



# A VISION for North American Orthodoxy

by Charles R. Ajalat

Late this summer, I had two close brushes with death. Through God's grace, and by the fervent prayer of righteous people (James 5:16) as well as the skillful hands of the medical team, I was brought back to life. These experiences led me to reflect deeply upon what is important in life, namely my own salvation, my family, and the Church.

As I reflected upon the Church as Eucharist, I felt unmitigated joy and thanksgiving. As I reflected, however, upon the Church as administration, I felt both joy and sadness. These emotions haunted me throughout my recovery, and finally led me to commit my thoughts to paper in hopes that they would provide both encouragement and exhortation to others. In this spirit, I commend them to the readers of AGAIN Magazine.

## **Governmental Chaos and a Bright Star**

In the mid-1960s at Harvard, we undergrads were very excited about what seemed to be happening in North American Orthodoxy—the unification of the Church and an increased witness to North America. Since that time, however, we have not moved much in terms of administrative

unity. This is so even though administrative unity is a canonical and practical imperative, and is historically inevitable. As I reflect upon the administration of the Church, I also think about the incredible historical significance of the autonomy or self-rule recently granted to the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

To be blunt, the governance of Orthodoxy in today's world is in shambles. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has caused or furthered division around the world—from America, Western Europe, and Australia to the Ukraine, Estonia, Greece, and elsewhere. The Jerusalem Patriarchate, with the blessings of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, has attempted unsuccessfully to create yet another jurisdiction in North America, and has disrupted relations between two of the key Orthodox jurisdictions here. The Moscow Patriarchate, in attempting to create unity with the former church in exile, may well create yet another jurisdiction on this continent.

Amidst this chaos, a bright and shining star from God has arisen. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the visionary Patriarch and Holy Synod of Antioch have granted the bold request of Metropolitan

PHILIP and the faithful in the Antiochian Archdiocese here for autonomy. The hallmarks of this grant are the right to self-rule and the right to nominate (by the clergy and laity), and elect and consecrate (by the local Holy Synod), our own diocesan bishops. Self-rule must and does also include the right to have our clergy and laity nominate our own primate, and require the Mother Church to choose from our three nominees when electing him. Our self-rule, as with all autonomy, is limited only by the Mother Church's decisions on doctrine, sacraments, foreign relations, and appeals of a diocesan bishop to the Mother Church from defrockment by the local Synod.

The Archdiocese was able to institutionalize a physical as well as a spiritual closeness between the Archdiocese and the Mother Church without violating any of these principles of self-rule. This was done by allowing two or three of the metropolitans of the Mother Church to have input and vote with our bishops when we elect diocesan bishops. It was also done by allowing our Metropolitan, in addition to presiding over our own local Holy Synod, to remain a member of the Holy Synod of Antioch, and by allowing our bishops to attend gatherings of Antiochian bishops called by the Patriarch.

The Patriarch and Holy Synod of Antioch has granted the Archdiocese this self-rule in part because of their desire to have the peoples of North America see the evangelistic witness of Orthodoxy. They also recognize the canonical imperative that there must someday be an administratively united Orthodox Church on this continent. It is against the laws and tradition of the Church to have multiple jurisdictions on the same territory.

## **The Mission of Christ's Church**

Why does the Orthodox Church in North America need to be administratively united? After all, the jurisdictions of the Church here are already one in doctrine, liturgy, and the sacraments. It seems to me the answer is rooted in missions and evangelism, in the mission of the Church.

The imperative under the ancient Church canons to not have multiple bishops on the same territory serves the purpose of witness and harmony. Perceived division resulting from multiple bishops is a denial to the non-faithful of the unity of Christ's Church, hampering our witness.

This is particularly devastating as a practical matter in a place like North America, where there already exist thousands of Christian denominations, not to mention non-Christian religions. It is even more devastating because the administrative divisions are correctly perceived by non-Orthodox faithful to be based on ethnicity. These "ethnic ghettos" are a denial of the Church being, or even wanting to be, indigenously North American. This is correctly perceived by our children.

The mission of Christ's Church, the Orthodox Church, is to transform the souls of the faithful in Christ and to therefore transform the culture around the Church. This is done through preaching the good news of God becoming man and His death and resurrection for our eternal salvation, and it is done by living lives—individually and corporately—that witness to this great truth. With respect to the need for transformation of the North American culture, few Christians would deny such need.

Administrative unity is not a panacea for the Church here, nor will it keep all of our children in the Church, nor, by itself, will it transform North American culture. Administrative unity also does not address the need for a larger pool from which to draw the Church's episcopal leadership. Administrative unity in North America is, however, an important building block for the future of the Church on this continent and, I believe, for world Orthodoxy.

