or self-aggrandizements of bishops, clergy, lay leaders, or anyone else. It is only about Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. All the concrete projects we undertake, all the offices and positions of authority and responsibility, flow from this source. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33).

If as an organization we had lost our vision, then we would have ceased to be the Church. But this is not the case here. That vision, and the grace to actualize and incarnate it, is bestowed at every Eucharist.



The blessed and ever-memorable Father Alexander Schmemmann clearly saw and clearly articulated the Kingdom of God, imparted in the Eucharist, as the focal point of the Church's life. It was this clarity of vision which gave such great strength to his leadership. We need to get back in touch with that vision. We must return to our first love. It is the Liturgy that gives us our identity and sends us on our mission, renewing our vocation to be the Body of Christ – the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in the world.

## **The Marks of the Church**

The Church's four characteristic "marks" – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity – are at once the Church's content and identity, constituting both her vocation and mission. They are our goal; it is our challenge to actualize them in our lives, both personally and corporately, in order for us to be the Church.

Before anything else, these characteristics are marks of Christ Himself. Jesus Christ is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit; He is the focal point of our unity, and the very context of our relationship with God and one another as His Body. Jesus is the ultimate criterion of holiness: the man transparent to God, revealing God, incarnating God, and imparting that holiness which is participation in God's very life, which lifts us up from the world of sin and corruption. Christ is the essence of catholicity or wholeness, in that "all things were created through Him and for Him ... and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1 : 16–17). He is also the source of universality because He embraces all things and permeates all things, and all things exist in Him. And He is the foundation of apostleship, the apostle and high priest from God, (Hebrews 3 : 1) Whose obedience reveals Him as transparent to God, speaking only the words of Him Who sent Him (John 3 : 34), and doing whatever He sees the Father do (John 5 : 19), transforming and redeeming the world.

Our vision as Orthodox Christians is always first and foremost Jesus Christ. His message is our message: the coming of the Kingdom. His life is our life. His mission is our mission: the salvation of all mankind and its union with the Father in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Our task in the midst of this is constantly to repent, to have this vision renewed in us, and to purge our lives of everything contrary to the vision and incarnation of Christ in our lives. These are the marks of Christ; and if we share His life, we also share these marks.

## **The Role of Autocephaly**

The unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Orthodox Church cannot be the exclusive possession of Middle-Eastern, Mediterranean and Slavic countries and peoples. The Orthodox Church in America has the vocation to manifest all the fullness of Christ's Church here in America. Her autocephaly was sought and granted in 1970 precisely to facilitate this. Many today look on that event as a grave mistake, the sad fruits of which we are now forced to reap. But if we make the effort to build up and not to tear down, (1 Corinthians 3:10) a more constructive approach to our autocephaly becomes apparent.

For, in fact, the greatest strength of the Orthodox Church in America is that in her we have taken full responsibility for the life and integrity of our Church and do not rely on anyone anywhere else. Of course, we preserve sisterly relations and Eucharistic communion with the other Orthodox Churches. But we elect our own bishops, we oversee our own finances, and we support our own ministries. None of the other Orthodox communities in America can say that. Thus we are responsible for our own mistakes, as well as our own victories. And when we are faced with a problem, we are responsible, as a single Body in Christ, to deal with it in a Christ-like manner. Yes, we sin; and the sins of one, ultimately, belong to all of us – the healing and reconciliation of those who have been hurt by sin are the responsibility of us all.

Therefore, our problems will not be solved by someone from the outside. No one overseas can come to the rescue. No one will impose one more set of foreign ecclesiastical bureaucrats answerable only to a distant despot somewhere in the Old World. Thank God. This is the beauty and the responsibility of autocephaly. It is our great strength. We simply need to put aside the distractions of our passions and accept this responsibility given by God: to be the Orthodox Church in this country; to reveal the presence of Jesus Christ here in America to souls perishing in darkness, ignorance, and despair; to give them hope; and to lead them to repentance in the knowledge and love of God.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. To what degree do I feel that the OCA is fulfilling the vision upon which it was founded?
2. How will we be able to recognize that the OCA is emerging out of the problems that it has faced in recent years?
3. What does it mean, in practical terms, to keep the Kingdom of God as the focus of Christian life? How can this be done in one's personal life and in the life of a parish and/or a monastic community?
4. What can I do in my own life as a member of the OCA to help promote the mission and vision of our Church?

