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## **“Us” vs. “Them”**

Inga Leonova

*“The entire climate of deception and deceit is quite healthy and flourishing... Satan's cold hand and club are right in the midst of those men who wear the garments of humility...”* – Recent anonymous posting on OCAnews.org forum

*“It is over. They are gone.”* – Bishop Jonah, 15<sup>th</sup> AAC address, Tuesday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

With all due respect to His Beatitude, unfortunately it is not over. What we are witnessing now is that the surgery has come too late, and the surgery was not enough. Removing the tumor did not fully cure the cancer which has been spreading for over 20 years. The metastases of the disease are many and varied. Some of them are easily traced back to the “old culture” of deceit and corruption. But the ones I would like to look at do not seem to bother many of the active participants of our ongoing discussions, and yet to me they seem to signify the depth of our ecclesiastical disintegration. I am talking about the ongoing “civil war” in our Church, the culture of watchdogs, inflammatory rhetoric, knee-jerk reactions, cheap politics, and the general unhealthy atmosphere of mistrust and easy slander. We have the presumed “us” watching “them” like hawks and pouncing on every real or perceived (or misrepresented) transgression. We have “them” expressing desire, sometimes within “our” earshot, of putting “us” “into place”. Both have painful history and real grievances to justify their attitudes. The question is, where are we going with this kind of ethos?

Let me begin by getting some facts straight. First of all, continuing to equate Syosset with Mordor, as some of the wittier posters on the online forums do, is mean-spirited and unwarranted. The Chancery of the OCA is not the Dark Tower. The Chancery is the place of repose of the saintly Metropolitan Leonty, and his spirit will endure in those walls long after the ghosts of the later transgressors will be exorcised. The St. Sergius Chapel is a place sanctified by the many relics of the saints of North America and filled with some 50 years of fervent prayer. Syosset also houses the precious archives of the OCA, our entire history from the first American saints through the years of the Metropolia and into our autocephaly. The Griswold estate was a gift to the Church and it is as much part of our turbulent history as the Holy Protection Cathedral or the Kodiak Island. So let us get over the Mordor image already.

Second, the administration that occupies the offices of the Chancery is not an abstract “force” to contend with. The “administration” is made up of real people, grossly understaffed as a result of the reorganization that was more reactive than constructive, and we have all seen and heard them and presumably know, at least to some extent, what they are worth. Over many months we have witnessed their heroic efforts to keep afloat a sinking ship that to some appeared so damaged it was beyond repair - and sinking fast. Those of us who are still obsessed with money more than anything else have been shown that it is possible to balance the budget in spite of the dwindling stewardship and mounting legal expenses. Moreover, we have witnessed acts of personal courage. Our Chancellor has put his head on the chopping block by writing an open letter to the Alaskan clergy when the Synod backed out of their poorly conceived

and incomplete effort to deal with Bishop Nikolai. Have we forgotten all that? If yes, why?

Third, the convenient excuse that keeps resurfacing that there was a (still debated, but relatively small) number of “goats” who abused their positions and led the multitude of “sheep” off the cliff is only partially true. Certainly the “goats”, named and unnamed, existed and abused their positions and, by extension, abused the Church. But that does not make the rest of us “sheep”. We are all complicit in what had happened. We were, if nothing else, the enablers, some of us by virtue of knowing things and letting them happen, but many, if not most, by virtue of happily cheering the former administration along because their PR efforts were making us look like a “real Church” – because, as somebody eloquently quipped before, Kondratich took the OCA “from the back kitchen into Clinton’s parlor.” Our focus shifted from the light of Christ and our evangelical mission in America to our “status” as an American Church, and we are paying for this dearly. It is not just our leadership who betrayed us; we betrayed our leadership as well.

Does the new administration do everything perfectly? Of course not. Has the Synod been completely transformed and is it fully functional? That remains to be seen. But to keep them in crosshairs is not my idea of working together to restore the trust and accountability in our Church. Trust and accountability have to be mutual, otherwise they are not real.

Those of us who thought that the newly elected Metropolitan is the new Messiah who would deliver the suffering OCA from its trials with the sweep of his hand are going to be bitterly disappointed. The Metropolitan’s staff is no magic wand, and it is not King Aragorn’s sword, either. By the way, to ride *The Lord of the Rings* analogy a little further, King Aragorn started out as Strider. He grew into the King after much trial and some error, and he grew because he knew his purpose, but he also grew because he had loyalty and support and, first and foremost, **love** of those who shared that purpose. Well, we are not creatures of a fantasy world. We call ourselves Christians, and our catechism teaches us that it is love above everything else that saves the world and that makes us God’s children. Where is the love that we give to each other and to our shepherds? When we speak our mind, even if we believe that we speak the truth, do we do it in love? Or are we rallying up to cry “crucify him” (“them”), blinded by our “righteous anger”?

The Internet has given us unprecedented freedom of speech, and it has also taken away much of the restraint that was not a product of fear, but of prudence. How did our discourse become a free-for-all? Why, several months after the AAC, are so many people still posting anonymously, and, more importantly, why are we sustaining it? There is nothing easier than to fire a cheap shot without signing one’s name.\* What does it say about us? All that is fostered is the continuation of a bar brawl in place of what is supposed to be a conciliar process.

(To qualify the above statement, certainly there are, just as there were from the beginning, many thoughtful, measured, well-reasoned postings that reveal great depths of discernment and wisdom. Yet too often they get drowned in the sea of less-than-meaningful, but very loud, screams that cancel out all possibility of respectful discussion.)

So the question is, *Quo bene?* Who benefits from this continuing opposition? I daresay only the evil one does. For in the Church there can be no “us” vs. “them”, even when we encounter frightening manifestations of evil in “our own”. Our one and only opposition is us, as in Christ’s Church, vs. the evil one. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Eph.6:12)

When one ponders the whole issue of how we must deal with each other in a Christian manner, one is reminded of the ability of the best among our pastors to see everyone they talk to, no matter how unbalanced or malicious or rude, as a **person**, as someone who bears the image of God. This certainly requires great charity and mercy and is overall a manifestation of an ascetic effort which is, after all, what we as Christians are called to. I find myself thinking about that every time I read about “Satan’s cold hand” or that “they are hopeless”. Do those writers even pause to think about who “they” are, or do they just see an abstract image, even if that image may be a fruit of journalistic fiction?

The web has liberated us and connected us, but it has also made us somewhat impersonal. We should try to go back to being personal, because the Church is nothing but personal. When it ceases to be about persons, it manifests itself as bowing down to the world. It is the world that is all about principles and concepts and groups and parties. The Church is all about **persons**, because it is first and foremost about the **person** of Jesus Christ. Not the principle, not the Law, but the **Person**. Quite recently Fr. Robert Arida, responding to the question of whether the OCA crisis was over, said that the Church was always in crisis by virtue of its existence in the fallen world. And that pronouncement goes way beyond our daily minutia. It goes to the heart of always needing to discern between the way of the cross and the way of the world. How much compromise is too much? How much of dragging the ways of the world and its politics, be it even good ways and good politics, into the Church ends up transforming it into an institution of the world, into the “New York religious corporation?” Too much of our today’s process is being modeled on the ways of the world – the corporate world of our democratic state. Perhaps if we try to relate to each other as persons, not groups, we will get out from behind the crosshairs and regain the understanding of our conciliarity. Until then, it will always be “us” and “them”, and the evil one will rejoice.

\*This comment does not apply to the recent discussion on the problem in the Antiochian Archdiocese since the contributors to that discussion are in a similar place many of the members of the OCA were three years ago.

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