

# **The Orthodox Church in America**

## **Vision, Vocation, Mission, Identity\***

### ***His Beatitude, Metropolitan Jonah***

The Holy Spirit gives the Church her vision, which comes from our identity in Christ as His Body. This vision is identical with the vision of all those who have gone before us precisely because it is the same Body, with the same vocation, mission, and identity: to be the Body of Christ: the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Whenever we add elements to that vision, we distort it, no matter how noble our qualifications and agendas may be. Whenever we subtract from or diminish it, we do likewise. If we change the vision in any way, we exclude ourselves from it and from the Body which it constitutes.

### **Taking Responsibility and Repenting**

There is a lot of interest in the sad scandals that are plaguing the Orthodox Church in America, in the East and in the North. Dire warnings of doom, betrayals, and speculations of perverse motives are all over the Internet and discussed widely. In particular, much is being said and written to the affect that the OCA lacks vision and that this, in turn, is due to a lack of good leadership.

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Such talk points to a truth: it is certainly the task of our ecclesiastical leaders constantly to announce and renew the Church's vision. But how, exactly, is this to happen? Is there a specifically churchly way to go about this task? For we are not a corporation or secular organization, and in this instance we cannot take recourse to secular models. Our identity, vocation, and mission – both as individual members of the Church and together as the one Body of the Church – derive from the Church's vision. Her vision is not that of any particular leader but is shared by the whole Body of the faithful.

Our task is to turn away from our own petty individual worlds, causes, and dreams – the delusions of our own reasoning. And our leaders' task is constantly to call us back to this repentance. This they must do so that we can share the vision given by the grace of the Holy Spirit and accept our calling from Christ to be the Church, His Body, which constitutes the very core of our personal and corporate identity.

But when this leadership fails to occur – when our leaders do not call us to repentance by word and example, but instead cause scandal, sorrow, and pain – what then? For undoubtedly there has been egregious wrongdoing, and these matters are serious and profoundly affect the lives of many. Thus there is a tremendous need for healing and for restoration of confidence.

When one is suffering, all suffer together. When one member is honoured, all rejoice (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 26). This is the basic principle of our communion in Christ. The bishops have a particular kind of responsibility, but they are not the Church by themselves; nor are the clergy, nor the rest of the laity. How do we support our bishops so that they can bear their portion of responsibility for the life of the whole Body? Christ is calling us to take the responsibility for the Church that is already ours by virtue of our baptism and chrismation. It is not about

how "they" deal with it. It is about us. It is our life, our union in Christ with one another.

If there is a lack of accountability and transparency in the hierarchy, is it not our responsibility to correct it? How would it have arisen, had we not abrogated our responsibility to demand integrity from the very leaders we put into office?

If we judge those in positions of authority who have fallen, we only accuse and judge ourselves. It is easier to blame hypocritically than simply to accept the responsibility of cleaning up the mess. We should grieve over our brothers' sins, not judge them. And in so doing, we come together in compassion. This strengthens our unity and welds us together in a common task: to take responsibility for the life of our Church.

Authority is responsibility. When authority degenerates into power, egoism, and position, it destroys the image of Christ which those positions of responsibility are meant to depict. "Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10: 44). The chief pastors of the Church are called to be that image of Christ, as are all of us the faithful. They fall short; we fall short. But we must constantly return in repentance, and encourage our fathers and brethren in that same repentance, supporting those who bear the responsibility for our souls. It is a heavy burden. But if we all bear it together, in a synergy of love and communion, it becomes the easy yoke and light burden of Christ, in Christ, by Christ. When we try to bear it by ourselves in isolation, we will inevitably fall, because it becomes something outside of Christ, about our own ego.

Thus, we must not become despondent or fearful. Instead, we must repent as a body. We must turn towards God and away from the

abstractions of petty personal agendas, which can include a vindictive and worldly desire for the punishment of those who have offended us. We must not be blind to our own sin and corruption. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8: 7). We must open our minds and hearts to Jesus Christ and to one another. Then we will see with great clarity the vision of the Church of Christ, and this will show us how to set our house in order, cleaning up the mess that we as a body have allowed.

### **The Vision of the Kingdom**

So, what is the vision of the Orthodox Church in America, and thus her identity, vocation, and mission? It is nothing other than Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. This vision is revealed to us when we celebrate the Eucharist, and the Eucharist, in turn, sends us on our mission: to bring Christ's Gospel to America in all its Orthodox integrity. We do not need the ways of the corporate world (vision- and mission-brainstorming, etc.) to determine this. Rather, we need prayer and discernment – together as the body of the Church, and in particular on the part of our Holy Synod of archbishops and bishops – in order to renew the vision of the Kingdom and to preach and proclaim the unity that exists in Christ by the Holy Spirit and constitutes us as the Church.

