

## Synodality in the Orthodox Church in America

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### **I. Early Mission to North America and first Orthodox Council on American soil.**

Prior to receiving autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970, what would become the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) was present in the North American Continent since the late 18th century, when Russian missionaries from the Valaam and Konevitsa monasteries on the Russian border with Finland made the 7,300 mile journey from St. Petersburg to Kodiak Island, Alaska.<sup>1</sup> After the sale of Alaska to the United States, the mission to America was re-organized in 1870 into a missionary diocese, now based in San Francisco, and grew over subsequent decades to encompass some 350 parishes, a seminary, a women's college, monasteries, orphanages and schools, with an overall administrative budget of half a million dollars by 1917. The head of the missionary diocese in America in the years 1898-1907 was Bishop Tikhon, who appointed an auxiliary bishop for Alaska in 1903 and another auxiliary bishop for Arab parishes within the contiguous U.S. in 1904. He also moved the administration of the diocese from San Francisco to New York in 1905 as waves of trans-Atlantic immigration were on the rise. The missionary diocese "held its first 'All-American' council, or "sobor", composed of clergy and lay delegates, in February 1907, in Mayfield, PA."<sup>2</sup> That was the same year, however, in which Tikhon would be summoned back to Russia for episcopal assignments there, culminating in his election as Patriarch of Moscow in 1917.

The American diocese by this time was one of the largest of the 65 dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church, which paid the salaries of all its parish priests. Tikhon had envisioned a multi-ethnic American Church in North America that one day would be self-supporting, local in every important sense, as hinted at even in the designation "All-American" given to that first Orthodox council held on American soil in 1907. But how to transition to such an independent local church from its original dependence on the mother Church of Russia would be an ongoing challenge.

### **II. The Collapse of the Russian Empire and Its Impact on the Organization of N. American Orthodoxy**

The North American diocese sent its leading hierarch, Archbishop Evdokim (Mischersky) along with two clergy delegates to the "All-Russian" Council that began deliberations in Moscow in August 1917.<sup>3</sup> Earlier in the year, Tsar Nicholas II had abdicated the throne, and by late October, the Bolsheviks would seize power in the capital of St. Petersburg. The Russian Orthodox Church was soon legally dissolved; 80% of the hierarchs at the "All-Russian Council" would be exiled, executed or allowed to die in prison along with thousands of clergy and upwards of

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Stokoe and Leonid Kishkovsky, *Orthodox Christians in North America (1794-1994)* (Cleveland: Orthodox Christian Publications Center, 1995), p. 7. My historical summary relies heavily on this source.

<sup>2</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 28. Archbishop Evdokim would never return to North America but remained in Russia, where he became involved in the "Living Church" organized by the Communists in the period of their liquidation of the Russian Orthodox Church.

100,000 lay leaders; all 1,500 monasteries and convents and all 61 seminaries would be shut down.

Administrative chaos ensued in the American missionary diocese. Faced with attempted legal takeover of parishes by U.S. collaborators with the "Living Church" in Russia (what remained of the ecclesiastical apparatus there, now under Bolshevik control) and with its source of financial support cut off, the American diocese at the Fourth "All-American" Sobor in 1924 under the leadership of Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky) took the radical step of declaring itself to be "temporarily self-governing".<sup>4</sup> An American court in 1925 nevertheless awarded the very diocesan cathedral in New York to the "Living Church". This prompted the American diocese to begin to divest itself of properties and deeds of individual parishes which became, at that point, unaffiliated, "a loose and essentially voluntary federation of *de facto* independent parishes," in the words of Alexander Schmemmann, "each caring about itself, and its 'interests,' and having entirely lost the sense of a common destiny and missionary vocation..."<sup>5</sup>

