

Council of Canonical Bishops in America

This year has seen some changes on both national and international levels.

A few weeks ago I participated in the third Annual Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America, which is one of many regional gatherings that are being held in anticipation of the next Great Council which will include all Orthodox Christians in the world.

The purpose for the regional meetings is to tackle the local issues that may be inconsistent with the Canons. For many years, the Standing Council of Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA) served as a way for jurisdictional hierarchs to coordinate activities such as campus ministry (OCF), mission (OCMC), Scouting, international charity (IOCC), as well as many others that SCOBA endorsed. However, SCOBA only consisted of the ruling hierarchs in the US whereas the new Council of Canonical Bishops includes all 56 Orthodox bishops in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Central America. To put it simply, the Annual Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America is much more significant than was SCOBA.

Last year the Assembly requested some regional reorganization, namely that Canada be given the blessing to hold its' own assembly and that Mexico, Central and South America also be given a blessing to meet separately from us.

To modify the structure of the Council of Canonical Bishops in America, it is necessary for all of the Orthodox Patriarchs to agree on a proposed change such as this. Presently not all of the Patriarchs have given their blessing to proceed on these two issues, although the Canadian bishops do gather together informally.

Committee work was the focus of the latest gathering as smaller groups met to address issues such as: campus ministry; endorsing an agency for military and other chaplaincies; theological education; monastic communities; the canonical issue of multiple bishops in one city; possibilities for redistribution of responsibilities for the Church in America; and possibilities for greater administrative cooperation.

Drafting and acceptance of the by-laws for the Assembly of Bishops were also adjusted and accepted by the gathering. The draft was sent to the Holy Synod of the OCA and we had our attorney help us make recommendations during our Synodal retreat at the Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Rives Junction, Michigan following the consecration of Bishop Alexander. It is important to note that all of us received the draft copy of the by-laws and sent in our suggestions and changes.

One major point of discussion at our assembly was the use of the word "diaspora" within the text of our by-laws. After discussion and consultation with the attorneys diaspora was removed from the text of our by-laws.

(His Eminence gave a short explanation of Diaspora relative Orthodox Christian Theology in his oral comments)

Politics

It has not been my policy to comment on politics or endorse any particular political candidate for office or speak about political issues. Our responsibility is to cast ballots for individuals who uphold the same morals and values that are given to us in the never changing truth of the gospel. However, I feel that it is necessary to say a word about a ballot proposal that will affect the Boston deanery clergy and faithful.

Proposition 2, on the Massachusetts, ballot asks voters to endorse and approve what is called “physician assisted suicide.”

I don’t believe it is necessary to reiterate at this assembly our commitment to the sanctity of life as the Lord knows us even from our mother’s womb.

The very disturbing aspects of this proposition if it becomes law are:

- An individual requesting “physician assisted suicide” would not be required to undergo psychological examination;
- There is no requirement that family members be notified that the patient has requested suicide;
- Although it is called “physician assisted suicide” no doctor is required to be present at the time of the death
- There are insufficient safeguards to avoid abuse, and there is no provision for oversight or data verification. For example, an heir can serve as witness to a patient’s signature, which is clearly a conflict of interest.

It is no surprise that Orthodox and Roman Catholic clergy unequivocally oppose this proposition in addition to many in the medical profession.

I mention this here since there are already states that have passed similar resolutions and in all probability there will be additional states considering similar proposals.

As Orthodox Christians we respect the right of every person to die with dignity, however, suicide is not a viable means to a blessed repose, nor is it a way to a painless, blameless and peaceful death.

National Church

It has been a difficult year for our national church and especially for the work of the Holy Synod. Some of the most demanding work that we face is addressing potential litigation that occurs regarding sexual misconduct or sexual harassment. Addressing these issues takes up so much time, yet it is absolutely essential that it be handled properly. All incidents must be thoroughly investigated and brought to a resolution that is in compliance with state laws which are not always the same from state to state.

(His Eminence gave an example in his oral comments)

Even though it is difficult and time consuming, complaints or allegations must be investigated. Basic Christian morality and local law require that we practice due diligence in every single case, whether or not they appear to have merit. Not only are we caring for the “least of the brethren” but we are also working to protect the Church and the Holy Synod when and if cases lead to litigation.

