

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA IN CRISIS



The Farewell to America of the Holy Patriarch Tikhon (Filipp Moskvitin, 2003)

I know that articles on this website are widely read in North America. I know that such articles are read by members of all jurisdictions there. That is why I try to be careful in what I write, using information about different jurisdictions coming only from members of that particular jurisdiction. Inevitably, sometimes, I may get the balance wrong and I am sorry for that, as also if I do not express my real charity for those who suffer there and give another impression. Having said that, the vast majority of my correspondents do say that I generally hit the nail on the head.

I have been asked to say something about the present crisis in the OCA ('The Orthodox Church in America'). There are the dark rumours/slanders of grave financial and moral misdealings that have yet to be resolved. Then there is the dreadful episcopal and pastoral crisis in Alaska with apparent Synodal hesitation and further accusations, almost criminal in scope. Then there is the much respected Archbishop Job, who is now, amazingly, publicly calling for Metropolitan Herman to resign.

My first reaction is that it is nothing to do with me and that I should be silent.

And yet, again and again, members of the OCA, especially clergy, ask me to comment charitably and positively. They know that I knew and have met many of the senior OCA figures in the past, including the late Fr Alexander Schmemmann and most of the

members of his family, scattered and divided as they were and are in the Paris Jurisdiction and ROCOR and I am related to Fr John Breck. Some people at least, despite some untrue stories, know that I have huge respect for hierarchs like Bishops Seraphim, Bishop Tikhon and Archbishop Job, as well as many other OCA clergy and people, who are models of Orthodox Christian life. They say that therefore I should break my silence.

Let me say that I know that the OCA is extremely varied. Let me say that I know that there are some remarkable clergy and people in the OCA and priests who work very hard for their flocks – just as there are in all jurisdictions.

Let me say that none of the present crisis in the OCA is new. ROCOR has had its own appalling crises and scandals. We all know about them. There is no sense of triumphalism or superiority or lack of charity, and there never has been, in what I say of the OCA. If there has been this impression, then I ask forgiveness for not being able to express my views sufficiently clearly. I know from my own life how painful it is to suffer in the Church, because of people who supposedly represent the Church and are instead our greatest enemies and ruin unique human lives. But we have to accept such suffering as what we deserve for our own sins, of which we have many. So all suffering, however apparently undeserved can be made positive, good for our humility.

I have been Orthodox for thirty-three years and each one of those years has been a crucifixion.

There is no jurisdiction without sin, and grave error. In ROCOR we have been there too and we too have had, and not so long ago, to haul ourselves up, repent and ask for forgiveness. Sectarianism and nationalism have been scourges of ROCOR. But so too has the Moscow Patriarchate had to haul itself up, repent and ask forgiveness. There is none without sin – we should know it, we sing it all the time.

Let us be frank. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989. I have a piece of it on my bookshelves in front of me, which I show to my German students, who were born after its fall. We in Western Europe lived through all the dramatic events then and the repercussions are still resounding nearly twenty years later. Amazingly, the current crisis in the OCA has been brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall all those years ago, or more specifically, by the two parts of the Russian Church, the Moscow Patriarchate and ROCOR, coming together, as a result of the end of the Cold War. Little wonder that one senior figure in the OCA went to Moscow in January 2007 and tried to torpedo the reconciliation. He knew that our reconciliation would be the end of the OCA as a structure.

The fact is that **all** the fragments of the Russian Church Outside Russia (not just those actually inside ROCOR) must yet come together. Historically, and it is now history, this meant first of all the Sourozh Diocese in Great Britain, which reconciled itself with its own Patriarchate in 2006 – though, sadly, only by the departure of the small modernistic group that had taken control of it in the early 80 and persecuted everyone else, forcing them to leave. Then, in 2007, ROCOR reconciled itself to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate reconciled itself to ROCOR. However, it is true that there have been departures of political and sectarian elements that infiltrated

ROCOR from the late 60s on, who often made the lives of ordinary ROCOR clergy and people a misery, leaving for sects of their choice.

There now comes the reconciliation of the OCA with the new reality, perhaps at its Council in 2008, perhaps in 2009. Certain individuals who belong to it will also have to leave Cold War compromises behind it, together with old-fashioned 60s modernism and prejudices, which makes the extreme parts of the OCA into a laughing-stock. Later, when a generation there has died out, the Paris Jurisdiction will also have to reconcile itself with the Russian Church, instead of behaving as a rude and rebellious teenager, as at present. On the distant horizon, there may yet come Belarussian, Carpatho-Russian and Ukrainian Jurisdiction reconciliations with the multinational and multilingual Russian Church, though that will depend in events in Eastern Europe, which are still to come. After that, who knows?

Let us be honest. The effect of the Russian Revolution was the splintering and fragmentation of the whole Russian Diaspora – indeed of the whole Orthodox Diaspora - into a plethora of jurisdictions. These will eventually either unite - or else they will die. Because of Russian disunity, individuals since 1917, like one well-known Orthodox bishop in England, either joined the Constantinople Patriarchate or else the Antiochian Patriarchate, thus further dividing Orthodox unity. Are those individuals to blame for creating division? No. It was Russian disunity that was to blame. But unity can only come if there is first reconciliation and unity between jurisdictions in the Diaspora and their Churches in the home countries. This is the great lesson that has to be learned. It is called maturity, a balanced attitude towards our parents. In some respects (but by no means all), it has been easier for ROCOR to do this, inasmuch as ROCOR always remained faithful to the services, calendar and customs, that is, to the Tradition, of the home country. Those who have moved further away from the Tradition at their roots have further to walk back.

For example, unity will be arrived at between ROCOR and the OCA, when you can walk into one or other of their churches and not know which ‘jurisdiction’ you are in. I realise that this is already the case for a minority of churches and there are parts of North America where churches of ROCOR and the OCA (and the Moscow Patriarchate) are indistinguishable. But, sadly, in many parts of the United States, this is not the case. It is all about everyone returning to our roots, our spiritual roots and giving up fantasies that came in over recent decades. In the case of the OCA, this means the return to St Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow, once Bishop of San Francisco. The solution is, literally, radical.

What can we do? I would suggest that we simply obtain a list of all the bishops of the OCA and perhaps other senior OCA figures, regardless of our opinions of them, and pray for them, that God’s Will may be done through them and not despite them. After all, are we not called on to pray for all, for those who love us and for those who hate us? Otherwise, we are simply not Christians. If we do not pray for our enemies, either former enemies or present enemies, how will they come to know us?

Some may want some more complicated solutions. But I assure you that praying for all concerned is the solution. We are all in for a period of long-awaited generational change. We need to pray.

Holy Hierarch Father Tikhon, pray to God for us and all thy North American flock!

Priest Andrew Phillips,
East Anglia

18/31 St Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem
Edward the Martyr, King of England