

**ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST 46TH DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY
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CLEVELAND, OHIO**

**METROPOLITAN COUNCIL REPORT
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A/ A Church in Denial

The format for what promises to be a traumatic AAC in Pittsburgh in July 2008 will be determined by the attitude set by the Holy Synod and accepted by the Metropolitan Council and the delegates. If the AAC is promoted as a movement towards the future without dealing with the traumas of the past, then the emphasis will be an attempt to create an aura of optimism – whether sincere or affected. Looking backward will be considered bad manners. Demands from the foolhardy and brave will be met with frowns of disappointment from the powers that be.

Good children know their place. They don't ask questions that they suspect either frustrate or irk their respected elders, who in any case refuse comment. Questions like:

- **How many persons were involved in the mismanagement of funds?** There was a silent trial, the issue is solved. Only one person has been censured. Issue resolved.
- **How much money was pilfered, squandered or may still be salted away in offshore accounts?** We don't discuss these things.
- **Has anything been resolved regarding the scandals that rocked the Orthodox Church in America nearly into annihilation?** Don't ask.
- **Do you know anything about the truth of the scandals?** Don't tell.

We should expect that attempts will be made to discourage any discussion of the ordeals that almost destroyed our beloved Church. If that ruse can be pulled off, then Pittsburgh 2008 will imitate Toronto 2005. The most likely scenario will be a scaled-down version of what transpired in AAC 14 in Toronto, slathered with much happy-talk of progress and change: Routine reports, assertions that all is well and that everything is in order. We have already moved beyond the minor disturbances and disruptions that rocked our boat and caused the minor flurries that – Thank the Lord! – are now all behind us. We have profited from our flubs (if there were any), and while “*mistakes were made*” nevertheless we have done the following to correct them and make certain they will never happen again: [list of all from “Best Practices” to new staff, foolproof accounting apparatus, best of modern technology, etc.]

So let's be good soldiers and fall in line. The good Orthodox Christian is an obedient Orthodox Christian.

- **What about the financial scandal?** We are handling it the way that Pres. Clinton dealt with gays in the military: Don't ask, don't tell.
- **What about the ADM grant? What happened to it?** Hush! Leave it to rest.
- **And whistleblowers? Have Protodeacon Eric Wheeler and John Kozey been vindicated and publicly thanked for their stance against corruption in the offices of the central Church?** Not yet, but leave that aside.
- **What were all the trips to Russia and elsewhere all about? And the money supposedly spread around the Church in that land?** We don't have to go there and stir up what is best left dormant.
- **Whatever was the St. Catherine's episode about – the pretense at opening a memorial in the name of M/M Andreas – that was a mere sham? And what of the Beslan episode?** As Virgil advised Dante on their journey through Hell: *“Let us not speak of them; but look, and pass on”* [Inferno 1.51] Forget about those sordid episodes of the past. It's enough that we now have provided for whistleblowers in the future. That should be satisfactory. If you want to sing in our Orthodox Church in America choir, learn the lyrics and keep on pitch.

The present administration will do their best to get through the AAC without incident, talking around the wounds that have not been addressed much less healed. They will set the agenda, present their version of normality, promise a happy end, close with a banquet and send off the delegates to go forth and keep the financial obligations flowing in. They will tell us that like the phrase on the dollar bill we are entering a *Novus ordo seclorum* – a new order has begun. “Best Practices” have been installed and will establish proper procedures within the Church administration compatible with those in commercial institutions. A new foolproof financial system of checks and balances will preclude money misappropriation that was at the root of the scandal that rocked the entire Church. The Central Administration, now restructured, offers a quartet of leadership replacing the former system with maximum authority invested in the chancellor's office. The first official message from the new chancellor was a call for obedience – from pastors, especially. Now is a time to move on, turn the page, put the scandals of the recent past to rest, and don't look back.

This attitude makes us Americans in the worst way. If this is our response to the traumas that have infected the Body of Christ that we call the Orthodox Church in America for the past decade, we deserve to lose a massive number of our loyal sisters and brothers in Christ. If we do nothing more than sweep it under the eagle rugs and move on without any evaluation of what went wrong, how it happened, who was responsible and what if anything, we have learned from the disaster, then we are like the Bourbon monarchy

restored to government in France, “*They learned nothing and forgot nothing.*” We have adopted the philosophy of existentialism, breaking up time into fragments. We defy and deny the basic principle of self-analysis. Every priest insists that all preparing for Holy Communion must first explore their consciences, analyze their lives, scrutinize their souls, repent, confess their sins and only then approach the sacred Gifts. Is this not applicable to the Church we call “One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic”? If we are not **One** any longer, if we have violated **Her Holiness**, if we are not **Catholic** [whole] or have lost the integrity to be honestly **Apostolic**, then how dare we roll on as though all is well and healthy?

If this is the direction blessed by the Holy Synod to be the theme of the AAC, then it will basically look like a scaled down version of the AAC 14 in Toronto, July 2005:

- Typical order of services
- Lengthy reports on the state of the Church, explaining all that is well known: Order has been restored, new officers and staff installed, miscreants properly admonished and disciplined, and we anticipate your cooperation in bringing about reconciliation, peace, harmony and order throughout the Church.