Addressing Misconduct

When entering the priesthood, I never imagined that I would have to investigate my brother clergy or brother bishops nor did I ever think that I would be investigated myself. The initial "accusations" or "charges" in every case of misconduct are just as deeply troubling to us on the Synod as they are to the clergy and faithful. I can tell you that every issue and every accusation is addressed as quickly as possible with our limited personnel and resources. However, an immediate public response from the Synod is neither possible nor prudent. The Internet is filled with mis-information about church related matters. Sometimes I feel that things are posted simply to "bait" us for answers or statements that we cannot morally proclaim in either a public or private arena. Unlike Internet bloggers who have almost unlimited freedom to say anything they want about any topic whether true or imagined, the Holy Synod has the moral and legal responsibility to protect accusers, victims and the accused in every case. We take this responsibility extremely seriously.

The Synod is a true brotherhood. Like any brothers, we often disagree, and sometimes we disagree strongly. However, the care of the Church is one area in which there is no disagreement. The Synod unequivocally affirms that the wellbeing, safety and integrity of the Church is our first priority. Like everyone who works to build up the Body of Christ, we too are often beaten down and discouraged yet every Christian is called to overcome temptation, and by God’s grace, manifest the love of Christ in the face of every attack on us personally or on the Church as a whole.

Holy Synod

In addition to these issues, the Holy Synod has faced the challenge of the Metropolitan’s resignation. Transitioning from his role as abbot of a monastery to hierarch and then quickly to the head of an autocephalous church was very difficult for His Beatitude JONAH. This also led to certain challenges with the others on the synod. His Beatitude, in his own words felt that he had neither the experience nor temperament to guide the Church and tendered his resignation as Primate of the Orthodox Church in America.

Whoever succeeds Metropolitan JONAH will have a difficult task: one of healing and rebuilding trust and confidence, and it will take time. While these challenges are difficult, our work and our calling remains the same. Our call to take up the Cross and follow Christ does not take a leave of absence; our work in all of our parishes continues, our responsibilities have not changed. More importantly, in challenging times God always strengthens His people to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (Heb 12:1)

It is so easy to lose sight of our mission and how important it is. In a world with shifting and corruptible mores and morals, the sanctifying and life-giving presence of Christ in our lives is more important now than at any time in the history of the Orthodox Church in America.

We are the Church, the Body of Christ, and the Church is in the world, but not of the world. The temptations to abandon our mission attack us from every side. Challenges come in every shape and size: administrative and legal challenges on the national and local level; financial challenges at home and in the parish; challenging relationships among family members whether at home or in the Church; not to mention the continuous and insidious challenge we face from a culture that glorifies self-gratification at the expense of others. Following Christ, being a Christian in the twenty first century in New England is not easy.

We find ourselves vulnerable, yet this is not cause for despair. God Himself became vulnerable in the Crucifixion, and in our vulnerability Christ has the opportunity to work through us. As we recently heard from the Apostle Paul, God's power is made perfect in our weakness. (2Cor 12:9) So we stand firm in the holy, eternal and divine, strengthened by the same Holy Spirit that led the Apostles. We share the Gospel of Jesus Christ without exception to all who seek and thirst, for in Christ we find perfect love and perfect peace.

The AAC

On November 13, 2012 the 17th All American Council will elect a new Metropolitan. The new Metropolitan, the Holy Synod, the clergy, monastics and every last member of the faithful face a challenge: to live in such a way that the moral authority, integrity, confidence and trust in our Church is restored. While much focus has been placed on the Holy Synod, the Metropolitan and the officers of the OCA, the entire Church faces this challenge. The danger is that we think of the Church as "us and them," that we draw lines in the sand and take sides as we point fingers and lay blame. I have experienced this within one of my dioceses before where there was discord and distrust, priest against priest, parish against priests. The solution only came through love, understanding, and most importantly, listening to one another. This is what restored a truly conciliar spirit in the Church. Transformation takes time, but in Christ all things are possible.

