

## **ORTHODOXY IN AMERICA: DIASPORA OR CHURCH?**

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The most common image of Orthodoxy in America is the image of immigrant communities, of parishes and dioceses gathered according to the organizing principle of cultural and linguistic heritages. Often, this is the view of Orthodoxy in America held in the patriarchates and “mother churches” of Europe and the Middle East. Often enough, this is the view of Orthodoxy held by the mass media in the United States and Canada. And it is all-too-common for many Orthodox Christians in America to see themselves in light of the “immigrant image.”

As a result, any definition of Orthodoxy in America built on the “immigrant model” has more in common with sociological interpretations and cultural categories than it does with ecclesiology. This makes the question “Is Orthodoxy in America Diaspora or Church?” a relevant starting point for my paper on the Orthodox understanding of the Church in the American experience.

The historical origins of the Orthodox Church in North America are connected not to immigration but to mission and evangelization. In 1794 missionary monks from Valaam Monastery arrived on Kodiak Island in Alaska. The mission they inaugurated brought the Gospel of Christ to the native tribes of Alaska. At the center of their endeavor was the evangelization of the Alaskan peoples, and not the dissemination of Russian language and culture. Indeed, at the heart of the missionary approach of the monks from Valaam was a respect for the native cultures and customs and a desire to baptize what was legitimate and valid in the native cultural traditions.

Thus the first dimension of Orthodoxy in America was the apostolic dimension, a genuine missionary impulse to evangelize.

With the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, a new stage in the history of Orthodoxy in North America opened. The American diocese was soon created, and the bishop for North America was no longer an auxiliary bishop caring

only for the Orthodox flock in Alaska. Now Orthodox began to arrive as immigrants in such cities as New Orleans, San Francisco, and New York. The new diocesan center was established in San Francisco. The new parishes varied greatly in character. Some were mixed ethnically, with Greek, Russians, Serbs, and Arabs sharing the same parish. Others were ethnically homogeneous - Arabic, or Greek, or Russian, or Ukrainian. Yet others were composed of former Uniates who were Carpatho-Russian or Galician or Rusin.

The streams of immigrants from the Middle East and Central and Eastern Europe continued through the decades, sometimes representing waves of economic immigration, sometimes representing waves of political refugees who were fleeing from totalitarian regimes and wars, and sometimes slowing down or even stopping. Today, there is a renewal of immigration from the post-communist societies.

During the 1960s a new phenomenon of conversion to Orthodoxy emerged in American and Canadian societies. Beginning in the mid-1960s, for example, approximately one half of every class entering St. Vladimir's Seminary has been composed of converts. These are men and women who have been received into the Orthodox Church as adults. They have made a conscious decision to confess the Orthodox Faith. Some have been active and convinced members of Christian bodies, but have come to an understanding of Orthodoxy as the fullness of the Christian faith. Others have lived in secularism or agnosticism or atheism, and have encountered the Gospel of Christ in the Orthodox Church. Yet others have come from non-Christian religious traditions. When they are received into the Orthodox Church, they bring with them family histories which have nothing to do with Orthodox cultures. In every case they represent a rich, though sometimes difficult, encounter of Western cultural habits and traditions with the Eastern Christian theological vision.

Thus the reality of Orthodoxy in America is as complex as America. Many of the histories and cultures and backgrounds which compose America also compose Orthodoxy in America.

The reality of Orthodoxy in America is also as complex as Orthodoxy. Every patriarchate and church of the Middle East, Europe, and Africa is represented within

American Orthodoxy. Every culture and language found in the Orthodox world is found also in North America.

Until the Communist revolution in Russia, there was only one Church hierarchy in North America. Although the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural mosaic of Orthodoxy in America was already diverse, multiple ecclesial “jurisdictions” did not exist. In ways both formal and informal, the diversity of Orthodox communities was contained within an ecclesial unity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the North American diocese was led by Tikhon (Belavin), first as bishop and then as archbishop. The future Patriarch and Confessor of Moscow, and the future canonized saint, showed a remarkable pastoral spirit and ecclesial vision in his labors and in his thought. He fully understood and affirmed the diversity of his flock. He also understood and affirmed the need for ecclesial unity. His vision and plan for Orthodoxy in America was a Church in which the varying needs of a diverse Orthodox population would be given pastoral care by Arabic, and Greek, and Serbian, and Russian bishops (and bishops coming from other cultural and ethnic traditions as needed), yet the unity of the episcopate – and therefore of the Church – would be protected in a canonical structure in which the bishops, led by an archbishop, acted as a united and conciliar body. He envisioned an autonomous Orthodox Church in North America, and in one document even used the word “autocephalous,” though he carefully placed a question mark after this word.

