

18<sup>th</sup> All American Council/External Affairs  
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Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky

Your Beatitude, Your Eminences, Your Graces,  
Clergy and Lay delegates to the 18<sup>th</sup> All American Council,  
Brothers and sisters in Christ!

The written Report of the Office of External Affairs and Interchurch Relations is available for your information and review along with the other documents disseminated in preparation for this Council. There you will find useful information on the presence and engagement of the Orthodox Church in America in relation to other Orthodox churches, the Assemblies of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the USA and in Canada, theological dialogues, ecumenical organizations, and aspects of our witness in society. The record shows that bishops, priests and laity represent the vision of the Orthodox Church in America with integrity and competence.

I regret that my recovery from illness and surgery during recent months has not been swift enough to allow me to travel to attend the Council. I am grateful for this opportunity to address you, thus complementing my written report on external affairs.

We do well to reflect on the guidance of Holy Scripture for the life and mission of the Church. “...In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Peter 3:15) These words of the Apostle are life-giving counsel for evangelism and mission. They are also core commandments for our relations with other Orthodox churches, other Christian bodies – indeed for our interaction with other religions and with society.

This New Testament word to us obviously illumines for us our witness to Christ. Witness to Christ is the calling of Orthodox Christians at all times and in all places. The priority for the Orthodox Church in America is evangelism and mission in North America. This means mission to Americans and Canadians and Mexicans. It also means ministry to ethnic communities in North America. All of this is captured in the Council theme of “how to expand the mission.”

Father Alexander Schmemmann once observed that we are called to be truly Orthodox and truly American. Our American identity suggests that our Church brings something unique to the Orthodox table and the Orthodox discourse. Likewise, our Church aspires to witness to the Orthodox faith from within the North American experience, and not as a diaspora. While the texture of our church life includes the immigrant experiences of other cultures and languages, the mission of the Orthodox Church in America does not consist of representing these other cultures to America.

The ecclesial identity of the Orthodox Church in America constitutes what some in the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the USA call an “anomaly.” The other churches in the Assembly represent the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Antioch, Moscow, Georgia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Orthodox Church in America, while not dependent on Orthodox patriarchates, affirms communion with them and strives to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As members of the Assembly, the bishops of the Orthodox Church in America “give an account of the hope that is in them” for a united autocephalous Church in America, doing so with “gentleness and reverence.” This suggests that the real and persistent canonical anomaly in America is the multiplicity of Orthodox jurisdictions.

The stewardship of His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon as primate of the Orthodox Church in America has been instrumental in slowly building and rebuilding constructive relations with Orthodox patriarchates and churches. It is worthwhile to identify the steps taken towards strengthening the bonds of unity and collaboration.

In December 2014 our Primate made his official visit to the Patriarchate of Moscow, during which the high point was the concelebration with Patriarch Kirill of the Divine Liturgy in the Uspensky Cathedral in the Kremlin. Upon returning to the United States Metropolitan Tikhon concelebrated the Liturgy with Patriarch John X of Antioch in Washington, DC. Before Christmas Metropolitan Tikhon traveled to Turkey to visit the Theological School of Halki on behalf of St. Vladimir’s Seminary; this visit included a meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul; this has opened possibilities for the resumption of dialogue with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

In April 2015 Metropolitan Tikhon participated in the commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in Yerevan and Etchmiadzin. From Armenia Metropolitan Tikhon traveled to Tbilisi for his official visit to the Patriarchate of Georgia, which included concelebration of the Divine Liturgy with Patriarch Ilya II of Georgia.

In May 2015 Metropolitan Tikhon participated in the Washington commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, at which the Supreme Catholicos of All Armenians presided, together with the Catholicos of Cilicia.

In June 2015 Metropolitan Tikhon participated in a visit of the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the USA to the Ecumenical Patriarch at the Phanar in Istanbul.

At the end of July 2015 Metropolitan Tikhon will preside at a St. Vladimir's Seminary academic convocation for the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Patriarch John X of Antioch, and in September for the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Patriarch Irinej of Serbia.

The communion of our Church with sister churches has also been advanced by the participation of our hierarchs and other representatives in celebrations and events and pilgrimages in Constantinople, in Moscow and Kyiv and Minsk, in Beirut and Tirana, in Presov and Paris, in Romania, Poland, and Turkey.

The Orthodox Church in America in its Tomos of Autocephaly is given the mandate to be in communion with the global family of Orthodox Churches, in good relations with the Orthodox jurisdictions in North America, and to bear witness to the Orthodox faith in society. Our Church must not live in isolation.

There are not many who would dispute that it is necessary to maintain relations and communion with the Orthodox patriarchates and churches. Placing these relations in the framework of our calling to be truly Orthodox and truly American is a helpful way of understanding our identity in inter-Orthodox endeavors.

The gift and mission of being truly Orthodox and truly American extends to the engagement of our Church with other Christians and with ecumenical Christian organizations. There are some who do not readily make this connection. Yet the word of the Epistle of Peter to us surely applies to our encounter with all – Christian and non-Christian. Give an account of the hope that is in you with gentleness and reverence. We are not permitted to remain indifferent to fellow Christians, but are called to give an account of the hope that is in us. We are not at liberty to remain disinterested in people of other faiths. In our society they are our neighbors. We are called to give an account of the hope that is in us. This account of the hope that is in us must be given with gentleness and reverence – and not on in a spirit of arrogance and superiority.

In the history of our Church there are many who excel in giving an account of the hope that is in us. Two such persons have recently died in hope of the resurrection. Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko died in the Lord on March 18, 2015. Fr. Thomas was a priest and pastor, a lecturer and writer, a teacher and theologian. He made profoundly significant contributions to Orthodox theological reflection and Orthodox unity, and to ecumenical dialogue in the quest for Christian unity. Dr. Constance Tarasar died in the Lord on November 7, 2014. Connie was a teacher and educator, a theologian, lecturer, and writer. She made deeply meaningful contributions to Orthodox collaboration in education and to Orthodox engagement in ecumenical Christian collaboration. Both Fr. Hopko and Dr. Tarasar were articulate Orthodox voices and eloquent proponents of the vision of the Orthodox Church in America. To them we owe a debt of gratitude. May their memory be eternal!

In our care for Orthodox truth and in our concern for the life of the Church we often fall into joylessness. Yet, as Holy Scripture testifies, the proclamation of the Good News begins with joy and ends with joy. At the time of Christ's Nativity, the angel tells the shepherds "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people" (Luke 2:10). And after the Ascension of Christ, the Apostles "returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24: 52-53).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian mystic, St. Seraphim of Sarov, greeted all who came to him with the words "Christ is risen, my joy."

The witness of the Orthodox Church in America in the world will be credible and powerful and persuasive to the extent that we live and act in the joy of the Resurrection of Christ.

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!