

"UNITED, WE CELEBRATE THE ALL-HOLY SPIRIT!"

On the Unity of the Church

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Towards the beginning of 1991, when the Holy Synod (Patriarch German was already bedridden, as Patriarch Pavle is today) decided by the grace of God, with Serbian seriousness and pastoral responsibility, that our unfortunate church schism in America should be resolved and surpassed, we wrote that the Diaspora has for a long time been the most complex problem of the entirety of Orthodoxy, and for that reason it has been included on the agenda of the future Great Council of the Orthodox Church. We also said at that time that the experience of Diaspora in the Church, either with the Jews in the Old Testament or with the Christians in the New, that is to say the Church, is not something evil in itself. It is an unavoidable and at the same time a providential challenge for God's Israel, both the old and the new, that is, for the Jewish people and the Church of Christ. The Diaspora reminds all of us, as the community of the people of God in history moving on the path towards the Heavenly Kingdom, of the traveling and crucified status of the Church in this world and age: "we are in the world but we are not of this world"; we are in the House of God, but the Dispensation – the building up of the House of God which is the Church – is still in progress and continuing. God's Kingdom is already present in the Church, but as Christians we are also simultaneously still on the path towards the Kingdom, the Heavenly Homeland of us all.

The Diaspora poses to the Orthodox Church two important questions: the question of verification of our correct ecclesiological understanding, our living experience of the Church, and the question of the mission of the Church in the world. In recent times the Diaspora has reminded us, and in its own

way has compelled us, to not forget the important mission of Orthodoxy in the modern world, which is possible only by coming out of our narrow nationalistic frameworks in which we are threatened by the dan-

ger of isolation. The Diaspora in the West was and still remains a missionary territory of Orthodoxy. Especially, North and South America still remain missionary territories.

The Diaspora presents a vital problem of Orthodox Ecclesiology to all the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches – one which we have apparently, under the influence of recent world and national political history, begun to forget about. Namely, that the fundamental organizational principle of the ancient Church of the East – the Church was born in the East and the Gospels were spread through out the world from the East, as St. Basil the Great and the Fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council remind us – was always geographical; not by nationality or state, but regional, local, that is, concretely lived. When, in the last few centuries, we hear the word "Local Church", we usually understand this as "national Church" (or even as certain Catholic theologians will maliciously say: "state Church"). In the ancient Church, however, the Local Church meant the Church of the respective place – of the city, territory, or land, regardless of the nationality, race or color of the faithful who live there. This understanding had two important consequences. Firstly, from this derived one of the foundational and unchangeable canons of the ancient Church, formulated at the First Ecumenical Council in Canon 8: "Two Bishops cannot be in one city", but only one (see the 35th Apostolic Canon and the 16th Canon of the First-second council). That one bishop in one city (usually including its vi-

cinity) was bishop of all the faithful of that city and area, with no regard to ethnic or other make-up...

In the centuries-old history of the Orthodox Church and of the Orthodox Churches, dioceses never overlapped, nor were they coexisting on the same geographical territory. The establishment of two or more Diocesan Churches in the same city or same area would be ecclesiological nonsense, for that would be a denial of the fact that the Church of God is One and undivided. There were exceptions in rare instances, for example in the seventh century when the Archbishop of Cyprus, because of an invasion by barbarians, fled together with his clergy and people to the region of Asia Minor, to Kizik (near the Dardanelles), and they organized themselves as a separate Church on the territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but this was permitted only until the liberation of Cyprus, which occurred soon afterwards. Or another instance, modeled after the former, when the Serbian Church allowed Russian refugees to organize themselves with their clergy and people on the territory of the Serbian Patriarchate (with headquarters in Sremski Karlovci).

In our proposal of 1991 aimed at overcoming the schism in America, written and adopted at that time with the blessings of the Holy Synod, it was suggested and was accepted by the Assembly that liturgical fellowship, canonical-eucharistic concelebration and communion be reestablished in the Diaspora, but that the overlapping of parishes and Dioceses should remain only temporarily, that is, that administrative unity would not be reestablished immediately.

From this we could not have and should not have concluded that this state of affairs, which was allowed to continue in our Diaspora only through extreme pastoral economia, should be made permanent and considered normal. On the contrary, that status should have been resolved long ago, and full canonical and administrative unity should have been established through a restructuring of the Dioceses, that is, that parishes in one particular region, in one episcopal unit – Diocese, be under one Bishop who is in liturgical and canonical unity with the other Orthodox Bishops (in this case of our Autocephalous Serbian Church, until a restructuring and a grace-filled liturgical and canonical-administrative unity on a pan-Orthodox level is established geographically, and not according to the “nationality principle”).