St. Paul reminds us that "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1Cor12:13) the Body of Christ. In Christ, there is no "us and them" for we confess in the Creed that we believe in one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Today, the Church, like any other time is in need of renewal and revitalization. I love my brothers on the Holy Synod and the new Metropolitan will not shoulder his responsibility alone, but as a member of a brotherhood. I am confident that any one of the members of the Holy Synod can serve as Metropolitan, working with his brother bishops, and working with the entire church as we seek restoration in Christ. No matter who is elected to serve as Metropolitan, healing will take time, but Christ the physician of souls will bring new life and health.

Dioceses

On a more personal note, my health is greatly improved. I still don't have as much energy as I'd like but maybe that is simply age. Regaining strength, however, still takes time. In no way has my recovery

deterred me from fulfilling my responsibility to our diocese as well as my duties as a member of the Holy Synod. I continue to be the episcopal moderator for the OCA Pension Plan as well as a member of the lesser synod that meets every other month.

We have several widowed diocese, namely the Diocese of Alaska and the Diocese of the South as well as the vacant Primatial See. The Diocese of Alaska held their nomination assembly and have chosen Fr. David Mahaffey. While we look forward to the election of the new Metropolitan in November, this will leave another diocese widowed.

I continue to serve the Diocese of the South as their locum tenens. We are in the process of planning for a special assembly to nominate a possible candidate to fill the void left by the death of Archbishop Dmitri, of blessed memory. The Diocese of the South is a very active, mission-oriented diocese that keeps me very busy. We recently had our annual assembly at Christ the Savior Cathedral in Miami in July. It is my hope that we will have a viable candidate for Diocesan Hierarchy so that I can call a special assembly to be convened by the end of February. The most likely location for this special assembly would be Atlanta.

Although this will be a big step in filling the shoes and work left by Archbishop Dmitri, the individual, if nominated by the diocese and elected by the Synod, will serve for at least one year as my auxiliary in the South, which means that my responsibilities there will continue for at least another year. This same protocol will be followed for the diocese of Alaska.

The Bulgarian Diocese concluded its search with the election of their new bishop Alexander Golitzen. I participated in his consecration in Toledo, Ohio in May.

Following the consecration, our Holy Synod met and convened at the Monastery of The Dormition of the Theotokos in Rives Junction, Michigan. It was a special treat to be at this monastery where we were privileged to participate in the daily cycle of services as well as have the opportunity to gather as Synod following the consecration.

Following our meetings I was able to serve at St Thomas Church in Farmington Michigan where I served as pastor for many years.

Another meeting of our Synod was held at St. Andrews Center for Orthodox Studies in Michigan during the second week in August.

Albania

Shortly after I completed my treatments in January of this year, I received an invitation from Archbishop Anastasios to participate in the inauguration of the new Cathedral in Tirana, and the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the election of Archbishop Anastasios as Primate of the Autocephalous Church of Albania. The last time I visited about six years ago only the foundation of the Cathedral was completed and I most certainly felt that it was my responsibility to represent the OCA at this most historic event in the life of the Church of Albania, indeed in the life of a resurrected Church in Albania. I flew to Rome where, surprisingly and joyfully, I met Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and we traveled together from Rome to Tirana, the capital of Albania. This was a special blessing as his schedule is very busy and one does not always have an hour or so to talk one on one with Archbishop Demetrios.

Archbishop Anastasios and Archbishop Demetrios were classmates in seminary so it was a joyous reunion for them and this presented an opportunity for demonstrating what has been achieved in the last twenty years in the restoration of the Church. We visited many of the places that I had visited before, as well as new projects and churches in the construction stages, but it was all new and exciting especially for Archbishop Demetrios.

I cannot express how important it was for us to be represented there as very few were invited, by this I mean that no heads of autocephalous churches were invited. Invitations were issued only to Archbishop Demetrios, Bishop Militos, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bishop Katre and me. (Bishop Katre did not attend.) Serving with Archbishop Demetrios, Archbishop Anastasios and Bishop Militos together with the hierarchs of the Holy Synod of Albania was important for us, and for our relationship with the Church of Albania.

I was and am awed and inspired by the accomplishments of Archbishop Anastasios and the work achieved in a short span of twenty years. It is interesting though that nobody is without critics. I heard criticisms of Archbishop Anastasios. One was from Albanians stating that he is not Albanian. The other criticism I heard from the Greek element is that he is Albanianizing the Church. The fact is, he is fulfilling his apostolic mission and I am inspired by his commitment to Christ and His Church.

