

A Native Church or Diaspora?

The Orthodox Church in North America

The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity

We have chosen to re-print in this issue of the *Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity* four articles published within the last year and a half regarding the future of the Orthodox Church on the North American Continent. We invite articles related to this on-going concern, as well as other topics.

It is our opinion that the articles re-printed in this issue of our Journal are simply a few indicators, among many more which could be cited, of earthquakes to come in Orthodox Christianity in North America. These upheavals are providing indicators already that they may also produce tsunamis on the shores of world Orthodoxy.

Fr. Michael Oleksa stated in 1992 (in his book, *Orthodox Alaska*) that the second major stage of indigenization of the Orthodox faith had not really begun in North America (with the exception of Alaska). Now there are indications that the process of the indigenization of Orthodox Christianity in North America is getting underway and is likely to gain momentum. The focus of many articles and debates for a good number of decades (including that of the articles published in this issue) has been on such matters as: ethnicity vs. mission and the

convert church; canonical prerogatives of Patriarchates, (especially that of Constantinople); apron-strings of Mother Churches vs. the state of maturity of their offspring in North America; and jurisdictional unity/disunity in North America, in conjunction with the problem of the so-called "diaspora."

However, it appears that something more significant may now be underway in North America, which may impact not only Orthodox Christianity in North America, but in fact may pose major challenges to the Patriarchates overseas and turn the search light on them as well. Part of the indigenization of Orthodoxy in North America is the integration within its life of the ethos of freedom of religion from government control, great freedom of communication, and the possibility of participation of the general public in the public sphere. Of course this poses questions (a good thing) in relationship to Orthodox ecclesiology and also poses dangers to it. However, in reverse it raises questions from within this culture regarding the degree to which, over many centuries under authoritarian regimes in the old world, the Churches there, besides having become indigenized in their various cultures, have also accommodated themselves to worldly economic and political practices, and submitted to, or even fostered ungodly conduct in ways which cripple the Churches' witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The following are some factors which may have contributed to overcoming longstanding inertia and repeated stalemates concerning "ecclesiological abnormalities" in North America on the part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and other Patriarchates, along with their lack of focus on mission to the very large majority of those in North America who have no connection with the Orthodox Christian faith.

First, processes were developed and established in the exposure of the scandals in the Orthodox Church in America, including the effective use of the internet to break open the wall of secrecy, to provide information, to make known the sufferings and responses of laity and clergy, and to provide a way for them to have a say in major church matters. The outcome of these processes, which undermined the previous ways of controlling information and hiding abuses, and of limiting full participation in the life of the Church, was a shakeup in the central church offices and episcopacy, with disciplinary measures, an actual conciliar engagement in the process in bringing the scandal to at least a partial solution, reforms in proper financial accountability, and a real All-North American Council in November, 2009, which was more than orchestrated window dressing or public relations, with the unexpected (at least by most) choice of Abbot Jonah (Paufhausen) as Metropolitan. This whole scandal and the struggle against it may have signaled to overseas observers that North American Orthodox Christians would not be satisfied indefinitely with old-world ecclesiological structures which have been accommodated to authoritarian political forms of various kinds over the centuries, and in some cases have become seriously entangled with, and compromised by, political authorities and sources of major funding. Rather, especially in the OCA, it might be that Orthodoxy on the North American Continent was determined to take matters into its own hands.

On March 16, 2009, at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological School, Very Reverend Archimandrite Dr. Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, with the blessing of the Patriarch of Constantinople, presented a manifesto on the prerogatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Church in North America, and chose to rebut an article on ecclesiology, critical of Constantinople, produced the year previous to his elevation to the role of Metropolitan of the OCA, by then Abbot

Jonah.¹ The speech of Lambriniadis was also directed toward a fairly recent article (at the time) published by Metropolitan Philip of the Antiochian Archdiocese of America. This article attacked interpretations of canon law by the Patriarchate of Constantinople regarding its prerogatives in the "diaspora."² George Michalopoulos, spokesperson for the Orthodox Christian Laity, quickly responded on March 26, 2009 in rebuttal to the speech by Lambriniadis.³

