VISION OF A CONCILIAR CHURCH

THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST ALL-AMERICAN SOBOR

Participants of the First Sobor

SAINT ALEXANDER HOTOVITZKY 1872-1937

1896-1914 – Missionary priest in America
1937 – Martyred
December 4, 1994 – Glorified as New Martyr of Russia and Missionary to America

SAINT JOHN KOCHUROV 1871-1917

1895-1907 – Missionary priest in America
1917 – First clergy martyr of the Russian Revolution
December 4, 1994 – Glorified as New Martyr of Russia and Missionary to America

SAINT ALEXIS TOTH 1854-1909

1889 – Arrived in America as a Uniate
1891-1905 – Orthodox Missionary in America
May 29-30, 1994 – Glorified as Confessor and Defender of Orthodoxy in America

IGUMEN ARSENY (CHAHOVTSEV) 1866-1945

1903-1910 – Missionary Priest in US and Canada
1905 – Founder of Saint Tikhon's Monastery
1926-1937 – Bishop of Canada
1938 – Founder of Saint Tikhon's Pastoral School (now Seminary)

Mayfield, Pennsylvania - 1907

Theme: HOW TO EXPAND THE MISSION

Its convocation set the precedent for all future All-American Sobors and Councils.

In order to expand the mission, the Sobor:

- decided to create orderly ecclesial structure at all levels of the Church
- decided to draft a Statute regulating this structure
- deemed essential the regular convocation of All-American Councils
- laid groundwork for a solid and equitable financial infrastructure
- acknowledged liturgical diversity reflecting variety of ethnicities

"Fathers and Brothers! ... I shall take advantage of your patience for a few minutes longer to speak of what and wanted together. In some matters, I initiated things, inspired you and you in turn went out to bring my ideas to life. In other matters, on the contrary, you suggested the thought to me – I am not ashamed to admit this – and I found the ways and means to implement your idea. I appealed to you for assistance and you did not refuse it. I came to address to you in the cathedral of San Francisco, and my appeal was not in vain. If something has been accomplished here, it was not I alone who accomplished it, but we together. It is self-evident that the more I study the history of the Orthodox Church in this land, the more convinced I become that our task here is God's task, that God Himself helps us. Precisely when it appears that everything is just about to collapse, our Orthodox ...mission, instead of dying, rises up in new strength and brilliance."

"From the very beginning, I allowed great initiative to my coworkers. Just so long as the work got done, the question of who initiated it, I or someone else did not seem important to me."

-From Saint Tikhon's remarks at a farewell meal with clergy following the First All-American Sobor, Mayfield, PA, 1907

Saint John the Baptist Church in Mayfield, PA – site of the First All-American Sobor

"May the Lord God, who is glorified in the Holy Trinity, be praised for designing this! May He be praised for the fruitful work of our Sobor and Council, to get to know one another, and by the measure of our strength and discernment to come to the needed decisions. Any betterment of these decisions, to strengthen them, will be worked on by our future Orthodox Councils, which, as all of us can see, are a necessity to meet at regular intervals again and again."

"Renewed in spirit, with faith and hope in God, may our Church, now and by courageous, pure, loving and strong in her unity; may she draw unto her bosom not only the Uniates, who are our brothers by blood, but advancing beyond the Russian race, may she draw unto her bosom the whole world of the Apostolic Church, so that here, there would be one flock and one Shepherd, Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and majesty with the Father and the Holy Spirit unto ages of ages."

-From the Concluding Remarks of Fr. Leonid Turkevich (later Metropolitan Leonty) at the First All-American Sobor in 1907

Visionary Leaders of the Councils Through the Century

"I recall how deep was my dismay at the news of my appointment to America...I was oppressed by the consciousness that I was not suitable for the work..."

"...And now I am inclined to think that my appointment came about not so much by the decision of men as by the plan of God, and that it was timely for this flock."

-From Saint Tikhon's remarks at a farewell meal with clergy following the First All-American Sobor, Mayfield, PA, 1907

"I welcome you honorable Fathers and delegates to the Council. Some of you have come from far, some have been kept from coming for a relatively short time, nothing needs to be said regarding the obvious importance and necessity of conciliar deliberation of its affairs. It seems that many of you have been previously well aware of this or have learned of it here in personal conversations. To say anything further is, I think, superfluous.

"For my part, I would just like to say that in order for our work to be truly fruitful – we must be guided not so much by self interest or personal advantage, but rather by what benefits our common work."

