

“SUNDAY OF CHRISTIAN UNITY”

A meditation given with the blessing of His Grace Bishop NIKON (OCA Diocese of New England/Albanian Archdiocese) at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church Southbridge, MA on January 20, 2008

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

GLORY TO JESUS CHRIST! GLORY FOREVER!

“I BELIEVE IN ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH”

This single line in the creed of Nicea/Constantinople expresses both the hopes and the anxieties of the Orthodox Church in relationship to the modern ecumenical movement.

Orthodox Christians have been involved in the ‘ecumenical movement’ since its inception in the 1920’s—and yet it is an involvement that has always been fraught with apprehension. In recent years there has been increasing pressure from broad sections of the church simply to be done with the ecumenical movement....the ongoing contention over gender and sexuality as expressed within some of the more liberal protestant denominations has exasperated and appalled the great majority of the orthodox...

The collapse of atheistic communism in Europe and Russia has made our involvement less necessary than it was in the past (when our membership the world council of churches and other ecumenical organizations was useful to the governing regimes and assured us at least a minimal degree of toleration from them).

And yet, there has been a true and often very deep friendship between the orthodox churches and various western denominations—witness the long and very respectful exchanges between high church Anglicans and the Russian orthodox church—a relationship extending back well before the Bolshevik revolution. There were conversations with the Lutherans and Calvinists in the 16th and 17th centuries.....

We simply cannot write off a continuing dialog with others who worship Jesus Christ as their lord and savior and who acknowledge the Holy Trinity as God.

On the one hand we definitively believe and confess that the fullness and unity of the 'ecumene'—*the Household of God*—exists already in the Orthodox Church.... It is by definition the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church"—and there exists no other. On the other hand, except for the most extreme among us, we cannot deny that there are others outside our communion who are Christians—the love of Christ forbids it.

Our relationship with the non-Orthodox is often put this way: we know where the Holy Spirit abides—in the Orthodox Church—but we cannot say where the Holy Spirit is *not*.

But, what does this mean?

After 80+ years of involvement with the ecumenical movement is the sum total of our message simply, "we are the true church and our aim is to bring everyone back into the fold?"

The answer to the question so boldly put is, yes!

But there are qualifications. And it is those qualifications that I think will make our continued involvement in the ecumenical movement worthwhile for all of us.

Let me explain what I mean....

In the flush of discussions and dialogs between the various Christian communions that followed Vatican ii in the 1960's and up until quite recently there was a great deal of emphasis on what we share in common and very little discussion about what kept us separated....we signed "agreed statements" with various other communions that clarified terminology about the sacraments, faith, grace, reason... and so on without plumbing the depths of how these things were actually appropriated in the life of believers....

In one sense this was a natural and good thing.... It was important to establish what we have in common and to affirm one another's dignity as bearers of the name of Christ after hundreds of years of name calling and condemnation.

The problem is that it can't go on this way....not if we really want to accomplish anything worthwhile and lasting

What we have had over the past forty years is ecumenical minimalism... we talk about what we share while being disinclined to point out the very significant things that we don't.... In fact, it has been something of a taboo to do so...

This is fine if our relationship is to remain simply polite....the equivalent of shaking hands, patting backs, and congratulating ourselves for being such nice people....

But you can't really create meaningful bonds without going deeper.... Relationships built on love are always challenging—and they often tell us things about ourselves that we rather not hear.

Anyone who has been married for a long time knows that—as does any teenager living in a home where the parents haven't opted out of their responsibility to be moral and spiritual guardians. True love entails suffering the truth about ourselves... it is so much safer to remain polite.

So in the spirit of truth and love, these are just a few of the issues that must be engaged if we are to take the next step in ecumenical relations.

We must—all of us—respond to the question that Jesus asked his apostles in Matthew chapter 16, “who do **you** say that I am?”

For orthodox Christians the only legitimate response is Peter's, “You are the Christ the son of the living God”.

Indeed the confession that Jesus is God incarnate, born of a virgin, crucified, dead and risen for our salvation is absolutely central to any meaningful ecumenical conversation.... If we don't have that much in common, then we have nothing really to talk about.

Absolute fidelity to Christ, just like absolute fidelity in a marriage, must be a given for fruitful ecumenical discussion...otherwise we devolve into something like interfaith dialogue—which is an entirely different from Christian ecumenism.

