

Mission and Evangelism from the Fathers to the Present

I have to offer several disclaimers as I begin today. First, I was assigned this topic for the conference – the title sounds like a dissertation topic and would need full dissertation to be treated in anything more than a cursory manner.

Second, I feel unequal to the task – not that I'm simply preaching to the choir, but that I'm likely speaking where most others know more about the topic than I do.

So I see my task today, not so much as giving you information that you don't have. (Indeed, in my experience as an Orthodox priest, it seems to me that most priests know everything)... Rather my task today is to help us think through, in an orderly fashion, what we *already* know. If I happen to accidentally relay some new information then thanks be to God. If I help us to think clearly and reflect carefully on what the information means, then my prayers will have been answered.

The task of the Church is the sanctification of all life and the salvation of man. This mission and announcement of the Good news (evangelism) has been part of the life of the Church from the very beginning. It was given to us in the commandment to "Go into all the world, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe whatsoever things I have commanded, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." St. Luke largely organizes his Acts of the Apostles around the topic of mission and evangelism, giving us very little detail of any other aspect of the primitive Church. Of course, the debate that provides the context for his writing is the mission and evangelism question of how to receive Gentile converts. Do they need to be circumcised or not? How to receive converts can still be a thorny subject.

We should add that it is not the mission of the Church to be a force in this world, to be bigger than the Baptists, to be the fourth largest or most important religious group in America. It is not the Church's mission *per se* to rebuild Byzantium, nor to create a new Christian empire. It is not necessarily the mission of the Church to have a good bottom line or to be well thought of by those around us. I will say again, that *the Church exists for the sanctification of all life and the salvation of man*. To remember this may help us as we look through the history of the Church's work of mission and evangelism.

I want to avoid a long history lesson today. Instead, I want to offer a list of methods that characterize different moments in the history of Mission and Evangelism and then use those to reflect on the mission that is set before us. The list and the terms are of my own creation.

Methods of Evangelism:

1. Proselyting
2. National Evangelism
3. Prophetic Evangelism
4. Imperial Evangelism
5. Diaspora Evangelism
6. Civilizational Evangelism

Each of the methods I have listed here have examples of Saints who employed them. They reflect different responses to different situations – or sometimes, different responses to the same situations. Let me give some definitions and examples.

Proselyting

I know that it is an unwritten understanding that we do not proselyte – that is we do not “steal sheep” or aggressively go out and try to make Christians who are part of a “denominational delusion” convert to Orthodoxy. We don’t try to, it just sometimes happens. The wealth of material that has been published over the course of the 20th century, sharing the Orthodox faith and theology with those outside the Church may never have been intended to proselytize, but it has been very effective. A protestant pastor friend recently asked me what sort of evangelism method I use – I told him: “I answer the phone.” Most people who come to our mission from other Christian backgrounds, have already been exposed to some amount of information from Orthodox sources – either through books, or the internet – I greatly prefer the former.

St. Paul is certainly a prime example of Orthodox proselyting. He aggressively went from city to city across the Roman empire, and preached – primarily in synagogues. In fact his sermon in Athens, a sort of unplanned side-trip in his mission journeys, is one of only three occasions in which St. Luke describes him as preaching to true Gentile pagans. The other would be following his shipwreck on the island of Melita following his miraculous encounter with the snake (chapter 28) and at Lycaonia (chapter 14) where after healing a man, Paul and Barnabas are worshipped as Jupiter and Mercury (to their utter dismay).

Most of St. Paul’s missions are to other Jews, or to converts to Judaism (proselytes) or to “God-fearers,” Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel but had not submitted to the Law of Circumcision. Important here is that he is preaching to a group that already has much of the informational background necessary for conversion. They know the stories of the Old Testament, and have some general idea of who God is. It is a daunting task, indeed, to do mission and evangelism where the hearers know nothing of the story of Israel. The success of the early centuries of Christian mission has much to do with the ubiquitous nature

of the Jewish Diaspora throughout the Roman Empire. It made trouble for Paul, but it also made Churches for him.