# **“Members of One Another in Christ”**

## **Study 3: Authority and Conciliarity**

Discussions and calls for transparency and accountability precede the recent unfortunate circumstances in the life of the Orthodox Church in America. Lately these calls have become more forceful and persistent. Still for some these terms are mistakenly seen as capitulation to North American culture and something not altogether Orthodox. In fact concern for such values is very much in line with the Orthodox canonical tradition. It is, of course, well known that the canons do not deal extensively with the administrative structure of the local church or diocese. In general they presume the full and exclusive authority of the bishop within his own church. But the canons also recognize the possibility for financial abuse within a diocese or any other ecclesiastical body. Concern for financial integrity led the Council of Chalcedon to require each diocese to have an *oikonomos* (treasurer or steward) to “administer the church’s goods with the advice of his own bishop” so that “the administration of the church will not be without checks and balances, the goods of the church will not be dissipated, and the priesthood will be free from all suspicion” (Canon 25). The same concern is evident in the enforcement mechanisms provided by Canon 11 of the Second Council of Nicea: If a metropolitan fails to appoint an *oikonomos*, “it is permitted to the bishop of Constantinople by his own authority to choose an *oikonomos* for the metropolitan’s church.” Analogous provisions apply if a bishop fails to appoint an *oikonomos*. Later commentators on the canons will expand on these provisions for direct intervention of an ecclesiastical superior. What is noteworthy here is that the Church’s usual insistence on the full and exclusive authority of the bishop within his own diocese is superseded by concern for financial integrity and accountability at all levels of church life.

### **Institution and Sacrament**

Authority is an inherent part of institutions but the truth is that the Church is not simply an institution. The Church is a sacramental organism, formed by baptism, sustained by the eucharist. The sacramental understanding of the church – so important for the early Christians and their understanding of the canons – began to be obscured in the Middle Ages. The Church came to be understood above all as a divinely instituted, hierarchically ordered body politic. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann put it, the Church came to be understood as an institution with sacraments rather than a sacrament with institutions. Although the reduction of the sacramental perspective has been pervasive, the authentic nature of the Church is still discernable. If we look attentively at the liturgy, at the writings of the fathers, at the canons themselves, we discover that sacramental perspective. In many ways, the canons in our canonical corpus bear witness to the sacramental understanding of the church that is fundamental to any proper understanding the institutional aspects of church life, church ministry and church authority. For this reason, although canonical authority is primarily vested in the ruling hierarch of a diocese, province or exarchate, neither the bishop, on his own, nor a diocese, apart from other dioceses, has an independent authority in isolation from constituents or other members.

The Orthodox concept of the Church is delineated by canonical norms but formed by a sacramental vision. Taken out of the context of sacramental life, through which we experience the unity, fullness and perfection of the church, canons can be harmful and divisive. One such divisive viewpoint is the trend to ascribe to dioceses certain “independence” or “sovereignty.” Currently fashionable this trend only serves to mislead those who are sincerely concerned about the challenges facing the Orthodox Church in America today. That the history of the Orthodoxy in North America has examples of uncanonical and irregular patterns of church administration cannot be denied. The Orthodox Church in America is not exempt from such examples. But these examples should not be considered as normative. The granting of autocephaly

in 1970 was achieved by a process of enlightened and mature theological thought. Thus at its inception the Orthodox Church in America possessed a vision of Church administration that was both canonical and pragmatic. This vision is succinctly expressed in the Statute of the Orthodox Church in America. In that Statute, dioceses are recognized as “basic” components of the Church. But this is a far cry from defining the dioceses as “sovereign” or “independent.” The very word comes from secular politics and is quite inappropriate. In general, other autocephalous churches in the world have structures that much more rigidly limit the prerogatives of diocesan hierarchs. In most cases, these churches are also more centralized than the Orthodox Church in America.

