



OFFICAL MINUTES

OF THE

14TH All-AMERICAN COUNCIL

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The following are the approved minutes of the 14th All-American Council of The Orthodox Church in America, convened July 18-22, 2005 at the Toronto Sheraton Centre Hotel, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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Opening Homily

Delivered by His Grace, Bishop SERAPHIM, Bishop of Ottawa and the Archdiocese of Canada on Sunday, July 17, 2005, at the Divine Liturgy opening the 14th All-American Council.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

By the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit, once again the OCA is assembling together to listen to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, and to try to accomplish the Will of God in our life together in the Church.

Once again, we have assembled because we love our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ. And it is our desire to serve Him. This is now the 14th time our Church has assembled as an autocephalous Church, and the context in which we are assembling is different now, by far, from what it was when the first of these assemblies took place. Right now, we are living in times which could be described as "out of joint"; in times in which right has become wrong, and wrong has become right, black has become white, and white has become black.

Society's understanding of how to live life has been turned upside down. And we - we Orthodox Christians, The Orthodox Church in America, the local Orthodox Church in and for North America - we who are called to be yeast and salt in this territory have a huge responsibility. We have a huge responsibility because it is so difficult to persevere on the right path in the context of this distortion and this turmoil and the atmosphere of constant war. I don't think there has been a time without war during my life. There have always been wars since I was a child. I have this phantasy that when I was a child, during "the good old days of the British Empire," things were quieter. Probably I am deceived. But regardless, the times in which we live require a great deal from us, because everything around us works against us.

It is a time in which, like the Gospel of St. John describes, "Darkness is trying to overcome the light." It is difficult for us, very difficult for us, to maintain a sense of equilibrium and of where we are going in the midst of all of this - very difficult indeed. And if we are not careful, we will fall into some dangerous traps, traps mostly intellectual or of passion, which will divert us from our sense of direction. That is the environment that we find ourselves in this morning, with the Centurion and the Saviour and the healing of the Centurion's servant.

The Lord found in this Centurion, converting to Christ, more immediate faith than he found in the children of Israel - who had inherited the promise. And this was because people had become distracted from the right course. They had forgotten their sense of perspective, and what comes first in life. And as a result, they were floundering, as human beings always do. I am noted for saying that "human beings are very slow learners," and I have yet to be proven wrong, because I can't see how human society has progressed in any way in more than five thousand years. I recall talking to one of the best Egyptologists on this continent last year and asking him the question, "Is anything different over five thousand years?" He said, "No, it's worse." We are not learning anything, because we can't keep our eyes on what is our end, and what is our purpose in life. And that end and that purpose is only one - Jesus Christ: loving Him, knowing Him, and serving Him.

Regarding the heretics, whose failures and foibles we recalled in our hymns last night at Vespers to the Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils: those Fathers kept a sense of direction, not because of their intellectual powers alone, but because their great intellects were informed and guided by the

love of Jesus Christ, and their hearts knew who Jesus Christ really is. The heretics, on the other hand, fell into intellectual traps, were afraid of the implications of the depth of God's love, and tried to rationalize around it to make the incarnation of God's love - Jesus Christ - more "acceptable" to humans somehow. They tried in their various ways to "box in" God's love, and that never works. The Fathers, who preserved for us the Orthodox Faith, did it because their hearts and their minds were together, and they knew the Lord; and they knew who the Lord is, and they knew who the Lord is not.

You and I, as salt and yeast on this continent, are not going to be winning people by intellectual games and arguments, because this society in which we live is far too clever for all of that. It is far too clever for the standard debates and arguments we have used in the past to help people find God. These days it comes down to the "brass tacks" of what kind of a life you and I live, because people are so cynical in North America now - they've "seen everything," or they think they have seen everything. "Big Red" still has some surprises, I think, but we ourselves are not responsible for the turmoil others are living in; we ourselves are responsible for keeping our hearts and our minds on Jesus Christ. We are responsible for living a life that is conformed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And this life, conformed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is characterized by self-giving and self-emptying love and nothing else, actually, except self-giving, self-emptying, serving love, imitating the Master Himself, Jesus Christ - who said to the Apostles, you have to do as I am doing, when He washed their feet. We have to imitate Him. I myself still have to learn a prime lesson I was taught by a parishioner many years ago in Winnipeg, who said to me, "So you are greater than God, are you?" I wondered what he was getting at. "So I notice you never take a day off. God took a day off, don't you remember?" I am afraid I still don't quite catch his meaning, and this is more than twenty years ago. When I talk about "slow learning," I know what I am talking about.

People around us who are lost in all kinds of webs of deceit, pursuing the emptiness of trying to be comfortable in this world; people who are broken and damaged badly by the pain of life; people whose hearts are "dried up" - they are the ones who are looking to you and to me, Orthodox Christians, who profess to inherit the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth of Jesus Christ, looking to us to show them that Christ. And the only way we can show them that Christ is by how we truly love each other in conformity with the Gospel.

In my early days as a priest, I was really depressed - a lot and often - by how little I found the people reading the Scriptures, by how ignorant people in our Church were of the Scriptures. Now things are a bit better. I now hear of people reading, at least, the daily Scriptures. That's okay, and over twenty years and more of serving, I am happy to see that much. But, brothers and sisters, those Fathers who "saved our bacon" fifteen hundred years ago and more were people who read the Scriptures every day. They were "bathing in it." They knew the Bible by heart, not by memory, but by heart, because they read it so much. It's important for us to remember that if we are going to know who Jesus Christ is, then where we are going to find out who He really is, and how we are supposed to live - in those Scriptures.

I really took heart when I was a "green" seminarian and a "one-year-old" priest when I went to St. Tikhon's Monastery. I met for the first time the now departed Archimandrite Vasily of very blessed memory; and I heard through secondary sources that his kalenik, his cell attendant, had commented recently how nice it was that Archimandrite Vasily, who by this time was an old man, had his cell attendant reading the Bible to him every day. When they came to the end of the Apocalypse, Archimandrite Vasily said, "Oh, that was so nice, let's start again!"

That is exactly how we have to feel. There are people these days who do have that attitude toward the foundation of our life in Christ - the Holy Scriptures. You and I, brothers and sisters, have got to grow up in our life in Christ, in our love in Christ, because it is not in systems, it is not in techniques (although they help), it is not in them alone that we can put any trust. It is only in our heart, knowing who Jesus Christ is and testifying by our life to that Truth, Him who is the Truth - our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ - that we can truly grow up.

And that is what this coming week is all about: deepening our love for Jesus Christ, encouraging each other to persevere, no matter how difficult it is, in serving Jesus Christ, in being salt and yeast as the Saviour has called us to be, imitating our Saviour as He calls us in His love to do. He calls us to be life- and light-givers to those around us - in all humility, with no pride - but only with the love of Jesus Christ, whom, with all love, we here all glorify, together with His Father who is from everlasting, and His All-Holy, Good, and Life-Giving Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.