Then, Metropolitan Jonah in early April, at a Pan-Orthodox Vespers service delivered a challenge to the Patriarch of Constantinople not to interfere in North America where there already was an Orthodox Church. He warned of plans afoot in upcoming meetings of the heads of Autocephalous Churches (excluding the OCA) actually to take in hand the resolving of the "ecclesiological irregularities" in the "diaspora." (Subsequently, Metropolitan Jonah apologized for any disrespectful language specifically regarding the Patriarch, but not regarding the substance of his address).⁴

Later, from the June meeting of the Autocephalous Churches in Chambesy, about which Metropolitan Jonah had spoken in anticipation of its actions, it was announced that the process of bringing unity in the "diaspora" would be initiated by creating gatherings of bishops in the territories of the "diaspora" under supervision of the representative

¹ See Metropolitan Jonah, "Episcopacy, Primacy, and Mother Churches: A Monastic Perspective," *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*, Volume IV, No. 1, Winter 2009.

² Archimandrite Dr. Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, "Challenges of Orthodoxy in America and the Role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate," in the current issue of *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*.

³ George Michalopoulos, "An OCL Board Member Responds to the Message of Chief Secretary of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate," in the current issue of *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*.

⁴ Metropolitan Jonah, "There is an American Orthodox Church, Leave It Alone!" in the current issue of *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*.

of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (unless there were no such representative in any given territory).

The final lengthy article included in this issue of CJOC was published on April 30, 2009 by the Faculty of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, perhaps as a more reasoned theological defense of the prerogatives of the "Ecumenical" Patriarchate in the "diaspora" than the previous address by Lambriniadis. This article of eight pages has over seventy references to the Patriarch and his prerogatives, and only one reference to Jesus Christ, which speaks of the "enduring mission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople . . . to proclaim the salutary Gospel of Jesus Christ" in the first paragraph, and a concluding reference to "our good and loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." One might compare the letters of the New Testament, most of which treat of ecclesiology and its aberrations in one way or another, where there are hardly more than two sentences in a row which do no mention the living God, often several times.

Also, anyone not under the Patriarchate of Constantinople, might be taken aback to learn from this article that "the enduring mission of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus" Christ was primarily associated with the "First-Called Apostle Andrew" and committed to the "Ecumenical" Patriarchate of Constantinople, rather than being held in common by the whole Body of Christ and every member thereof!⁵

⁵ A Statement by the Faculty of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, "The Leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Significance of Canon 28 of Chalcedon," in the current issue of *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity*.

This article by the faculty Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology was re-printed in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada publication, the Herald. Substantial immigration from Russia to Canada and political/ecclesiastical struggles between Moscow and Kiev continue to affect deeply the situation of the Orthodox Church in Canada where the Canadian Archdiocese of the OCA has tried to embrace and serve the faithful of this immigration, while centering on ministry and indigenization of the faith in this culture. The UOCC has often been pre-occupied with issues related to Russian pressures on Ukraine and with those of Ukrainian descent in Canada. These factors continue to affect the attitude of a good number in the UOCC to the OCA in Canada.

Other situations of claims to territorial rights and ecclesiastical prerogatives on the part of the Patriarchates, which often are linked to, or expressions of national political interests and pressures; for example, in the Middle East, Georgia, Estonia and other places around the world, certainly ought to raise as much concern about ecclesiological aberrations and division in world-Orthodoxy as the North American situation. These are matters about which the Patriarchates ought to be giving leadership and resolving in a conciliar fashion, in order to manifest their unity as members of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as witnesses to the presence of the Kingdom of God among the nations. These aberrations in Orthodox ecclesiology are surely as serious as the problem of multiple jurisdictions in North America and the rest of the "diaspora." If there were open communication and engagement among the Orthodox Churches around the world as is developing in North America, perhaps there might be a courageous challenging and correcting of the silence, inaction, and even the complicity out of fear, in relation to the oppression, violence and death of Orthodox

Christians in each other's countries (not to mention gross injustice to all human beings!

Is it not proper that the Patriarchate of Constantinople come to terms with the fact that other autocephalous Churches strongly disagree with its interpretation of its prerogatives regarding the "diaspora," based on Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon. The fact that this disagreement is very longstanding, and that there is continued serious reaction to the Patriarchate's unilateral insistence on its own view of its prerogatives, ought to suggest the necessity of a conciliar approach to a full understanding of the unity of the Church in biblical terms such as the Body of Christ, rather than a continued unilateral assertion by the Patriarchate of its view. When the Patriarchate of Constantinople continues to maintain its view in defiance of other interpretations by autocephalous Churches, instead of seeking the Spirit's interpretation in Council with the other Orthodox Churches, how can this be an acting as first among equals, and trusting the Holy Spirit's working in the whole Church to lead her into all truth?