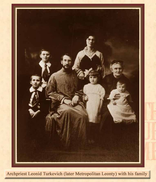
-From Saint Tikhon's Opening Address to the First All-American Sobor in 1907

SAINT TIKHON 1865-1925

110th Anniversary of Arrival in America

1898-1900 – Bishop of the Aleutians and Alaska
1905-1907 – Archbishop of the Aleutians and North America
1907 – Convened the unprecedented First All-American Sobor
1917-1925 – Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia
October 9, 1989 – Glorified as Confessor of Russia and Enlightener of North America

Saint Tikhon shown presiding at the All-Russian Church Council held in Moscow in 1917-18, at which he was elected Patriarch of Moscow and All-Russia... The All-American Sobor, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in November of 1907, was destined to play a role in paving the way for the All-Russian Council and the Russian Council, in turn, became the template for all subsequent All-American Sobors and Councils.



Archpriest Leonid Turkevich (later Metropolitan Leonty) with his family

After reflecting on the extraordinary God-given vision of Saint Tikhon, the Council, as a witness to Holy Orthodoxy, uncontaminated and untainted by any external political forces, Archbishop Leonty speaks of the nature of the Church's councils:

"In concerns our organizational structure, we – Orthodox Christians – are unique in this. We can, in good – can assemble freely, without any coercion, for our church-wide gatherings, which we call "All-American Church Councils". With faith in the guiding salvific grace of the All-Holy Spirit, the Comforter, we can, poucifully, in brotherhood and with mutual understanding, correct our common affairs, discuss our common concerns and problems without looking back, without discussion, without fear. ... Our Orthodox Church is being freely fortified here by the church councils, from Council to Council, without restraint, radiantly, joyfully, dynamically, amicably and effectively. God and His power are with us!"

-Archbishop Leonty's opening address at the Eighth All-American Sobor, 1950 (where he would be elected Metropolitan)

METROPOLITAN LEONTY (TURKEVICH) 1876-1965

1906-1933 – Priest and Seminary Professor in America
1907 – Chairman of the First All-American Sobor
1933 – Bishop of Canada
1945-1950 – Archbishop of Chicago
1950-1965 – Metropolitan of All America and Canada
1917-1918 – Delegate from the North American Diocese to All-Russian Church Council
1907-1963 – Participated in every All-American Council

Archpastoral staff is presented to Metropolitan Leonty following his election as Primate at the Eighth All-American Sobor at Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral, New York City, December 1950.

Some Post-Council Thoughts

By Fr. Alexander Schmemann

Each All-American Council—for me it was my eighth—is above all an experience in churchness. One goes there with all kinds of human apprehensions; doubts, even fears. One asks: How can anything good come from a short gathering of so many people so different from one another in background, in mentality, in ideas? And each time the same miracle happens. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of unity and limitation is transformed into the Church. Each time, as the Council progresses, there grows in each participant the joyful certitude that we all belong to something which transcends all of us, and by belonging to it, belong to one another in Christ. And this is exactly the experience of the Church!

* * *

There was that fear about the Council being held for the first time in a hotel. Would it not be another surrender to the world? Would it not be another compromise and concession toward "unchurching" the Church? Yet exactly the opposite happened. Seldom before was a Council so deeply rooted in prayer and worship, so centered on the Divine Liturgy, so truly experiencing the Church as indeed being the Body, of Christ. The ballroom miraculously transformed into a beautiful church; the magnificent singing; the long lines of people receiving Communion; the quiet joy and peace that revealed a victory—that of the Church's power to transform even a hotel into the temple of God. Truly Christ was in the midst of us!

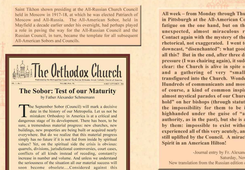
* * *

How often in the past one could sense the polarization of the Council between clergy and laity, the presence and the action in it of various "blocs." Since 1970 all this is gone. There were, to be sure, differences of opinion; there were, on many occasions, majority and minority votes; but none of them created blocs. There was, in fact, no trace of anxiety or distrust and fear. A few voices which kept "singing the old tunes" seemed quite anachronistic. What a tremendous growth in otherness, in genuine churchness.

* * *

This, genuine churchness was already vividly revealed in 1965 when, having given the majority of its votes to one bishop, the Council had to accept as Metropolitan another bishop selected between two candidates by the Synod of Bishops. The unanimous and prayerful *le polle eti despote* which greeted the Metropolitan-elect revealed that unity, obedience, and trust which are the component parts of churchness. Of course, there are still some problems, and sometimes learning the hard way how to put the Church above our limited and human likes and dislikes, how together to care for her. It is my fervent wish that this growth will continue; that more and more the old attitudes will be overcome by mutual trust and obedience to the Holy Spirit who teaches us how to be one, how to be a true, free, old "clerical" but also laity, and, yes, even bishops, no longer any need for the old "bar" four of the clergy. If this last Council proved anything, it is above everything else that we care together for the Church, and that the Holy Spirit speaks and acts only through our unity in Christ.

