

Rector's Reflection: General Meeting Of Holy Trinity Cathedral 2016

I.

Orthodoxy and the Pan-Orthodox Council In Crete

As some of you know, this past summer, during the week of Pentecost (June 19-26), bishops throughout the Orthodox world gathered in council on the island of Crete. Such a gathering of hierarchs had not occurred for over a thousand years. The council was comprised of bishops representing ten of the fourteen universally recognized autocephalous churches. Absent were the representatives of the churches of Antioch, Georgia, Russia and Bulgaria. As for our church, the Orthodox Church in America, whose autocephaly is not universally recognized, no invitation from the pre-council committee was extended to members of our synod to attend even as observers.

While the absence of five local churches can be considered a deficiency relative to the council's makeup, the fact that the council took place at all is in and of itself a major accomplishment for the Orthodox Church in the 21st century.

Preparation for the council extends back to almost sixty years. The fruit of these years was the Church gathering to begin addressing issues that challenge its life and work in a post modern world. Given that the council met for only one week, the number of issues addressed was limited. Time was spent on improving and honing statements on Ecumenism, Marriage, Diaspora, Mission and Fasting. One can sense from these texts, even in their often officious, incomplete and overly cautious tone, the need for the Church to grapple with the issues of our time if it is to faithfully continue the work of Christ in and for the life of the world.

It is not my intent to make this reflection into a detailed critique of what is being called – prematurely in my opinion – the “Great and Holy Council.” Many, including myself, have expressed in writing to the participating hierarchs criticism regarding the lack of theological, historical and pastoral breadth and depth of the council's official statements. Therefore, I am making these introductory remarks about the council so as to focus our attention on two interconnected issues that will hopefully be treated more comprehensively in future pan-Orthodox councils. These issues are secularism and globalization. The council documents primarily express a negative attitude towards secularism and globalization especially with regards to marriage, the structure and stability of the family, the approach to and implementation of the sciences (particularly bio-technology), and inter and intra religious dialog.

For the remainder of this reflection I would like to point out in broad brush strokes the positive benefits offered to the Orthodox Church within a secularized and globalized social context. In no way should this approach be taken to mean that these benefits mitigate the political, cultural, legal, and religious challenges

that come with a secularized and globalized environment. On the contrary, to appreciate the benefits we must also appreciate the challenges and risks.

II. Orthodoxy and Secularism

From a theological perspective secularism has made its greatest impact on the concept and reality of the transcendent. Even if it has not totally denied the existence of God and the transcendent, secularism has certainly minimized their importance. Consequently the human person stands as an autonomous being having little interest in establishing communion with either the divine or one's neighbor. From this perspective it is the *individual* detached from God and neighbor who becomes the standard for self-understanding. This shift from *God and neighbor* to the *ego* also becomes the basis for understanding, evaluating and defining every one and every thing as it relates to the self. As Father Alexander Schmemmann pointed out many years ago, the result of this shift leads to major misunderstandings of liturgy and its relationship to life. Through the lens of a secular mindset liturgy ceases to be an encounter with God and neighbor. No longer is it an epiphany and celebration of the "*endowed kingdom that is to come.*" No longer is it the offering and sanctification of all creation. Instead, liturgy is relegated to an activity that is no more or less important than any other facet of daily life. Liturgy ceases to be life and life ceases to be liturgy. The result of this reduction is the transformation of liturgy into a private ritual that exists to satisfy one's individual needs. Liturgy as a communal act "*on behalf of all and for all*" becomes a self-serving enterprise. Divorced from the totality of life – from birth, death and the eschaton – secularism virtually renders the liturgy meaningless.

Given all of this, secularism still offers the Church including our parish many opportunities. Our secular context allows us to stand free of any political or social institution and its accompanying ethos. Thanks to secularism our existence as a local church does not depend on the support of the existing government. This allows the Orthodox Church to freely contribute to the building up of the culture without being obliged to cater to or to promote any political party or institution. Consequently, unlike other local Orthodox churches, we are not expected to promote a geo-political agenda that replaces theology with ideology. In fact, because of secularism the Orthodox Church is free to criticize the government without fear of reprisal.

Because of secularism the Church is challenged to offer the Gospel of Christ without the aid of any institution of worldly power. This means that the Church, if it is to change the minds and hearts of people, cannot be a lobby representing any political or special interest group by which it seeks to *impose* the Gospel on the lives of others. The life and word of the Church must be the means by which it draws others to the new life in Christ.

Being in a secular context offers the Church the opportunity to assume a humble place in the culture i.e. a place in the culture in which it bears the burdens of all people as it offers the mercy, forgiveness and unending love of its Lord and Savior.

III. Orthodoxy and Globalization

Unfolding within our secular culture is the ever-expanding reality of globalization that has given rise to religious pluralism. On the one hand religious pluralism is not something new. For millennia various religious groups have co-existed either as friends or as enemies in which case one group seeks to forcefully persecute, subjugate and even convert the other. In spite of the rise in Islamophobia, religious intolerance in the West is, for the time being, an aberration.

As Orthodox Christians in America we peacefully co-exist with other Christians as well as with many who are not Christians. We live in a country where there is no state church. And though we are not persecuted, as were the Christians of the first three centuries, the religious pluralism of our time has more in common with the pre-Constantinian era than with the Christian empire. We live in a country where the religious makeup of its citizens is anything but monolithic. Being a small, sociologically insignificant and poor church allows us once again to be dependent on and thankful for the gifts of the Spirit who makes possible the proclamation of the Gospel.

Religious pluralism can instill insecurity and vulnerability in the minds and hearts of those adhering to a particular belief system. Comparing and contrasting one's religion with those with which it co-exists is inevitable. Consequently, one of the greatest challenges accompanying religious pluralism in a free society is the possibility to choose and therefore the possibility to leave one religion – one creed - for another. The changing of one's religion is often preceded by doubt brought on not only by ignorance, indifference and/or insecurity in the life and tenets of a given faith but also by what is perceived as new, challenging and vivifying in other belief systems. Doubt and change also occur when one's religion espouses or is perceived to espouse enmity and even hatred towards a particular group or groups that question and challenge the status quo of a given faith system. The absence of dialog and the unwillingness of a given faith to re-examine or cross-examine what it perceives as its unchangeable ethos is basically an invitation for many to leave what is most loved and cherished in their lives. With this exodus one is left with two options, either to assume another religious identity or to remain outside organized religion all together.

Yet doubt can also bolster one's faith. For an Orthodox Christian doubt can serve as a catalyst to question and probe the Church's life and thought. Doubt can awaken one from the ennui of taking one's faith for granted and can draw one into a deeper understanding and experience of the living God. In the hymnody for the Apostle Thomas we sing about his "good" or "virtuous doubt" (καλή ἀπιστία). It is this probing doubt that led him to proclaim and confess Christ as his Lord and God. It is this probing doubt that can emerge from a religious pluralism that opens our minds and hearts to the universal Spirit of truth who is everywhere present and filling all things. It is this probing doubt that can affirm the presence of Christ wherever truth, goodness and beauty can be found and embraced.

Whether we want to accept it or not, secularism and pluralism are not going away any time soon. Whether we want to admit it or not, our Church exists in a culture grounded in secularism and pluralism. In recognizing this reality we Orthodox Christians have two paths from which to choose. We can either retreat into a ghetto and pretend to close ourselves off from our surroundings or we can take advantage of the fact that in the American context secularism and pluralism offer us the opportunity to discover and implement a new and vibrant freedom that flows not from the power and prominence of institutions but from the power of the cross.

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