



DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST  
*presents*  
*Reflections on the Autocephaly of the*  
**ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA**

Why was it a good thing then?

Why is it a good thing now?

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**PART VI**

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## The OCA & Autocephaly

*October 1970*

In October of 1970 the 14<sup>th</sup> All American Church Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church was convened. The verbatim minutes of that Sobor, later to be called the *First Council of the Orthodox Church in America*, make fascinating – even *exciting* - reading.

Chaired by Father Alexander Schmemmann, delegates endorsed the Holy Synod's April 1970 acceptance of the Tomos of Autocephaly received from the Church of Russia. They also discussed various legal questions associated with autocephaly including the name of the new church. After much debate<sup>1</sup> the name, "Orthodox Church in America", proposed by the Metropolitan Council, was agreed to by 301 of 310 delegates<sup>2</sup>.

In the course of the discussion bishops, priests and laypersons referred to the "Paschal joy of receiving autocephaly". The "risk" in negotiating with the Moscow Patriarchate. In accepting autocephaly, speakers noted they were proclaiming we "will *remain* in the free world" and "will not be any sort of satellite." That, in international Orthodox gatherings, they would be the "free voice of Orthodox in America". And they were now, "possessors of church affairs here" with the "opportunity of carrying this through to an end".

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<sup>1</sup> Why not "Russian" in the name? Will the lack of the word Russian create some sort of vacuum into which the Moscow Patriarchate will 'move in'? Why not "Orthodox Catholic"? Why not "American Orthodox"? Why not "North America" since Canadians "don't like to be called American." Why not "of America"?

<sup>2</sup> Seven "No" votes and three abstentions.

A layman from Connecticut<sup>3</sup>, rose to say, "After a period of time, everybody in the nation, everybody in the world, will know who the 'Orthodox Church in America' is."

In light of our continued relative anonymity we can be relieved that the speaker was not more precise about what that *period of time* would be. Nonetheless there was a sense of 'statesmanship'<sup>4</sup>. Talk of our 'mission to America'. An opportunity to make a difference. A sense of growing up.

The soaring rhetoric of the day of course gave way to the long hard road that has been travelled for now fifty years.

Was autocephaly a good thing? It could probably have been done better. Yet, it is likely that if an effort had been made to build a bigger tent for many or all jurisdictions prior to autocephaly *nothing* would have been done.<sup>5</sup>

### *Practical Impact of Autocephaly*

Did autocephaly and the creation of a Church whose focus was on America have a positive impact? To this observer the answer is clearly yes.



### *Saints*

In our parish there is hardly a dry eye –cradle or convert- as we sing "*Rejoice O Mountains of Pennsylvania. Leap for Joy O Waters of the Great Lakes*"<sup>6</sup> on the Sunday of All Saints of North America.

Without a Church focused on the life of the Church in America:

How many of our Saints - beacons of light for our American Church - would be canonized?

Would the above (and other) beautiful words of the Saints of N. America commemoration have been written to inform our veneration of those who shaped our Church? *Could* that have happened?

Would, for example, a canonization of St. Raphael of Brooklyn, first Bishop consecrated on American soil, have even been undertaken by the church of Antioch?

Or, would that ancient patriarchate have been focused on its own internal affairs?

<sup>3</sup> "Mr. Kruege"

<sup>4</sup> "Churchmanship" may be preferable.

<sup>5</sup> Reference the failed Ligonier meetings approximately 25 years later.

<sup>6</sup> Sixth Stikheron All Saints of North America

### *Leaders Rooted in America*

As “possessors of church affairs here”, we have now freely elected four Metropolitans. Many priests and Bishops, including our Metropolitan, are converts to the faith. All Bishops are English speaking<sup>7</sup> and virtually all are American born. Rarely are Bishops imported from a distant land unfamiliar with the circumstances of life in America. Order appointed and imposed from the outside would feel wholly inauthentic to us.

### *Chrism – Enlivening Our Gifts*

These American bishops prepare our chrism *here*. Pardon any doctrinal innovations, but it has always seemed to this writer to be important that entrants to the Church are receiving the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit from the *local Church*. Exhorting them to enliven and use these God-given gifts *locally* to bring forth the gospel to the people of America.



### *More Parishes. Better Parishes.*

Many parishes have been planted over these fifty years. Having traveled to over ninety Orthodox parishes in the past dozen years (most OCA) it is clear to this observer that those parishes planted *after 1970*, in the light of autocephaly, are strongest and healthiest.

From maturing parish councils to an emphasis on active service<sup>8</sup> parishes are living the Gospel to a much broader extent than in 1970, often borrowing what is good, and Orthodox, from the American religious landscape.

### *English and Ethnicity*

In this Diocese a review of parish websites reveals that there are no parishes, whether founded pre or post autocephaly, that externally label themselves “Russian”. Is this likely without autocephaly?

Little Slavonic remains in liturgical services. Ninety plus percent of the Liturgy in 90+% of parishes is in English. In the midst of social media firestorms over retaining the ‘poetic beauty’ and ‘theological accuracy’ of various old world liturgical languages<sup>9</sup> most OCA parishes have put down roots that are understandable to our neighbors.