At stake is not the issue of “centralization” but the concept of conciliarity. This is usually understood as the principle that recognizes the participation of laity as well as clergy in the affairs of the Church. Conciliarity can also be applied to the interrelations between diocesan hierarchs at the level of the synod of bishops. Conciliarity is not really an administrative concept as much as it is the theological principle of faithful co-responsibility and communion. This is neither like authoritarian monarchism of yore nor today’s rule of the majority. The canons attempt to give concrete institutional expression to this understanding of conciliarity. By their repeated references to synodal activity they draw attention to the bishops’ pastoral oversight of the whole Church. In addition, by their attention to the specific role of the metropolitan within the ecclesiastical province (or patriarch or primate within a more comprehensive body) the canons indicate that bishops, while “sacramentally equal” nevertheless exercise their common episcopal ministry in different ways.

## **“National” Church and Diocese**

Modern Orthodox ecclesiology has drawn attention to the importance of the local church, which in practical application most often has meant the diocese. But if each diocese is indeed fully Church – the effective presence of God’s saving activity manifested in a given place – this does not mean that each diocese is self-sufficient. Dioceses are parts of a larger whole, separation from which can only have tragic consequences. To present the concept of a diocese as a something in competition with a “central” or “national” church is a regrettable distortion. A central or national church exists naturally as that which is more than the sum of its parts in a region or nation. Connecting dioceses to each other, insuring productive communication, facilitating mutually beneficial projects, working to produce a united presence, the central Church has no agenda that would compromise what is in the best interests of each individual diocese. Bearing witness to the Lord’s call for unity, dioceses achieve greater successes when they work effectively with each other. The scriptural imperative to “evangelize” the territories of the Orthodox Church in America has been impeded not because of an overbearing national church but because individual dioceses too often have acted as though they themselves were autocephalous, pursuing their own policies and practices even in such vital and sensitive areas as ordination, interjurisdictional relations, not to mention Christian education and liturgical translation and usage. Can our autocephalous Orthodox Church in America really expect to be taken seriously, whether by the non-Orthodox or by our fellow Orthodox Christians here and abroad, when each diocese petulantly insists on “reinventing the wheel,” or rather, inventing “wheels” so different in size and shape that any unified movement, any common activity and life, is seriously impeded?

The canons of the ancient Church clearly recognized the need for adequate structures for communion and unity, both within the dioceses themselves and on more comprehensive levels – provincial, regional, global. The secular concept of “independent” dioceses ignores the mutual openness, mutual concern and mutual responsibility that must be present if the church is to be truly Church. As aberrant as extreme parochialism, diocesan “sovereignty” misses the mark and does not reflect and participate in that life of communion and mutual indwelling which is proper to the Holy Trinity. The Statute of the Orthodox Church in America has already outlined the core principles for theologically sound and efficient interrelations between dioceses and the national church. More articulation of fine points is needed, but the way forward should be clear.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How is the tension between the Church as sacramental and as institution experienced in parish life?
2. Do you envision the concepts of the central Church and the diocese as necessarily inclusive or exclusive of each other? Why?
3. How can a central Church administration best function to promote and nurture the mission and vision of the Orthodox Church in America?
4. How can a diocese best function to promote and nurture the mission and vision of the Orthodox Church in America?



# “Members of One Another in Christ”

## Study 4: Manifestations of “Orthodox” Ecclesiology

### I. Introduction

If there is a positive side to the protracted crisis rattling the Orthodox Church in America it is the opportunity afforded us to re-examine the current life and work of our local Church. The task is enormous and not without inherent difficulties. Beneath virtually every facet of our crisis, there emerge questions related to ecclesiology. Until it became apparent that the infrastructure of the OCA was in desperate need of reform, a serious assessment of our ecclesiology and the way it manifests itself in America was either ignored or hidden. This is not to say that fundamental issues relative to Orthodox ecclesiology and, by extension, the missionary vision and work of the Church in America were not discussed, debated and even implemented. The articles by Father Alexander Schmemmann on the spiritual, canonical and liturgical problems of Orthodoxy in America – articles predating autocephaly – are still relevant.<sup>1</sup>