This plan was slowly implemented. A bishop for the Arabs, Raphael (Hawaweeny), was the first Orthodox bishop consecrated in North America. (Bishop Raphael was recently canonized by the Orthodox Church in America, with the participation of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America.) An auxiliary bishop was consecrated for the Alaskan flock. And steps were envisioned for the consecration of Greek, Serbian, and other bishops for the diverse Orthodox communities in the United States and Canada. The recall of Archbishop Tikhon to Russia in 1907 slowed down the movement for which he had laid careful plans. And World War I, which was followed by the Communist revolution in Russia, followed

by the Civil War in Russia, distorted the development of Orthodoxy in North America.

In the 1920s multiple “jurisdictions” emerged in America, setting the stage for many decades of the ecclesiological nonsense of canonical Orthodox Churches sharing the same territory and dividing the Orthodox according to the principles of nationality, culture, and language. The energies of the “jurisdictions” were now directed to the preservation of the various national-cultural heritages – Russian, Greek, Syrian-Lebanese, Romanian, Albanian, etc. Gradually, both in America and in the “mother churches,” Orthodoxy in North America began to be viewed as a “diaspora.” Or, to be precise, as specific national and ecclesial “diasporas,” united in Orthodoxy, but divided ethnically, culturally, canonically, and administratively.

From time to time, initiatives were undertaken to create structures of unity. These were efforts to bring the Orthodox together into a relationship of consultation and co-operation. The most prominent such effort was the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA). Formed in 1960, SCOBA remains the primary forum for inter-Orthodox collaboration in the United States. Though the SCOBA itself is not a strong institution, and does not possess any canonical authority, it does provide a framework for common work and mission. There are several agencies and organizations authorized by the SCOBA which have been able to build their work “as if” the Orthodox in America were united in one Church. Nevertheless, the fundamental “canonical position” of the SCOBA is the preservation of parallel “jurisdictions.”

Another approach to the future of Orthodoxy in America was taken in 1970, when the Church of Russia granted a Tomos of Autocephaly to what was then called the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North America and became the Orthodox Church in America. In the context of the persecution of the Church of Russia by the Communist regime in the 1920s, the American diocese in 1924 declared a “temporary autonomy.” The one diocese gradually became a Church with several dioceses, and was often called the American “Metropolia.” Since the Moscow Patriarchate did not recognize the self-declared autonomy of the Metropolia, until 1970 the Metropolia was in schism from the Church of Russia. In America, on RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 3 (JUNE 2004) page 38.

the other hand, eucharistic communion was maintained between the Metropolia and the new Orthodox jurisdictions of Constantinople, Antioch, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Tomos of Autocephaly restored communion between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church in America. It also gave the OCA the mandate to build up the life of Orthodoxy in America while maintaining communion and good relations with other Orthodox Churches and striving for the full canonical unity of Orthodoxy in North America.

The granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America provoked what the late Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann called “a meaningful storm.” Since the Orthodox Churches saw Orthodoxy in America as “diaspora,” the creation of an autocephalous Church in America presented a difficult challenge. The breaking of eucharistic communion was a distinct possibility, which would have meant a schism in America, and possibly even beyond the North American continent. Although schism was avoided, and co-operative relations within the SCOBA were eventually restored, canonical unity remained out of reach.

In the 1990s, visits of the Orthodox Patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, Moscow, and Serbia to the United States showed the fundamental unity of Orthodoxy in America. Though the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, and Serbia were making pastoral visits to their own flocks, their own “diasporas,” and the Patriarch of Moscow was a guest of the Orthodox Church in America, Orthodox Christians in the United States saw the visiting patriarchs as signs of Orthodox unity.

In this atmosphere and context, two significant inter-Orthodox institutions were authorized by the SCOBA. International Orthodox Christian Charities and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, respectively the humanitarian agency and the mission agency of Orthodox Christians in America, have labored fruitfully for more than ten years, acting “as if” full canonical unity has already been achieved.