### **Are There Two Visions of the Church in North America?**

The North American Orthodox jurisdictions appear to be breaking into two camps. There are those whose hierarchs have or may be willing to renew a vision for a single North American Church (such as the OCA and the Antiochians). And there are

those whose hierarchs have a focus primarily on their internal affairs and their Mother Church abroad. While there can, and should, be cooperation between the hierarchs of the two groups, the time has now come for those who hold a common vision of an administratively unified North American Church to focus together, and by themselves, on the issue of administrative unity. And if only a sole Orthodox jurisdiction is able to pursue the dream of witnessing to North America from an indigenous North American perspective, then it must do so. The faithful of all jurisdictions will ultimately welcome either development. All this is so, even though it would be best if all jurisdictions supported and implemented right now a common vision of administrative unity, capitalizing on the momentum of the grant of Antiochian Archdiocese self-rule.

Archbishop SPYRIDON, former Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, recently discussed the future of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese with regard to American Orthodoxy. He recognized the problem that exists:

I cannot see how anyone can be optimistic if the situation continues as it does today. Hundreds of thousands of Greek Americans have left the embrace of the Archdiocese over the past decades. You can count the true friends and supporters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the fingers of your hand. In order for the situation to be reversed, many profound changes will need to be made. . . .

[American] Orthodox . . . [are] unable to break the ring of their religious ghettos, to make a dynamic presence in American society and to be part of mainstream and decision-making America.<sup>1</sup>

Archbishop SPYRIDON appears to believe, however, that administrative Orthodox unity is not the answer and that this is a dream mainly of the OCA and the Antiochians, as opposed to the Greek

hierarchy. He went on to say:

The presence of all Orthodox of various nationalities under one supranational—namely American—autocephalous institution, has been mainly a dream nourished by the Russian and Arab Orthodox in America. However, many Greek Orthodox clerics and laymen, especially the Greek Orthodox OCL [Orthodox Christian Laity], aspire to an autocephalous status. This solution would lead each Orthodox group to hastily rid its national characteristics and to form a fully Americanized entity without any national references at all. Personally, I do not think this solution can be regarded as very promising.

Hopefully Archbishop SPYRIDON is wrong.

Not only do a large part of the priests and laity of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese desire administrative unity, the dream of unity has been part of their own heritage from the beginning. Essentially at its founding in 1922, Ecumenical Patriarch MELETIOS IV said:

I saw the largest and best part of the Orthodox Church in the Diaspora, and I understood how exalted the name of Orthodoxy could be, especially in the United States of America, if more than two million Orthodox people there were united into one church organization, an American Orthodox Church.

How many millions would be joined to the Church today had this prophetic vision been implemented? Sadly, under the leadership of the current Ecumenical Patriarch, this vision appears to be drifting farther away rather than coming closer. He led an attempt to change the 1977 Charter of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (which can only be changed with the consent of the Clergy-Laity Congress) to a Patriarchal Charter placing the control of all decision-making in Constantinople. He has also



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ignored thirty amendments to the Patriarchal Charter proposed by the Clergy-Laity Congress. As Archbishop SPYRIDON, the former Archbishop of the Greek Archdiocese of America, said in the interview quoted above:

The difficulty now lies in the fact that, in compliance with the Archdiocesan charter hitherto valid and approved by the Patriarchate Synod in 1977, no charter modifications can be made without the approval of the Clergy-Laity Congress. And there has been no such approval to this day. I now hear that reactions to the procedures followed in this case are slowly but surely growing. In this effort, the OCL, the well-known para-ecclesiastical organization which played a major role in rejecting the Patriarchal draft in Los Angeles, is again a protagonist. Today, this organization is active in sensitizing the Greek Orthodox communities on the issue at hand, while at the same time it continues to systematically promote autonomy. The situation, as you can see, is becoming precarious once more.

The Antiochian situation is in contrast to the situation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Echoing Patriarch MELETIOS, the late Antiochian Patriarch ELIAS said in a 1977 interview, published in *A Man of Love*:

Our position is clear. . . . We affirm that in North America there should be an autocephalous church with its own Patriarch and Holy Synod. However, all Mother Churches must agree on this point, and more importantly, the faithful in North America must do their part to make independence and unity a reality and not just a written Tomos.

Through his courageous act in granting self-rule to the Antiochian Archdiocese of

North America, Patriarch IGNATIUS has advanced the vision of his predecessor, recognized the maturity of all the North American faithful, and furthered the cause of a unified Church.

#### **Current Inter-Orthodox Cooperative Efforts**

As Patriarch ELIAS said, “the faithful in North America must do their part to make independence and unity a reality.” We constructively criticize the hierarchs for failing to achieve Orthodox administrative unity. But what about the beautiful common actions that have thus far been achieved by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA)? What about International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC), and the first and historic conference of all North American Orthodox bishops at Ligonier, Pennsylvania, in 1994, which called for Orthodox unity, evangelization of North America, and cooperative action? Don’t these actions lead to administrative unity among the hierarchs?

Having been a part of these SCOBA agencies since the very beginning, I can say that the people involved have incredibly good hearts and do incredibly good work. While the agencies do unify some of the faithful, they do not unify the hierarchs and they also have two limitations.

First, they operate within a difficult, non-unified hierarchical climate. This was clearly revealed in 1994 when the Ecumenical Patriarch forced the resignation of Archbishop IAKOVOS of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese for meeting at Ligonier and for even *suggesting* an ad-

ministratively unified hierarchy in North America. The subsequent conference of the bishops, “allowed” by the Ecumenical Patriarch and held in Washington D.C. in 2000, did not even attempt to deal with the real issues facing the Church here or abroad.