Thus, as the indigenization process truly gets underway in North America (in contrast to "trying on the clothes" of Orthodox Christianity, which includes modifications adopted under other regimes), the emerging and maturing Orthodox Church in North America, and the working out of her mission in the reality in which she lives, is going to call in question not only the attempt to control the situation in North America by the "Mother" Churches and Patriarchates, but also the distortions in ecclesiology in Orthodox practice in old world countries.

Most recently the major issues regarding the status of bishops and the synod of bishops within the Antiochian Archdiocese, and many

intrigues, suspected financial corruption and other matters, which have not only been related to the Patriarchate overseas, but also have raised serious questions regarding its practices, provide another example of how the North American Orthodox context is opening up serious questions regarding possible corruption and possible serious aberrations in Orthodox ecclesiology in the Patriarchates overseas.

Finally, there has been a sudden about-turn in the Romanian situation, in which the failure of the attempt to draw the intruding Romanian Diocese (under the Patriarchate in Romania) into unity with the Romanian Episcopate within the OCA, has morphed into pressure to seek unity of the Diocese and Episcopate under the Patriarchate. The proposal to try to unify the two dioceses has also been raising questions about the Patriarchate's practices. Despite the repeated phrase "maximal autonomy," so far the words and actions of the Patriarchate and its Diocese suggest rather secrecy, control and resistance to transparency within the proposed new entity. Strong reactions and concerns have been raised in this encounter, on the basis of the continued strong presence in the Romanian government and the Church overseas of those linked to the former brutal communist tyranny, and compromised by it, as well as concerns about the degree to which the Romanian Diocese in North America is able to operate in freedom and openness and conciliarity, while under the Patriarchate of Romania. Also there has been concern raised regarding the recent removal of provisions for participation by laity in decision-making within the Romanian Patriarchate.

It seems likely that events such as the Antiochian Archdiocesan drama and the Romanian unity issue, related to church order in North America, in part may be connected to a jockeying for influence in the new order being proposed for North America, spearheaded by

Constantinople and involving big stakes in territorial influence overseas as well as in the "diaspora," and most especially North America.

In the case of the OCA scandal, the Antiochian crisis, and the Romanian unity issue, the usual, long-entrenched approaches of creating a wall of secrecy, and using authority and the call for obedience as means to avoid addressing serious matters within the Church, though not in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, have been shown to be obstacles to the indigenization of an Orthodox presence in a maturing Church in North America.

In the Church's wrestling with the so-called unity problem in North America, it is not enough to talk about canons, history, prerogatives, the Orthodox pecking-order, and the "obligations" of Mother Churches to "care for" their great or great, great grandchildren in North America. To gain a full picture it is necessary to shed light on political, economic and other forces which have a stake in using the cover of the progeny of Orthodox Churches so entangled with these powers in their homelands, as places where ears and avenues of covert operation in one of the most powerful and prosperous empires in the world may possibly be hidden.

But most of all, it is important to focus on the one original canon and rule of the Church, Jesus Christ, who is the express image and full revelation of the invisible Father, and also the full expression and fulfillment of our destiny as human beings and the only Saviour of the whole world. And it is therefore crucial to consider the message of salvation in this culture and how people can be brought into – not primarily the Church as some organization – but the Body of Christ, and transformed by the Holy Spirit. In this process, as has been the pattern throughout history, the culture may be transformed significantly.

This focus on Jesus Christ and spreading the Gospel to the vast majority who have no connection with Orthodox Christianity, inevitably breaks open the secrecy and control, and other agendas, with all of the interminable talking and jockeying for influence and other ungodly objectives not related to the Gospel. The chains of pre-occupation with the agendas of those Patriarchates having a stake in North America by which the mission of the Orthodox Church in North America is held back, will be broken by a focus on proclaiming Jesus Christ in the context of this culture, baptizing people into His death and resurrection, and incorporating them into the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that is, by embracing the mission of the Trinity to save the world. It will not happen by talking endlessly about the prerogatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and lamenting the insults to its honour. When the Patriarchate acts, not to bring all North America under its representatives, but respects the people of North America and the mission to which the members of the Body of Christ here are called, and supports the indigenization of the faith in this culture, the Patriarchate will be respected and honoured. It is Jesus Christ, who is the only Head of the Church, working by the Holy Spirit in all the members of the Body of Christ, each being set free to offer his or her gifts in proper order, who will gather in the great harvest from the fields which are ripe and waiting. It is aberrations in Orthodox ecclesiology world-wide, along with corruption and misuse of authority, which is by far the greatest obstacle to the spread of the full and saving Gospel of Jesus Christ in North America.