Next, we must agree that the church is vastly more than a mere voluntary organization—a sort of club in which like minded people come together to meet their particular needs so long as it suits them.

If the church really is the body of Christ, and Christ really is the savior of the world...then, like it or not, to be cut off from the body of Christ is to be cut off from salvation.

And let me make it clear—we are not in the business of determining who is saved and who isn't...that's God's business.... But a willful choice to separate oneself from the body of Christ has clear connotations.

For God, in Christ, has called us into communion with him within the bounds and bonds of a living community.... We have been “called out” from one way of being into another—we have literally been made “church” (ek-klessia, --from, εκ-καλεο, “to be called out”, in Greek).

If that is so then there are limits—there is an inside and an outside—and those limits are defined once again by how we answer the question, “Who do you say that I am”?

To say that God himself has become one of us, that God has become a man, that the uncreated has united himself to the creation... has profound implications with regard to the nature and meaning of human life...the nature and meaning of material existence...and the interrelationship between the world as it is and the world as it will be in the age to come.

It is precisely the purpose of the church to unfold, explain, and interpret such things.

For instance, if human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and God is the communion of three persons, then human beings are by nature persons made for communion with God and with each other...there is no room here for the sovereign individual... the lone ranger...the captain of his or her own soul.

If human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and God has taken on his own image in Christ from the very moment of conception, then we are called to ponder exactly what this means.

To say that God took on the completeness of our nature....that he healed all of it, leaving nothing out—physically, emotionally, or spiritually....has tremendous ramifications for the sanctity of all human life, at every stage of our existence.

If we **really** believe that God became one of us then the church as the body of Christ must resist and condemn every attempt to justify abortion, euthanasia, and all else that desecrates the image of God in us.

If God has sanctified and blessed marriage between one man and one woman and has confirmed this in the gospel of Jesus Christ—then it is the church’s solemn vocation to affirm and defend this mystery in the face of rampant divorce, the introduction of the fiction of homosexual “marriage”, and every other assault on the Christian home and family.

These are not ‘moral issues’ somehow separate from theology—they are profoundly theological concerns since they involve beings made in the image and likeness of God....orthopraxy (right action) is intimately connected with orthodoxy (right faith).

We cannot simply say that the intellectual and spiritual hubris of our times is sufficient reason for us to throw away everything that has been handed down to us in Holy Scripture and in the witness of countless holy men and women who have gone before us in faith.

These are just a very few of the concrete and timely points that we must address as Christians....

There are others for which there isn’t sufficient time to discuss in this venue: issues of authority and hierarchy in the church, the matter of the sacraments (or mysteries as we call them in the orthodox tradition), our relationship to the material world around us, war, the death penalty, prayer, the right interpretation of scripture and so on.....

Clearly we have our work cut out for us....

And, lest this brief meditation sound overly triumphalistic, there is the matter of Orthodoxy’s failure on this continent to live up to its high calling as the ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church’

With the paradoxical exception of mission growth in the evangelical south, we have failed to engage American society in any significant way....

In spite of the fact that over fifty percent of the membership of the church in many areas is made up of converts to the faith, we continue to be known almost entirely as an “ethnic” church.

For many—even within the church—we are little more than Greek, Russian, Serbian, or Albanian clubs.

For others, we seem content to stand disdainfully—even contemptuously—apart, unwilling to contaminate ourselves by contact with others.

Both attitudes are disastrous in their denial of true oneness, true holiness, true catholicity.

We desperately need to find ways to connect with this culture, this society in ways that are truly meaningful without selling out to false and facile relevance.

To do this we must learn from other Christians.... We need to learn from you....

By now, I hope that I have demonstrated something of the challenges we face in taking the next steps in ecumenical dialog...steps into regions that may be profoundly uncomfortable for us all.

But I am convinced that if we enter into serious discussion on these matters *with love and true affection for one another* something good and blessed will come out of it.

In the end we will have gone beyond polite well wishing—and vastly beyond the angry and bitter condemnations of the past....We will have finally started to seriously address the matters that confront us as Christians living in an increasingly hostile world... plumbing the depths of the holy scriptures and tradition for the truth that never fails...endowed with faith and reason and filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit

If we truly want the church we can have it.... For what is impossible for human beings is possible for God...