Concurrent developments in the Greek parishes in America, although not directly apropos of synodal structures in the OCA, help fill in the broader ecclesiological picture in a way that sheds further light on how understandings of synodality in the OCA were developing. The Greek parishes established in the U.S. had themselves been independent "trustee" parishes, which turned either to the Church of Greece or the Ecumenical Patriarchate for assistance, whether financial or pastoral, but which had no *formal* affiliation until, in 1908, a decree of the Ecumenical Patriarch gave the Church of Greece episcopal oversight over them.<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of the American Missionary Diocese these Greek parishes were proceeding in an ecclesologically unsound manner when they organized themselves under their mother churches abroad rather than join the American Missionary Diocese as an ethnically distinct auxiliary diocese of it. In September 1921, a formal North American "Greek Archdiocese" was established under Meletios Metaxakis, the exiled Archbishop of Athens. Elected Ecumenical Patriarch only two months later, he repealed the 1908 decree and transferred jurisdiction of the new Greek Archdiocese from the Church of Greece to the Ecumenical Patriarchate he now led, referring to Chalcedon canon 28 in justification.

These same years saw an increasing fragmentation and disintegration of the American diocese, or "Russian Metropolia" as it came to be designated under Metropolitan Platon, so that it could scarcely respond to the creation of either the Greek Archdiocese or, also in 1921, the Bulgarian jurisdiction, the latter under the authority of the mother Church in Bulgaria. In 1924, Arab parishes formerly within the American diocese moved to affiliate themselves with the Patriarchate of Antioch. Even the "Metropolia's" claims to be the legitimate inheritance of just Russian Orthodox Christianity in North America were soon challenged by the "Karlovtsy Synod" - what came to be called the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) -- and by parishes in N. America established in the 1940s by the Soviet-dominated Russian Church. Most Slavic parishes in America did remain in the Metropolia; its numbers had, in fact, swelled in the preceding couple of decades by roughly 100,000 due to the influx of 163 Eastern Catholic, or "Uniate", parishes by 1916. But it built only very few new parishes from 1925-1950, a time when Russian refugees landing in the United States tended instead to join the staunchly anti-communist Karlovtsy Synod. In the following decades as the Metropolia began again to open new parishes

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<sup>4</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 30, quoting A. Schmemmann [FIND CITATION BY CLICKING ON FOOTNOTE 2].

<sup>6</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 30.

(20 between 1950-60, 50 between 1960-70, and 90 between 1970-90), it would have much to do with its singular emphasis on holding liturgical services in English and reaching out to converts.

This consciousness of continuing to develop as a *local* and specifically *American* church led the Metropolia's 13th All-American Council, or Sobor, in 1967, to propose an official name change from "Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America" to simply "Orthodox Church in America." The bishops of the Metropolia, only two of the twelve of whom were themselves actually American-born, vetoed the proposal. But they did allow for a non-binding vote of the assembled delegates, who overwhelmingly voted in favor of the change.

It was only three years later that the name was changed on the occasion of the Russian Church's granting of autocephaly to the Metropolia. The OCA issued at once a "Message to all Orthodox Christians in America", inviting all Orthodox bodies in North America to unite with it.<sup>7</sup> In this message, the newly independent OCA presented itself as the unique organ of North American Orthodox unity, while also promising to honor and promote the authentic cultural and liturgical diversity found across all the numerous "ethnic" Orthodox traditions.

As we well know, this invitation was not well received, in particular by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The latter claimed that it alone among the Orthodox Churches has the prerogative of granting autocephaly.

It may therefore be said of the OCA in its understanding and practice of synodality that perhaps more than any other Orthodox jurisdiction in the world, the OCA is utterly enmeshed in the question of *global* Orthodox synodality. That is to say, the OCA's very canonical existence is inseparable from the question of how synodality properly works at the global level, in particular in terms of the contentious question of how and by whom a local church's autocephaly is to be granted. The lengthy historical excursus I have provided has been necessary for illuminating just this point. To speak of synodality in the OCA, of how it is practiced and understood internally, within its own operation, is impossible without first noting that the longstanding and crucial irresolution, among and within Orthodox Churches, about the synodal structure of Orthodoxy at the level of the universal church has accompanied the OCA's historical journey all along its way, from the missionary activity of the 1790s all the way to the disputed canonical inception in 1970.

