

Office of Communications

Orthodox Church in America Diocese of New York and New Jersey

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The following interview regarding the recent **Episcopal Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Hierarchs of North and Central America**, which convened in New York City on 25-28 May, was conducted with His Grace, +Michael (Bishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey) on Wednesday, 2 June 2010. A news release about the Assembly is now available on the OCA webpage: <http://www.oca.org/news/2168>



Question: Your Grace, we appreciate you taking time out of your extremely full schedule to share some of your observations, thoughts and reflections following the historic Assembly of Hierarchs that concluded just last week in New York City.

Bishop Michael: To begin with, I have to say what an incredible experience it was for me, just newly consecrated, to be privileged to be a part of this first Episcopal Assembly. To be there ... to walk among giants ... the great leaders of the Orthodox Churches in this country and in Canada and in Mexico. To see fifty-six bishops gathered together in the same room for the same purpose, was just awesome. As I said, I was privileged to be there. I had been at Ligonier [Pennsylvania, November 1994] as a priest when SCOBA [the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas] hosted such a gathering, and there were half as many bishops. This was an incredible event to be a part of.

Question: Looking at the group photograph of the hierarchs at the Assembly, one might say “It is an icon of diversity and unity”; but someone else might say “It is an icon of ethnicity and fragmentation.” What would you say?

Bishop Michael: I think if you look at a glass you can rightly say “it’s half empty” or “it’s half full.” Actually, it is both. It depends on how you want to see it. I think one could say that this is an icon of ethnicity and fragmentation ... or, at least, ethnicity ... in the sense that the hierarchs were arranged by jurisdiction. They were arranged by the Mother Church to which they belonged. So, the Greeks were together with the Ukrainians, the Carpatho-Russians, and the Albanians, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Churches; and then you had the Antiochians, and Moscow, and all the rest. So, in that sense, I think the picture is ethnically oriented. But on the other hand, I think if you stop and think of the fact you have fifty-six bishops from all these different jurisdictions -- from all these different ethnic backgrounds -- come together in one place, to begin to regularize in good Church order the reality of North America, then I think there is a unity to be found in the midst of diversity. And, that is what I prefer to see. These hierarchs met together without ever openly speaking for their ethnic identities, their affiliations ... but just to work together for a few days ... to begin the work, again ... to begin anew

... regularizing the good order of the Church in America. So, I see it that way. I also think that Saint Luke, the first iconographer, who -- when he paints the picture for us in the Book of Acts of the works of Saint Peter and Saint Paul who were so different in their personalities and their mission -- finds unity and that which is common in the Holy Spirit, Who guides the Church. If Saint Luke were painting the icon of our Assembly, I think he would see the same thing here; for him it would be an icon of unity in diversity because he believed so strongly that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church, in spite of what we do as humans: in spite of Judas Iscariot, in spite of Ananias and Sapphira, in spite of Simon the magician ... all of whom are referenced in the Book of Acts. So he would see our Assembly, I am convinced -- and I see it -- with great hope in our unity within diversity.

Question: The Assembly agreed to recommend a separate "Assembly" for Canada and to recommend that Mexico and Central America join the Assembly of South America. Thus, the Assembly to which you belong would -- if so comprised -- represent the United States geographically. Were there any other notable outcomes, or tangible fruits, of the Assembly?

Bishop Michael: There definitely were. One of the decisions the hierarchs reached was that they would establish a registry of canonical bishops in this country, so that you could find out exactly the status of a given hierarch. Also, there is going to be a committee to establish a registry of canonical clergy; and a way of informing the Church on matters regarding clergy. For example, if Father "X" is on the registry and all of a sudden he does something that requires his deposition, that will be noted and known to all. And, there will also be a registry of canonical parishes in the country. I think it is important for people who are traveling, moving to a new area, joining a parish ... and it is important for priests to know. In the absence of territorial dioceses, this is a good thing. And you are correct, it was decided that Canada is large enough for its own Assembly, and that Mexico and Central America would be with South America because they have many of the same issues, the same goals to be achieved in what we call Latin America. And, since the Assemblies are organized in geographic terms, this would make for a better balance and more meaningful gatherings. It would leave us in the United States with about 45 bishops, as I understand, which is still an incredible number of hierarchs working together. I must say, in all, there is great promise.

Question: What about the status of the Orthodox Church in America and the contentious matter of autocephaly? What is the "OCA Story" as presented to the Assembly? As a member of the OCA Synod of Bishops, how were you received?

Bishop Michael: At least as I see the story of the Orthodox Church in America, there was a time when ... the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North America had a primary concern for people of Russian and Carpatho-Russian and Slavic ancestry ... to care for those people. Certainly, the Orthodox Church in America has broadened its horizon, without neglecting those people to reach out and to bring Orthodoxy to everyone regardless of their ethnic ancestry, regardless of their denominational background, regardless of the faith taught to them by their parents, and regardless of the fact that they may come from no faith-base at all. We have this vision to follow the Great Commission and to make America Orthodox, and I think that is what we really have to focus on, and

make our parishes stronger ... to be strong examples of that vision and that mission. In the OCA, our dioceses nominate their own bishops who are elected and consecrated by the Holy Synod, and those bishops, in turn, elect our own Metropolitan ... without any guidance or interference from anywhere else. The Metropolitan and the bishops consecrate our own Holy Chrism. I think those are examples that it can be done here. It is certainly a prelude to what can happen on a larger, fuller, and more complete scale of Orthodox unity in America ... for all of us in this country. I think this is the hope, and the role that the OCA has to play. The OCA has functioned as an autocephalous Church for forty years now. Many of our faithful -- the young of age and converts -- have never been under the authority of a "Mother Church" and only know the authority of an autocephalous OCA. At the same time, some of the other autocephalous Churches do not recognize our autocephaly at all. I think that about one-third recognize the OCA autocephaly, one-third reject it, and one-third are neutral on the matter. But, we are not universally recognized as the autocephalous Church in this country, and that has its problems. On the other hand, we -- OCA bishops -- were received with kindness and openness, and without a hint, at least any that I observed or felt, of any contentiousness.