To a large extent our mission and evangelism today shares something with this approach. We rarely catechize someone who has no knowledge of the Christian faith. I had opportunity to prepare one immigrant Russian family for Baptism. "We know nothing," they said. "Not even how to make the sign of the cross." (Of course, in this simple confession, they were already acknowledging some familiarity with Orthodoxy). We began our sessions with "Kto Bog?" (Who is God?) I'll have more to say on this in a few minutes. But for the moment we should at least note that our mission is at least primarily a mission to those who have a modicum of exposure to a Christian faith. On some level we proselytize, like it or not.

National Evangelism

There are a number of prominent stories of evangelism and mission that I place in the category of *National Evangelism*. St. Vladimir's conversion is perhaps one of those. Certain aspects of St. Patrick's mission to Ireland, as well as many of the early centuries of Christian mission come under this heading. I am referring, of course, to mission "from the top down." It's erroneous, I think, when detractors of this sort of mission liken it to "Baptism at swordpoint." What we see in national evangelism is a cohesive society in which individualism plays little or no part. In Western Europe the Peace of Augsburg that brought about an end to the religious wars between protestants and catholics did so on the principle: "The religion of the prince will be the religion of the people." As contrary as that is to the modern idea of separation of church and state, it was merely a part of a worldview that had little or no place for the complete autonomy of the individual.

It would be hard to point to modern examples of this form of evangelism – although I will cite some possible candidates. The initial burst of baptisms following the fall of the Soviet Union would possibly be placed under this category. Once the state abandoned its loyalty to atheistic materialism, large segments of the population embraced the Church. It's not entirely the same, but the approach being taken is fairly similar. Baptisms in Russia frequently follow almost no catechetical training (what takes place is primarily post-baptismal). The Russian immigrant family I mentioned looked at me with dismay when I first proposed a long catechumenate in our American fashion. They expected to be Baptized in a week. I made them wait longer. They have since told me that they are "not converts." "Converts are people who choose. We didn't choose our Church – we are Pravoslavie!" It's hard to imagine such a statement from a natural born American. "I did not choose," would almost never be a point of pride for Americans.

I would place some of the success taking place in protestant missions as similar to this process. I will not dwell on this point, but it's worth noting. A local

protestant pastor, admonishing a member of his flock who is contemplating Orthodoxy, recently told him, "All of the movement I see worldwide is not towards Orthodoxy or Catholicism, but towards Evangelical Protestantism." That's not entirely false. But I think it illustrates the fact that American democratic free-market capitalism – call it "globalization" or what have you, is sweeping the globe in a massive campaign of cultural empire building – and with it comes evangelical protestantism. The evangelicals are simply the American culture at prayer – or a very large segment of it. It is an evangelism from the top down, first the culture, then its members.

I'll have more to say about this in a few minutes – but for the present I'll leave it with the observation that what I am asserting is that the worldview of American culture is still largely a protestant worldview. Even the Catholics in America are protestant – and I would argue, that the American version of Atheism is itself a protestant version of Atheism. But more later.

Prophetic Evangelism

I struggled to come up with this name, primarily to find a pleasant way to describe what could be the most controversial form of mission. This is a mission in which the cult of other religions is directly assaulted. There are numerous examples in the lives of the saints – without apology, usually. We generally like to point to how gentle and kind, and culturally sensitive we Orthodox are, a noted example being the mission to Alaska. But if you shift your attention a few centuries, you can find St. Boniface chopping down a large Oak Tree worshipped by the Frisians on the Northern coast of Europe as he sought to evangelize the native peoples. They returned the favor by killing him with an axe.

Many of the stories of such missions involve martyrdom. I suspect that if there is ever going to be a successful mission among the nations of the Islamic world, it may necessarily take this shape. Given the fact that speaking ill of Mohammed can bring the death penalty in many countries hardly makes any other kind of mission possible.

Another example, by the way, might be Bishop Leo of Catania who took a false prophet and leapt with him into a host of flames. St. Leo survived; the false prophet did not. There are times and places where such evangelism is called for, possibly in our own day and time. Archbishop Iakovos marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama. Many Orthodox Christians take part in the march for life each year in Washington. I have at least one member of my congregation who did jail time for rescue work in the war for the safety of the unborn.

