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Through the cross joy has come into all the world

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### On Conciliarity, the Emperor and the Laity

by V. Rev. Michael Oleksa

*(Editor's note: During the recent Metropolitan Council meeting Fr. Michael Oleksa, Chancellor of the Diocese of Alaska, spoke about the role of the clergy and laity in the Church. At the request of many present - hierarchs and delegates - Fr. Michael was asked to put his extemporaneous remarks in the form of a public letter to the Metropolitan so that his comments could be considered by a wider audience. Here is that letter, printed with permission of the author.)*

Your Beatitude! Most Blessed Master, Bless

Your Beatitude asked me to write some thoughts and reflections on the situation of our Church, of Orthodoxy in the New World, to continue thinking about who we are and what we are doing, and perhaps where we've been and should go. I have no pretensions to being a learned theologian, still less in any way adequate to offering any "brilliant insights" or "ultimate solutions," to anything. But since Your Beatitude asked me, I am writing this morning, the day after our Metropolitan Council sessions adjourned, to offer some observations on our history and the work that lies before us as Church.

With the arrival of St. Herman and the Valaam monks at Kodiak in 1794, the holy task to which the Mission devoted itself has been to bring Orthodox Christianity to Americans in North America. Initially, the "Americans" meant the indigenous Alaskan tribes, but this was later expanded to include immigrants who came to the New World seeking a permanent home in the USA and Canada. Later still, the Mission also welcomed additional communities, both indigenous and immigrant in Mexico, into the

Household of Faith. Never, not even when the majority of parishes were Slavic and Eastern, did the Metropolia lose sight of its Alaskan (origins and identity as "Nasha Missiya," as Metropolitan Leonty of blessed memory used to reflect), as a continuous mission to North America and Americans.

Following the Council of the Church in Russia at Moscow in 1917-18, where the former bishop "of the Aleutian Islands and North America," Tikhon (Bellavin) was elected Patriarch, the American Mission attempted, perhaps more intentionally than anywhere else, to implement the decisions of that council, particularly embracing the concept of "sobornost," (catholicity as conciliarity) specifically by organizing itself in a conciliar structure, with parish, diocesan and church-wide councils, a pattern instituted by St. Patriarch Tikhon before his return to Europe.

The ninth century genius of the Greek missionaries, SS. Cyril and Methodius, presented the Slavic Orthodox the opportunity to develop this concept of catholicity as conciliar, from the translation of the Symbol of Faith, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, stating that we believe in "edina, svyataya sobornaya i apolstolskaya Tserkva--one, holy catholic-as conciliar, apostolic Church. The notion that the Faith, preached by the Apostles and delivered to the Church is proclaimed and preached by the ordained clergy, bishops and priests, but is defended by the whole People of God, who remain responsible for it, was reaffirmed by the Eastern Patriarchs in their reply to the Pope of Rome in 1848. The whole Body, the whole People of God are the guardians of the Faith, not just the professional theologians or the hierarchy. Thus, in a certain way, the whole Orthodox Church has affirmed its commitment to catholicity as conciliar.

The commitment to offering the Orthodox Faith, to opening the Orthodox Church to all peoples of North America, and to a polity of conciliarity in its governance and decision making structures at the parish, diocesan and continental levels, characterize and define the particular identity of the Orthodox Church in America.

The process by which the Metropolitan Council and its Strategic Planning subcommittee is employing to develop a church-wide consensus on the identity, condition and future development of the OCA exemplifies this continuing commitment to conciliarity. Each successive draft of the Strategic Plan has been edited, augmented, and reconsidered following hours and even days of discussion. In fact, the process by which each level of the Church becomes engaged in this task may, in the long run, prove to be more significant and potentially transformative--healing and uniting the faithful, the parish clergy, and the hierarchy--and fostering a renewal of faith, of mutual trust and respect, and ultimately of love, out of which our evangelical mission flows.

