

The December 1966 Christmas Message of Metropolitan Ireney addressed to Patriarchs of the Autocephalous Churches, imploring them to consider the unity of the Orthodox Churches in America.

THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO ALL PATRIARCHS

December 1966

*Christ is born - glorify Him
Christ has come from heaven – receive Him!*

Your Holiness!

With this joyous, festal greeting, uttered in the past by St. Gregory the Theologian, and sung each year in our churches, we greet you, Your Holiness, wishing you and your divinely protected flock health, prosperity, success in all good endeavors, preservation from every enemy and foe, and above all God's help during these festival days and for the approaching New Year.

The Good News of the Incarnation of the Son of God has been heard in the world for two thousand years, bringing each year light and joy to the hearts of Christians. But at the same time millions of unbelieving people remain indifferent or openly hostile to the great Truth of our Salvation. We must admit, contritely, that this indifference or hostility is often founded on the behavior of Christians themselves, who are unworthy of their calling, and who forget that they, as disciples of Christ, are called upon to be witnesses of uncompromising truth, peace, love and unity.

For this reason the Holy Church summons us not only to "rejoice" during these days, but also to "glorify" the Lord worthily, showing to the world a way of life which is consistent with the great mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, born in Bethlehem of Judea of the Most Pure Virgin Mary.

Separatism and Divisions

We, the leaders of the Churches of God, called upon to care for the flock of Christ, have a particular responsibility for the Christian life of the entire "fullness of the Church." However, our Holy Orthodox Church today suffers many internal divisions – and even schisms – many misunderstandings brought about by political events, much provincial separatism in local churches, dioceses and parishes. Many of them live independently and forget that there is but one Holy Church in the whole world, and that if all Christians today are striving towards unity, then we Orthodox Christians above all should be able to realize among ourselves the unity already granted us by our Lord God in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church – the "Body of Christ."

Conscious of my particular responsibility for the fate of our American flock, I consider it my duty in this letter not only to greet Your Holiness, but also to share with you some thoughts concerning the past and future destinies of the Orthodox Church in America.



American Orthodoxy in the Past

As Your Holiness is no doubt well aware, Holy Orthodoxy was introduced into the New World through the efforts of Russian missionary monks, who came to Alaska from the Valaam Monastery in 1794. In 1840 the mission became a diocese, headed by the Apostle of America Innocent (Veniaminov), and did not cease to develop after the transfer of the Church center first to San Francisco (1872) and later to New York (1903). During these long years, the American Church was headed by a succession of missionary bishops: Peter (1859-1867), Paul (1867-1870), John (1870-1879), Nestor (1880-1882), Vladimir (1888-1891), Nicholas (1891-1898), Tikhon (1898-1907), Platon (1907-1914) and Evdokim (1914-1917). In 1914, the Church already numbered several hundred parishes, accepting steadily into its fold Uniates returning to Orthodoxy and successive waves of new immigrants from Europe.

Patriarch Tikhon Speaks

Throughout this entire period, the leadership of the diocese belonged to a hierarch appointed by the Holy Synod of Russia. The Russian ecclesiastical authorities were fully aware of the multinational structure of American Orthodoxy and encouraged the organization of special national entities within the framework of One Church. Such, for example, was the Syrian vicariate, under the leadership of Bishop Raphael Hawaweeny of Brooklyn, which was established in 1904, and the Serbian Administration, headed by Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich. Most of the Greek parishes were also under the jurisdiction of the American Mission, with the exception of two or three communities which recognized the authority of the Church of Greece in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was assumed that a special diocese would be set up for these Greek parishes as was made clear from the well-known and truly prophetic address of Tikhon, Archbishop of America and future

Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, to the Pre-conciliar Commission in 1905:

'In North America a whole Exarchate can easily be established, uniting all Orthodox national churches, which would have their own bishops under one Exarch, the Russian Archbishop. Each one of them would be independent in its own sphere, but the common affairs of the American Church would be decided in a Synod, presided over by the Russian Archbishop . . . It should be remembered, however, that life in the New World is different from that in the old; our Church must take this into consideration; a greater autonomy (possibly autocephaly) should therefore be granted to the Church of America, a status different from the other Metropolitan sees of the Russian Church' (Opinions of Diocesan Bishops Concerning Church Reforms, St. Petersburg, 1906, Part I, p. 531).