### **III. Changes from the 1955 Statute to the 1971 Statute that Reflect OCA Understandings of Synodality**

In 1924, the All-American Sobor meeting in Detroit that declared the American Mission "temporarily self-governing" in the context of the Russian Church's collapse after the Bolshevik Revolution also resolved to move toward creating a detailed governing Statute, which would be based on ecclesiological principles set forth in the 1917-1918 Moscow Council. This Statute was not realized for another thirty years, until 1955. Two main areas of emphasis of the 1955 Statute in line with the 1917-1918 Moscow Council were, according to John Erickson, somewhat in tension with one another: "(1) A desire for conciliarity and lay participation on all levels, but (2) in fact a preoccupation with the central authority in the church and relative neglect of 'lower' levels."<sup>8</sup> In Erickson's reading, the entire conceptual framework and language of a central or "Highest Authority" in the church was patterned on theories of sovereignty derived from

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<sup>7</sup> Stokoe and Kishkovsky, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Erickson, "Concrete Structural Organization of the Local Church: the 1971 Statute of the Orthodox Church in America," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20 (1976), pp. 9-18, here at p. 15.

medieval imperial monarchy and, at a later period, from the modern nation state.<sup>9</sup> He sees this "ecclesiology of the Highest Authority," or "universal ecclesiology" as he says it is also "often denominated", as having been most fully developed within Orthodoxy in the Russian Church, particularly among canonists of the 19th century; he avers that as of his writing in 1975, it "is now largely discredited in Orthodox theological circles," even if, as he adds, "its continuing influence can still be seen in the official utterances of the particular churches."<sup>10</sup>

In 1971, a year after being granted autocephaly, the OCA passed a new official Statute. Roughly two-thirds of it was taken from the 1955 Statute as slightly amended in the intervening years. As for what changed between the 1955 Statute and the 1971 Statute, Erickson demonstrates that much of it hinged on a movement then underway among influential North American Orthodox theologians away from the "Ecclesiology of the Highest Authority" and toward a eucharistic ecclesiology that understood the local church not as a part of the universal church but as itself bearing the fullness of catholicity in its own place.

So, for example, the 1971 Statute lays greater emphasis on conciliarity / *sobornost* at the diocesan level than did the 1955 Statute, which had mostly considered conciliarity / *sobornost* at the "highest" level of the church in America and had devoted relatively little space to such structures as the diocesan assembly and diocesan council. The shift is epitomized in the move from calling the diocese "a part of the Church" in the 1955 Statute to calling it "the basic church body" in the 1971 Statute.<sup>11</sup>

How the concrete prerogatives of the diocesan bishop were laid out in the respective documents mirrors the same development. The 1955 Statute (Article IV, section 4) stipulated that the metropolitan had to be presented with candidates for holy orders and with applications to establish or dissolve a parish, but the 1971 Statute restores to the diocesan bishop these prerogatives of jurisdiction, stating in Article VI, section 4, "By virtue of his episcopal consecration and canonical appointment in his Diocese, the Diocesan Bishop possesses full hierarchical authority within his diocese."<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the metropolitan, in the 1971 text, although it is said of him that he "enjoys primacy, being the first among equals," is virtually excluded from interfering in another diocese's internal affairs. The 1971 Statute emphasizes as the 1955 text did not that the metropolitan is "the diocesan bishop of one of the dioceses of the Church." As Erickson summarizes, "his former rights of approval and of visitation of other dioceses have been eliminated."<sup>13</sup>

In line with the same vision that gives greater respect to the diocese than had previously been the case, the 1971 Statute somewhat reduces the authority of the Holy Synod. Still referred to as "the supreme canonical authority in the Church," which Erickson sees as still hearkening back to "the ecclesiology of the Highest Authority," it nevertheless no longer includes, as voting members, any but diocesan bishops of the Church; the 1955 Statute had allowed auxiliary and titular bishops to be voting members of the Holy Synod. By restricting voting membership to only

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<sup>9</sup> Erickson, p. 11. For Erickson, the deficiency of the "ecclesiology of the Highest Authority" is both practical, reflected in the failure of autocephalous "sovereign" churches "to meet the demands made on [them] in our tragic [20th] century," and theological, for "[t]hrough Orthodox responses to Vatican I argued that the existence of these sister autocephalous churches is an alternative to papalism, in fact the search for the Highest Authority in the Church cannot stop at the level of the particular church. Inevitably this approach to ecclesiology demands a pope."