What is unique to Orthodox mission? What lies at its source? Where is its "heart"? Over twenty years ago I was invited to reflect on this for an issue of the *International Review of Mission*, published by the World Council of Churches. I entitled the essay, "Overwhelmed by Joy," and wrote in an uncharacteristic first-personal way, of my luminous Paschal experience of love, joy, peace, during Holy Week and culminating at the glorious Bright Night of the Resurrection vigil at St. Vladimir's when I was a college student. I don't have to explain to any Orthodox Christian who has shared this encounter with the Risen Lord, for indeed there are no words. But I am certain that many of us know exactly what this experience is, though we seldom speak of it, even to each other. There are those unexpected moments when the significance of what we are remembering and celebrating simply overcomes us.

We can do nothing to instill or incite it. It is not deliberately sought or induced. But it comes: the overwhelming sense of joy, love and peace which passes, precisely, all understanding. The only sadness one can feel after such moments pass, is that there are those who have never known such

encounters. And it is the inward compulsion, the burning desire to share this experience, this encounter with others that inspires and impels us to declare what our eyes have seen, our ears have heard, our hands have touched--the reality here, in this world, of the age to come, the Kingdom of God revealed and accessible, the eternal present in time, the ineffable and uncontainable with us and in us.

For us, as Orthodox, this experience is offered to us in and through the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. We must say to the whole world, and for our mission, to all North America, "Come and see!" For this invitation to be at all successful, I believe our public worship must embody three elements. First the services must be intelligible to anyone who attends. This means the use of whatever language predominates in that location--Unangan Aleut in the Aleutian Islands, Tlingit in Sitka and Juneau, Yup'ik Eskimo in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Slavonic for Eastern European immigrants, Greek for Greeks, Romanian for Romanians, French in Quebec, Spanish, Mayan and Aztec for the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Guatemala. And if we look back on the last half century, we realize that this is precisely what we have attempted to do. The entire liturgical heritage of the ancient Church is now available in English and daily published on our website. We cannot do mission in "unknown tongues," but we are truly "pentecostal" in the great number of languages and cultures employed in our churches across this continent.

Second, our Tradition must be explicable. We cannot expect visitors or even our own people to understand intuitively the meaning of our worship. Its foundations are ancient. Its texts are Biblical and patristic. The structure may be difficult to discern. Full participation with understanding requires more than an intelligible translation: we need to teach and preach, to explain and more, to challenge those who have ears to hear with the substance, the eternal truths of our Faith. There should never be a service, no matter how brief, without a few words of instruction. Woe to us all if we do not preach the Gospel!

Thirdly, our services must be as solemn and beautiful as possible. Beauty and Truth, in our

Tradition, are intimately linked. I realize that we can be rightfully criticized for perhaps exaggerating, for over-emphasizing this dimension to the exclusion of other Christian duties, but the necessity of beauty cannot be neglected. If our goal, our mission, is to witness to the Kingdom of God which has come upon us, to testify to our encounter with the Risen Christ, iconography, architecture, music and even landscaping are essential components of our witness to the world. We need art, as well as words, that is "adequate to God." And if a parish, no matter how humble, celebrates its services in an intelligible language, with regular and meaningful preaching, in an environment of artistic beauty and solemnity, it will, at least liturgically, be adequate to the mission of the Church--to offer Paschal Joy to all who enter and, with attention, participate in its worship. The rest, the encounter, the experience of the Risen and Triumphant Lord, is up to God.

In this sense, I believe Orthodox religious education must be fundamentally distinct from other Christian approaches. The goal of our church schools must be to inform and equip our children to participate meaningfully and attentively in the Liturgy and the liturgical life of the Church. For if they simply attend with some knowledge and "eager anticipation" of the coming Feast, and observe the cycles of fasting and fulfillment in joy, as their (often illiterate) ancestors did, they will know that overwhelming Joy into which we have baptized them. Simply knowing the biblical stories and commandments is not sufficient to bring a person into the Church and retain them as a committed Orthodox Christian. One "good" Pascha will.

