

2013 Fall Meeting of the Metropolitan Council

September 23-26, 2013

East Norwich, NY

by Fr. John Shimchick

Prior to the Metropolitan Council (MC) sessions, a Retreat for members was offered on Monday September 23 at Our Lady of Kazan Church in Sea Cliff, NY on the topic of ***Conflict Resolution: A Christian Perspective***. Led by Fr. Nicholas Solak and Professor Al Rossi, the Retreat provided both reflection and the development of practical skills for looking at the issues and attitudes that divide individuals and organizations, particularly churches and the bodies that are meant to guide and support them (such as parish, diocesan, and metropolitan councils). Most often we are prepared to either avoid or be aggressive toward accomplishing our own goals in resolving conflict (“flight” or “fight”). But for those who are willing not just to argue or to win at all costs, but to listen patiently to the other’s position and to deal with ambiguity and disharmony, they can find that the process can be transformative, broadening both the context of the issue and themselves.

There were many valuable things shared during this Retreat, but for now I would just like to share two sections. First, Metropolitan Leonty was presented in the beginning as a model for the Christian Resolution of conflict:

He consistently worked for harmony and unity, calmly and kindly, yet with awesome strength and undaunted courage. In the face of the most violent and virulent denunciations that labeled and libeled his beloved Church as “schismatic” and “uncanonical” – and even, at times, “graceless” and “heretical” – the saintly Metropolitan’s face always beamed with a forgiving smile, filled with light and peace. He never wavered. He never slandered. He never condemned. And he surely never returned evil for evil. (from *The Orthodox Newspaper*)

Then Dr. Rossi offered a summary of the principles he has found most helpful:

- 1) Separate people from the problem
- 2) Focus on common interests
- 3) Invent options for mutual gain
- 4) Insist on objective criteria
- 5) Avoid language of enemies

In the end it is necessary to conclude that, while certain skills can perhaps be learned, “only Christ can resolve conflict,” and as Metropolitan Tikhon would later say in his own report, we are “all on the same team.”

Though he was not present for the Retreat, Professor Paul Meyendorff offered a reflection, “*Does the OCA Still Have a Vision?*”, which was distributed but not really discussed in much detail. Since I believe it has significance for our work as a Diocesan Council as well, I have included it at the end of this report.

The actual work of the MC began on Tuesday. A good summary of the sessions can be found on the OCA website (September 27 - <http://oca.org/news/headline-news/metropolitan-council-approves-balanced-2014-budget-recommends-atlanta-as-aa>). In this report, I will review those areas in which I was involved and the topics I feel are of interest to our Diocese.

REORGANIZATION WORK GROUP

Over the past year I have been particularly concerned with the “*Reorganization Task Force*” or “*Work Group*” -- becoming its Chair at the last MC meeting. This Group, was composed of the Lesser Synod, the Officers, and several members of the MC (Jan Van Duyn, Fr. David Lowell, and Maureen Jury (who was unable to fully participate due to health problems). Our mandate was

to prepare an initial draft on what is the work of the Church and where, centrally or locally, it can be most effectively done.

In June, 2013, we received over 100 pages of “unfiltered” work logs for the Chancery operations as detailed for the weeks of May 12-24. These included the daily activities of everyone from Metropolitan Tikhon, Church Officers, all staff, and Department chairs. In addition, I consulted by phone with nearly all of the members of the Holy Synod, reviewing how they perceived the work of the National Church from the perspective of their own Diocesan needs.

Here is part of our conclusions:

The hierarchs and Group were quite satisfied with the level and quality of the work done at the various levels, particularly by the Officers. In fact, it was generally acknowledged that greater awareness of these efforts would be valuable and should somehow be made available to the broader membership of the OCA. It was affirmed that as in life, “you get what you pay for,” and maintaining quality staff in a reasonable way while living in an expensive part of the country does have its legitimate expenses.

Several hierarchs noted that as an Autocephalous Church it is essential that we are prepared to deal with our own internal needs and to have the necessary expertise to present ourselves both to the rest of the Orthodox world and to the non-Orthodox in America.

The underlying tension for some was not the value of the work being done or the integrity of the individuals represented (particularly the Officers), but the ability of the Church to financially sustain these efforts. Relying on the existing method of assessments, based on the “head tax” of members, has proven unreliable, with declining memberships in some Dioceses. It is important, some have suggested, to establish healthier models of support based on proportional giving as well as to have “stewardship based” resources, such as was provided by the Fellowship of Orthodox Stewards (FOS).