-From The Orthodox Church, December 1972



The Orthodox Church
Volume 7, No. 11 November 1971

The Sobor: Test of our Maturity

by Father Alexander Schmemann

The September Sobor (Council) will mark a decisive time in the history of our Metropolia. Let us not be mistaken: Orthodoxy in America is at a critical and dangerous stage of its development. Then but been, to be sure, a tremendous material progress: new churches, new buildings, new properties are being built or acquired nearly everywhere. But do we realize that this material progress simply has no future if it is not led from inside by spiritual values? Yet, on the spiritual side the crisis is obvious: conflicts of all kinds, instead of receding, constantly increase in number and volume. And unless we understand the spiritual nature of the crisis, we shall continue to be more become obsolete....Considered against this background of crisis, our Sobor will be a test: a test of our maturity as people who have to live and witness in the Church and not as a loose and sometimes unorganized combination of local, selfish and private interests. It will be a test of our ability to understand that there are things in life are stronger than our petty human passions, or, to put it in much simpler words, whether our faith and dedication to Christ are still strong, are stronger than our individual and communal selfishness.

The Sobor will elect our new Metropolitan. This is not a mere "administrative business." This is an act of the highest spiritual significance. For the Metropolitan is precisely the man who, by his very presence, reminds us that we must first seek to be keep as together, to give us a sense of direction, to lead us along the path of God's will. In fact, the Sobor will be a test of our ability to understand that Theophilus and Leonty were in "salvation" that they were "acclaimed" rather than elected. There is not the case of a majority and a minority, of competition and of spirit of partisanship. It-will not be divisions. Here, therefore, is our first test. Each one of us has, of course, the inalienable right to express his opinion and to vote according to his conscience, before God, he thinks to be the best and the ablest. But we must remember that ultimately the decision will be made by the Bishops who are the successors of the Divine will, the organ of the Holy Spirit, whom each one in his own rank and responsibility responds and surrenders to the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the Sobor will be a test of our maturity—in adviance—there not total and unconditional obedience and loyalty, love and respect. Here is the test of our churchness, of our maturity in Christ.

The election of the Metropolitan will then mean our ever-renewed commitment to the Church, to her unity, to her one-ness, our local and partial loyalties and interests, which is God's work and service on earth. It will also mean our commitment to the Church as the unique and ultimate manifestation in Christ, the only content and measure of our life in the Church. At a time when the Church is threatened by so many forces, it is important that we remember our high calling. "Brethren—writes the Apostle—(ye are the temple of the living God, as God has said: I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God and they shall be my people....Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 6:16, 7:1).

All week – from Monday through Thursday night – in Pittsburgh at the All-American Council. Great joy, great hope, great love, great faith, great and unexpected, almost miraculous ray of light. Contact again with the mystery of the Church, *not* rhetorical, not exaggerated. I went to the Council downcast, "disenchanted": what good can come of all this, in the end, after so many years of hopeless pessimism? Even during the Council it seemed to become clear that the Church is, in spite of everything, and a gathering of very "small" people is transfigured into the Church. Wonderful services. Hundreds of communicants and most importantly of course, a kind of common inspiration.... An inspiration that overcomes all pessimism. We "hold hold" on her bishops (through statute, structure, the impossibility for them to be irresponsibly highlanded under the guise of "archpastoral" authority, as in the past), but she is also "upheld" by them: impossible to exist without them.... I experienced all of this very acutely, and my mood is still uplifted by the Council. A miracle of the Holy Spirit in an American Hilton!

Journal entry by Fr. Alexander Schmemann, Saturday, November 17, 1972
New translation from the Russian edition of his "Journal"

Just months before his death, Fr. Alexander Schmemann, priestly son of Saint Tikhon, addresses the Seventh All-American Council, Philadelphia, PA, August 1983.

FATHER ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN 1921-1983

25th Anniversary of Repose

1951-1983 – Professor at Saint Vladimir's Seminary
1962-1983 – Dean of Saint Vladimir's Seminary
1955-1983 – Participated in every All-American Council

Fr. Alexander Schmemann presides at a session of the Second All-American Council at St. Tikhon's Monastery, South Canaan, PA, October 1971.

Prepared by
OCA Department of History and Archives