In 1994 the hierarchs of the SCOBA convened for the first time a conference of the canonical Orthodox episcopate in America. Some forty bishops met at the Antiochian Village in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, the conference and retreat center of the Antiochian Archdiocese. The hierarchs issued two documents – a “Statement on the

Church in North America” and a “Statement on the Church Mission and Evangelism.”

The “Statement on the Church in North America” was a respectful and humble appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarch and to the Primates of the other mother churches. It referred with gratitude to the “love and concern exhibited by the prominence given to the ‘diaspora’ on the agenda for the forthcoming Great and Holy Council evidenced by the Adopted Texts of the Preparatory Commission.” It continued:

“We await the next meeting of the Commission referred to in the Adopted Text of November 1993. We maintain that it is critical that the Church in North America be directly and concretely represented in that and future meetings. How is it possible for there to be discussion about the nature of the Church in North America in our absence? We must be present to share two hundred years of experience that we have had of preaching the Gospel and living the Orthodox faith outside of those territories that have historically been Orthodox....Furthermore, we have agreed that we cannot accept the term ‘diaspora’ as used to describe the Church in North America. In fact the term is ecclesiastically problematic. It diminishes the fullness of the faith that we have lived and experienced here for the past two hundred years.”

The “Statement on the Church Mission and Evangelism” was a strong declaration that mission “is the very nature of the Church, and is an essential expression of apostolicity.” Reference was made to the vigorous Orthodox missionary history – the missions to the Slavic peoples, missions in Siberia, China, Korea and Japan, the evangelization of the Alaskan native peoples, and contemporary mission in Africa, Indonesia, and Albania. An appeal was made to the Ecumenical Patriarch to convene a world conference of mission representatives “to help coordinate Orthodox mission strategies and efforts around the world.” And, finally, the statement ended in this way:

“We Orthodox in North America commit ourselves to bringing our household into order for the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ, His Incarnation and His teaching, His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection, and His presence in the Church through the descent of the Holy Spirit.”

These statements, though intended to be respectful and meant to make a contribution to progress towards Orthodox unity under the guidance of the patriarchates, caused much controversy and harshly negative reactions. They failed to secure the support of the patriarchates for a coherent movement towards Orthodox canonical and administrative unity in America.

During the past two years the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America has engaged in a vigorous process of consultation, even debate, with the Patriarchate of Antioch concerning “autonomy” for the Archdiocese. The result has been a resolution by the Holy Synod of Antioch affirming “self-rule” for the Archdiocese: “The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America is and shall remain self-ruled within its present jurisdiction (The United States of America and Canada) and shall constitute one unified ecclesiastical Antiochian entity.” Other provisions of the resolution create dioceses within the one archdiocese, establish the rules for the election of bishops for these dioceses by appropriate action of the Archdiocese itself, and define the election of the metropolitan-primate in a way which assures that the nominations of three candidates are made by the Archdiocese, and the election of the metropolitan-primate is performed by the Holy Synod of Antioch. An eparchial synod has until now been composed of auxiliary bishops and chaired by the metropolitan-primate. As a result of the recent resolution of the Holy Synod, the members of the eparchial synod will in the future be diocesan bishops. A general convention, composed of the episcopate, as well as clergy and lay delegates from all parishes, is convened regularly.

Within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America some have expressed the view that the ecclesiastical “autonomy” of the Archdiocese within the Patriarchate of Constantinople is a necessary and legitimate goal. In the meantime, the Greek Archdiocese of America has dioceses which are ruled by diocesan bishops (the archbishops and the metropolitans), and the metropolitans are members of a Synod under the presidency of the archbishop-primate. An archdiocesan council, with mixed membership of bishops, clergy, and laity has financial and administrative responsibilities. A clergy/laity congress gathers the episcopate and clergy and lay delegates from all archdiocesan parishes.

It must be noted that the Russian Metropolia, has adhered to the church structure and order established by the 1917-1918 Council of the Church of Russia, and has led the way in America by example. Thus, regularly-convened All-American Church Councils are composed of the entire episcopate, and clergy and lay delegates from all parishes. (The fact that Council of the Church of Russia was composed of clergy and lay delegates from dioceses, while the Church Councils in America have been composed of delegates from all parishes is simply the result of the differences in number of parishes and dioceses.) The Holy Synod of Bishops is the highest canonical body in the Church; it meets twice a year and is composed of all diocesan bishops, with auxiliary bishops also attending. A Metropolitan Council, composed of clergy and laity elected by the All-American Council, as well as clergy and laity elected by the dioceses, is chaired by the primate.