And from this encounter, this conversion, we can anticipate an overflow of precisely that very love, joy and peace, the Presence of Christ, which will impel that person to acts of mercy, kindness charity and generosity, to the love of God and neighbor which are the natural fruits of such a conversion. Preaching "good works" without this experience may have some positive influence, but we are doing very little more than the local chapters of the the Red Cross or the Rotary Club. Christ did not command us to make improvements, to raise living standards, to lobby for political reforms, necessary though these may be. He revealed to us His Kingdom and He insists that we reveal and proclaim it. We are not here, ultimately, to transform this world into God's Kingdom: there is no biblical evidence that the world will evolve gradually to some better, higher "improved" condition and final-

ly metamorphasize into God's Reign. In fact, Christ expresses some doubt whether or not He will even find faith on earth when He returns. We have no confidence in some evolutionary upward progression by human effort. The Kingdom will simply come as a decision and act of God. All we can do as witness to it and prepare for it. Our acts of charity and outreach, like all our evangelical efforts, are inspired and energized by Paschal Joy.

Returning to the work of the Strategic Planning committee and the final document the entire Church will produce, I might contradict somewhat what I just wrote: the final product may be of some lasting importance, depending on how the Church in North America develops. We may be unique in our commitment to clergy and laity cooperating in the administration of the Church, in our focus on conciliarity. The medieval tendency toward aristocratic and even autocratic structures had its impact on the Church which imitated, in many ways the top-down, lord to servant, social organization of their societies. In this system, the bishop sits as prince and the clergy his immediate servants, the laity as peasants with no voice or responsibility except obedience. Our recent tragic experience in Alaska with a hierarch who attempted to impose this sort of understanding as canonical and traditional there, however, indicates that conciliarity has become endemic among us, not only among Alaska Natives but across the entire Church. When a few heroic Yup'ik clergy defied specific orders from their bishop as detrimental to the well-being and salvation of their flocks, dozens and eventually hundreds of others supported them. The Holy Synod was initially reluctant to intervene, but the whole church, clergy and laity, rose to their defense. Confusion, hesitation and even betrayal of our own highest ideals did not prevent the whole People of God from expressing their love, their commitment, their dedication to precisely the identity of the Orthodox Church in America as essentially conciliar and missionary. Alaska represents the missionary foundation of the Church in North America, and in defense of its fundamental missionary identity, affirming its conciliar nature, priests and laity and ultimate the entire hierarchy eventually spoke "with one heart and one mind."

Much has been said about the internet and its use in Church life. Some consider this technology inherently evil, others see it as a great blessing. The internet is a human tool. It can certainly be used diabolically. The power of words of language, can be powerful and

poisonous. But like any human tool, any invention or technology, it can also be put to positive and effective use. Like a knife or ax, the internet is neutral-- neither good nor evil in itself. It's goodness or wickedness are not in the object itself, but in the use to which human beings will put it. And we should note, with gratitude, that the instant communication that emails permit, the proper use of the internet, saved Alaska.

When our final Strategic Plan document is adopted, I hope it will be a milestone for us and for Orthodoxy in the New World. I expect it to be an historic statement that, for however long it survives, whether that be five years or five thousand, there is in America a fully canonical and historical Orthodox Church, a community that has sought to adapt Orthodoxy to the new conditions and to face the challenges of modern life, structuring itself in a conciliar fashion to bring Orthodoxy to America, for Americans. Whether this vision, by the Grace of God, spreads and inspires other Orthodox communities in this hemisphere or the other, whether it endures or disappears temporarily, I have no doubt that, if this is the work, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, our continuously evolving Strategic Plan, will have lasting meaning and significance for Orthodox Christians yet unborn. That is my hope and prayer.

Ancient Byzantium's flag, adopted by other Orthodox nations and incorporated into the flag that flew over Alaska for 127 years, depicted a double-headed eagle, representing the two dimensions our Greek Orthodox forebearers understood as complimentary and necessary to the proper governance and well-being of society, Church and State. In that era, of course, the State was but one person, the Emperor or Tsar. The Church was represented by its Patriarch, and the ideal of harmony, the "symphonia" between him and the secular ruler was envisioned as the ideal balance of responsibility and authority in the Empire. There were, of course, situations in which the Emperors sought to impose their will, even their theology on the Church, particularly during the iconoclastic controversy. In Russia, there was a time when the Patriarch dominated secular as well as religious life. There were frequent conflicts between the two "heads," but the symphony they were intended to produce remained the ideal.