Imperial Evangelism

I have used this category to describe what may seem to have been already described, but I think it deserves its own designation. This is an evangelism of minority peoples by the majority culture. Much of the work of the Russian mission in the bounds of its empire would belong in this description. It has the benefit of cultural support, with obvious rewards for converts. How a nation or people engage in such evangelism speaks volumes. The fact that there are still non-believing tribes in Russia speaks volumes about the gentleness and sensitivity of those missions in Orthodox Russia. The mission to Alaska would probably be as good an illustration of this form of evangelization as I could give. The Church had the advantage of the dominant culture, and yet did not use that culture as a tool of force. Frequently this kind of mission has seen two kinds of priests. Those who took care of the missions already established and those who had no job other than that of starting new missions. This may be very timely for our considerations as well.

Diaspora Evangelism

America should be very familiar with the mission to the Diaspora. Most of the 20th century history of Orthodoxy in America has been marked by a mission to those who are already Orthodox. Such a mission is often tied up with preservation of the culture and language of the motherland, and, in some ways, serves to continue the alienation of its members from the host culture at the same time.

The problem with this mission is that it places the Church in the position of swimming upstream. With each passing generation the current of the dominant culture will be stronger and harder to resist. Inter-marriage and other culture forces will erode the culture of the Church. Pressure will be put on the Church to conform, at least in some measure to the larger culture, with at least equal pressure to remain different. Often the battlegrounds of these two opposing forces will be on issues that have little or nothing to do with the greater questions at hand.

There are renewed questions of diaspora evangelism today, with the recent immigrations from Eastern Europe and Russia. How we minister to a population that is itself frequently under-churched “ne tserkovnie” is worth pondering at length. How are non-diaspora clergy (who know little or nothing of the immigrating culture and who do not speak the language), to do an effective job of ministering to a diaspora has perhaps never been asked before. The OCA’s position with regard to the current immigration is nothing like its position 90 years ago. We **were** the immigration 90 years ago. Today, we have “converts” (“choosers”) like me, baptizing the unchurched offspring of Holy Rus. We could all share experiences, I am sure.

We cannot and dare not *assume* that the new diaspora is already Orthodox. It is certainly not being assumed back home in the motherland.

Civilizational Evangelism

I struggled with a proper term for this category. It is meant to describe perhaps the most dominant form of evangelism for Orthodox Christianity over the centuries, the form which has been the most successful and has produced the greatest achievements in the Church's life (in my judgement). These missions are the gradual communities that are spawned by centers of the Christian life, be they vibrant monasteries or vibrant parishes who slowly and carefully live the fullness of the Christian life and inculcate it in their members and share it with those around them.

I have called it Civilizational because it is precisely how the bulk of "civilization" was itself planted across most of the British Isles, Northern Europe, parts of Eastern Europe and Russia. This is not to ignore the role of trade and politics, but the civilization itself was carried and nurtured by the Church. It is true, at least for the West, that the "Irish saved civilization," but only if we say the Irish Monks saved civilization.

St. Sergius of Radonezh is the great example of this in Russia. St. Pavel Florensky has described St. Sergius' home monastery, the Trinity Lavra outside of Moscow, as the true font of Russian civilization. Rublev's icon of the Trinity being is thus its visible expression, an icon not only of the Old Testament Trinity, but of Holy Rus as well.

It is worth noting that this same pattern obtained in the British Isles. Monastery and Monarch enjoyed an intimacy unmatched in the modern world (there's a bit of understatement). One branch of the Royal Family of England produced more than 20 canonized saints of the Orthodox Church in the matter of but a few centuries when Britain was also at its best and holiest.

The examples of this form of evangelism could be multiplied. Even though this sort of mission doesn't play as strong a role in the Middle East and Mediterranean, it can be said to have played an important role in its renewal at certain points.

Where we stand today

The task of the Church is to sanctify all of life and the salvation of man. I believe that the dominant form of evangelization for us today will and must be that of the civilizational model. Though there is a diaspora mission that must be carried out – even this, I suggest, should be looked at from a civilizational perspective if it is not to meet the same fate and struggles of earlier such missions in America.