Patriarch Meletios IV

This project reveals the broad-minded and truly missionary spirit of the leaders of American Orthodoxy, who were fully aware of the specific purpose and special mission of Orthodoxy in America. They knew that its normal progress could be guaranteed only on the basis of canonical unity and independence, with preservation, where necessary, of all national identities.

It is important to note that not only the Russian hierarchs were concerned with the future of Orthodoxy in America. His Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV (Metaxakis), after his two visits to America (in 1918 and 1922), also foresaw the future of Orthodoxy in the New World as a single, local Church. In his address, given at his enthronement as Ecumenical Patriarch on January 24, 1922, His Holiness Meletios said the following:

'I saw with my own eyes, the biggest and the most numerous part of the Orthodox Church in diaspora and I understood the measure in which the name of Orthodoxy would be exalted, especially in the great country of the United States of America, if the two millions of Orthodox Christians were organized there into one united ecclesiastical organization, as an American Orthodox Church' (B. Zoustitis, *Hellenism in America and Its Activities*, New York, 1954, p. 147).

The Crisis of American Orthodoxy

Half a century has already passed since the time when these prominent Orthodox hierarchs, each in his own way and under different conditions, expressed the same thoughts about the future of Orthodoxy in America. New generations have grown; hundreds of new churches, schools and religious institutions have been built. The whole world is looking at the Orthodox Church of America and is expecting from it a witness of the true unity — Christ's unity — in faith and love. In the meantime, our Church, living in the heterodox western world, is deprived of canonical unity: several jurisdictions are co-existing on the same territory, often competing one with another, while the flock is led into confu-

sion by the absence of a single ecclesiastical authority.

The events which brought about this situation are common knowledge. The ecclesiastical divisions in Russia, ensuing after the October Revolution of 1917, left the American Church without a permanent leadership. The restoration of normal church life was only made possible after the return of His Eminence, Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), who had previously headed the American flock and was well-known in America. At the council held in Detroit in 1924, through conciliar effort of the entire Church, it became possible to normalize the life of the Church on a basis of total autonomy. During these critically painful days for the Russian Church, when His Holiness, Patriarch Tikhon, himself had been under arrest and trial for a year, there existed no other way for those Russian dioceses which did not wish to recognize the schism of the "Renovation," than complete independence, and many dioceses within Russia itself chose to follow this path.

In America, meanwhile, the other national groups — Greeks, Syrians, Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians and Albanians — began to organize independent dioceses. In some cases, the Russian Church gave her blessing for their separate existence, and the Moscow Patriarchate even to this day recognizes them, maintaining friendly relations with them.

Thus, the Moscow Patriarchate itself shows that unity of Orthodoxy in America cannot be realized merely through the restoration of its territorial canonical rights, which in 1905 Archbishop Tikhon took for granted, but that unity can be reached only through an agreement between all the national churches.

As far as our North American Russian Metropolitanate is concerned, its growth and internal development after the Detroit Council (Sobor) of 1924 demonstrate clearly that the way of complete autonomy and independence was the right solution.

Growth of American Metropolia

During these years, the destinies of the Orthodox Church in Russia and America have been completely distinct. With the constant help of God, the Metropolitanate continued the great task of the Orthodox Mission to the New World and, since 1946, in Japan as well. It comprises today 11 dioceses, more than 350 parishes, and almost a million faithful Orthodox Christians — American citizens — a great majority of whom are American-born. Our theological schools are growing; future priests of our Metropolitanate, as well as of other Orthodox Churches, receive in them a theological education. A missionary and pastoral activity is developing, drawing to Orthodoxy an ever-increasing number of Americans.

The English language is in general use, together with Slavonic, in services and publications. The Orthodox Church plays a constantly increasing role in the social life of the country: many of our Orthodox clergymen and laymen teach in American universities, and our military chaplains care for the spiritual needs of the Orthodox members of the armed forces of the United States.

This growth of our Church under the wise guidance of my predecessors of blessed memory, the Metropolitans Platon (1922-1936), Theophilus (1936-1950) and Leonty (1951-1965), together with the other hierarchs who lead our American dioceses, shows the rapid movement of history.

