

Challenges of Orthodoxy in America
And the Role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

By

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Reverend Protopresbyter Nicholas Triantafyllou, President,

Reverend Protopresbyter Thomas Fitzgerald, Dean of the School of Theology,

Reverend and Esteemed Members of the Faculty and staff,

Dear Students,

It is an exceptional honor and a great joy for me to be here today, among you, with the blessing and permission of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch and the consent of His Eminence the Archbishop of America, in order to share with you some thoughts regarding the present condition of Orthodoxy in America and our Ecumenical Patriarchate's position towards it.

You have, my brothers and sisters, the privilege to be citizens of a country which determines to a great extent the fate of many people on our planet; a country where pioneering technologies as well as ideas and philosophies have been discovered and disseminated. The cultural peculiarities and characteristics of the United States find also a reflection in, as it is only natural, and exercise an influence on the religious communities of this country. It is far from accidental that none of the "traditional" religions (coming either from Europe or elsewhere), remained the same once they were replanted on American soil.

The same change can be of course observed in the case of Orthodoxy, whose appearance and development in America was influenced by certain indeterminable factors.

The first and main challenge that American Orthodoxy faces is that it has been developed in a region which, from an administrative and technical point, is that of *diaspora*. By the term

“diaspora” we indicate that region whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction has been unfortunately claimed by a variety of “Mother” Churches, which wish to maintain their pastoral care over their respective flocks, comprised by the people who, over the years, immigrated to the superpower called USA.

In this way, the Orthodox faithful in America became organized according to their national origin and not according to the canon law of the Orthodox Church—that is, they organized themselves not in accordance with the principles of Orthodox ecclesiology which dictates that neither national origin, nor the history of a group’s appearance in a particular region but rather the canonical *taxis* and the perennial *praxis* of the Church, as codified by the Ecumenical Councils, has the ultimate authority.

According to such ecclesiological principles, in any given region there can be one and only one bishop who shepherds the Orthodox faithful, regardless of any nationalistic distinction. It was, however, the very opposite scenario that took place in America and today one observes the challenging deplorable condition where a number of bishops claim pastoral responsibility for the same geographic region.

A second challenge of the Church in America is that it was brought here by people who left their homelands at a time that these homelands were economically underdeveloped. Economic immigration created, from the very first moment, the need for these people to assimilate to their adopted land in order to achieve, as soon as possible, the high living standards of the privileged Americans and therefore to enjoy the fruits of the American dream. Towards that goal, they changed their names, they put an emphasis on the English language in every aspect of their lives, and at last they succeeded in becoming true American citizens, holding ever higher positions in the financial, commercial, academic, artistic and political life of this country. The negative aspect of this strong emphasis on cultural assimilation was the consideration of the faithfulness in one’s cultural background as an impediment to the progress and success in the American society. Thus, the complexes of an alleged inferior nationality or class that, in order to enjoy the fruits of the American dream, is supposed to eradicate any bond to its distinctive culture.

The third challenge of Orthodoxy in America concerns the manner of its ecclesiastical organization. The Orthodox faithful organized themselves in communities of lay people, who, in turn, became identified with the ecclesiastical community in the manner of the traditional organization of Christian communities. Thus, the parish (κοινότητα) being now governed by lay elected members, builds its own Church, school and other such institutions, and provides the priest’s salary. Such communal organization improves, as it is right and desirable, the role of laity in Church administration, and increases the sense of responsibility and participation in the life of the Church, offering thus the change to the Church to profit of its talented and able parishioners.

On the other hand, however, four very concrete dangers lurk behind such a communal organization of the local Church:

- a) That the priest might become alienated from his administrative duties, and from being the spiritual leader of the parish would become a clerk of the parish council,
- b) That the parishioners would find it difficult to comprehend the rules according to which the Church is governed and instead they would follow their own secular reasoning,
- c) That the structures of the parish would become influenced by the prevalent Protestant models and thus they would replicate and imitate practices that are foreign to the Spirit of Orthodoxy, and
- d) That the parishes would degenerate into nothing more than membership clubs, invested with some ecclesiastical resemblance.