I would like to suggest several conclusions for such a mission:

Sanctifying all of life and saving mankind can be stated in another way: the Church's primary task is to "be the Church." I don't mean to state the obvious, much less to be "cute," in making such a statement. The Church finds itself in a surrounding culture that is largely foreign to Orthodoxy. That culture is of at least two minds: secular protestant (with the emphasis on one or the other), or post-modern, in which the reaction is largely against the dominant secular Protestantism of the larger culture. As an aside I would observe that many of the conversions we have enjoyed in American Orthodoxy of late, belong to this post-modern variety – that is, many of our converts are more than willing to engage in a general critique of the culture which birthed them, and see and love Orthodoxy for the fact of its alternative status.) I had one teenage inquirer once say to me (and she meant this as a high complement) "What I really like about the Orthodox Church is that it is so pagan." My how times do change!

Civilizational evangelism is somewhat difficult for the culturally dominant Protestants. One of the reasons is that their civilization is bifurcated. In American culture, religion is an upper story event, with the *real* world being down here, and the world of religion being "up there." Temptations for Orthodoxy in the modern American context will be to borrow the dominant culture model, and simply have an upper-story Orthodoxy. I would argue that we frequently fall into that trap. What this looks like is going to a Church that is Orthodox in every appearance, and going to a home that is secular in most appearances, or in those that are most important, with little or no integration between the two. Indeed, the dominance of the American secular Protestant culture is so great, that Orthodox in this country, regardless of how ethnically insulated they might have been, are themselves "secular Protestant Orthodox" to some extent.¹ This is particularly true in the sense of Orthodox Christians in our culture living a "two-story" Orthodoxy. I have included in footnote form a letter from Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad on the subject of the role of religion and culture in the European Union. His insight into the dangers presented to the Orthodox from even a well-meaning secular culture is very apropos to our discussion here.

The need to integrate fasting, home prayers, home altars, spiritual disciplines, feast days and the rhythm of the Orthodox life into the homes of our church are an essential part of our evangelization. The difficulties presented by the modern American suburban life-style are a challenge. It is quite possible that the suburban model is *structurally designed* to produce a two-story worldview and that Orthodoxy will always have to struggle not to be compromised by that model. When home and Church are separated by driving distance – when the natural human model of village is replaced by the individualistic, consumer model of suburbanism, it is hard to get anything other than suburbanized Orthodoxy. One positive way to state this question: How do we sanctify the life of the suburb?

Please don't think that I'm saying that *this* Church is more Orthodox because it's in a village and *that* one is less Orthodox because it's in a suburb. But the villages of Europe and the towns that grew up around them were often designed

by the spiritual life of the Church. So are the towns and suburbs of America – but the churches that designed them and were designed in turn by them – were and are not Orthodox.

I would add that the growth of monasticism in America is, from this standpoint, a good thing. Of course, there are differing forms of monastic expression and each could be involved in a differing form of mission. But the presence of Orthodox institutions, living the fullness of the Orthodox life is essential for civilizational evangelism.

For the parish Church, civilizational evangelism would mean something other than an Orthodox version of a protestant evangelical church. Indeed protestant churches find civilizational evangelism almost impossible, because of the two-story nature of the modern worldview. The closest approximation for the secularized church is the “baptism of culture” or the “xeroxing of culture” described by the religious columnist Terry Mattingly (an Orthodox Christian). That’s where everything from coffee cups to tee shirts, to music, carries a “Jesus” stamp. It differs in no way from the culture (I would point to much of contemporary Christian music, whose dance, dress, lyric and presentation differ but little from non Christian music. It is not introducing a new culture, just allowing some Christians to engage in the same culture with a little less guilty conscience, and, incidentally, making a number of vendors quite wealthy.) Mattingly suggests several possible responses to the culture:

1. *Burn the culture.* In this approach we say, “When it doubt “burn it.” It is essentially adversarial.
2. *Baptize the culture.* In this the culture sets the trends for the church. The church adapts itself to the culture.
3. *Photocopy the culture.* Simply duplicate the culture with a Christian brand. They have tee shirts, we do, etc.
4. *Change the culture.* There are legitimate areas in the culture where the church must struggle, but this too is a losing battle to a large extent.
5. *Missionize the culture.* In this we recognize the culture for what it is (foreign). We train people to evangelize and missionize here as thoroughly as though they were entering a foreign country. Failure to address the culture in such a way is failure to address the principalities and powers that rule our nation.²

An Orthodox parish must first *be the Church*. What its people do should be integrated into the life of the Church – the *whole* life of the Church and be for the purpose of salvation, in its fullest sense. I personally don’t think we have to be concerned with strategies of mission (where and when, per se). Rather there needs to be a constant mind toward mission, by which I mean the vital living of

the fullness of the Orthodox faith in parish, home and monastery, and sharing the same life with all who want to know.

