

Making Unity Happen

by Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

"A new commandment I give to you, that you should love each other even as I have loved you …" (John 13:34-35). In successive weeks in July I attended the 14th All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America and the 47th Convention of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. I was an observer at the OCA Council in Toronto, whose theme was Our Church and the Future, and also served as guardian for two of our grandchildren, who participated in the youth program, Becoming What You Are. At the AOCA Convention in Detroit I gave two talks on the convention theme, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2). I also delivered the main address at the Grand Banquet. A main point in my presentations was that Orthodox unity in North America will happen when our churches prove that they are "not conformed to this world" by sacrificing their pride, power, prestige, possessions and pleasures for the sake of being united in one church.

As official church assemblies, the two gatherings were the same in substance and spirit. Clergy and lay delegates heard reports, discussed issues and made decisions about their church's life and work. Other participants observed the proceedings. And still others, including many young people, engaged in educational and recreational activities and events. The AOCA Convention was longer, larger and more multi-faceted than the OCA Council. It also had an ethnic dimension (Arabic, of course) that was wholly absent from the OCA Council (although the Romanian, Albanian and Bulgarian dioceses in the OCA have assemblies dealing with ethnic interests similar to the "ethnic aspect" of the Antiochian Convention).

The AOCA Convention also had events with music and dancing, which the OCA Council did not. Matins and Vespers were served daily at each assembly. The AOCA Convention also had Bible study in the morning and Compline at night. Priests served the Divine Liturgies at the AOCA Convention, except for the final Lord's Day Liturgy served by Metropolitan Philip and his brother bishops. Metropolitan Herman and his fellow hierarchs celebrated the three Divine Liturgies at the OCA Council. Many participants took advantage of opportunities for sacramental confession at both assemblies. Some Arabic was used at the liturgical services in Detroit, although most of each service and all of the sermons were in English. The preaching and singing at both gatherings were superb.

Both assemblies had programs for young people. The AOCA Convention witnessed the last rounds of a Bible Bowl for young people on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, and an Oratorical Contest on themes related to Romans 12:2. Metropolitan Philip and the bishops attended these events as an integral part of the convention proceedings. The teenage teams and orators in these two events were the winners of regional competitions in the seven AOCA dioceses.

There were no contests for young people at the OCA Council, but representatives from each age group in the youth program made moving presentations at the assembly's final session. Over eighty volunteers covered their own expenses to come to Toronto to care for the youth. Many who attended the two assemblies felt that the presence and participation of the young church members were their most inspiring and encouraging feature.

An amazing thing happened at the final Divine Liturgies at both assemblies that was certainly planned by God. It was exactly the same thing, and was completely spontaneous. During Holy Communion, while the hundreds of priests and people were partaking of Christ's Body and Blood, choirs of young people at both liturgies led the communicants in singing the entire Polyeleon (Psalm 136) in the lively Greek melody (sometimes called "Athonite"). And at both liturgies, immediately after the festive psalm, the same youngsters led the faithful in singing the Carpathian folk hymn consisting of Christ's words, "A new commandment I give to you, that you should love each other even as I have loved you …" (John 13:34-35). This remarkable coincidence was clearly orchestrated by the Lord Himself. It was His message, delivered through His children, that His churches

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The OCA Council and the AOCA Convention should act at all times and in every way to "become what they are" when they partake of Holy Communion.

A high point of the OCA Council was a taped video message by Bishop Basil of Wichita of the AOCA. The popular hierarch spoke about the common history of the two churches in North America. He emphasized the need for the OCA to continue to serve as a catalyst for the unity of all Orthodox churches in the new world. And he stressed the necessity of strengthening relations between the two churches that would result in their eventual unification, and that of Orthodoxy as a whole in North America. Bishop Basil's message, like the forceful words on Orthodox unity by Metropolitans Herman and Philip, were received with enthusiastic applause.

The two assemblies in July demonstrated beyond any doubt that "the hour has come" for the Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America to glorify God, and to have God glorified in them, by dying to themselves as distinct ecclesiastical entities in order to be raised into one church body. (See John 13:31-32.) The two churches share a common history in North America from the time of Saint Tikhon and Saint Raphael. Changing the changeable in ethnic traditions and interests, their committed members are exactly the same kind of

people. Both churches have a significant number of converts to Orthodoxy among their clergy and laity. The seven Antiochian bishops include three born in America, one of whom is a convert to Orthodoxy, the only one not of Arabic origin. The Orthodox Church in America hierarchy includes nine bishops born in the USA, one born in Canada, one in Mexico, one in Bulgaria and one in Romania. Eight of the thirteen OCA bishops are converts to Orthodoxy. Two of the OCA's hierarchs, one being the metropolitan and the other a convert, are of Slav/Russian heritage. Two are of Romanian nationality, one being a convert. And one each are of Bulgarian, Albanian and Serbian blood. What an impressive synod these bishops could form to govern a unified Orthodox Church in North America!

We can imagine a first assembly of this new church body. The primate would be chosen by lot from two candidates, one presented by each of the churches. A suitable person (for example, someone like the elder Archimandrite Roman Braga) would pick his name from a chalice after an All-night Vigil, Divine Liturgy and Service of Prayer. If deemed necessary and permitted by the Patriarchate of Antioch, an Arabic-speaking archbishop from North America could continue to sit on the Patriarchal Synod in Damascus as long as this was required and desired. The bishops of the church's regional dioceses would have different cities for their titles and cathedrals. They would continue at first to govern their flocks mostly as they now do, especially when ethnic considerations must be honored for pastoral reasons. They would implement plans for working in harmony with each other, and with the Orthodox hierarchs and churches still governed from abroad. Little by little, with prudence, patience and many sacrifices, the church's various ministries would be unified as conditions demanded and allowed. Funding of church activities and projects would slowly and gradually be combined. Church properties would remain in control of their present owners until common ownership could be achieved. Their use by all Orthodox Christians would be governed by the bishops in the respective dioceses, and by all the governing bishops in the church's common synod.

The Orthodox Church in North America would, of course, continue to support Orthodox churches, institutions and missions around the world, especially those closest to its members. North American support for Orthodox work abroad would grow greater and more effective as the churches in the new world became more deeply unified and united. All Orthodox churches in the United States, Canada and Mexico would be invited to join in the common work of the new church according to their convictions and circumstances. No Orthodox would be excluded. All Orthodox would be welcome.

In his report to the AOCA Convention, and in his printed message in the convention book, Metropolitan Philip declared that "nothing will happen unless we make it happen." Thousands of Orthodox believers in North America agree with him. Certainly those who participated in the assemblies in Toronto and Detroit demonstrated that they do. And they also demonstrated in word and deed that the time has finally come for the Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America to make unity happen between them for God's glory and the good of God's people. May the Lord, with whom all things are possible, grant that this unity be actualized at their next assembly convened in common in 2008.