As a matter of historical interest, it should be noted that in America the practice of convening clergy and laity to meet with their hierarchs to make common decisions in ecclesial life even preceded the decisions of the Russian Church Council of 1917-1918. Archbishop Tikhon took the initiative of convening the first council in America when he organized a meeting of clergy and laity in Mayfield, Pennsylvania, in 1907. In a style typical of his archpastoral leadership, he made it clear that he wanted open discussion and conciliar decisions. Thus, the American Orthodox experience, under the guidance of the future saint and confessor, drew clergy and laity into co-responsibility with their hierarchs even before the decisions of the Council of 1917-1918 in Moscow.

Similar structures of church governance, involving clergy and laity in appropriate decision-making and advisory capacities under the leadership of the hierarchy, now exist in most of the Orthodox “jurisdictions” in North America.

This account has demonstrated that Orthodoxy in America has dimensions of mission, immigration, and conversion to Orthodoxy. We have seen that the Tomos of Autocephaly granted by the Patriarchate of Moscow to the Orthodox Church in America has affirmed the Orthodox ecclesiology by affirming the principle and practice of “local Church,” and thus implicitly rejecting the notion of “diaspora.” We have observed that the canonical Orthodox “jurisdictions” in America have tried to

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build structures of co-operation and unity, while preserving the concept of parallel “jurisdictions,” in creating the SCOBA. We have also described the effort of the Orthodox hierarchs, convened in the first episcopal assembly in America, to define the experience of Orthodox life in America in terms of Orthodox witness in America, and not in terms of “diaspora.” And we have noted that the structures of church governance in America, involving the central role of the hierarchy, and the appropriate participation of clergy and laity and giving space to a conciliar approach, have basic similarities among the Orthodox Churches in America.

Orthodoxy in America is only one of the examples of a vigorous Orthodox life “outside of those territories that have historically been Orthodox.” We find Orthodox archdioceses and communities in Western Europe, South America, and Australia. The question as to whether Orthodoxy is “Church or Diaspora?” is as relevant in these places as it is in North America.

On the whole, it appears that for the Orthodox patriarchates and autocephalous churches in the “traditionally Orthodox territories” the witness and the future of Orthodoxy in North and South America, Western Europe, and Australia are marginal questions. In response to this, it must be stated – and with a sense of urgency – that the witness and future of Orthodoxy in what one might broadly call the West are of cardinal importance. On the one hand, the Orthodox Church considers herself to be catholic, and not only in the sense of being “whole,” but also in the sense of being “universal.” On the other hand, the wide-spread, and in many ways justified, view is that Orthodoxy is limited to its traditional regions in central and eastern Europe and the Middle East.

And when Orthodoxy is found outside these “traditional” regions it is found in the form of parallel “diasporas.” It can even be said that today’s Orthodox world-view is comfortable with parallel “universalisms.” It is assumed that each of the Orthodox Churches is legitimately “universal,” legitimately establishing its presence as a heritage, as a jurisdiction, as a “diaspora” in any country or region. It is further assumed that the Orthodox Church can be expressed within the category of “diaspora.”

The only way out of this dead end is a renewal of authentic Orthodox ecclesiology, a renewed faithfulness to the ecclesial vision of the apostolic calling of the Church. “Diaspora” is a concept not at all adequate to the apostolicity of the Church. Those who believe that the Orthodox Church, when living outside historic Orthodox territories, is living in “diaspora” in practice diminish the Church’s apostolicity. To be apostolic cannot be limited to the notion of having “roots” or “foundations” in the places where the Apostles of Christ preached and established churches. To be apostolic is also to continue, in new circumstances and lands, the apostolic vocation.

The concept of “parallel jurisdictions,” which is a natural child of the “diaspora” worldview, is alien to Orthodox ecclesiology. When a defense of “jurisdictions” is attempted, this usually amounts to concealing the ecclesiological nonsense and even sin of “jurisdictions” under the garments of unity in faith and unity in sacraments. It is precisely unity in faith and unity in sacraments which demand unity in episcopal conciliarity and oversight, concrete unity and coordination in the witness and mission of the Church!