As you all know, one of the secrets for the success of the American miracle in its financial, political and technological aspects was precisely its desire to detach itself from the traditional models of the old world, its ability to break free from the established norms, its willingness to question whatever was considered as given or beyond any criticism. As it might have been expected, these tendencies soon found an expression within the life of the Church, sometimes in more extreme ways, other times in more temperate ways. Thus, soon Orthodox clergymen became indistinguishable from the clergy of other denominations, choirs in the western style were adopted, the liturgical tradition became more and more impoverished by being limited only to the bare essentials, etc.

Against that gradual secularization of Orthodoxy in America, a reaction soon made its appearance in the form of a number of rapidly spreading monasteries of an Athonite influence, characterized by ultraconservative tendencies, attached to the letter of the law, and reacting to any form of relationship with other Christian denominations. All of this is nothing but the manifestation of the intense thirst for a lost spirituality and a liturgical richness of which the Orthodox people of America have been for very long now deprived, forced, as they were, to embrace the Church only in the form of a sterile social activism.

The traits of the American clergy today also appear to undergo certain differences.

The secularization of the parish life, as described above, fails to inspire young men and to cultivate in them the religious vocation, so that tomorrow's pastors would be part of the very flesh of today's parish. That vacuum in clerical vocation is covered by candidates who, being unusually older than what was perceived the standard age, have already on their shoulders the domestic burden of a family. Thus they struggle to obtain the necessary degree that would secure

for them among others the society's respect.

Another great number of candidates to the priesthood come from converts, who possess little, if any, familiarity with the Orthodox experience and they are usually characterized by their overzealous behavior and mentality. It is of interest that the converts who become ordained into priesthood represent a disproportionately greater percentage than the converts among the faithful. The result of this disanalogous representation is that, more often than not, convert priest shepherd flocks who are bearers of some cultural tradition, but because their pastors either lack the necessary familiarity with that tradition or even consciously oppose it, they succeed in devaluing and gradually eradicating those cultural elements that have been the expression of the parishes that they serve.

It is particularly saddening that the crisis in priestly vocation has decreased dramatically the number but also the quality of celibate priests, who one day will be assigned with the responsibility of governing this Church. Lack of spirituality makes the monastic ideal incomprehensible and unattractive especially among the youth (with the exception, of course, of the aforementioned monastic communities with their own peculiarities).

Having attempted this general evaluation of the American Orthodoxy, allow me to consider briefly the Holy Archdiocese of America, this most important eparchy of the Ecumenical Throne.

The image we depicted above in rough brushstrokes holds also true for the Archdiocese. Thanks to the selfless dedication of our immigrants and under the protection of the first See in the Orthodox world, a strong Archdiocese was created that, in time, reached a level of maturity and excellence and it is today the pride of the Church of Constantinople. The Archdiocese took advantage of the possibilities that a deeply democratic, meritocratic and progressive state, like the United States, was able to offer, in order that the Orthodox faith of our fathers take root deep in the American land.

To this effect, the active participation of the lay element was, as we have seen, very important. We believe that the younger generations of the *omogeneia* are free of the past's prejudices and complexes, according to which, if you wish to succeed in America you have to forget your cultural patrimony and your language in order to be left naked, so to speak, in the thorny desert of the Wild West. Today's *omogeneia* has overcome that denial and has come to understand that the secret of the American civilization's success does not lie in the obliteration of one's cultural background but rather in the free and harmonious co-existence of people and races who have come to this hospitable land seeking a life in freedom, in faith and in dignity. Our cultural heritage and our national conscience is not, by any means, an obstacle for our progress

and for the successful witness to our faith, especially insofar as ecumenicity (οἰκουμενικότης) is the heart of Hellenism and by definition alien to any form of nationalism or cultural chauvinism.