Finally, I would say that we need much greater funding for our work. Not the department, but the work of parochial missions. I remember hearing Archbishop Dmitri say that he could start 40 new missions if he had 40 more priests. I pray that God gives them, and that through the work of this department we can help equip those priests and those new communities for the work of bringing the faith to this land in all its fullness. Thank you for your attention and your prayers.

<http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne302143.htm> On February 14, 2003, *Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad*, DECR chairman, sent an open letter to Valery Giscard d'Estaing, Chairman of the Convention on the Future of Europe Presidium in connection with the preparation of the EU Constitutional Treaty draft.

The Convention began its work in March 2002 and is to complete it in April 2003. The Convention is an assembly composed of representatives of governments and parliaments from EU member-states and candidate countries, as well as delegates from the EU institutions. The Convention powers are based on the Laeken Declaration adopted by the EU summit in Brussels in 2001. According to the Declaration, the Convention is to sum up the previous phase of the European integration and outline prospects for its further development. The draft of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for the EU is to be its principal result.

In February 2003, the first 16 articles of the Constitutional Treaty (<http://european-convention.eu.int>) were presented. They concern fundamental values as well as cultural and national bases of the European Union. The values declared in the Constitutional Treaty draft are based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of 2000 which has no reference to religious values and their significance for social and cultural development of the European nations. In this connection, major European churches including the Russian Orthodox Church, [sent their statements to drafters of the Charter](#) and, later, to those of the Constitutional Treaty urging them to include the reference to traditional religious values in the document that will determine the everyday life of millions of religious citizens in the EU member-states.

The letter of Metropolitan Kirill is another important effort of the Russian Orthodox Church to exert positive influence on the process of shaping of a future constitution for the united Europe.

Mr. VALERY GISCARD D'ESTAING
Chairman of the
Presidium of the Convention on the Future of Europe

Dr. Mr. Giscard d'Estaing,

May I cordially greet you and express my high appreciation of your activities as Chairman of the Presidium of the Convention on the Future of Europe, since this representative assembly is completing its work with serious and specific achievements.

The Convention had an unprecedented task to assess results of the European integration and to provide new legal framework for its development in future. Last October you presented a description of a draft treaty, establishing a Constitution for Europe, and the draft of its first 16 articles was put out in February 2003.

I am convinced that you are well aware of active involvement of the Churches and religious associations in discussing the Convention themes and of their attitude to particular issues. The Russian Orthodox Church expressed its opinion in a special statement on the work of the Convention and also through the Conference of European Churches, being its permanent member. Besides, we have found many ideas harmonious with our position in the statements made by the Orthodox Church of Greece, the Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, the Evangelical Church of Germany, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and many other Churches and communities.

The Orthodox Christians of Russia and other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States as well as the Baltic countries understand that the values laid into the foundation of the European Union will serve as a starting point for domestic life of its member countries and for the relationship of the EU with its neighbours. That is why the Russian Orthodox Church has been interested in the elaboration of the document, which very soon will determine the life of many countries in Europe, including its Orthodox population. This prompts me to share with you, with all participants of the Convention and with European public my views on the first results of the work of the Convention.

Before doing that I would like to refer to the recent experience of our country, through the prism of which those who live in the East of Europe, inevitably assess the present situation. The religious life in the USSR was limited by private sphere, while any religiously motivated public action was persecuted, as it did not conform to the dominant ideology. In the draft (with a reference to the Charter of Fundamental Rights) there are standards, which defend the religious freedom of an individual, including that in his social life, but there are no standards, which guarantee that integral religious philosophy of life will be taken into account, when socially important decisions are elaborated and social order is built up.