This vision is not about programs, institutions, administrations, budgets, or bureaucrats. Even less is it about the personal ambitions, agendas, or self-aggrandizements of bishops, clergy, lay leaders, or anyone else. It is only about Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. All the concrete projects we undertake, all the offices and positions of authority and responsibility, flow from this source. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6: 33).

If as an organization we had lost our vision, then we would have ceased to be the Church. But this is not the case here. That vision, and the grace to actualize and incarnate it, is bestowed at every Eucharist.

The blessed and ever-memorable Father Alexander Schmemmann clearly saw and clearly articulated the Kingdom of God, imparted in the Eucharist, as the focal point of the Church's life. It was this clarity of vision which gave such great strength to his leadership. We need to get back in touch with that vision. We must return to our first love. It is the Liturgy that gives us our identity and sends us on our mission, renewing our vocation to be the Body of Christ – the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in the world.

### **The Marks of the Church**

The Church's four characteristic "marks" – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity – are at once the Church's content and identity, constituting both her vocation and mission. They are our goal; it is our challenge to actualize them in our lives, both personally and corporately, in order for us to be the Church.

Before anything else, these characteristics are marks of Christ Himself. Jesus Christ is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit; He is the focal point of our unity, and the very context of our relationship with God and one another as His Body. Jesus is the ultimate criterion of holiness: the man transparent to God, revealing God, incarnating God, and imparting that holiness which is participation in God's very life, which lifts us up from the world of sin and corruption. Christ is the essence of catholicity or wholeness, in that "all things were created through Him and for Him ... and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1: 16-17). He is also the source of universality because He embraces all things and permeates all things, and all things exist in

Him. And He is the foundation of apostleship, the apostle and high priest from God (Hebrews 3: 1), Whose obedience reveals Him as transparent to God, speaking only the words of Him Who sent Him (John 3: 34), and doing whatever He sees the Father do (John 5: 19), transforming and redeeming the world.

Our vision as Orthodox Christians is always first and foremost Jesus Christ. His message is our message: the coming of the Kingdom. His life is our life. His mission is our mission: the salvation of all mankind and its union with the Father in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Our task in the midst of this is constantly to repent, to have this vision renewed in us, and to purge our lives of everything contrary to the vision and incarnation of Christ in our lives. These are the marks of Christ; and if we share His life, we also share these marks.

### **The Role of Autocephaly**

The unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Orthodox Church cannot be the exclusive possession of Middle-Eastern, Mediterranean and Slavic countries and peoples. The Orthodox Church in America has the vocation to manifest all the fullness of Christ's Church here in America. Her autocephaly was sought and granted in 1970 precisely to facilitate this. Many today look on that event as a grave mistake, the sad fruits of which we are now forced to reap. But if we make the effort to build up and not to tear down (1 Corinthians 3: 10), a more constructive approach to our autocephaly becomes apparent.

For, in fact, the greatest strength of the Orthodox Church in America is that in her we have taken full responsibility for the life and integrity of our Church and do not rely on anyone anywhere else. Of course, we preserve sisterly relations and Eucharistic communion with

the other Orthodox Churches. But we elect our own bishops, we oversee our own finances, and we support our own ministries. None of the other Orthodox communities in America can say that. Thus we are responsible for our own mistakes, as well as our own victories. And when we are faced with a problem, we are responsible, as a single Body in Christ, to deal with it in a Christ-like manner. Yes, we sin; and the sins of one, ultimately, belong to all of us – the healing and reconciliation of those who have been hurt by sin are the responsibility of us all.

Therefore, our problems will not be solved by someone from the outside. No one overseas can come to the rescue. No one will impose one more set of foreign ecclesiastical bureaucrats answerable only to a distant despot somewhere in the Old World. Thank God. This is the beauty and the responsibility of autocephaly. It is our great strength. We simply need to put aside the distractions of our passions and accept this responsibility given by God: to be the Orthodox Church in this country; to reveal the presence of Jesus Christ here in America to souls perishing in darkness, ignorance, and despair; to give them hope; and to lead them to repentance in the knowledge and love of God.

*About the Author:* His Beatitude Jonah (born James Paffhausen) was elected Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in America by the 15<sup>th</sup> All-American Council on November 12 2008, in Pittsburgh, PA. Hi Enthronement took place on December 28 2008 in St Nicholas Cathedral in Washington, DC.