But something else has taken place. The intransigent bond of silence by the members of the Holy Synod was broken by our own Archbishop +JOB, to the chagrin of his colleagues. He heard the maligned Protodeacon Eric Wheeler and asked the question that the whole Synod should have asked:

- Is there any truth to his charges of long-standing and on-going monetary abuse in the chancery by officers of the Church?
- If so, can the matter be investigated so that clarity, transparency and good order are to be returned to the Church?

The results are well-known. He was abused, insulted and scorned, but he held his ground, which is why our Midwest Diocese – to his and our credit – is adamant about restoring integrity and virtue to the Church; and until that is done we have chosen to withhold our assessments to the national Church.

To give a modern parable, our beloved hierarch Archbishop +JOB took the role of Dorothy in the American classic: The Wizard of Oz. His quest is to lead the *entire* Church from the quagmire of obfuscation, intimidation, and a pretense of normalcy – in other terms, a Church going in the wrong direction. He is trying his best, guided by the Holy Spirit, to lead us along our yellow brick road – each brick marked ADM – joined by various characters in search of honor, courage and wisdom past numerous dwarfs and midgets, beyond the hurricane of scandals that engulf us, ever moving forward despite frequent stops and new starts towards the Wizard.

We are Orthodox. We take responsibility for our past actions. We do not pretend that we are exempt from the wrongdoings and failures that affect and infect our present and future. The curtain at the end of the money trail shuts us off from the Kingdom of God beyond. The AAC in Toronto was a failed and sinful travesty of what true councils should be. The dozen or more booths and displays in the Sheraton hotel lower level, the program with its presentations, lunchtime seminars for all the good they had done were but a Potemkin village disguising the charade of fiscal duplicity that was perpetrated by the Central Church Administration and covered up by a Synod aware of the fiction of financial corruption endorsed by a falsified audit. After enjoying the best rooms in the hotel for that week of our shame, the fantasy of respectability was capped by running out on a bill of \$124,000. It was the threat by the Sheraton Hotel to prosecute us that sent the Central Church Administration scurrying to come up with the \$1,700,000 loan to pay that debt and other misappropriations, not the nine even more sinful obligations to causes of welfare.¹[1] No wizard can bully or bargain us out of recognizing that sinful week of our shame and making amends to the Lord. To deny our sinfulness is the curtain that prevents us from moving beyond and towards the Kingdom.

“There is not one righteous. No, not one.” [Rom. 3:10]. It took a Svengali-like illusionist to pull off the financial shenanigans for more than a decade; but no ‘rational sheep’ are naïve enough to think that he did it all alone without collusion at the top. This did nothing to enhance their places in the Kingdom of God. **And all of us are responsible for some share in the transgressions done to Christ’s holy Church.**

- The members of the Holy Synod who never gave the whistle-blowers a hearing, but instead demeaned and denigrated the former Treasurer;
- The members of the Metropolitan Council who are and were responsible for the good order of the Orthodox Church in America between AAC’s, but failed by ignorance or otherwise to perform their due diligence;
- Those even now who consider the scandal normal, who equate the holiness of the Church with the scandals of big business, and the only shame is in being caught;
- Those clergy and laity who are quick to attack and slow to show mercy, patience and forgiveness;
- Those with vindictive personalities, using our plight as gall nurturing their enjoyment in relishing the celebration of the demons over our humiliation;

¹[1] Several other examples include: Three annual appeals; Christmas Stocking Appeal; 9/11 Emergency Funds; Beslan Relief; Florida Hurricane Relief; Books for Russia

- The writers with so much to say and yet who hide behind the fig leaf of anonymity;
- The “Eyores” among us, bearers of that specific spiritual flaw of “Slavicness,” who search and celebrate the negative in every fact and act that affirms their conviction that all is lost, all has failed, nothing redeeming or worthwhile is possible.

Now we are in need of a Toto who is willing to tear away the curtain and open up the way to a new day of honesty, truth and the gospel values. We have had enough of lies, stonewalling, stalling and deceptions! We had our fill of that in what led up to Toronto 2005. We do not need a sequel. Are we capable of a new beginning? Can we make a radical transformation? *With God all things are possible.* But even God cannot or will not forgive those who do not repent.

B/ The Hail Mary²

Leadership in repentance has to be the duty of our hierarchs. We are the Orthodox who will brook no papal pretensions. The bishops owe the Holy Spirit, guide of the council and to the people of God, an example of humility and repentance. The clergy and laity will take their lead, and all together shall plead for the Lord’s mercy in starting a new day of our salvation.