An active position of the Churches during discussion of the project of the Constitutional Treaty is based, first of all, not on the care for their narrow interests, but on real anxiety for the destiny of the faithful in Europe, their convictions and lifestyle. The danger of absolute dictatorship of an ideology guided only by the earthly well being of people, their material prosperity and free self-realization in activities of this world without any system of moral values becomes even more evident to many people. Religion is perforce declared a private affair of an individual. The proposed provisions of the Constitution of Europe leave aside a tremendous layer of religious culture, which inspires minds and hearts of many politicians, public figures, scholars, artists, religious leaders and common people on the European continent. Europe that renounces religion and especially Christianity as one of its fundamental life-giving forces can not become Fatherland for many people who live in it. Moreover, it may tear them away. No one has tried so far to

explain the reason of active unwillingness to allow even a symbolic presence of Christian values in the Treaty.

Certainly, the values fixed in the project, such as human dignity, freedom, supremacy of law, tolerance, justice and solidarity are not alien to Christian morals. However, they are disputable to the faithful if not linked with concrete moral values. History knows how often these values were exploited to establish tyranny, to manipulate human consciousness, to justify various vices, etc.

The faithful are also anxious for how all these values will be interpreted, when practical decisions are taken, for example, in the field of sexual relations, the institute of marriage, the use of the achievements of science, and in information and cultural policy. Unfortunately, we see persistent efforts to fix on the level of the European Union the standards, which do not conform to religious and philosophical choice of some nations. Suffice it to give an example of the resolution on human rights approved by the European Parliament in January 2003, which contains an appeal to hold the all-European campaign in support of homosexual marriages and obtain permission for women to visit the Holy Mount Athos. In the latter case, the religious tradition of the country belonging to the European Union is outraged, while the established standard is clear and indisputable to majority of the citizens of this country. Why is the minority, which does not understand this standard, given a possibility to impose its viewpoint to the majority through the EU mechanisms of governance? Does the mechanism of democracy become inconsistent, and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe may find themselves in a new 'Procrustean bed'? Is it possible that the European Union will use the same approach in the dialogue with its neighbours, for example, with Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia?

Moreover, there is a predominance of values of anthropocentric humanism in the Constitutional Treaty draft as compared to religious national and cultural ones. Faith, holy places and objects, an opportunity to lead an integral religious life, cultural and national self-identification and the notion of Fatherland are no less important for many people than their everyday well-being, material comfort, health and earthly life as such. That is why religious and cultural-national values, especially in case of any conflict, must be defended by law just as those of life, freedom, human dignity, to say nothing about material and economic values.

On the basis of these considerations the Russian Orthodox Church supports efforts of European religious associations, which insist that the mechanism of defending specific culture and religious philosophy of life of the EU nations must be fixed in the Constitutional Treaty. We believe that the draft should contain:

A reference to the Christian heritage of the European Union, as well as other religious traditions and secular thoughts and ideas. This provision added to the preamble or any article will allow avoiding the monopoly of a single interpretation of the declared values and broadening the range of values recognized as important.

A provision on the mechanism of consultations between the European institutions and religious communities of the European Union. That standard would allow considering the

opinion of religious communities when important decisions on cultural, information and scientific policy are taken.

A provision on the prerogative of the EU member-states in regulating the religious sphere. It would be expedient to include Appendix 11 to the Amsterdam Treaty in the Constitution. This move is aimed at preserving cultural and religious identity of European nations that have worked out balanced systems of relations between religion and the state during centuries.

I hope that you, Mr. Chairman, and the esteemed assembly will take into account the presented considerations when drawing up the final text of the Constitutional Treaty. I am confident that lending an ear to the voice of churches and religious communities, whose members are mostly Europeans, the Convention and EU governing bodies will show true democracy in their work, a desire to base their actions on the opinion of people as well as non-acceptance of ideological diktat.

I wish you fruitful work and remain,

Yours truly,

+Kirill
Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad
Chairman
Department for External Church Relations
Moscow Patriarchate

² See Terry Mattingly, "And Now a Word from Your Culture," *Shaping our Future: Challenges for the Church in the Twenty-first Century* (Cowley, Boston, 1994), J. Stephen Freeman, editor.