One dares to say that “parallel jurisdictions” are a greater threat to the Orthodox ecclesiology and theology than schism or even heresy. The dangers and deformations of schism and heresy are usually clear and unambiguous. Only those who fall into schism or heresy find for themselves justifications and explanations. The Church as a whole stands firmly against schism and heresy, rejecting their distortions.

In the case of “jurisdictions” and their apologists, a beautiful and harmonious justification is constantly offered by pointing to unity in faith and unity in sacraments. “We are already united, both in faith and in sacraments, and therefore there is no need to worry ourselves about unity in one local Church.” This is a view of Orthodoxy in America which is today accepted in the Orthodox Churches as self-evident and acceptable. It is little noticed that this view contradicts - both in practical terms and in theological terms - the Orthodox teaching about the Church.

Adherence to Orthodox ecclesiology must, of course, have a pastoral character. The concern of the Church is the salvation of souls, the salvation of

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persons, the right orientation of Christian believers towards God, the Church, and each other.

In this perspective it is obviously necessary to take into account the cultures and languages of concrete people and communities. When immigrants arrive in new lands, they naturally see themselves in the beginning as a “diaspora.” Pastoral sensitivity to their self-understanding is required of the Church. Indeed, this pastoral sensitivity to Orthodox immigrants with a “diaspora” consciousness is just as important from the point of view of missiology as is pastoral sensitivity to those men and women and communities who are not Christian or are not Orthodox.

The contradictions and problems emerge only when the Church herself is seen as diaspora, and diaspora becomes the organizing principle of Church life. It must be strongly maintained that the Church of God can and must be sensitive to those who see themselves as diasporas. The Church is a larger and more spacious reality than diaspora, and can pastorally contain within itself ethnic, national, and linguistic communities regarding themselves as diasporas.

It is when the attempt is made to fit the Church of God into the diaspora framework that we sin against the nature of the Church, making her serve goals and purposes which are not at the heart of her mission and task. In such cases we also fail to offer Orthodox people the proper theological perspective and ecclesial orientation. Those who see themselves as a cultural or national diasporas must be assisted in placing these relative values within the larger and more spacious household of the Church of God, which is oriented towards the fullness of God and which is by its nature inclusive of many cultural and national communities.

Another aspect of the distortions brought about by the “diaspora” consciousness is the loss of credibility for the Orthodox Church’s witness. One of the strengths of the Orthodox witness in ecumenism and in the world is the clarity of the ecclesiological teaching of the Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox understanding of the nature of the Church has been an important and influential Orthodox contribution to ecumenical dialogue. It has also been a significant element in the attraction Orthodoxy exercises on those who encounter Orthodox theology in their quest for an authentic expression of Christian

life, an authentic expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Sadly, when those who are nourished by the theological perspectives of the Orthodox faith and by the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Orthodox Church encounter the empirical reality of Orthodox life and Orthodox church order, they are wounded and scandalized by the contradictions they encounter.

In America, as elsewhere in the so-called “diaspora,” it is not in fact difficult to begin immediately a responsible, visible, and viable process for the building of the unity of the Orthodox Church. This requires a common commitment among Orthodox Churches to move towards the creation of local autonomous or autocephalous Churches. There will need to be a quest for the right ways to express the unity of the episcopate, the right ways to express the exercise of primacy, the right ways to provide for the coordination and collaboration of the Churches. Progress along these lines would not deprive the patriarchates and mother churches of the support of the communities they have so far envisioned as “diasporas.” On the contrary, more vigorous and useful support for the patriarchates and mother churches would be generated. Progress along these lines would not deprive the emerging local Churches of the support, wisdom, and guidance of the patriarchates and mother churches. On the contrary, such support wisdom, and guidance would be welcomed.

The “right way” which is needed is readily found in the ecclesiological vision of the Orthodox Church. The problem is not that new formulas or principles must be found. The problem is that the ecclesiological vision of the Orthodox Church must be affirmed theologically and applied practically.

The answer to the question “Diaspora or Church?” must be unequivocally “Church and not Diaspora!” In America, in other places where Orthodox Church lives in “territories not historically Orthodox,” and in the historic centers of Orthodoxy there is today no greater need than the need to live Orthodox faith in full faithfulness to the true ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church. This is the way to deter or overcome divisions and schisms. This is the way to bear credible witness in the world and among other Christian bodies. This is the way to offer the members of Christ’s Body the joy of ecclesial experience and good pastoral care, equipping them to a life in service to the Gospel of Christ.