

ORTHODOX UNITY ? A RESPONSE FROM BISHOP EPHRAIM ^{1*}

of the Holy Orthodox Church in North America

How can unity be achieved among the Orthodox Christians? Our response to this question is quite simple: we must all earnestly seek "the one thing that is needful" - our eternal salvation. And this is accomplished through our faithfulness to Holy Tradition.

Our Saviour taught us:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.

(Matt. 28:274)

And the Holy Apostle Paul writes:

Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or any epistle.

(II Thess. 2:15)

Basing ourselves, therefore, on the Holy Apostolic Traditions, the unity and concord that we must have are twofold: doctrinal and liturgical (which comprises both way of worship and way of life).

1) Doctrinal unity may be achieved if all the Orthodox begin again to abide by the decisions and canons of the Ecumenical and Local Councils. Here, it would be useful if everyone humbly abandoned their own *personal* opinions, specifically in regard to how the church should deal with those that are non-Orthodox ? especially in the Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches. If all of us simply re-affirmed the teaching and practice of the Orthodox Church in this matter, as it is codified and proclaimed in Holy Tradition, most problems of Orthodox church unity would resolve themselves.

To better illustrate this point, we will repeat here what we have written in other publications of our diocese:

Since our diocese adheres to the traditional, ecclesiastical calendar and we have also been very vocal in our objections to Ecumenism, our clergy are quite often visited by students, professors, clergymen, and once in a while, even bishops

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affiliated with the various new calendar jurisdictions in this country. These visits are often made with the purpose of trying to persuade us that the ecumenical path which their jurisdictions follow in no way compromises the Orthodox Faith. Virtually without exception, these good people open their defense with the words, "I believe," "I think," "I feel," or "In my opinion." But right at this point, we feel compelled to say, "Wait, wait! What you or I believe, or think, or feel, has no bearing on this matter. The only thing that is of any importance and has any authority in these matters is what the *Church* has always believed, thought, and felt. If we start going on the basis of what each one of us thinks, believes, or feels, then we'll become like the Protestants, and in fact, soon we won't have just four or five hundred denominations as they do ? we'll have millions. Each individual will become a church in himself, each one feeling, believing, and thinking as he sees fit. In this, as in every matter, it is the Church and its sacred tradition that must teach us, and we must listen humbly and be instructed."

2) Liturgical unity may be easily achieved if all the Orthodox simply adopted the Julian calendar again. Since most of the Orthodox already use this calendar, this particular obstacle to church unity is not so insurmountable as it may first appear.

In our diocese we have clergy and laypeople from every possible background one could imagine. Not only have we come together from different, ethnic Orthodox jurisdictions, new calendar and old calendar, Greek, Russian, Romanian, Syrian, Ukrainian and American melting pot, but also from non-Orthodox denominations, and even pagan religions. Many of our clergy who are from Orthodox jurisdictions have been trained in different theological schools: Holy Cross, St. Vladimir's, St. Tikhon's, Holy Trinity in Jordanville, and elsewhere. Yet, we are all of one mind, and one heart, and one soul in matters of the Faith. Why? Because we have all adopted one criterion: Holy Tradition, as it is embodied in the Holy Scriptures, the Lives of the Saints, the decisions of the holy Ecumenical and Local Councils, and the writings of the Church Fathers. This is the standard by which we conduct our church life, correct ourselves in our personal lives, and guide ourselves in every aspect of our earthly sojourn, striving for that one thing that is needful: our eternal salvation.

As Orthodox Christians, what other criterion can we have?

But, some may object: even those who follow the traditional ecclesiastical calendar are divided. This is true, although it is not a problem unique to those who adhere to the traditional ecclesiastical calendar, as is evident from the many overlapping new calendar jurisdictions that exist in this hemisphere and in Europe.

In response to this objection we must admit that some of the divisions that exist among the True Orthodox Christians are due to human weakness, personal ambitions, pride, etc. However, it is equally true that many of the divisions that exist among us are due to the new calendarists. How so?

When the calendar change was first implemented in the early 20's, the bishops of the new calendar Church in Greece (and later in Romania) unleashed a terrible persecution against those clergy and faithful who refused to follow them in this innovation. The innovating bishops ordered the police to break up any church services held according to the traditional ecclesiastical reckoning. Hence, the police, swinging their clubs, would enter the churches during the services. Heads were smashed, people were killed, priests were pulled out of the sanctuary by gendarmes, who walked right through the Royal Doors; holy Communion was spilled, chalices broken in half. Priests were stripped of their rassa, shaved, dressed in dirty and ragged secular clothing and pushed out into the street. Nuns had their habits ripped off and then they too were pushed out into the street. Churches, monasteries and convents built by the True Orthodox Christians were confiscated or bulldozed.^{2*}

At the same time this was happening, these Orthodox Christians were told that their children were unbaptized, that the marriages performed by "old calendarist" priests were invalid, that their children were illegitimate and had no inheritance rights. Yet, the True Orthodox Christians saw that the new calendar bishops in Europe and America *accepted* the validity of the baptisms, weddings and ordinations performed by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and others, even though these people had been separated from the Church for almost one thousand years, and had espoused innumerable errors and heresies.

Now, how should a traditional Orthodox Christian assess this situation? How should he have responded to this vicious persecution, to the fact that his Mysteries were considered invalid (although he had not changed any doctrine of

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the Church), and to the fact that, simultaneously, the new calendar hierarchy recognized the validity of the sacraments of those who ? without remorse or repentance ? openly taught heresy?

What happened then was that the True Orthodox Christians became divided. Some said that the innovating hierarchy had initiated a true schism, and therefore that the canons regarding schism should be applied, and they believed that there was no way that the new calendar Church could in any way be the Church of Christ, since it was doing all these terrible and blasphemous things against the faithful; others said that we should await a synodal decision before making a final judgment (although, actually, the calendar change had been condemned already by the Pan-Orthodox Councils of 1582, 1583 and 1593, as well as those of 1663, 1687, 1824, 1848 and others); yet others said that the people who followed the new calendar did not really know what was going on, and that it was solely the responsibility of the new calendar bishops. And so on. And thus, this became a major cause for the True Orthodox Christians also to become divided.

Despite all these grievous circumstances that have occurred and, in certain aspects, are still occurring, the clergy of our Church and I myself are nonetheless willing to discuss these matters with any Orthodox Christian clergyman or layperson, so that the unity that all long for may be achieved. However, this has to come to pass on the basis of sound Orthodox doctrine and ecclesiology, and not on the basis of our private opinions. Any basis other than Holy Tradition is bound to fail, since it will be an endeavor that is merely human, and not according to God.

In our own diocese, we already enjoy this unity of many different ethnic usages and customs which, in fact, have enriched the lives of all of us, and many have incorporated the whole spectrum of the varied ethnic traditions into their parish and family life. But the one common denominator to which we all cleave with love is the Holy Tradition of the Church. We are convinced that this is the answer held out to us by our Saviour and all the Saints from ages past, and that it is ? as we know from the experience of our own diocese ? entirely possible and attainable. We know that it can, and in fact, does work.

In Christ,
✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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