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<sup>7</sup> At 1970 Sobor/Council the Metropolitan’s address was given in Russian with a written English translation.

<sup>8</sup> Parishes that do not at least collect clothing or canned goods to assist with local needs are rare. Many, including some in this Diocese, have exemplary charitable ministries.

<sup>9</sup> “Should Greek/Ukrainian/ Serbian be augmented with English?” is a debate that rages in many jurisdictions. For most in the OCA these discussions are anachronistic. A return to c. 1970? We’ve moved past this.

Thousands of converts have been brought to the Orthodox Church. A large portion would not have been attracted to a church with an ethnic name, dependence on foreign language liturgy and looking backwards to the old country. Because our forward focus is America, we are slowly learning how to talk to America and Americans. Numerous books and materials in English have been written with an understanding of the perspective and mindset of American audiences.

### *Exports*

As we have participated in gatherings with ancient patriarchates, and as the faithful themselves travel, many of the good, unique practices and fresh perspectives that have blossomed in this land have been shared. Liturgical renewal and emphasis on regular communion, emphasis on vernacular, expanded parish lay and women's participation<sup>10</sup>, "coffee hour" as a practical form of koinonia, emphasis on education, books, approaches to emerging social issues, even music are important exports to world Orthodoxy.



### *Maturity– not 'Phoning Home'*

Maturity comes, in part, from making one's own mistakes and cleaning up one's messes without needing to phone home for permission or instruction. To be sure the OCA has engendered some major messes. We cleaned them up on our own and did so. Hopefully experience will be a good teacher.

### *Challenges Abound*

Many of the above changes can be accurately claimed by other jurisdictions as well. They are certainly not the sole product of autocephaly.

The Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America has *numerous* exemplary parishes, initiatives and programs. In many ways they followed a vision for North America, in part, articulated by the existence of a local autocephalous Church. Without attempting to take any *credit* for the efforts of the Antiochian Church, we recall Bishop Basil of the Antiochian Church acknowledging their appreciation of the OCA's 'pathfinding' role for Orthodoxy in America during a video address to the 2005 Toronto All American Council.

And huge challenges exist. Some new. Some remain.

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<sup>10</sup> No women delegates were allowed at the 1970 Sobor/Council



Many parishes are smaller – some having shrunk to less than five percent of their previous size. Some are closing. Yet this too partially proves a point made above - that parishes that are most insular and most resistant to change, development and adaptation are in greatest peril.

The quality of liturgical singing is declining. Yet we are responding with new tools, classes and accessible music.

Despite an autocephalous presence, Orthodoxy in America often appears to be diverging not converging. We seem no closer to 'unity' –or even understanding it in some common terms. Autocephaly has, for some, been an unquestionable hindrance to unity. And yet has it not, even at its worst moments, been a driver as well? What might an autocephalous American Church look like –warts and all?

The OCA has no corner on good efforts here in America – but it has been and continues to be the seed of much of the modest progress in America. Having been forced to face challenges, the OCA is, in this observer's opinion, well ahead in its understanding of their complexities.



### *Facing Forward: A Vision*

At the onset of the First All American Council, as debate began about endorsing the decision for autocephaly and deciding upon a name, the chair noted that, "Once we have voted this, all discussions concerning the autocephaly, pro and con, will be out of order."

Yet we debate.

As we face forward many suggestions can be made. Perhaps most useful might be a sort of vision. Some elements might be:

*As we move forward we seek to become a church...*

Where its life and the lives of its communicants are transparent to Christ and proclaim hope and life in Him.

Whose holiness is worked out according to the established traditions of the ancient Church *and* the particular needs of Christians sojourning in North America.

Where there is a respectful reverence for the inheritance from traditional Orthodox lands. Where visitors from historically Orthodox countries can recognize a continuity of the faith with their homeland *while also* appreciating that the Church here is a living form of Orthodox Christianity. A Church that builds upon the best qualities and culture(s) of North America and has put down deep roots in a new homeland.

With parishioners/worshippers who reflect the local neighborhoods and communities they serve.

Where faithful are knowledgeable in their faith and demonstrate a zeal for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a willingness to share it with others. A zeal normally seen from within the American evangelical tradition - yet shaped and enabled by the historical, spiritual depth of the Orthodox Faith and nourished regularly by its sacraments and worship.

That leads by example, humility and *without timidity* to achieve an autocephalous, administratively unified, locally led American Orthodox Church.

A Church that communicates first through its deeds and uses all of its God given talents, available resources and technologies, to speak loudly, forcefully, consistently, clearly, skillfully and often to the people of North America about the Orthodox faith and Holy Tradition, its ability to deliver salvation and to be a principle centered compass for a morally challenged society, while always remembering that its principle aim and goal is to...

**Enable Americans to acquire the Holy Spirit of God through the Orthodox Faith...**

**... by bringing an authentic, living form of the Orthodox Faith and its Tradition to the people of North America.**