It is against our wish that at the time of Russia's great troubles the canonical ties with the Church in Russia were broken, but we firmly believe that our spiritual bonds with the faithful Russian people, which confess their Christian hope in an officially atheist state, have never been severed. We have a holy regard for this spiritual bond, and also for the memory of those who laid the foundations of Orthodoxy in America, especially the holy monk Herman of Alaska, of blessed memory, as well as Bishops Innocent and Tikhon, who later headed the Church of Moscow. If such is the will of God, the popular veneration which they enjoy today may lead eventually to their official glorification by the Church.

However, this sacred memory from the past calls us to responsibility for the future, which must follow the pattern foreseen in 1905 by Archbishop Tikhon: an independent, autocephalous church in union with the entire Orthodox, Ecumenical Church, and realizing full unity locally.

Return to Past Impossible

The return of the American Church to the canonical leadership of the highest church authorities in Russia is impossible — for reasons both practical and canonical.

In practice, the existence of two very different and often contradictory social structures in America and Russia, and the fundamental distrust we have towards any instruction issued from communist countries, make the submission to the Moscow Patriarchate virtually inconceivable. The grievous events which recently occurred in the Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian dioceses in America bear witness to this fact: the attempt to restore a direct canonical relationship with the Mother-Churches results in schism and inadmissible church disorder.

The Canons of the Church

However, practical arguments would not suffice if they contradicted the holy canons of the Church of God. In reality, the holy canons themselves clearly stipulate:

- that there should be only one church authority in each district (First Ecumenical Council, Canon 8; Second Ecumenical Council, Canon 2; Sixth Ecumenical Council, Canons 20 and 29). This unity reflects the very nature of the Church, which knows no national, racial or linguistic barriers.
- that, in the words of the 34th Apostolic Canon, "The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them, and recognize him as their head, and do nothing which exceeds their authority without his consent . . .," and that "neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all."

Our flock, although multinational in origin, has for some

time already belonged to a single American nation, and the 34th Apostolic Canon, together with all the canons pertaining to ecclesiastical provinces (in particular, Canon 5, First Ecumenical Council), are certainly applicable to America. We know also with what zeal the ancient Church preserved these rules, with what confidence in their rights the bishops of Africa wrote to the Pope of Rome, protesting the appeals of some clergy "beyond the seas" to a foreign primate.

Foreign Control Disapproved

It is entirely understandable why the Church should express clear disapproval of a canonical structure in which the Christians of one country are submitted to the ecclesiastical authority of another state. Even when the political relations between the two states are normal and friendly, the Church which is under the authority of a foreign leadership is suspected of being "alien." What can be said then about our situation, when the relations between the two political giants of our era, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, continue to be grounded in mutual distrust and competition?

Meanwhile, the work of our Church must progress. By the will of God, during the great trials endured by Orthodoxy in Russia and in other countries, Orthodox Christians were scattered over the countries of the West. In America they created a healthy young Church. One cannot but see in this new development a special grace of God, given not to any local church in particular, but to the entire Church as a whole, and the entire Church must show concern for the future of American Orthodoxy. In order to establish a correct ecclesiastical organization in America, the agreement and the active cooperation of all Orthodox Churches is essential.

Unity of All

Your Holiness!

We dare hope that you will deem it possible to raise your voice on behalf of canonical order and justice.

Peace, love and unity are the unique goals of the Russian American Metropolitanate, entrusted to my humble leadership: to unite with all the Orthodox Churches and, in particular, with Your Holiness. Insofar as we are able, we strive towards realizing this unity here in America by participating in the Standing Conference of Orthodox Canonical Bishops, under the present chairmanship of His Eminence, Archbishop Iakovos, Exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarch in America. We also hope that the time is approaching when, by the general consent of all the Orthodox Churches, without any external pressure, whether non-ecclesiastical or anti-ecclesiastical, the entire Orthodox Church will bless and support the young American Orthodox Church, preserving all those cultural treasures bequeathed to her by our past.

Again wishing that Your Holiness will spend these coming Holy Days in spiritual joy and comfort and asking for Your prayers, we remain,

Yours faithfully in Christ,

/s/ †Metropolitan Ireney