These probing and prophetic articles are joined by the cautionary and historically grounded works of Father John Meyendorff who saw the Church as a living reality that was not immune or resistant to developments that affected the external contours of ecclesial life and administration. These developments often veiled the very nature and purpose of the Church in and for the life of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the ecclesiological insights offered by Fathers Schmemmann and Meyendorff as well as others, not the least being Father Georges Florovsky, were absorbed into a movement that created another ecclesial dynamic. On the one hand, this dynamic helped to create the impression that the Church was facing the challenges of American life. On the other hand, emphasis was placed on the restoration of an ecclesiology through which the life and work of the Church would be manifested in the symbiotic relationship of bishop, priest and laity. Given our crisis and its aftermath this seductive dynamic accomplished neither.

### II. Eucharist, Ecclesiology and Conciliarity

Ecclesiology or more specifically, ecclesial reform is coming to be seen as an imperative to resolving our crisis. However, before the interrelationship of bishop, priest and laity can be addressed it needs to be stressed that Orthodox ecclesiology has a context that cannot be separated from the Eucharist. It is the **con-celebration** of the Eucharist by clergy and laity and not the formal convening of a council that provides the foundation and context for Orthodox ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is first and foremost a Eucharistic phenomenon – a Eucharistic event – on which rests all discussions regarding conciliarity as well as catholicity in its quantitative and qualitative expressions. Metropolitan Maximus of Sardis strongly affirms that ‘without reference to the Eucharist, the entire ecclesiology of primitive Christianity becomes meaningless.’<sup>3</sup> We can add that without reference to the Eucharist the ecclesiology of any period of Church history becomes compromised and therefore distorted. It is the Eucharist that forms the most basic image **of** and context **for** conciliarity.

<sup>1</sup> “The Canonical Problem,” St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly, 8(1964), no.2, pp.67-85; “The Liturgical Problem,” SVSQ, 8(1964), no.4, pp.164-185; “The Spiritual Problem,” SVSQ, 19(1965), no.4, pp. 171-193.

<sup>2</sup> See The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church, “Ecclesiastical Regionalism: Structures of Communion or Cover for Separation? Pp.217-237. First published in St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly, 24 (1980), pp155-168.

<sup>3</sup> The Oecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church, Thessaloniki, 1976, p.28

To speak about ecclesiology and conciliarity is to first identify the Christian community as the gathering of the local Church to celebrate the Eucharist.<sup>4</sup> The letters of Saint Paul are the earliest texts that describe the grounding of our ecclesiology in the Eucharist. Terms or phrases such as “coming together as church” or “coming together in the same place” or “Lord’s supper” refer to the gathering of Christians to celebrate the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>

Juxtaposed to the Pauline letters is the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15. The Lucan account of this council has become more in theory than in fact the paradigm for ecclesial conciliarity. Very little is known about its composition. Less is known about its relationship to the Eucharist. Yet, given the Emmaus event in Luke’s Gospel (24:13ff) and the description in Acts of the Jerusalem Church devoting itself “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”(2:42) the importance and centrality of the Eucharist cannot be easily ignored.

The few details about the Jerusalem council offered by Acts 15 show that the local Church functioned as a conciliar body in discussing and debating issues relative to the preaching of the Gospel. At the same time Acts 15 lends itself to two expressions of conciliarity. In verse 6 it is the Apostles and elders who gather apart from the rest of the Church to discuss and debate the Gentile question. Later, in verse 22 mention is made of how the Apostles, elders and the whole Church chose men (andras) to “send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabus” to deliver the decision of the Jerusalem council, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (vs.28). One can ask, does Acts 15 provide two configurations of conciliarity i.e.1) Apostles and elders and 2) Apostles, elders and the whole Church ? If so, does it then set the foundation for what will eventually become exclusively hierarchical councils?