The second limitation on the SCOBA agencies is one of focus. The witness by such agencies has tended to center primarily on activities abroad (following the lead of their hierarchs). This has taken place at the expense of the vineyard in which God has placed them, here in North America. Not only is evangelism to the many, many millions of unchurched North Americans not an important focus of OCMC, it is unanswered in a unified fashion by the jurisdictions here. For this, we will all answer to God.

For the needs of the North American hungry, the homeless, the unwed mothers, the abused spouses, the prisoners, students on drugs and alcohol, and others of our brothers and sisters in Christ in need, we will also answer to God. We pray that IOCC will one day not only have a “U.S. country program” like it now has an “Ethiopian program,” but that serving the vineyard in which God has placed us will be an equally large ministry with serving God’s children throughout the world.

#### **Principles of Implementation of Administrative Unity**

Those jurisdictions here which do have a common vision for an administratively-unified North American Church must implement this vision while recognizing three principles.

The first is that Orthodox administrative unity on this continent is inevitable.



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Many of the Mother Churches have fallen into the delusion of not recognizing this, yet it is only a question of time. It is only a question of whether it will happen now or when the Church overall, through loss of communicants, becomes smaller and smaller and less and less helpful to the goals the Mother Churches might be otherwise seeking. Significant concrete steps directed specifically toward administrative unity at the hierarchical level should be taken now by the Mother Churches and / or the Churches here in North America.

The second principle is that Orthodox unity here cannot be at the expense of the well-being of the Orthodox Church throughout the world. Just as the local parish is the fullness of the Orthodox Church, just as the national church is the fullness of the Orthodox Church, the Church throughout the world is one and is the fullness of the Church. In particular, as each daughter owes an incredible debt of gratitude and love to her mother, so it is in Christ's Church. We must say to the Mother Churches, “We can be of greater service to you if we are united here.” And these must not be words alone, but must be put into significant, concrete action. If at all possible there must be unity here without division between the parts of the Church here and the Mother Churches.

The Antiochian model of self-rule for the Archdiocese here is in this respect one of brilliance or, better yet, of grace. While granting the full hallmarks of an autonomous Church, such as control of elections of diocesan bishops, the hierarchs of the Holy Synod of Antioch, through love and God's grace, simultaneously emphasized the spiritual and even physical unity of the

Church in North America with the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch. It is a model that, if followed by others, would strengthen all of the Mother Churches while laying the groundwork for accomplishing administrative unity on this continent, to the glory of God.

The Antiochian model is historic in a very special sense. The previous self-governance achieved by Orthodox jurisdictions (the Romanian Archdiocese, and the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America) resulted from having to deal with the historical aftermath of the persecution of the Church in Russia and Eastern Europe by the Communists. The Antiochian Archdiocese self-rule is a result, for the first time, of the recognition by the priests, deacons, and laity of the Church here, and the hierarchs here and abroad, of the growth, assimilation, and maturity of the Church in North America.

The third principle is that in the implementation of Orthodox unity the Church here must pastorally care for all its faithful: current and future. As the Church here administratively unifies, there will continue to be communities that carry on traditions brought to North America by generations of Orthodox immigrants from many different countries. There will also be communities that build on the traditions of those of all races and ethnic groups who have come to Orthodoxy, but whose ancestors were not Orthodox themselves.

The uniqueness of America, a land of immigrants, presents an opportunity for the Church to provide a home for many different kinds of customs within one Orthodox Christian faith. Even now in the Antiochian Archdiocese, there exist entire

communities of non-“cradle” Orthodox, of different ethnic backgrounds. These communities of North American Orthodox—whose ancestries are, for example, Anglo-Saxon, Puerto Rican, El Salvadoran, or Black—add to the richness of the Archdiocese. As Metropolitan PHILIP often says, in discussing unity between Greek-Americans, Arab-Americans, Russian-Americans, and so on, there must be “unity with diversity.”

### **So What Is the Goal?**

The goal of those who share a vision of unity is that there be one primate in North America, a Patriarch, surrounded by his metropolitans, bishops, and other clergy, and a unified laity. This way we would unite our efforts to present the Orthodox Faith to this land. Imagine the joy the converts to Orthodoxy would experience, not having to decide which of the many jurisdictions to join!

Two thousands years ago, our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the Church to His Father, “that they may be one as We are” (John 17:11). By the grace of the Holy Spirit we Orthodox in North America are one in doctrine and worship. Let's finish the task and be one administratively, for the sake of witnessing to the gospel and complying with the canons of the Church.

Having recently flirted with death, I pray that before I stand at the dread judgment seat of Christ my life may be transformed, according to His will. But I pray also that through one united North American Orthodox Church, the culture of this continent may be transformed as well, and resound to His glory. ❖

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1. An Interview with Spyridon, Former Archbishop of America, by Despina Syriopoulou, TGA News.com, 2/26/03.