The Holy Archdiocese of America under the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the most organized, well-structured and successful presence of Orthodoxy today. This is not accidental. This success was not achieved by foregoing its cultural identity. It was not achieved by ignoring the sacred canons and the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. It was not achieved by succumbing to the temptation of secularism. It was not achieved by imprisoning itself in the darkness of the extreme fundamentalism, nationalism and sterile denial.

Precisely because the Holy Archdiocese of America occupies such an esteemed position in this country we are obliged to offer a self-criticism but also to defend ourselves against the unjust accusations that target this jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Examining, then, ourselves, I believe that we ought to be more careful towards the easiness with which we are ready to abandon our Hellenism, both as language and as tradition. As we have already said, it is nothing but a myth the opinion that Hellenism is an obstacle to the creative and successful incorporation in the American reality. Hellenism is identified with its ecumenical character and for that reason it can never be nationalistic for both of its manifestations, its culture and its Orthodox faith are concepts that transcend the boundaries of the national.

I do not support the opinion that we can today oblige everyone to speak Greek, but I think that we have to offer that possibility to those who so desire, to learn Greek in well organized schools, by talented teachers. I think that we owe our children the possibility of choice. We owe to our culture the obliteration of contempt for a language that expressed the Gospel and became the vehicle for the most subtle meanings in the articulation of the dogma by the founders of our faith and Fathers of Christianity.

I do not support the opinion that the services here in America should be done exclusively in Greek. Simply I do not understand how it is possible that any priest of the Archdiocese might not be able to serve in both languages. It is not understandable how an institution of higher education cannot manage to teach its students a language, even in the time span of four years!

My brothers and sisters, I am not one of them who believe that there is a sacred language (*lingua sacra*) for the Church. I just wonder why in every Theological School in the world the students are expected to learn the Biblical languages, and it is only in our School of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America that such a requirement seems anachronistic, nationalistic or conservative.

Speaking now of your Theological School, do you think that the Church's expectation that the graduates of this School know theology, canon law, Byzantine music, be able to celebrate the service of matins, vespers and the sacraments, be able to preach the Word of God and instruct our youth in the catechism is unreasonable or excessive?

My dear brothers and sisters, allow me now to return to the problem of the *diaspora* and the jurisdictional diversity that one observes in the USA.

First of all, allow me to remind you that the term "diaspora" is a technical term denoting those regions that lie beyond the borders of the local autocephalous Churches. It does not mean that the Orthodox people who dwell in these regions live there temporally, as misleadingly it was argued by His Eminence Phillip in a recent article ("The Word"). According to the 28th Canon of the 4th Ecumenical Council one of the prerogatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch is precisely His jurisdiction exactly over these regions, which lie beyond the prescribed borders of the local Churches. The canon in question uses the technical term "barbaric" in order to denote these lands, since it was precisely referring to the unknown lands beyond the orbit of the Roman Empire.

On account of this canon, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has suffered the unfair and unjust criticism of two American Orthodox Hierarchs: Metropolitan Phillip and the newly elected Metropolitan Jonas.

It is my duty to refute the injustice directed against the Mother Church of Constantinople for the sake of historical truth and for the sake of moral conscience.

Metropolitan Jonas, while he was still an abbot, in one of his speeches presented what he called "a monastic perspective" on the subject "Episcopacy, Primacy and the Mother Churches". In the chapter on autocephaly and primacy he claims that "there is no effective overarching primacy in the Orthodox Church." He seems to be in opposition to the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, because he considers that such an institution "is based on primacy over an empire-wide synod" and that this "has long become unrealistic." What surprised me the most in this "monastic perspective" of His Eminence Jonas was the claim that allegedly "now only the Greek ethnic Churches and few others recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate to be what it claims to be." It is indeed saddening the ignorance of this Hierarch not only on account of History and canonical order but even on account of the current state of affairs. How is it possible that he ignores that there is no Church that does not recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate? Perhaps he is carried away by the fact that the ecclesial schema over which he presides and which has been claimed as "autocephalous" in rampant violation of every sense of canonicity, is not recognized but by few Churches and it is not included in the diptychs of the Church.