Within the New Testament, local Churches possess a structure rooted in the charismata of the Holy Spirit. Emerging from these pneumatic charisms is a hierarchical structure necessary for the building up of Christ’s body. Placed within a Eucharistic context there can be no hierarchy without the local Church nor can there be a local Church without its hierarchy. The variety and diversity of gifts and offices are offset by the interdependence of every member of the Eucharistic community. “If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable...”(1Corinthians 12:20-22) From a Eucharistic and therefore conciliar perspective there is an interdependency of all the members comprising the body of Christ. “Now you (plural) are the body of Christ and each one is a member of it.”(12:27)

### **III. The Early Years following the Apostles**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> century letters of Sts. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch reveal another stage of development in ecclesiology. For both writers, but especially St. Ignatius, the episcopacy was an established and defined office. Whether the presbyter-bishop referred to by Clement predates the monarchical bishop of Ignatius is of secondary importance. What is important is that each local Church appears to have had a hierarchically conciliar structure that continued to reflect the celebration of the Eucharist. He who presided over the Eucharist was entrusted to oversee the daily life of the local community.

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<sup>4</sup> See Georges Florovsky, « Le Corps Du Christ Vivant », in La Sainte Eglise Universelle :Confrontation Oecumenique, Paris, 1948, pp.9-57

<sup>5</sup> For example 1Corinthians 11:18-34



With dissent dividing the Church in Corinth due to the depositions of its leaders, Clement sets out to bolster the office of presbyter-bishop. "Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the title of bishop. For this cause, therefore, since they had received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have been already mentioned and then made a decree that, when these men fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. We consider therefore that it is not just to remove from their ministry those who were appointed by them, or later on by other eminent men, **with the consent of the whole Church**, and ministered to the flock of Christ without blame, humbly, peaceably, and disinterestedly, and for many years have received a universally favorable testimony. For our sin is not small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and in holiness offered its sacrifices. Blessed are those Presbyters who finished their course before now, and have obtained a fruitful and perfect release in the ripeness of completed works..." (1 Clem. 44,1-4).

Details are lacking as to why the Corinthian leaders were expelled from office. However, it is clear for Clement that those deposed had been chosen "**with the consent of the whole Church**" and that they presided over the Eucharist. Among Clement's concerns for the Corinthian Church was its disobedience to what was for him a tradition established by the Apostles. Deposition of the Corinthian bishops (presbyter-bishops) was a break with the Apostles, which left the local Church divided and without one to preside at the Eucharist. The bishop for Clement was the one who ensured the unity of the Church and its continuity with the Apostles.

Complementing Clement, Ignatius also sees the bishop as the one entrusted to teach the true faith to his Church. All are to be in "agreement with the mind of the bishop." (Eph.4) The one who teaches is also the one chosen to maintain the unity of the local Church. As teacher and standard of truth, the bishop stands in the center of the Eucharistic community where the **conciliar** unity of the "Catholic Church" (Smyrn.8,2) is manifested. "Be careful therefore to use one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do you may do it according to God." (Phil.4)

Both Clement and Ignatius see the hierarchy of the local Church as essential for maintaining Eucharistic unity, conciliarity and catholicity as fullness of faith.<sup>6</sup> However, it has been suggested that in Clement there is a shift in how ecclesial hierarchy is perceived. It has been suggested that Clement viewed hierarchy more from a legalistic perspective than as a charism of the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the groundwork is prepared for formalism, as an established custom or law, to curtail and even oppose the work of the Spirit. "Each of us, brethren, must in his own place endeavor to please God with a good conscience, reverently taking care not to deviate from his established rules of service (41,1).

By the time the canons of the Church became reduced to a legal system complemented by liturgical formalism, the Spirit underwent a process of depersonalization. The legal code bolstered by liturgical formalism often usurped the person of the Spirit through whom every one and every thing receives its authentic personal or hypostatic identity within the life of the Eucharistic community. Once **law and form** became equated with the activity of the Spirit, the way was opened for a new model of ecclesiology to ensue. Within a Eucharistic context, hierarchy, particularly the office of the bishop, would supersede the role of the presbyterate and laity. Conciliarity would eventually become an episcopal phenomenon.