<sup>10</sup> Erickson, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Erickson, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Erickson, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Erickson, p. 18.

diocesan bishops, properly diocesan authority is significantly restored, and "the juridical [jurisdictional] and the sacramental order"<sup>14</sup> brought back into line with one another.

Interestingly, Erickson suggests that the 1971 Statute did not go far enough in restoring an ecclesiology of the local church. He proposes that to be more consistent with such an ecclesiology, the 1971 Statute might have had the metropolitan elected "in the same manner as the other diocesan bishops," namely, through a process of nomination by the diocesan assembly, with the Holy Synod having the power of final decision. As it is, the metropolitan is nominated by the All American Council (with the Holy Synod again making the final determination); the diocese in which the metropolitan has jurisdiction plays no direct part in the process.<sup>15</sup>

#### **IV. The Revision of the OCA Statute at the 18th All-American Council in 2015.**

Although in nine instances the 1971 Statute was amended between 1973 and 2011,<sup>16</sup> the first complete revision of the OCA's Statute was proposed and passed at the 18th All-American Council, in 2015. Several features of the 2015 revision may be noted.

The title of the Metropolitan's diocese, not mentioned in the 1971 Statute, is included in the 2015 Statute. In Article IV Section 1 of the latter, it is stated of the metropolitan not only that he is "president of the Holy Synod," but also that "[h]e is the ruling archbishop of the Archdiocese of Washington . . ."

Whereas the 1971 Statute explicitly speaks of the Holy Synod's authority to establish dioceses, the 2015 Statute is more specific and elaborate in speaking of the Holy Synod's authority also to modify diocesan boundaries as well as "suppress or merge Dioceses according to the needs of the Church" (Article VII, section 2). This point may be of ecclesiological interest in connection with some of the themes raised earlier about the diocese as the "basic unit" of the church. If decision-making about whether a diocese is to continue to exist falls to the Holy Synod, then obviously the authority of a diocesan bishop who "governs with the assistance of a Diocesan Assembly and a Diocesan Council" (Article VII, section 1), and who has "the right of initiative and authoritative guidance in all matters concerning the life of his Diocese" (Article VIII, section 2, b.) is limited.

The definition of a parish differs from the 1971 Statute to the 2015 Statute. The former states: "The parish is a local community of the Church having at its head a duly appointed priest and consisting of Orthodox Christians who live in accordance with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, comply with the discipline and rules of the Church, and regularly support their parish. Being subordinate to the Diocesan Authority, it is a component part of the Diocese." (Article X, Section 1) The 2015 removes the word "part" and instead includes sacramental language: "The Parish is a local Orthodox Eucharistic community canonically established by and subject to the authority of the Diocesan Bishop." (Article XII, Section 1, a.) The 2015 Statute, here and at several other points, also includes the generic statement: "The Orthodox Church in general and the Orthodox Church in America in particular are hierarchical in structure." (Article XII, section 1, b.)

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<sup>14</sup> Erickson, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> See Erickson, p. 18, n. 22.

<sup>16</sup> These instances were in 1973, 1977, 1980, 1986, 1989, 1995, 1999, 2008, and 2011 at the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 12th, 15th and 16th All-American Councils respectively See Alexander Rentel et al, The Commission on Canons and Statute, "Report on the Proposed Statute Revision for the Orthodox Church in America," available at

## **V. Overall Breakdown of Basic Synodal Structures and Features**

Having offered some diachronic perspective on the development of the OCA governing Statute, it is in order now to summarize OCA synodal structures and decision-making procedures. This will be followed by a few concluding thoughts and questions.

The supreme canonical authority in the OCA is the Holy Synod. Comprised of all the diocesan bishops of the OCA under the presidency of the metropolitan as the primate, the Holy Synod convenes twice annually, and in such special sessions as may be called by the Metropolitan.

A Standing Synod, presided over and convened by the Metropolitan between sessions of the Holy Synod, is composed of the Metropolitan, the Secretary of the Holy Synod, and two or more additional diocesan bishops. The Standing Synod has authority delegated by the Holy Synod to make necessary decisions that do not require the latter's judgment, and provisional decisions subject to the Holy Synod's ratification.