Please allow me, by way of illustration, to sample a few other points of the same article

that should not remain unanswered.

Metropolitan Jonas claims that in America “there is no common expression of unity that supersedes ethnic linguistic and cultural divisions.” Does His Eminence ignore the fact that under the canonical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America belong Greeks, Palestinians, Albanians, Ukrainians and Carpathorussians? Is this not proof enough of a common structure that supersedes ethnic and cultural divisions? Does he imply perhaps that SCOBA either constitutes a common expression of unity that supersedes such divisions?

The most provocative of his claims is that which asserts that with the formation of the so-called OCA “the presence of any other jurisdiction on American territory becomes uncanonical, and membership in the Synod of the Orthodox Church in America becomes the criterion of canonicity of all bishops in America.” It is perhaps a sign of our times that he who violated the holy canons par excellence, the most uncanonically claimed as allegedly autocephalous, makes now himself the criterion of canonicity and vitiates the canonical hierarchs as uncanonical. *O tempora, o mores!*

Instead of acknowledging the mercifulness of the other Patriarchates which, in spite the uncanonical status of the so-called OCA, accept it in communion, its representatives choose to subject them to such an unfair treatment that contributes nothing to the common cause of Orthodox unity. I would be interested to hear an explanation from His Eminence in response to the question “How will the so-called OCA contribute to our common Orthodox witness in diaspora by electing bishops holding titles which already exist for the same city”. Especially our Ecumenical Patriarchate not only is it not “unable to lead” as most unfortunately Metropolitan Jonas claims, but already since last October (in order to limit myself to the most recent example) has launched under the presidency of His All Holiness the process for the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod. I am not sure whether His Eminence, upon his ordination to the episcopacy, refused to put on the vestments of a bishop, which he, in the same article, and while he was still an abbot, had called as unfitting to the real nature of the arch-pastorship (p. 11).

Let me add that the refusal to recognize primacy within the Orthodox Church, a primacy that necessarily cannot but be embodied by a primus (that is by a bishop who has the prerogative of being the first among his fellow bishops) constitutes nothing less than heresy. It cannot be accepted, as often it is said, that the unity among the Orthodox Churches is safeguarded by either a common norm of faith and worship or by the Ecumenical Council as an institution. Both of these factors are impersonal while in our Orthodox theology the principle of unity is always a person. Indeed, in the level of the Holy Trinity the principle of unity is not the divine essence but the Person of the Father (“Monarchy” of the Father), at the ecclesiological level of the local Church the principle of unity is not the presbyterium or the common worship of the Christians

but the person of the Bishop, so to in the Pan-Orthodox level the principle of unity cannot be an idea nor an institution but it needs to be, if we are to be consistent with our theology, a person.

The second article that I have to mention here is that of His Eminence the Antiochean Metropolitan Phillip under the title “Canon 28 of the 4th Ecumenical Council—Relevant or Irrelevant Today?”

Metropolitan Phillip begins his argument with an entirely anti-theological distinction of the holy canons into three categories 1) dogmatic, 2) contextual and, 3) “dead”.

I would like to know in which of these three categories, following his reasoning, His Eminence would classify the canons of the Ecumenical Councils that demarcate the jurisdictions of the ancient Patriarchates. Are they “contextual”—subject, as it is, to change? Does His Eminence believe that in this way he serves the unity among Orthodox, by subjugating the holy and divine canons under the circumstantial judgment of some bishop?

Based on the above distinction, and although he accepts that canon 28 of the 4th Ecumenical Council is not “dead” (since there is so much debate about it), he affirms that indeed it gives certain prerogatives to the Ecumenical Patriarch, on the other hand, however, he claims that this happened for secular and political reasons that have nothing to do with today’s state of affairs. Implicitly and yet all too clearly, Metropolitan Phillip implies that the prerogatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch can be doubted. The question then is: does His Eminence know of any Church whose status (Patriarchal or Autocephalous) were not decided according to the historical conditions that they were current at the time? Or, does His Eminence know of any Church that has received its status on the basis of theological reasons exclusively? Every administrative decision of an Ecumenical Council is equally respected to perpetuity together with its dogmatic decisions. Imagine the consequences for the Orthodox Church if we begin to re-evaluate the status of each local Church!

