

Introduction

Every three years, the bishops, clergy, and delegated laypersons of the Orthodox Church in America gather together in council. They assemble to deliberate and to make decisions affecting the life of the entire territorial church. They elect the primate of the church; they revise the statutes; they set priorities for the future work of the central church administration. They hear reports about all aspects of the work of the church. Just as importantly, they gather together to pray; they get to know one another and reaffirm old friendships; and our youth learn that there is more to the church than the local parish as they engage in special programs for young people of all ages.

Clearly, some Councils have very particular tasks to perform, as was the case in Orlando in 2002 when we elected a new Metropolitan. Other councils do not have as clear a task, but they are nevertheless just as important, for they give us the opportunity to reflect **together** about the life of our church. Councils give us the opportunity to gather, **to be the local territorial church**, just as the local parish gathers together each Sunday for the eucharistic liturgy **to be the Church** in that particular time and place. In other words, we attend the liturgy on Sunday – and we attend All-American Councils – to affirm, indeed **to be**, what we are called to be here in North America. Thus, the very act of gathering together every three years is an essential aspect of what it means to be the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America.

We will gather together in Toronto in July 2005 to reflect together on our common task: how are we to live out our life as the Church in North America in the 21st century? We will do this in conciliar fashion, which means that we will all – bishops, priests, and laity – have a voice. The Orthodox Church in America is unique in the Orthodox world in having a truly conciliar structure, as reflected in the Statutes, a structure that allows every person, whatever his/her ecclesiastical rank, to participate in the decision-making process. And this is so at every level of church life, the parish, the diocese, and the territorial church. This is a great blessing and a great responsibility, and it must not be taken lightly. This was the vision expressed by Archbishop (St.) Tikhon of North America a century ago and implemented by the founding fathers of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America some thirty-five years ago.

Every three years, we gather in council to reflect together on whether we are living up to this vision, to support one another in keeping this vision alive, to pray together, and to work together for the future of our church. It is in order to facilitate this common reflection the Preconciliar Commission prepared these preparatory papers, which focus on five key aspects of church life, here referred to as “pillars.” These pillars include:

Our vision and identity as the Orthodox Church in America;

Our relations with others, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox;

Clergy formation and development;

Parish health;

Evangelizing North America.

We identified these as essential components of a healthy ecclesial life, and therefore as key elements requiring the attention of the entire Church. In order to spark the discussion, some forty persons from all walks of life – including bishops, priests, and laypersons – were asked to contribute their thoughts on specific issues. The writers were asked to reflect on these areas from their own perspectives. The contributions were then combined into these papers, but no attempt was made to homogenize them. They were edited slightly for style, and those papers that greatly exceeded the assigned length were abbreviated. Every effort, however, was made to preserve the original content and perspective of each contributor. In this way, we hope that these papers do express the many voices in our church, and that they will serve as fodder for our deliberations.

We wish to express our gratitude to all those who contributed to this effort. While they remain nameless, their work is greatly appreciated, and it shows the energy and vitality that are to be found in our church. We hope and pray that these papers will help to focus our discussion and our work as we gather together in council.

The Preconciliar Commission