The preferred recommended approach was not to explore avenues of reducing the staff or their salaries, but to guide and strengthen the life of our parishes. As expressed by one

hierarchy, “When the hull of a ship rises, the entire ship rises,” so it is with parishes, Diocesan life, and our whole Church.

Certain “overlaps” were noted by the Group, especially as relates to decision-making and the process of responding to emails. However, it was not clear how much actual duplication these represented, particularly as understood from the financial perspective of employee’s time, and how much of this may have been necessary and perhaps even valuable (utilizing additional eyes and ears who can be sensitive in perceiving the proper context and tone of an issue).

When the hierarchs were asked about their Diocesan interactions with National Departments, most acknowledged that while some areas are best done on local levels (particularly youth work and mission), others like the identification and availability of professionals in the area of Sexual Misconduct are essential. The financial resources provided by the Department of Evangelization’s “Mission Planting Grant” can rarely be duplicated on a Diocesan-level. The instant online access to well-set liturgical texts and music produced by the Department of Liturgical Music are much appreciated. No doubt, the upcoming online training sessions for choir directors (first piloted in the Diocese of NY & NJ) will help greatly, with minimal expense. Online materials prepared by the Department of Christian Education are also easily accessible.

Our initial review of these worklogs has assured us of the great amount of work being done throughout the levels of our Church Administration. The MC asked us to continue this review and try to determine if there are specific areas where the transfer of work and financial responsibility might be shifted between the National Church and Dioceses. One area that came to mind was the expense of psychological background testing for seminary graduates pursuing ordination: Should that expense, now covered by the OCA, be the responsibility of the Diocese for which the graduate will be serving? (Right now, it is \$1,500.)

2014 OCA BUDGET

Melanie Ringa presented a review of the 2013 budget, the results of the external audit, and proposals for the 2014 budget. According to the resolution of the 16th All-American Council, the assessment will be reduced to \$92.00 per adult member—the second reduction in as many years. In response, the 2014 income budget was reduced by \$95,000.00, while budgeted expenses were reduced by \$125,000.00, thereby realizing a balanced budget for 2014. In addition to a reduction in expenses, the 2014 budget reflects a voluntary 5% pay cut for the Metropolitan and officers of the Church and a change in staff health insurance, which yielded a savings of an additional \$34,000.00.

PENSION PLAN

While the Plan as presented by its representatives is considered strong, nevertheless, it was pointed out that only about one third of the OCA’s clergy are participants (and more than half of that group is over 55). As many are aware, fewer companies are providing pension benefits to their employees and so all clergy and parishes need to follow the Resolution of several

All-American Councils that have made participation of all clergy mandatory. It was noted that the benefits currently provided for contributions of 12% (6% from clergy / 6% from parishes) usually require a higher rate of contribution, closer to 20%. With this in mind, the Pension Board recommended that to maintain the current strength of the Plan, the rate of contributions be increase to 14% -- the additional 2% increase being the responsibility of the parishes.

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

While sexual misconduct is a subject that perhaps many are tired of hearing about, it has become obvious that greater awareness and preparedness continue to be required of clergy and parishes. The Church's *Policies, Standards, and Procedures on Sexual Misconduct*. (PSPS), as acknowledged by our Legal Committee, will always be to some extent "a work in progress." The Holy Synod is reviewing the updated documents, and it is hoped that they will be approved during their Fall Session.

BEING THE CHURCH

Finally, for me, the hopefulness that is provided in the review of the OCA's life which takes place during the Metropolitan Council was given in the words expressed by the hierarch of another Orthodox Church. He stated, "You in the OCA are always trying to defend your autocephaly. Don't spend so much time explaining: just be the Autocephalous Church."

There may be lots of things we are still not doing or doing as well as we might. Yet, I left the meeting encouraged by the broad, solid efforts of our leadership and the significant work being done on many levels of church life. There are some voices that, while seeming to express the same language found so often in politics between the work and rights of states over the national government, seek as well to emphasize the work of strong, robust dioceses over the national church. I am more convinced, in the words of Metropolitan Tikhon mentioned earlier, that we all are and must "be on the same team." Even in our own Diocese, there may have been a time when we needed to think only about ourselves, even simply as individual parishes. But the time has arrived for us to continue in prayer and effort to desire the growth and stability of our entire Church. "When the hull of a ship rises, the entire ship rises," one of our hierarchs said. So it will be with our parishes, Diocesan life, and our Orthodox Church in America.

