

REPORT ON PARTICIPATION IN THE SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS  
OF THE  
EVANGELICAL ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Santa Barbara, California  
June 7-9, 1981

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

Introduction

At the request of His Grace Bishop DMITRI, Chairman of the Orthodox Church in America's Commission dealing with the Evangelical Orthodox Church, I accepted the invitation of the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, Peter E. Gillquist, to spend three days (June 7-9, 1981) at the session of the EOC's Council of Bishops held in Santa Barbara, California. I was asked by Bishop Gillquist to deliver four lectures on the various aspects of the Orthodox Church and to be available for discussion of the problems related to the EOC's intention to join the OCA. The entire leadership of the EOC -- 19 bishops -- was present as well as Fr. Thaddeus Wojcik, the secretary of the OCA's Commission.

Before I describe and analyze our discussions, I wish to relate some general observations.

I feel compelled, first of all, to state that seldom in my entire life have I had such a deep and joyful experience -- the experience of a truly Christian community desiring nothing but the fullness of the Church. Their interest in and desire for Orthodoxy can be termed essential. For in their spiritual pilgrimage, they discovered Orthodoxy as Truth and not as mere "ancient and colorful rites"; as Life, and not as self-contained and self-centered "ecclesiasticism"; as a God-given answer to a world and to a culture rapidly sinking into apostasy. During the days I spent in Santa Barbara, I could not help feeling all the time that the encounter of this particular Christian group -- whose background may include anything except Orthodoxy -- with the Orthodox Church is of the order of a miracle, of a kairos both for them and for us. Above everything else, it requires from us an effort of discerning what is, what ought to be, the essential message and gift of Orthodoxy to America.

This, however, does not mean that to fulfill the EOC's very sincere and deep desire to become an integral part of what they themselves call canonical Orthodoxy will be an easy task; some problems, and I will speak of them below, are very difficult and will require from both sides much prayer, reflection, and theological investigation. All I am trying to stress here is precisely the need for such an approach in depth. For the first time we are to deal here, not with individual converts simply to be integrated into existing parishes, and not with congregations having ecclesiastical and even religio-cultural affinities with the Orthodox Church ("High Anglicans" or Mexicans, for example), but with a community which is totally and exclusively American, and whose discovery of Orthodoxy, as said above, does not stem from any emotional attraction to the "East." Thus, on how we solve the problems of the EOC depends, in a sense, the entire missionary perspective and strategy of the OCA.

#### I. The Unity of Faith

Since the beginning of the Orthodox participation in the so-called ecumenical movement, the particular and essential Orthodox affirmation aimed at non-Orthodox was that the unity of the Church is based on, and is the expression of, the unity of faith. The Orthodox theologians and delegates to innumerable ecumenical gatherings consistently rejected any "reduction" of the Church's unity not only to "social concern," or "involvement in the world," but also to external uniformity and legalism (the idea that being "under" some Orthodox jurisdiction ipso facto makes a community Orthodox). Neither was the total uniformity in worship or in organization considered a prerequisite for unity.

I began with these observations because in the case of the EOC, and this sounds like a paradox, what we have in common is precisely faith -- the acceptance and the confession of the Church's Truth in its totality. I have seldom seen, even among the Orthodox, such a living, truly existential interest in the Fathers;

such certitude that the doctrinal tradition as formulated by the Ecumenical Councils and in the writings of the Fathers is the true and divinely inspired expression of the faith, the true interpretation of the Word of God.

During my stay in Santa Barbara, we agreed not even to consider the dogmatical issues -- so self-evident is the EOC's unconditional acceptance of the Orthodox doctrine. I stress this unity of faith because if it is true that the Orthodox Church has always and everywhere seen and expressed herself primarily as unity of faith, then the major problem is solved and this, I should add, constitutes the fundamental difference between our "dialogue" with the EOC and all other ecumenical dialogues in which we were or are still involved. There, in the ecumenical movement, not only is the unity of faith an ideal to be reached, but it is not yet recognized by many as necessary! Therefore, our unity in doctrine with the EOC places our common search for their integration into the historical and canonical Orthodox communion on a basis radically different from all other ecumenical endeavors.

## II. The Liturgical Problem

### 1.

The real problem, and an extremely difficult one, is thus implied not in "doctrine," but in worship, in the understanding and acceptance of the Church's liturgical tradition. This problem therefore was the first item on the agenda of the Santa Barbara meeting.