Pastoral and Parish Changes

Fr. Steven Belonick was assigned as rector of Holy Ghost Church in Bridgeport, CT.

Fr. Nicholas Hubbard was assigned as rector of St Mary's in Waterbury, CT.

Dn. Jeffrey Frate was ordained to the Holy Priesthood and is attached to Holy Trinity Cathedral in Boston. On the same day Michael Arida was ordained to the Sub-Diaconate.

Several wonderful celebrations have occurred in a few of our parishes during this past year. Most recently was the centennial celebration at Sts Cyril and Methodius in Terryville with a number of distinguished guests in attendance.

Our mission station in Maine has enjoyed regular pastoral services and reader services during this past year giving it a solid foundation to build upon. Our thanks to Fr. Kreta for maintaining and providing this schedule of services for that budding community. I recently elevated this mission station to mission status with the name of Christ the Savior, Mission. Fr. John Kreta is Priest-in-Charge of this community and Fr. John Pawelchak has ministered to this community on many occasions. According to our diocesan treasurer the success in Maine enabled our diocese to have an overall increase in membership for the first time in many years.

Fr. Michael Westerberg hosted a Connecticut Deanery meeting so all of the clergy would have had the opportunity to see the new cupola that adorns Holy Transfiguration in New Haven, CT

We also celebrated a gala festivity marking the 50th Anniversary of Fr. Nicholas Timko's ordination to the Holy Priesthood.

COLA

According to a vote of our Diocesan Assembly the COLA adjustment for 2013 would be the highest of three indexes from the Board of Labor Statistics for September 2011 to September 2012.

US City average is 2.0, Northeastern Urban average is 1.7, Boston, Brockton, Nashua, NH is 1.7.

Therefore our COLA adjustment is the highest of the three which is 2.0

Inter Diocesan Cooperation and Participation

We continue to have good inter diocesan cooperation between parishes in the Diocese of New England and the Albanian Archdiocese.

The parishes under my omophorion in Natick, Mass and Maynard, Mass have always worked out a reasonable visitation schedule for me as both share the same Patronal Feast Day of Holy Annunciation.

I might also note that both Fr. Joseph Gallick and Fr. Robert Dick and I have travelled together to the Metropolitan Council Meetings held in New York.

Holy Trinity Cathedral in Boston and St George Cathedral have shared deacons and sometimes sub-deacons on occasion as well as sharing pastors when needed. I know that Fr Mark Doku of the Albanian Archdiocese has served several times at Holy Trinity Cathedral when available and called upon.

The New England Diocese Youth Rally for the past several years has had participation of parishioners from the Albanian parish of St George in Trumbull. In addition, Fr Dennis Rhodes, now serving as pastor of St. George parish also participates during the Youth Rally.

This year's Youth Rally was well attended and expertly guided by our youth director Fr. John Hopko.

Three Diocese and Three Chancellors

I rely heavily on my chancellors in the three dioceses that I serve as they work to keep them in good order. I am in constant contact with all three via telephone, text and email.

Fr. Arthur Liolin in the Albanian Archdiocese, Fr. Marcus Burch in the Diocese of the South and our own Fr. John Kreta in the Diocese of New England all do tremendous work as chancellors.

I am most appreciative of their work, dedication and commitment.

Thanks

I also take this time to thank all of you for your constant care for your parishes and the diocese.

Closing Thoughts

Traditionally I close with a statement from one of the Holy Fathers, but today allow me to close with a prayer. This prayer is used at the harvesting of a vineyard. I chose this because our vineyard is ready for harvesting.

O God our Savior who was well pleased that your only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, be called a vine and who manifested the fruit of immortality by the Grace of Your Spirit, as the same Lord, now bless this vine, the Diocese of New England and grant sanctification and prosperity of soul to all participating in it.

For having fashioned us, make us always to be communicants of the true vine and preserve us unharmed who are adorned with Your eternal and undiminished gifts by the grace and love for mankind of Your Only Begotten Son, With whom Thou art blessed, together with Your Most Holy Good and Life Creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

AMEN