Does the OCA Still Have a Vision?

by Paul Meyendorff
Metropolitan Council Member

Following the Russian Revolution, the old Russian mission to America found itself in a precarious situation. Funds and support from Russia were cut off, and the Metropolia, as it came to be called, found itself isolated not only from the Russian Church, which broke all relations, but also from the other Orthodox Churches. The vision of Archbishop, later Patriarch Tikhon, for a united, autocephalous, local church in America seemed futile.

Yet that vision was never lost. Despite all the trials (including not a few court trials!) and hardships, the leadership of our church never lost hope. Though we became just one jurisdiction among the many that were created in the ensuing years, we never saw ourselves merely as another ethnic group, nor as people living in diaspora. No, we were here to stay, and we wanted to promote Orthodoxy in and for the society in which we lived. We founded seminaries and monasteries, we translated and published service books in English, we sent Orthodox chaplains into the military... We were here to stay, and we had a vision!

So it was that a miracle came to pass in 1970. A totally unexpected opening occurred, which allowed our church to regularize its canonical status vis-a-vis the Church of Russia and, more importantly, become an autocephalous, local church. Our founders understood this to be both a blessing and a tremendous responsibility. We were to be the vehicle that would bring about that long-desired unity. We had a call to look beyond ourselves and to invite all the Orthodox in this land to share in that vision and that joy. We knew that this unity would not easily be achieved, but we saw it as our mission.

This enthusiasm remained strong in the years following our autocephaly. Through our ecclesial vision, through our revived liturgical life, through our seminaries and their leaders, the OCA had a reputation, throughout the Orthodox world as a church that did not just look to the past, but to the future. We were attracting many converts. Our liturgical life, renewed through the influence of men like Fr Alexander Schmemmann, was (and remains) a model for many Orthodox churches throughout the world. Our conciliar structures, which involve bishops, clergy, and laity together in church governance, are envied by Orthodox everywhere. So where has this vision gone?

In my numerous trips abroad, I am often asked: "What has happened to the OCA? You were our hope for the future of Orthodoxy!" To this question, there are several answers. On the surface, the problem is simple, ordinary, human sin. We and our leaders succumbed to mundane passions of greed, lust, power... But in doing so, have we not also lost that bright vision of a united church in North America that could witness to the truth of Orthodoxy in a society that so often feels lost? How can we speak of a united church when we ourselves are divided? We find ourselves living in isolation from one another, parish from parish, diocese from diocese, everyone from the "central church" in Syosset. The result is a kind of parochialism at every level: the parish, the diocese, and yes, even at the "central church" in Syosset.

None of these can exist in isolation, precisely because Christ came to break the separation that existed between humanity and God, and also between human beings. To be Christian, to be Orthodox, means to be in communion with both God and with others. In the words of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, to be human is to be **in communion**. The most perfect expression of that communion in this world is the eucharistic communion that we experience in the Orthodox Church, and which is the visible expression of our unity. But this communion needs to be real, and we should all heed the warning of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:20 when he tells the divided Christians of Corinth that "It is not the Lord's Supper that you eat." That gift of unity that we receive from God needs to be lived and experienced in everyday life, and at every level of church life.

What is our task as members of the Metropolitan Council? It is certainly to represent our dioceses, but it is also more than that. In fact, our task, together with the Synod of Bishops and the central administration, is to foster that vision that our fathers and mothers in the faith experienced when that miracle was given us in 1970.

The challenge, and the question we have to ask ourselves, is whether we share that vision and whether we are willing to work for it. That work needs to be done at every level:

- By the individual parishioner whose life is a shining example to others at home, in the workplace, and in society.
- By the parish through its liturgical and social ministry, as well as in its cooperation with other parishes and outreach to the local community. By the diocese, led by its bishop, which coordinates and supervises the work of the parishes.
- By the Holy Synod and the central church administration, which coordinate the work of the dioceses, maintain good relations with other Orthodox jurisdictions and churches, and witness to Orthodoxy in the public and ecumenical arenas, both nationally and internationally.

The task is daunting, and it can only be carried out when there is cooperation and a shared vision.

- Do we share that vision?
- Are we willing to work for it?

What are the practical steps that we, as the Metropolitan Council, need to take at this point?