The first difficulty here is that an overwhelming majority of the people of the EOC come from a radically non-liturgical religious background. The question then cannot be reduced to the usual Eastern vs. Western Rite debate because for all practical purposes the EOC has no identifiable rite, if by rite we mean a certain continuity, a structure, a "lex orandi" encompassing all aspects and dimensions of life. The leadership of the EOC is fully aware of this liturgical "absence" and realizes that lex orandi being lex credendi, the Orthodox doctrine which they so joyfully and unconditionally accepted, must, of necessity, have its full

liturgical expression. They know that the Church is manifested and fulfilled in the liturgy and that the liturgy is the "epiphany" of the faith. The simple fact, however, is that having no roots in any liturgical communion, they do not know how to achieve this liturgical expression and liturgical life in an organic and not an artificial manner. This, indeed, was their main reason for inviting me to Santa Barbara and the greater part of our discussion was devoted to this liturgical problem.

The liturgical situation is further complicated by still another absence -- the absence of the temple, the church as a sacred building, as not only the self-evident place of worship but, in itself, the symbol, or perhaps I should say, the experience of God's presence, and of the church as a heavenly reality so that ". . . standing in the temple we think that we are in heaven. . . ."

On Sunday, June 7, I attended the EOC's Sunday services. I say services because the most characteristic feature of this worship is its double structure: a Synaxis, to which all the members of the Church living in one place "come together," and the celebration of the Eucharist, taking place in private homes and at which the attendance is limited to the members of the "parish." To understand this practice, so unusual from our point of view, one must know the basic principles of the EOC's ecclesiastical structure which, as we shall see later, also raises some serious questions.

The EOC is comprised of relatively small territorial units, each headed by a bishop. This small "diocese" is comprised of a number of parishes serviced simultaneously, but on different levels, by the bishop and by the presbyters. Thus, for example, in Santa Barbara alone there are five parishes. On Sunday morning the members of all parishes, (i.e. the entire Church), gather in one place which, in Santa Barbara is the so-called Family House serving in fact the needs of the Church (meetings, theological studies, etc.). The first Sunday gathering is called Synaxis and is presided over by the bishop. It consists basically of prayers,

litanies, singing hymns, the reading of the Holy Scripture, and the sermon. Immediately after the Synaxis, each member of the Church goes to a private house where the "parish" to which one belongs assembles for the Eucharist celebrated by the presbyter in the living room of that house. The celebration of the Eucharist includes the Offertory, the Anaphora, and the Communion. One of the topics on the Agenda of this Council of Bishops included the Introduction to St. John Chrysostom's Liturgy. Since, however, the discussion of this topic and any decisions thereon had to take place after my departure, I will not analyze here the Eucharistic celebration in detail.

The important issue is this liturgical "dualism" itself and its evaluation from the Orthodox point of view. It is not difficult to understand the spiritual and the ecclesiological rationale for this liturgical practice if one keeps in mind the origins of the EOC. It was born primarily out of the so-called campus crusade which in the '60s united students and young pastors throughout the United States in a militant defense of the Christian faith and life in opposition to the spiritual and the moral disintegration of society in general and the university community in particular. The members of that crusade wanted not only to save people from drugs, immorality, sexual depravity, homosexuality, the collapse of the family, the enslavement to the demonic forces of destruction and apostasy, to save them by bringing them back to Christ, but also to restore the true Christian community as community of faith and love, of mutual support and solidarity. As one of their leaders told me, during that fight they understood that bringing people back to Christ implied bringing them into the Church, but a real Church, a real community, a sense of belonging "to one body and one life." Hence, the emphasis on the family, on the Church as primarily a network of families having a real focus of their belonging to and caring for each other. This real focus then is the Eucharist which, with even a relatively small number of people attending, can truly be experienced as a "sacrament" of the Church, as family of God, as unity in Christ fulfilling and nourishing their unity in life.

As to the Synaxis -- being the teaching part of worship -- it is considered to be the proper liturgy of the bishop as the guardian of the apostolic faith in its fullness. However, the relatively small size of the diocese makes it possible for the bishop to be very close to his entire Church and for the presbyters to constitute his presbyterium. We must also mention the order of deacons whose prime responsibility, if I understand correctly, is to be ministers of agape -- the area of the practical and even material solidarity among the Church's members.

I must confess that all this is indeed very real in the EOC, and that, in spite of my natural and organic alienation from that type of worship, I was deeply moved by the seriousness, the reverence, the simplicity, the joy and love which I experienced at both the Synaxis and the Eucharist. I want to mention how especially impressed I was by the words of a young woman who, during the few minutes allocated in the Eucharist celebration for "personal" thanksgiving, confessed her thanksgiving for the Church and for belonging to the Church which has completely liberated her from the temptations of feminism made up entirely of ambition, envy, hatred, and self-affirmation.