Thanks be to God, and due to the continuing efforts

of our Holy Patriarch and Assembly, just this May at the Holy Assembly of Bishops of our Church, on the feast day of St. John the Evangelist and Theologian, 21/8 May, this liturgical-canonical and administrative unity was finally realized, and we should thank with all our hearts, souls and minds our Chief Shepherd Christ the Savior and the Inspirer the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, that this was accepted by all of our Bishops, both those in America and all the rest of the members of the Holy Assembly of Bishops.

There never was, and especially now, there is no serious ecclesiastical, Orthodox, nor Serbian reason that the previous temporary state of disunion – of not being under one Bishop in one region – should last any longer. Anyone who would bring into question the ecclesiological, the church-strengthening value of this decision by this year’s Assembly, would only demonstrate their petty, narrow-minded, personal or group fearfulness and self-centeredness, their un-Christian and anti-church intolerance and, in the final analysis, their church-destroying hatred for their brothers. The soul-destroying schism, as the Holy Abba Justin with tears and prayerful lamentations used to call it, the schism which brought poison and drowning to the souls of our brothers of the same faith and blood, is over and done with, and no trace of it can be allowed to remain.

In this year’s unified and unanimous decision of the entire Assembly of Bishops there is no “victory” or “defeat”, there are no “victors” or “vanquished”, for it demonstrates a church-building consciousness, an Orthodox conscience and a brotherly and salvific love in Christ our Savior towards all.

Our brethren Serbs in America, truly ecclesiastically and Orthodox, by this church-building unity and love, by the act and deed of their full unity in Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father and for our salvation, are also giving an example to the other Orthodox Christians. For, as St. Bishop Nikolai said in America itself back in the 50’s, a day is coming when the full unity and missionary activity of Orthodoxy in the New World will be made manifest to us all. And this truly ecclesial and missionary activity has appeared through this event in America and in the Church of Saint Sava and Saint Nikolai, in the Church of the New Martyrs, Hierarchs and faithful of our Cross-bearing people.

“This is the day of Resurrection, let us be illumined by the feast; Let us embrace each other. Let us call ‘Brothers!’ even those who until now have hated us! Let us forgive all by the Resurrection!”





And also our brethren the Russians recently created this unity (except for a small number of individuals, or little groups poisoned with hate), and we Serbs helped them in attaining this, for we became for them a model of reconciliation and unity. God grant that we may be a model to the other Orthodox manifesting the conciliar-catholic nature of the Orthodox Church of God, which by its full liturgical-canonical unity reveals its Liturgical and Missionary essence in the unity of the faith and in the communion of the Holy Spirit, as we confess at the Divine Liturgy before the Communion of all in the Heavenly Bread and the Cup of Life Eternal.

According to the God-inspired Psalmist: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity!" It is then that we all may with one mouth and one heart glorify and hymn the all-honorable Name of the Holy Trinity, the Eternal Assembly – the Archetype of the Unity of the Church. And it is then that we all may commune from the One Bread and One Cup, and thus visibly confess and announce that we are living members of the One Body of Christ the God-man and Savior of us all and of the entire world (1 Cor. 10: 16-17).

By the way, we would add that at this Holy Assembly the oneness of spirit and of mind of the Fathers of our Church was revealed in that there was no

more unnecessary mention of the inappropriate questions of the so-called "old" and "new" ways of serving, for at the meeting it was said that we all serve the one and same Divine Service, even though there might be variations in certain details, as there always have been and there are in the living and life-creating Church of Christ from the East throughout the ages, just as there is one Gospel of Christ even though there are four Evangelists, and in them, just as in the Orthodox Liturgies – and there are four of them as well – there appears a polyphonic symphony and a symphonic polyphony of the Holy Pentecostal, fiery spirit-filled Grace of the Spirit, the Comforter of the Church, Who "calls all to unity."

The unity of the Church, in a grace-filled unity of concelebration and communion in the Divine Eucharist, and a canonical unity of administration, where "all things are done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40), from Pentecost to today, and from Jerusalem to America, was always a gift and event of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit – in the Church of the Apostles and Fathers, of the Martyrs and faithful successors of the Lamb of God, Whose Church is the Body of the God-Man, Community in One Spirit, the House of the Living God, the Pillar and Foundation of Truth, of salvation, of Resurrection, of Life eternal.

Holy Pentecost, 2009