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<sup>6</sup>See Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity Of The Church In The Divine Eucharist And The Bishop During The First Three Centuries*, Brookline, MA. 200, pp. 107-194

<sup>7</sup> Campenhausen, *op.cit.* p.86, "To this extent it is understandable that Sohm saw I Clement as the beginning of canon law in the Church."

St. Cyprian of Carthage has been used as one of the pillars upholding Eucharistic ecclesiology and therefore Eucharistic conciliarity.<sup>8</sup> Cyprian's letter 14 (written 250 A.D.) is one of the proof texts used to demonstrate the inclusive composition of a local Church council. "[F]rom the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your advice and without the consent of the people." However, St. Cyprian was not above acting unilaterally.

In his letter 38 also addressed to priests, deacons and all the people, he writes: "In the ordination of clerics, dearly beloved brethren, we are accustomed to consult you in advance and in common council to weigh the characters and merits of each one. But human testimonies must not be looked for when **divine approbation supercedes the council of the Church.**" Ultimately, in this case, it is the bishop, and only the bishop, who decides who has been divinely approved.

Though one passage from a collection of 80 letters and numerous treatises is insufficient to draw firm conclusions regarding episcopal unilateralism, Cyprian's letter 38 offers support for a bishop to act without the consent of his clergy and laity. By the next century this becomes an established norm in Byzantine canon law.<sup>9</sup>

## IV. The Byzantine Period

With the conversion of Constantine and the eventual *symphonia* established between Church and State, ecclesiology takes on a configuration that is, for all intents and purposes, exclusively episcopal. The only lay person to play an active role in a council was the emperor or empress. Non-episcopal delegates to councils represented their respective bishops. With empire and Church forging an inextricable bound, conciliarity takes upon itself juridical authority. Decisions of councils, particularly those labeled as Ecumenical, were implemented not only through the Church but through imperial channels which often helped to drive deeper the wedge between the Orthodox and heterodox.

As conciliarity acquired legal status, i.e. imperial support and protection, the focus on the Eucharist diminished.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, even when less emphasis was placed on the Eucharist and when conciliarity morphed into an episcopal and imperial institution driven by *law* and *form*, the activity of the Spirit still remained alive and strong. The Byzantine period witnessed to the ecumenical councils, the Studite reforms of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Palaeologan renaissance which began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Palamite councils of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

As infrequent communion became the norm, as councils took on the configuration of the imperial senate and became exclusively episcopal in composition, ecclesiology as a catholic i.e. universal or inclusive event uniting clergy and laity became a memory locked in the past.

It was not until the Moscow council of 1917-18 that conciliarity again became a manifestation of the whole Church gathered together as bishops, priests and laity.

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<sup>8</sup>See Archiprete Nicolas Afanassieff, *L'Eglise Du Saint Esprit*, Paris, 1975, pp.101ff. Also his « Una Sancta », *Irenikon*, xxxvi, 4<sup>e</sup> trimestre 1963, pp.436-475.

<sup>9</sup>Laodicea, canon 13.

<sup>10</sup>See Robert F. Taft, S.J., "The Decline of Communion in Byzantium and the Distancing of the Congregation from the Liturgical Action: Cause, Effect, or Neither" in *Thresholds of the Sacred*, Sharon E.J. Gerstel, ed. Harvard University Press, 2006, pp.27-50.

## V. The 1917-18 Moscow Council

Much has been said and written about the Moscow council.<sup>11</sup> There are some in the OCA who see the Moscow council as a point of reference for returning to a more inclusive ecclesiology. The reform and counter reform movements that swept through the Russian Church beginning in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the formal preparation of the Moscow Council in 1905. “By 1917 the bishops stood ready to abandon the *ancien regime*.”<sup>12</sup>

