

## ORTHODOXY IN AMERICA—REVISITED

*Rejoice, O mountains of Pennsylvania;  
leap for joy, O waters of the Great Lakes;  
rise up, O fertile plains of Canada;  
for the elect of Christ who dwelt in you are glorified,  
men and women who left their homes for a new land!  
With faith, hope and patience as their armor,  
they courageously fought the good fight.  
Comforted by the beauty of the Orthodox Faith,  
they labored in mines and mills, they tilled the land,  
they braved the challenges of the great cities,  
enduring many hardships and sufferings.  
Never failing to worship God in spirit and truth  
and unyielding in devotion to His most pure Mother,  
they erected many temples to His glory.  
Come, O assembly of the Orthodox,  
and with love let us praise the holy women, men and children,  
those known to us and those known only to God,  
and let us cry out to them:  
“Rejoice, All Saints of North America and pray to God for us!”*

(Stikhera on “Lord I Call”, Sunday of All Saints of North America)

When I read the lovely verses of this hymn, I find great hope and consolation. Our Orthodox forbears on this continent sacrificed so much to be sure that the faith was planted here in the midst of an often uncomprehending and even hostile culture.

Yet, when I look around me at the state of the Church today, nearing the end of the first decade of the 21st century, I am often appalled by the pettiness and indifference in our Orthodox communities—cradle and converts alike!

How is it possible that we are still divided into separate ethnic ‘jurisdictions’ over two hundred years after the establishment of the Church on our continent? How is it possible that bishops in our Church will become so exercised about their episcopal titles that they will forbid their priests to concelebrate together and lead their flocks into even further disunity with one another? How is it possible that one of the tried and true ‘missionary’ strategies for Orthodox parishes on this continent is to steal parishioners from other Orthodox parishes in the area—one of the most reprehensible practices committed by our parishes and clergy? I needn’t mention financial scandals and the divisive websites hosted by clergy and laity that exist solely to add to the harm already done.

All is clearly not well with the state of our Church.

We are fragmented and fighting among ourselves; our numbers—especially where there is no immigration to artificially boost them—are declining.

Yet, we remain “the assembly of the Orthodox—never failing to worship God in spirit and truth”.

And therein lays our hope.

We do not need to “re-discover” ourselves. Our true nature as the Body of Christ—His Church—is always before us.

What we need is to reformulate our mission specific to North America in the 21st century.

We already know that we are the Church. We already know—as we sing on Pentecost—that we are called to “draw the whole world into His (Christ’s) net”, that the Orthodox faith is meant for all people everywhere.

What we need to work on are the specifics of bringing this faith to the people of North America. We need to return to that zeal that our forbears in faith had when they built the Orthodox communities that still dot the mountains of Pennsylvania and the fertile plains of Canada.

We must discover ways to strengthen and build up the communities that already exist and to build communities where none yet exist.

In some ways, we have seen remarkable success in these very areas. Parish communities are being renewed and new parishes are being built—particularly in the South and West of the United States. Almost all the jurisdictions have mission planting commissions—whether for new immigrant communities or for the ground up establishment of Orthodox communities in virgin territories.

But, it would be false and empty triumphalism to pretend that this is the norm. In too many places established parishes are withering from age and spiritual sloth (or out of simple desperation over what to do). In too many places “mission” is understood to mean taking advantage of recent immigrant influxes without any plan for a truly “American” future—thus re-creating the same scenarios that we have inherited from our past.

Once the immigrants have integrated into the larger culture and their children have become Americanized what real claim the Church will have on them if all she has been is a glorified immigration agency?

We need to have a plan that centers on the question: Why should anyone want to be a Christian—specifically, why should anyone want to be an Orthodox Christian in a society where he or she can choose from hundreds of “spiritualities” conveniently listed on the internet for easy picking?

What do we have that anyone else—including our own children—would find worth wanting?

The truly frightening thing is that many Orthodox, when they see the question put this way, find it difficult to come up with an answer.

Why would someone outside the Church, or marginal to it, want to join us?

You certainly don’t need to be Orthodox to enjoy ethnic foods—most of us know of plenty of places where we can buy good spanakopita, pirogies, humus, and feta. These things are becoming run of the mill in American supermarkets.

So, what is it that would compel someone to want the Orthodox faith?

Well, what is it that we love about our faith? What keeps us faithful to it? Perhaps we can start here.

The mission of each and every Orthodox believer is to be a ‘confessor’—to be able to share what it is that keeps us true to Jesus Christ with His Father and the Holy Spirit—what keeps us united to His Body, the Church. Unless we can do this much, then our own faith is in doubt.

This doesn’t mean that we must become seminary level theologians. When someone asks us why we believe as we do, we don’t need to give the whole counsel of God.

But, we do need “to make a defense to anyone who calls (us) to account for the hope that is in (us)...” (1 Peter 3:15). We have to be able to say why we believe what we believe—what it is that motivates us to remain faithful Orthodox believers.

So, is it the knowledge that we are united to Christ—made partakers of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist that keeps us coming to Church? Is it the beauty of the services throughout the church year? Is it the proclamation of the gospel message of salvation? Is it the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation that we receive in holy confession? Is it all of these things and that fact that we are bound together as believers in a way that is stronger and deeper than any national or ethnic heritage—even our American heritage?

A yes to any (and hopefully to all) of the above is a profound statement of faith that can be easily shared with others who are seeking, who are questioning—not to dispute, but because they are genuinely searching themselves. A simple, profound, and direct statement of faith is all that is needed to begin the process of bringing others into the communion of the faith (and to maintain our own commitment).

Orthodoxy was planted in America—on the mountainsides of Pennsylvania, on the shores of the Great Lakes, on the fertile plains of Canada, and now, in the hot lowlands of the Carolinas, the scorching deserts of Mexico, the towns and cities of the Rockies and all the places in between—because people believed that there is something unsurpassably beautiful and true in our faith. And they believed that it is a truth and beauty that is meant for every human being.

If we can express this belief with conviction—first and foremost in our own lives, and then to all who enquire of us, there can be no doubt of the future of Orthodoxy in our land. The personal commitment to Jesus Christ and to His Holy Church must always come first—above and beyond any qualification of ethnic tradition or jurisdiction. Our desire for growth must be for real growth in the total number of souls coming to the faith (and not simply to our parishes—by hook or by crook). Only then can we dare to claim to be, “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” which our Lord established on the Day of Pentecost.

May the following be as true of us as it was of our mothers and fathers in the faith:

*Today, as we celebrate the memory of all the Saints of North America,*

*let us praise them as is fitting,*

*for they lived all of Christ’s beatitudes.*

*Deprived of material wealth, they became rich in spirit;*

*meek, they inherited the earth;*

*mourning, they were comforted;*

*thirsting for righteousness, they were satisfied;*

*merciful, they obtained mercy;*

*pure in heart, they beheld the image of God;*

*as peacemakers, they became God’s children;*

*persecuted and tortured for righteousness’ sake, they now rejoice in*

*heaven;*

*and they pray fervently to the Lord that He may have mercy on our souls.*

(verse on the Apostikha for the Sunday of All Saints of North America)