The All-American Council, the highest legislative and administrative authority within the (local) Church, is comprised of all members of the Holy Synod; Auxiliary bishops; the parish priest and any associate priests together with an equal number of lay delegates from each parish; military chaplains; one assigned deacon per parish; one lay delegate from each parish without an assigned priest; members and alternates of the Metropolitan Council (see below); members of the Auditing Committee; one priest or deacon and one lay person from each theological institution; superiors of monasteries; members of the preconiliar commission. The All-American Council meets normally every three years. Among the key responsibilities of the All-American Council is the nomination of candidates for the office of Metropolitan.

The All-American Council's decision-making authority in relation to that of the Holy Synod is important to specify in some detail: "Every resolution or decision made in a plenary session of the All-American Council shall be reviewed by the Holy Synod within twenty-four (24) hours of the adjournment of that session. The Holy Synod's approval or rejection of a resolution or decision shall be reported to the presiding officer of the All-American Council and transmitted to the All-American Council at the beginning of the following session. In case the Holy Synod does not accept a resolution or decision adopted by a plenary session of the All-American Council, it shall explain its reasons for not accepting the resolution or decision." (2015 Statute, Article III, Section 15)

The Metropolitan Council -- comprised of the Metropolitan; the Chancellor, Secretary, and Treasurer of the OCA; two representatives from each diocese, a priest or deacon and a lay person; and six at-large members elected by the All-American Council, three priests or deacons and three lay persons -- has as its purpose the implementation of the decisions of the All-American Council. Decisions of the Metropolitan Council are made by a majority vote of those present. Decisions are effective upon approval by the Metropolitan or the Holy Synod, "depending on the nature of the decision." (Article V, section 6)

The procedure for electing the metropolitan warrants particular mention. It is the All-American Council that proposes nominees for the office of metropolitan. This is done, first, by secret ballot, and "without previous discussion of names" (Article IV, section 4, a.). In the event that two-thirds or more ballots nominate the same candidate, that name is passed along to the Holy Synod "for canonical election". (Article IV, section 4, b.) If the Holy Synod decides not to elect that nominee, "a member of the Holy Synod shall formally state the reason for which the nominee was not elected". If, after the first round of voting by the All-American Council, no nominee has a two-thirds majority, or the one who does is not elected by the Holy Synod, a second vote occurs with two names written on each ballot. The top two vote-getting candidates'

names are then "submitted to the Holy Synod for canonical election of one of these nominees." (Article IV, section 4, d.) At this point, there is no mention of any contingency whereby the Holy Synod might decide not to elect either one or the other of these two candidates nominated by the All-American Council.

At the level of the diocese, the diocesan bishop "possesses full canonical authority within his Diocese" (Article VIII, section 1) and is said to govern "with the assistance of a Diocesan Assembly and a Diocesan Council". (Article VII, Section 1). Decisions of these diocesan "mixed" bodies -- that is, mixed in terms of having both clergy and lay representation -- are subject to the approval of the diocesan bishop. His authority in the diocese thus parallels not that of the metropolitan but of the Holy Synod at the jurisdiction-wide level.

Interestingly, however, the OCA Statute makes the appointment of a priest to a parish the decision of the diocesan bishop. Nothing in the Statute *excludes* a role for the parish in putting forward nominations, but nothing formally institutes such a role, either.

## VI. Concluding Thoughts and Questions

Two brief concluding lines of thought may bring these reflections on synodality in the OCA to a close while raising questions for further consideration.