The mission of Jesus Christ continues in the world. Woe to those who, especially in His name, stand in the way of that mission and put stumbling blocks in the way of those who would enter into life in Christ, and even to the descendants of immigration who have left the Church over the years in very large numbers! The letters to the

Churches in the Book of Revelation are very direct and sobering regarding the judgment upon the churches which give way to idolatry in all its subtle forms, and give way to abusive power and self-preoccupation and riches, rather than repenting and being faithful witnesses to the New Creation in Jesus Christ. They will be judged along with the old creation if they are conformed to it as the risen and glorified Lord warns in those letters to the Churches in the Apocalypse. None of the Orthodox Churches in the old world or new are to be subject to anyone other than the Lord Jesus Christ, present in their midst through the Holy Spirit, nor are they to pursue any other ends than manifesting His presence and love to all of those who are neighbours to them by their circumstances. The problem is not the "diaspora" or church order in North America. The problem is whether the Orthodox Churches are being servants of the Lord and His mission, without compromise, without tolerating corruption, without quenching the Spirit, for all of us will be, and are being held accountable for what we have been given and how we are using it for the benefit of all human beings, all equally created, loved, and redeemed by God in Jesus Christ!

The spotlight is on all of world Orthodoxy at this time. And that spotlight is Christ. The situation of the Orthodox Church in North America is one in which the Lord is cleansing His temple to be a place of prayer for all peoples. This may become an earthquake, for this is what the message of the new creation in Jesus Christ precipitates when it becomes present in the old world which is passing away. If there is to be indigenization of Orthodox Christianity in North America, then the Gospel must make its way and be proclaimed using the means by which it can travel best into the hearts and lives of people living within this culture and mindset. However, this indigenization will include a shedding of clothes which do not fit, which hinder, obscure or even discredit the Gospel which the Church is given for its members to

be transformed by and to share. This indigenization will not be able to happen while the Church remains bound in the forms of control, often opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which have developed in other cultures. Because a number of Patriarchates have very significant stakes, material and otherwise, in North America, and disproportionate influence in the affairs of the Orthodox Church in North America, they will discover in their efforts to control it in terms which serve their purposes, that as the faithful and clergy of the Orthodox Church in North America exercise their gifts and place in the Body of Christ as part of the indigenization of Orthodox Christianity in this culture, those Patriarchates which want to remain involved, will also come under the searching questioning and open examination from this culture, and hopefully also from the Light of the world, Jesus Christ.

There are many who are called to carry out mission on this continent. It is important that the overseas Patriarchates and those exercising leadership in the Church in North America do not find themselves opposing the Spirit of God in His mission on this continent, nor opposing the Father who is without beginning, who gave His Only-Begotten Son out of love for the World. For the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seek full salvation and communion with the human beings of all races and nations and cultures and circumstances, without exception, to which they have given life.

May we hear in this process of indigenization of the Orthodox faith in North America and may we hear from the Patriarchates which make claims to a stake in this mission, a deep concern for the suffering and poor and those becoming more and more lost in the darkness of the neo-pagan culture in which we more and more live. May we hear offers of support and empathy with the struggles of people here, a desire to learn on the part of those who are determined to "mother" and "father" their offspring on this continent, less and less

about themselves, and especially much, much more about Jesus Christ and the love of God for the people of this continent, which has such a huge impact on the world. Let us see examples of the Patriarchates blessing outreach to the vast majority of the people of this continent who are not their spiritual children. Then we can rejoice together in Jesus Christ and the salvation of many, to the glory of God, with everyone acting according to the pattern of Him who thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but instead, emptying Himself, became of no reputation, taking the form of human nature and submitting to death, even to the utterly brutal and shameful death on the Cross, out of infinite love for those lost and being destroyed.