The correct interpretation of canon 28 is considered by His Eminence as “novelty”, by invoking only sources of the 20th century, while it has been scientifically established already by the late Metropolitan of Sardeis Maximos the uninterrupted application of the canon in question during the history of the Church of Constantinople.

The question, my brothers and sisters, is rather simple:

If Constantinople was not given that prerogative by canon 28, how was she able to grant autocephalies and patriarchal dignities to the Churches of Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Czech Lands and Slovakia, Poland and Albania? Under the provision of which canon did Constantinople give the right of jurisdiction over the remaining of Africa to the Patriarchate of

Alexandria in 2002?

And if the Ecumenical Patriarchate has not granted the Patriarchate of Moscow the privilege to bestow autocephaly as it pleases it, then what gives it the right to do so on the expense of the Orthodox unity?

Summarizing my lecture, I wish to call your attention to the following points:

1. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is a Church that undergoes martyrdom, a Church that often has received unfair criticism, especially by those Churches which were most richly benefited by it. At no point, the spirit of nationalism took hold of the Ecumenical Patriarchate because that is incompatible with the concepts of Hellenism and Ecumenicity (ecumenical character) as well as with the Christian Orthodox faith. The proof of this emerges in the most decisive manner throughout the 17 centuries of its history, during which it never Hellenized, not even attempted to Hellenize the nations to which it gave through its apostolic missions the undying light of Christ. What better example than the Slavic tribes which owe even their alphabet to the Thessalonian brothers Cyril and Methodios. I, who speak to you tonight, although I am an Antiochean from my maternal side, nevertheless I serve as the Chief-Secretary of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Church of Constantinople.
2. The Ecumenical Patriarchate neither had nor has territorial claims against the sister Orthodox Churches. That truth is testified by the fact that, although the Patriarchates of the East were virtually destroyed during the difficult times of the 17th and 18th centuries, nevertheless, the Patriarchate of Constantinople was taking the care to have a Patriarch elected for those Patriarchates, supporting their primates in every possible way.
3. The submission of the diaspora to the Ecumenical Patriarchate does not mean either Hellenization or violation of the canonical order, because it is only in this way that both the letter and the spirit of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils is respected. The Mother Church knows, however, that such a submission is difficult to be accomplished under the present historical conditions. For this reason, and by employing the principle of economy, it was suggested and it has now become accepted in Pan-Orthodox level, that there will be local Pan-Orthodox Episcopal Assemblies in the diaspora (like SCOBA in the US). The principle of presidency is followed, namely the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate presides over these Episcopal Assemblies in order to preserve the necessary element of canonicity.

As you surely know, last October the Ecumenical Patriarchate summoned in

Constantinople a Synaxis of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches. The Primates accepted the proposal of Patriarch Bartholomew to move ahead with the Pan-Orthodox preparatory meetings, within 2009, so that the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church take place as soon as possible. For the record, please note that this decision was reached thanks to the concession on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate which accepted that the Autonomous Churches will no longer be invited as to avoid the thorny problem of the Church of Estonia in the relations between Constantinople and Moscow.

4. With regards to the United States, the submission to the First Throne of the Church, that is, to the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not only fitting with the American society and mentality but also it opens up the horizons of possibilities for this much-promising region, which is capable of becoming an example of Pan-Orthodox unity and witness.

The Mother Church of Constantinople safeguards for the Orthodox Church in America those provisions that are needed for further progress and maturity in Christ.

Please allow me to conclude with the phrase of His Beatitude Ignatios Patriarch of Antioch during last October's Synaxis of the Primates at the Phanar: "In the Orthodox Church we have *one* primus and he is the Patriarch of Constantinople."

Thank you for your attention.