One concerns the matter of a "universalist" ecclesiology and a contrasting "eucharistic" ecclesiology of the local church; we saw an augmentation of the latter ecclesiology in certain changes from the 1955 to the 1971 OCA Statute. One may ask how far in this direction it is possible or necessarily desirable to go. In an as yet unpublished paper, presented just last week at a conference in Bologna by Fr. Alexander Rentel, a faculty member at St. Vladimir's Seminary and the principal author of the Report on the OCA's Proposed 2015 Statute Revision, the view is advanced that the OCA still has a distance to go before its statutes will properly reflect the eucharistic ecclesiology it says it espouses. Picking up on a footnote on this point at the end of the article from the mid-70s on canonical structure by John Erickson that I referenced earlier, Rentel highlights in particular the process of electing the metropolitan. He suggests, much as Erickson had done, that "if the statutes of the Orthodox Church in America were to remain fully consistent with its theological underpinnings, the metropolitan should be elected by the diocese that has priority within the Church."<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Rentel is gently critical of Fr. John Meyendorff for looking too favorably, in fact, on the practice whereby "the entire body of the Church"<sup>18</sup> was given opportunity to select the metropolitan through the participation of the All-American Council. Rentel characterizes Meyendorff's viewpoint here as "imprecisely" worked out. Rentel writes of Meyendorff:

His only justification for this electoral process is that the process gives the "metropolitan wider prestige."<sup>19</sup> Beyond this, he does not reflect on this basic aspect of Afanasiev's ecclesiology, according to which a metropolitan, one who has priority amongst the Churches, should only be elected by *his* diocese. If he were to be elected, as Meyendorff says, by the whole Church, then he would be the bishop of that *whole* Church. This then

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Rentel, "Fr. John Meyendorff and the Election Procedures for the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in America: Theology in Action," a 16-page typescript I am indebted to the author for allowing me to read and cite, here at p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Rentel, p. 15, quoting Meyendorff, "The Privilege of Freedom," in idem, *Vision of Unity* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> Rentel, p. 15, quoting Meyendorff, "The New Metropolitan," in idem, *Vision of Unity* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p. 152.

would set up a two-tier system of bishops: bishops of dioceses, and a bishop of the whole Church, which is exactly the system that the Orthodox Church in America was trying to dislodge.<sup>20</sup>

While there is a consistency to the logic that Rentel, and Erickson before him, have articulated here, my question is whether there might be an ecclesiology in which bishops of dioceses and a bishop of the whole church could in fact cooperate for the good of the church in a structure in which there is, to be sure, a certain tension between the two “tiers” as Rentel calls them, but not a contradiction. This is obviously a very large question for further exploration.

The second of the two lines of thought with which I would like to conclude has to do with something not mentioned anywhere in my paper to this point, nor alluded to anywhere in the 2015 Statute for perhaps obvious reasons, but something just as obviously overhanging the entire issue of synodality today with respect to the Orthodox Church in America. This is the matter of the Assembly of Bishops of the United States. The mission with which the Assembly of Bishops was charged at its inception (then designated as the Assembly of Bishops of North and Central America) and the mission of the Orthodox Church in America are remarkably similar. For that reason, one may ask – and people have asked – whether their co-existence is somehow redundant. The question, then, of how the OCA has looked upon the development of the Assembly of Bishops and the degree of its support for Assembly become crucial elements in any consideration of the nature of synodality in and for the OCA.

And, interestingly, the OCA by and large has been highly supportive of the Synod of Bishops. The OCA has been encouraging of its mission of seeking to restore canonical regularity and unity to Orthodoxy in North America. By contrast, it has been some of the so-called “ethnic” churches in North America, with strong administrative ties to mother churches elsewhere, that have put up most resistance to this work of the Assembly – *some*, as I say, and not all of these churches. The dynamics at play in terms of what churches in North America most support the Assembly’s charged task of restoring canonical unity and what churches most resist it offers, I would suggest, a fresh lens through which to re-visit, and perhaps to reinterpret in the light of historical developments these forty years on down the road, the extraordinarily rich and insightful survey of the ecclesiological landscape offered by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann in his important 1971 article, “A Meaningful Storm: Some Reflections on Autocephaly, Tradition and Ecclesiology”.

