

## **Chancellor's Address at the All American Council in Atlanta: "How to Expand the Mission"**

Glory to Jesus Christ!

You already have my full written report, so I will only highlight a few main points.

I can say that by the grace of God and the efforts of many the OCA is now on a path to a calm and healthy normality unimaginable in the fall of 2011. As Metropolitan Tikhon said we can turn our attention to the real work and mission of the Church.

The work we do as the OCA's central administration with His Beatitude, the Holy Synod and the Metropolitan Council is first and foremost to foster a sense of mission, identity and connection among our parishes and dioceses as "The Orthodox Church in America." We serve people from a wide range of backgrounds. But we share a vision about being Orthodox Christians *here*—in the US, Canada and Mexico. We have planted our roots *here*, we love the culture, people and history *here*. Sticking closely together in our OCA identity is all the more important when we are only about 100,000 souls scattered across fifty states and three countries.

Our focus is "How to Expand the Mission." We as Orthodox Christians have largely accepted North America's vision of who we are. *"You are one of several hundred religious denominations and sects and your churches are exclusive gatherings that cater either to specific ethnic groups or to religious, political and social conservatives who are attracted to Eastern Orthodoxy."* This is what we are being told. Of course this is a caricature, but it's what the public thinks of us, if they think about us at all.

But this is not who we really are. We are the Orthodox Church in America. We are the expression here of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, even if that sounds delusional at times. Like last Friday night. My wife and I arrived in Atlanta early that day and on the spur of the moment decided to join 40,000 other people and watch the Atlanta Braves play the Chicago Cubs (Atlanta won.) It was a great atmosphere, yet I would guess that almost all of those 40,000 had zero idea that we are here in Atlanta talking about how to expand the mission. Despite that, nothing stops us from being who we are: members of the Church, with a capital C, whether others know it, accept it, ridicule it, reject it or not. To be the Church in this universal sense means we look at every human being the way God does. *Regardless of who they are or what sins they have committed this is a child of God. This is someone for whom Christ died. This is someone for whom the Orthodox Church could be a spiritual home.*

The Church is also a spiritual hospital for *all*. Jesus envisioned a Church that would bring everyone from the highways and byways, the poor, the sick, the lame and the maimed: wounded people all in need of healing. And we are among them. We are all "the first of sinners," receiving communion "for the healing of soul and body." We are all works in progress.

Yesterday I had the privilege of joining the Holy Synod of Bishops for a visit to the Loaves and Fishes Ministry at the OCA's St John the Wonderworker Church here in Atlanta, where Father Thomas Alessandrini is the pastor. They serve 20,000 meals a year to people on the street and in need. But they do a lot more as well whenever someone is ready to change his or her life. Reconnecting them with their families. Helping them negotiate the maze of social services. Putting them in touch with medical, dental and mental-health care. Getting them a phone, a postal address and an email address so the able-bodied can look for work. The aim if possible is to give them the resources to be self-sufficient. But as Fr Thomas told us, "These people are used to being looked at as blights on the landscape. So the message we want to give them is 'I love you the way you are.' We don't require progress to continue serving them. Because what motivates people to change is an experience of love and acceptance, not more judgment. We help them when they're ready."

Now that's a lesson in how to expand the mission.

Like the Loaves and Fishes Ministry we must not require progress in order to welcome those who come to us with whatever ills of soul and body may afflict them. Who knows what can happen in a person's life when he encounters someone in the Church who even now says to him, "I love you the way you are"?

Last night Becky Tesar gave a powerful exit speech as the outgoing president of the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians in America (FOCA). Over the last three years she was feeling increasingly embattled as she was asked time and again, "What do I get from my membership?" But the more she pondered these questions and her defensive answers she said, "I started to think, that like President Kennedy, instead of continuing to ask 'what's in it for me' it is time for each of us to look inside ourselves and ask, "What have I done for the FOCA?" Each of us can ask the same questions about our membership in the Orthodox Church in America. Instead of continuing to ask "what's in it for me, for my parish, for my deanery, for my monastery, for my diocese," it is time for each of us to look inside ourselves and ask, "What have I done to support the Orthodox Church in America as a whole? How have I made the Orthodox Church in America stronger, better and relevant to the challenges facing Orthodox Christians today? Have I done my share?"

We are a tiny church on the vast North American landscape. But we have a precious treasure to offer. And despite our small size, our vision for America gives us unique possibilities unknown in other parts of the Orthodox world. As Archbishop Anastasios of Albania said, "In North America especially, the Orthodox witness is offered within a dynamic society with universal interests. In such a society Orthodoxy is in a state of mission—and she cannot, certainly, be content with a museum-like preservation of the glorious Orthodox past of far away homelands. Something substantially new and important ought to arise..."

This week, we must keep asking ourselves what this new and important "something" might be that God is calling each of us to do.