Question: In relation to this problem, it is the case presently that the OCA bishops are included in the General Assembly of Hierarchs but are not represented with a seat on the Executive Committee. What are your thoughts about this?

Bishop Michael: That is correct. All of the canonical bishops, including our bishops -- His Beatitude, Archbishops, Bishops, and auxiliary Bishops of the OCA -- participate in the Assembly. We have a voice. We have a vote. The other hierarchs treated us very kindly and with respect. In the Executive Committee, that will continue and guide the work of the Assembly between assemblies, His Beatitude is presently not seated. And, that was based on the fact that the OCA is not part of an autocephalous Church that is universally recognized. That being the case, it is somewhat disappointing because we are guiding a significant number of Orthodox Christians in America ... and it is disappointing that His Beatitude's leadership is not being recognized on that Executive Committee at this point. However, we continue to work toward the goal of one Church in this country through the vehicle of this Episcopal Assembly. Our bishops continue to work for that. And, His Beatitude has accepted this and spoken about it, with humility. And, we have agreed to work -- and will work -- on various committees within the framework of the Assembly. For the future, the work of the hierarchs in committees will deal with questions of liturgical matters and practice, pastoral issues, theological and parochial education, ecumenical relations, the chaplaincy, monasteries, etc. ... all of these different aspects of Church life in this country are going to be examined, and I am hopeful that we will be able to eliminate some of the irregularities -- the discrepancies -- that we have. For instance, how we receive people into the faith; our relationships with Roman Catholics and Protestants; membership in the WCC; guidelines on the relationship between frequent communion and frequent confession; or, how long one should fast before the reception of the Eucharist. Each bishop was invited to volunteer to serve on committees of our choice ... and, yes, our bishops will be participating and working in those committees, and that work will be a giant step forward.

Question: *So, the committees will be formed and their work will begin as guided by the Executive Committee. What's next? Has a date been set for the Assembly to reconvene?*

Bishop Michael: A date has not been set yet, to my knowledge. It is agreed that we will meet again, in a year. Every year we are going to meet, and we can meet more often if His Eminence, Archbishop +Demetrios [Chairman of the Assembly, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate] on behalf of the Executive Committee chooses to call for an additional meeting, or if one-third of the bishops of the region feel it is necessary to meet. Moving forward, SCOBA, which was the meeting of the jurisdictional heads representing all of the canonical bishops, has now been succeeded by this Episcopal Assembly where all of the canonical bishops will meet and the jurisdictional heads will guide and continue the Assembly's work in the Executive Committee. So, there is a greater substantive collegiality and ecclesiological correctness to this format. And, there is another very important fact: this Assembly has the blessing of all the "Mother Churches." SCOBA was created independently, so to speak. It was a gathering of the bishops on their own initiative ... and it evolved into what it became. But this begins with the blessing of all the "Mother Churches." This has a greater potential, I believe, and a much greater impetus and substance to it. In general, my experience with all these bishops was extremely and completely positive. Obviously, I was the most junior bishop there ... and they knew I was recently consecrated in the OCA ... and everyone was very kind. The spirit of the gathering was never contentious, it was positive ... a little subdued, I would say ... but positive. In the social gatherings everyone was cordial, getting to know one another. Many of these bishops had never met before. I think that is very significant; they met together face-to-face for the first time. They got to talk about "Where is your diocesan headquarters? How many parishes do you have?" Everyone was very kind and positive. In that sense, it was a wonderful thing. We prayed together, communed at Liturgy together, met in sessions together, ate meals together ... these are things that fifty-six bishops in our region have never, ever, done together before. And so, it is a great blessing.

Question: *What would you ask of the clergy and laity of your diocese?*

Bishop Michael: I think there are three things. First of all, I think our parishes need to be about the business of The Church. We need to be growing in our communities and in our personal faith. We need to come closer to Christ; attend more services; commune more frequently with proper preparation in confession and prayer; read the Scriptures; do the work of the parish community and within the diocese; reach-out to people in need. We need to be living witnesses of the vision of the Orthodox Church in America, which is to do the work of the Lord ... bringing people to the faith that was given to the saints once and for all ... and receiving them into that faith. But also, at the other end of the spectrum, to help those in need -- through acts of charity -- regardless of who that "neighbor" may be or where, or how, we might find him. So, I think it is important to make our parishes strong in their relationship with our Lord and in the communal love and fellowship among the faithful; as a witness to both the community that is Orthodox and to the much greater community that is not Orthodox. Second of all, I think it is important for our priests and parishes to be involved in pan-Orthodox, inter-jurisdictional, activities as much as possible: to support one another, to strengthen clergy brotherhoods,