The Moscow council was a major step towards ecclesial reform. Until the election of Metropolitan Tikhon as Patriarch of Moscow the Russian Church, since the Reforms of Peter the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had functioned as a national Protestant Church. Peter’s Reforms reduced the Orthodox Church to a department of the state. Replacing the Patriarch with the monarch, the Reforms took the Russian Church a step further in molding ecclesiology into a juridical institution. Every aspect of Church life was affected by the intrusion of civil law. The Holy and Governing Synod presided over by the Emperor’s lay Oberprocurator instilled in the collective psyche of the Russian Church the rule of law while the law of the Spirit (Rom.8:2) became an elusive ideal. Indeed, the Ecclesiastical Reforms of Peter exceeded the juridical antecedents of Byzantium. Yet, here too, as with the Church in Byzantium, the Holy Spirit remained active. While the Russian Church was held captive by imperial law and while the Eucharist continued to be a legal obligation, missionary activity continued, holy men and women were glorified and the Optina Startsy were saving souls.

With the opening of the Moscow council on 15 August 1917, the Church Reforms of Peter began to be undone. However, as Father Afanassieff rightly points out, the council was in its very essence flawed. It could not free itself from “the prison of the law.”<sup>13</sup> The courage, zeal and faith of the participants could not transcend the juridical spirit that permeated the “ecclesial conscience” of the Russian Church. Consequently, while outward reform was being discussed and debated, the need to reform the soul of the Church was ignored. Father Florovsky is among those critics who, like Afanassieff, saw that a true return to the law of the Spirit could not be accomplished solely by legislative and administrative change. “Everyone talked too much about ‘interests’ and influence, and they were too anxious about defending these interests and balancing these interests. The supporters of a broadly representative council did not have a very precise understanding of the nature of the Church, conceiving it as a kind of constitutional structure...It remains indisputable that attention focused almost exclusively on organizational reform. Few acknowledged the need for a spiritual awakening; few understood that the restoration of inner peace and order could not be achieved by Church politics, but only through spiritual and ascetic exploit. The only way out was precisely in [an] ascetic renaissance.”<sup>14</sup>

## VI. Where Are We Going?

The preceding ecclesiological configurations are guides requiring theological and historical interpretation. They are also signposts of caution. The crisis within the Orthodox Church in America offers it the possibility to recover its Christological and Pneumatological foundation, but in doing this we should be very careful not to impose the past on the present. We are not the Church sojourning in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Neither are we the Church in Byzantium nor the Church in imperial Russia. We are the Church sojourning in America. Are we willing to meet the many challenges that this entails including the challenge of **re-establishing** and therefore **re-configuring** an ecclesiology of Eucharistic con-celebration in which bishop,

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<sup>11</sup> One of the most comprehensive and recent studies on the Council is Hyacinthe Destivelle’s *Le Concile de Moscou (1917-1918)*, Paris, 2006

<sup>12</sup> See Gregory L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform*, Princeton, 1983, p.469. Also, Georges Florovsky’s *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part II, Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p.259-283.

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit. p. 108

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit. pp.261,265

priest and laity are driven by the ascetic tension of being in the world but not of the world? Are we willing to harvest and offer the fruits of this creative tension to the world for its life and salvation? Or, do we sojourn as a Church in which the celebration of the Eucharistic continues to have no substantial impact on our ecclesiology and consequently on our understanding and implementation of conciliarity? In many ways, it seems that the Eucharistic renaissance that continues in the OCA is more a conversion of the mind than of the heart. How else is one to explain an exclusively episcopal ecclesiology that has sparked a new wave of anti-clericalism, parochialism and individualism?

Reformation is an ascetic ordeal that reorganizes the personal and communal components of the Church so that all may strive to be in harmony with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit renews and refreshes the Church by giving Christ himself to the Church. "Watered by the Spirit we drink Christ", wrote Saint Athanasius of Alexandria.<sup>15</sup> Exterior reorganization, while necessary, will collapse if it is not accompanied by an authentic conversion leading to a personal and conciliar reorganization of the mind and heart.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How is the Eucharist a conciliar act?
2. What is your understanding of a bishop's role as chief shepherd of his diocese?
3. What opportunities and challenges does the North American culture present to the Orthodox Church's conciliar model of governance?
4. What can I change in my life to help rebuild the Orthodox Church in America?

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<sup>15</sup> St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Epistle I to Serapion in Florovsky's *Le Corps Du Christ Vivant*, p.19.