How well do our hierarchs understand the Lord’s word to his disciples? And will they listen to the rational sheep of their flock? If they feel there is nothing more that needs to be addressed in the life of the Church, the AAC in Pittsburgh will be modeled on those of the past: The state of the Church will be presented in a positive format as sketched above:

From the least to the greatest of them, Everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the Priest, everyone deals falsely; They have healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace. [Jeremiah 6:13]

But on the other hand if our spiritual leaders wish to reach out to embrace all those who have been hurt, spiritually wounded, confused, frustrated, angered and damaged by the activities that have shaken our Church to its roots, **a whole other scenario is mandatory.**

²[2] In football, a desperation play. It’s the fourth down; the ball is in midfield, remaining seconds of the last quarter, the losing team has the ball. The quarterback sends all eligible receivers into the end zone and throws a low percentage pass, hoping for a miracle. Many would say the Orthodox Church in America is in this situation.

The wolf of souls has entered the fold not through the back gate, but through the front. He has had his way with Christ's lambs for a decade; and after years of denial, stonewalling, threats against exposure and persecution of those who had opposed him, brave souls have risen in counterattack.

- Has he been driven out or just made a tactical withdrawal?

We must know if the sheepfold is safe – and not all the lambs are yet assured of it. It depends to a great extent on the chief shepherds. Can they continue to send signals from outside the gates that all is well, or will they enter the sheepfold and mingle among their lambs, understanding their qualms, soothing their ire, calming their anxieties and – in a word – being true examples of him who said: *“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* (Jn. 10:11)

- Will they have the will to humble themselves and replace the imperial robes for a more pastoral adornment? *“Whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Lk 14:11) Are bishops excluded from the Lord's word?
- Will they heal with the staff, and not the rod? That depends on what our hierarchs consider to be the symbol of the crosier they hold while in Church. Is it a scepter that displays royalty, or is it the staff of a shepherd? If it's the former, they ought to expect no trust or loyalty from us: *“Put not your trust in men, in princes, in sons of men in whom there is no salvation”* we sing as the second antiphon of each Divine Liturgy.

At this critical moment in the history of our precious Church – a time unlike anything ever experienced in the two centuries of our existence on this continent – we have an opportunity to give an example of the hope that is in us, or to lose this precious opportunity to turn defeat into victory and shame into glory. It is within the power of the Holy Spirit living and dwelling in our Church to lead us up from the ashes of our humiliation to a mountaintop experience of mutual love, joy, celebration and witness if we are open to the Spirit. By our sins we have proved we are nothing, but in Christ we can more than make up for our shameful scandals of the past.

Begin with repentance, and let the leaders take the lead!

Three phases:

1. *Complete accountability.* Let the Special Commission complete its due diligence by interviews, explorations, delving to the depths of the scandal and presenting an honest, complete report. Most of the essentials have long been known. Part of the scandal is that it has been dragged out for such a length of time. The Roman Catholic Church has paid more than a billion dollars to victims of priests' pedophilia, and they are now moving beyond the issue. The Episcopal Church is

still dealing with homosexuality and have somehow muddled through. So far our scandals are about finances. My wife reporting to our parish the conclusions of the October 2006 Diocesan Assembly held in Palatine, Illinois, including the Syosset scandal, returning along the aisle to her place in the nave was stopped by a compassionate parishioner who said: “*Remember, it’s only money.*”

Nevertheless everything must be laid out in the open, hiding nothing that is known. Nothing.

2. *Repentance.* No more justifying the wrongdoings, an end to stonewalling, self-serving denials: “*I had not known,*” “*I had nothing to do with it,*” etc. All are guilty – those in office, those responsible for the welfare of the Church, those who went along innocently or knowingly, those who profited in any way from the misuse of funds, and the bystanders, bloggers, and critics. In that spirit of repentance, those delegates and observers to the AAC in ’08 must prepare themselves by **a two week strict fast, during which time they are to make a serious confession to their spiritual fathers.** All delegates are to be sent special prayers for the AAC that include such prayers at the ending of the All-Night Vigil “*for those who love us and those who hate us...*” The theme of repentance and forgiveness should be the overriding tenor of the entire AAC. If that does not or will not happen, then we have not truly opened ourselves to the mercy of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit.
 3. *Asking for Forgiveness:* At some point, either at the opening or the closing session of the AAC in Pittsburgh there ought to be a service that is normally held in all parishes and monasteries on the vespers of the eve of Great Lent, with choir singing throughout, and the whole gathering in concentric circles approach each person, making a lesser prostration before him/her and asking for forgiveness for all the pain caused through this sordid ordeal that must be concluded. This cannot be done in a perfunctory manner. Only Jesus Christ can heal us, and only with our complete cooperation. Triumphalism, self-justification, cynicism, resentment, hidden grievances, attacks on various orders or segments of the Church, pettiness, hopelessness, all that which comes from Satan has to be revealed and rooted out if the Tree of Life is to take root again, to grow and flourish in America. We have been humbled by our sinfulness, mocked from beyond and within, shamed, scorned and abandoned by some; nevertheless *with God all things are possible.* But only if we surrender our pride and self-righteousness, one and all chastened, penitent, cleansed from our sins and open once again to the Holy Spirit who returns us to the Father in Christ Jesus.
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