At that time and from Fr. Schmemmann’s point of view, the greatest threat and infringement on the freedom and universality of Orthodox ecclesiology came from a strain of religious nationalism that mistakes something good but relative and impermanent for something essential. In his 1971 article, Schmemmann discusses two especially significant historical currents within Orthodoxy that have been susceptible to this conflation of what is particular for what is universal. One current is Greek. Schmemmann suggested that the Greeks had become “progressively imprisoned . . . by the identification of the 'Byzantine' with the 'Greek,' of the national and even ethnic reduction of Byzantinism”<sup>21</sup> -- whose authentic spirit of universality was thus impaired in the Greek mode of its retrieval. Within his own Slavic tradition Schmemmann was often an outlier in his robust defense of the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but this worry he had about the latter's loss of a universal orientation, in its reduction, as he saw it, of Christian Hellenism to mere Hellenism, led him to speak of “the fundamental ambiguity of the 'universal

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<sup>20</sup> Rentel, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Schmemmann, p. 23.



primacy' in the Orthodox Church," and to ask, "Does it belong to the first among bishops, the one whom the 'consensus' of all churches respects, loves and venerates in the person of the Ecumenical Patriarch, or does it belong to the spiritual head and bearer of 'Hellenism' whose Christian value and affiliation is as questionable as that of any modern and half pagan nationalism?"<sup>22</sup>

The second current of religious nationalism that Schmemmann discusses in his 1971 article is Russian. He admits the existence of "Russia's own messianic and imperialistic nationalism" and notes that fears, both within global Orthodoxy and beyond, of a pan-Slavic threat were hardly allayed by "the Russian imperial policy" that was guilty of "many a tasteless tactic."<sup>23</sup> But in his reading of history's unfolding, Schmemmann was convinced that an isolating and self-exalting Slavophil nationalism had already reached its peak and had stopped short of whatever tendencies it may have seemed to have to usurp Constantinople's role. "On the contrary," he writes, "the 19th century in Russia was marked by a revival of precisely 'Byzantine' interests, by a return to 'Christian Hellenism' as the source of Orthodoxy, by a return to a truly universal Orthodox ecclesiology, by the progressive liberation from the narrow, pseudo-messianic nationalism of the 'Third Rome.'"<sup>24</sup>

For Schmemmann, then, the Greek captivity to a parochial ecclesiology remained a great threat as the Russian captivity to such parochialism no longer did. I wonder if the balance of his judgment would fall in just the same way today -- he did not live to see, after all, the ecclesiological contraction that took place in the post-communist period when his own books would be burned as vessels of modernist heresy on the streets of Moscow. We would be as unwise today to read these and other selectively discouraging ecclesiological developments in the Russian sphere as if they alone could tell us the Russian Church's future trajectory as Fr. Schmemmann would have been to read the selectively discouraging developments he identified in the Greek sphere as wholly indicative of the future path of the EP.

We must of course follow all these developments, however, candidly and closely, as the freedom of the church and the integrity of her synodality hang in the balance, now no less than when Fr. Alexander was writing. And in doing so, too, we must be ready to rejoice in unexpected openings of light and common mind and purpose. The fact that the OCA has been among the North American jurisdictions most supportive of the Assembly of Bishops is significant: it is the vision and hope of an administratively single yet multi-ethnic local church in North America that both the OCA and the Assembly represent, each on a different historical foundation.

At a meeting of the Orthodox Theological Society in America held at St. Vladimir's Seminary some years ago, Fr. Mark Aery, then the Secretary of the Assembly, and Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, the longtime head of the external affairs office of the OCA (and co-author of the history of the OCA from which I extensively drew in the early part of this paper), came to speak with the Society's members about the then newly founded Assembly and the general matter of North American Orthodox unity. One of the things that Fr. Kishkovsky said to us that day has remained with me as especially poignant and powerful. Without sentimentality and in the new ecclesiological context that the Assembly's existence had brought about, or at least had potentially brought about, he said of his own Orthodox Church in America -- that is, of the jurisdiction that since 1970 has gone by that name -- that it might have to die. If the voluntary

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<sup>22</sup> Schmemmann, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Schmemmann, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Schmemmann, p. 24.

death of the Orthodox Church in America as a jurisdiction could contribute to the realization of the Orthodox Church in America as a single multi-ethnic local church, it was clear to me that Fr. Kishkovsky would have been willing to see the OCA undergo such a death. And this of course stands as a call to all of us, of whatever jurisdiction, not necessarily to have to see our ecclesiastical structures disappear and die, but to ensure that our desire to preserve them never comes in the way of the unity for which they have been given to us.