Some observers have noted that there is very little in the canonical tradition of the Church to justify the participation of laity or even parish clergy in the adminis-

trative governance of the Church. I would note however, that the Church historically and even canonically, recognized a role for the Emperor, precisely in the administrative life of the Church and even accorded him certain liturgical prerogatives. The Church depended on the Emperor to grant it land, to recognize its moral and canonical decisions as legal and binding, to support many of its monasteries, even to build and maintain its temples and chapels. Other wealthy benefactors, princes and even "business men" erected and funded churches in the days of these empires, and no one considered this inappropriate or abnormal.

Part of the process of adaptation to the new circumstances of life without an empire, without an emperor requires the Church to find another benefactor, a replacement for the role fulfilled by the Imperial government in its affairs. And who serves that function in a democracy. If in an autocracy an autocrat did, then in a democracy, the demos must. The place of the Emperor has been taken by O Laos tou Theou, the People of God.

I realize this concept requires deeper theological and canonical reflection and elaboration, but I would submit that as the Church, changing only to remain the same, as Father Alexander Schmemmann so often declared, adapts to the new conditions in a new society, she needs to recognize that without an Emperor to support and defend her, must rely on the Laos collectively to fulfill the necessary role of the Tsars. The bishops of the old world were not educated in law, engineer and architecture, finance and accounting, medicine, education, mathematics, biology, or physics. They relied on the expertise the government and court could provide. Today these areas of expertise are the offering the laity bring to the Church. While understanding and accepting, welcoming and rejoicing in the hierarchial leadership of the bishops as archpastors and teachers, the guardians and embodiment of the Orthodox Tradition, the laity also have their responsibilities and functions within the Body, just as St. Paul wrote so many centuries ago. As the Strategic Plan develops therefore, we expect that these basic principles will not only be further defined and articulated but exemplified by the very process we seek to follow in our discussions.

And to be conciliar is not simply to decide by majority vote, as "Roberts Rules of Order" suppose. In this respect, we need to consider whether this format is

altogether appropriate for our purposes. I have no problem with the “order” it imposes, the need for speakers to be recognized by the Chair, for motions to be filed and for voting to occur. But if we are committed to conciliarity, the Rules will need to be adjusted first to insist, not just permit, that everyone be given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. This requires the Chair to call upon all those who have not spoken to speak before any vote has been taken. This seems to me to be a simple but necessary adjustment. And the opportunity to reconsider a decision should be more easily and widely offered. A narrow majority is not consensus. If, because some participants are more vocal or simply more agile or successful in securing the Chair’s attention, they dominate the conversation, it is incumbent on the Chair to allow those who move less quickly or who speak more softly, an equal opportunity to express their views. In particular, women should not be deprived of their voice because the men are speaking faster or louder, not deliberately or consciously of course, but simply because different cultures and even genders within cultures have different patterns of speaking, especially in public. In a multi-cultural and international Body, these variations must be taken respectfully into account.

Well, Your Beatitude, those are my immediate thoughts and reflections as we conclude this extraordinary week. I think we should all rejoice in each other, delighting in the gifts God has given each member of the Holy Synod and to each member of our Council. They listened with respect and patience to each other this week, appreciating that everyone present sincerely loves God, loves Jesus Christ, loves His Church. If we can enlarge this circle now to include more clergy and laity, in the parishes and dioceses of North America, if we can bring the questions and challenges we face before the entire People of God, and with the same respect and love hear their voice, our Church will heal and regain her strength, her voice. And then we will, in whatever canonical governing structure, have the renewed commitment to our mission, bringing the Joy of Pascha, the Reality of the Kingdom of God and His Righteous, to the people of this continent which we also deeply love.

In Christ,  
the unworthy archpriest  
Michael Oleksa