To this I must add something else which I find to be very important. It is the Eucharist, its roots in the reality of a community, that had aroused in the EOC their thirst for the fullness of the Church and led them to the encounter with Orthodoxy. Whatever the formal "deficiencies" of their present liturgical worship, and I will speak of them now, what I saw and experienced is absolutely genuine.

## 2.

Once all this is said, there remain some very important questions. The first one is that of the temple, the house of God and of its absence from the life of the EOC. In all my liturgical teaching I have always stressed that the history of the Christian temple begins with the radical negation of the temple. (cf. Acts 7:48 ". . . Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands. . . ." and John 2:19

". . . Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The temple restored by Christ is His Body and this means the Church made up of human lives as living stones. The early church had no temples. It was only after the conversion of Constantine that the building of temples began. But -- and here is the whole point -- it was no longer the temple that sanctified those who prayed therein; it is the Church, the Body of Christ, fulfilling herself in the Eucharist, that sanctified the temple. Thus, this seemingly paradoxical resurrection of the temple in Christianity was necessary. Granted that, as everything else, the temple and the "piety of the temple" can be made into an idol. But free of all "reductions," be it to the idea of the temple in the Old Testament (which signified and prepared its own fulfillment in Christ) or to the pagan temple (the holy place per se), the Christian temple expressed something absolutely essential -- the experience of "heaven on earth..." of the mysterious presence in the world of the Kingdom which is to come. The temple is the icon of the Kingdom. Russia, for example, will be saved by the silent testimony of the innumerable churches claiming human life for God. There exists, to be sure, a very serious problem of what a temple should be in our secularized world, although we have not even begun to think about that problem, or even to admit its existence. But no matter how we solve it, the temple is an essential dimension and witness of the Church in the world, and any "return" to the early church with no temples would be a pseudo return and, in fact, a negation of the Church's tradition.

I said all this to the Bishops of the EOC and none of them really disagreed with me. The problem however remains unsolved and will require further discussion.

### 3.

The second problem is that of the liturgical dualism mentioned above. The main question here is whether eucharistic celebration "at home" reveals and fulfills all the dimensions of the Eucharist. It certainly reveals a very essential one:

that of Eucharist as sacrament of love and communion, the one which is, more than any other, weakened in our own liturgical life. But the Eucharist is also an eschatological sacrament: the ascension of the Church to heaven and her gathering at the table of the Lord in His Kingdom. It is a cosmical sacrament offered "on behalf of all and for all." It encompasses the entire creation. It is a sacrament of transformation and transfiguration. And all those dimensions, however forgotten they are in our "Westernized" theology of sacraments, have found (at least such is my conviction) a perfect balance and truly heavenly expression in our liturgy, in our Eucharist which in order precisely to reveal its own fullness, requires a church. The church itself was born from all of this and, since then, in the Orthodox mind at least, the proper place for the Eucharist is the church. Once more we may discuss what a church ought to be in America at the end of the 20th century; but I cannot think of any answers to that question in which the Eucharist and the church would be totally disconnected from one another. Our encounter with the EOC may be the Providential occasion for that discussion.

Then comes the question of the interrelationship between the Synaxis and the Eucharist. Here again I can perfectly see and understand the rationale for the EOC's practice and its ecclesiological justifications. What this practice is meant to preserve is, on the one hand, the real unity of the bishop as priest, pastor, and teacher, with the Church; yet, on the other hand, the function of the Eucharist as again really building up the Church as community. It is true that in our present structure the bishop is experienced primarily, if not exclusively, as a distant ruler and administrator and not as the priest, teacher and pastor par excellence. It is also true that we have virtually lost the understanding of the priest as member of the Church's presbyterium, the Council of the Bishop. Finally, it is true that in large dioceses the episcopal visitation



is essentially a ceremonial and festal event, whereas the government of the Church in fact consists of bureaucratic paper work. Thus, the "instinct" of the EOC is, in many ways, correct and challenges us in some very real deficiencies of our own Church life, deficiencies so old as to have become identified with Tradition. But the liturgical expressions of an idea or principle that are correct per se, may still be inadequate. It is a historical fact that very early in the history of the Church the Synaxis became an integral part of the Eucharistic celebration so that the Eucharist itself is experienced primarily as an organic and essential correlation between the Liturgy of the Word, the Offertory, the Anaphora, and the Communion. Historically, there have always existed and there still exists the practice of Synaxes without the Eucharist; but never has the Eucharist existed without the Synaxis. We have examples of situations where, in a given city, the local church, too large to be gathered, to use the terms of St. Justin, ". . . in one place," held several Synaxes simultaneously but only one Eucharist was celebrated by the bishop. The gifts consecrated at that Eucharist were then carried to all "gatherings" so that in spite of its unavoidable "fragmentation," the entire local Church could partake of the "one bread and the one chalice," be one Eucharistic Body of Christ.

Thus, whatever the results of our further liturgical discussions, it seems to me that if the positive principles shaping the present liturgical practice of the EOC are preserved, a reversal of that practice would partly express such principles. This means: an episcopal Eucharist and a presbyterial synaxis.

## 4.

Finally, we discussed at the Santa Barbara meeting those dimensions of the liturgical tradition which express the Christian and ecclesial experience of time (Liturgy of Time -- feasts, cycles, seasons) and the liturgical forms of the

Sanctification of Life (the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation, Matrimony, Penance and Healing, Holy Orders, and the Liturgy of Death). At present none of these dimensions are fully developed in the EOC. Thus, for example, the Sunday on which I attended their worship being Pentecost, the Pentecostal theme was more than adequately expressed in the lexionary and the sermon, but without any "proper" (hymns, prayers, etc.) expressing the Church's acceptance of and rejoicing in the mystery of that feast. The same can be said of the various liturgical acts pertaining to the Sanctification of Life.

The spiritual leaders of the EOC are fully aware of all this and even asked me to prepare, at least for the Liturgy of the Sanctification of Life, acceptable adaptations of our own services. But, of course, this problem, to be fully solved, must be placed in the perspective of the liturgical tradition and this means of a clear understanding of what essentially constitutes that tradition.

### III. The Ecclesiological Problems

#### 1.

It goes without saying that the main ecclesiological problem facing the OCA in its encounter with the EOC is that of Holy Orders and more specifically of the Episcopate. This problem as such was not on the agenda of my discussions with the EOC's Council of Bishops. First, because I had no mandate to initiate any concrete canonical "negotiations"; and second, because I was invited mainly for participating in a common clarification of liturgical issues. Thus, I will limit my remarks to the following points:

(a) the leadership of the EOC is fully aware that the Orthodox Church does not and cannot recognize its present "orders" which, according to the basic doctrinal and canonical principles of Orthodoxy are "outside" the Apostolic succession.

(b) the leadership of the EOC is equally fully aware that since the Seventh Century, the Orthodox Churches have limited the access to the Episcopacy to non-married men and that, although this principle of episcopal celibacy is of a disciplinary and not dogmatical order, it is very doubtful that a revision of that principle will occur in the foreseeable future.

I do not know to what degree the rank and file of the EOC membership shares this awareness, but I am convinced that because this issue is crucial to any concrete and practical movements toward the EOC's joining "canonical" Orthodoxy, it must be both formulated and discussed with utmost clarity, seriousness and depth.

2.

My last presentation to the Council of Bishops dealt with the problem which I defined as the problem of the catholicity of memory. By this I mean the unavoidable necessity for the EOC to realize that Orthodoxy, besides being first of all and above everything else, the true faith, is also a history filled not only with victories, achievements and manifestations of holiness, but also with tragedies, periods of decay, surrender to different cultures, and so on. Therefore, their joining the Orthodox Church means not only accepting a clearly defined body of doctrinal definitions, an acceptable liturgy, and valid orders, but to make this long and more often than not tragical pilgrimage of the Church through history a part of one's spiritual experience and memory. If the Orthodox Church must make a tremendous effort to understand the spiritual and cultural background of a body like the EOC, the latter must extend its own "memory" to the catholic dimensions of Orthodoxy. It may be that the greatest difference between

Orthodoxy and Protestantism is that in the Protestant faith and experience, the Church is always a vertical phenomenon and this means has no real history, no horizontal dimensions. Even when they join the Orthodox Church, the Protestants very often preserve the illusion that there exists an ideal Church, and then, having discovered the Orthodox reality, go through a traumatic experience and disillusion.

I cannot develop this theme of catholicity of memory here. I only want to stress that the encounter between the OCA and the EOC cannot, should not be limited to official "negotiations," but must be extended to a much closer experience of each other. Without such a real encounter, our negotiations will remain abstract and will not lead to that unity which is the unity not only of convictions but of life itself.

#### Concluding Remarks

Concluding this brief and by no means exhaustive report of my participation in the Santa Barbara meeting, I want to stress once more the uniqueness of the encounter between our Church and the EOC. If this encounter requires a tremendous self-examination on their part, it certainly requires not a lesser one for us. The more I think about and analyze the experience I had during those days, the more I become convinced that, ten years after we received the mandate and the possibility of being an American Church for Americans, we are to take a decisive test in how we ourselves are to fulfill that mandate and that possibility.

--- Rt. Rev. Alexander Schmemmann

June 1981