

Enthronement Address of His Grace, Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland

13 April 2015 (Old Style)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!

Your Eminence, Metropolitan Demetrios,
President of our Eparchial Synod in America;
Your Eminence, Metropolitan Moses of Toronto;
Your Grace, the Right Reverend Sergios,
Bishop *emeritus* of Portland;
Your Eminence, the Most Reverend Chrysostomos,
Metropolitan *emeritus* of Etna;
Archimandrite Akakios, Abbot of our Monastery;
Mother Elizabeth, Abbess of the Convent of St. Elizabeth
the Grand Duchess of Russia;
Beloved Presbyters and Deacons, our Fellow Servants
in the second and third ranks of the Priesthood;
Monastic Fathers and Mothers in Christ;
And the Royal Priesthood of the Faithful,
my Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη! Христосъ Воскресе! Christ is Risen!

There is no shortage of materials testifying to the lofty vocation of the Episcopacy and to the sacred, sacrificial, and divinely sanctioned relationship between a Hierarchy and his Rational Sheep, his flock, which has as its prototype the relationship between the Lord Himself and the whole Church. As resources for those wishing to deepen their understanding of these matters, I can very enthusiastically refer them to the consecration and enthronement addresses of the venerable Hierarchs here present, and notably of our former First Hierarchy, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle. Those thirsting for even deeper wells can expand their inquiry to the writings and the lives of the Holy Fathers, the Church's invaluable heritage and indispensable resource for maturation in the Faith. Saints Dionysios the Areopagite, Ignatios of Antioch, John Chrysostomos, Maximos the Confessor, and Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, to name but a few, depict an image reflecting such high standards for the Hierarchy, his flock, and the relationship between the two, that I would not dare to repeat their words while standing here before you, my own faults so obviously manifest and so much in contrast to this image. Such words, which strip us of all pretense and affectation and expose our shame, are best left for reading in private. There, with genuine sincerity, we can weep for our nakedness and lament our lack of a wedding garment that might signal acceptable efforts towards perfection or assure us of a welcome at our Lord's banquet.

What I will mention, as the theme of my address, as I assume the guidance of our small diocese, is my own perspective on the ills that plague the Church today and the challenges, correspondingly, that confront us. Since the Church is in the world and draws faithful into her nets from this same world, let me begin with some comments about secular society.

In simple terms, the society around us is fractured. No matter what lens one uses to examine it, the divisions are evident and extensive. Our nations war with their enemies and waiver in their allegiance to their allies. Factions within our governments war with one another. Within each society, we suffer from endless divisions along religious, ethnic, economic, political, racial, and generational lines. We war with our cultural legacies, our moral codes, standards, and institutions. What was once considered the foundation of all social units, the nuclear family, is now an institution under siege. More and more children have experienced first hand the traumatic and scarring dissolution of their own family—whether by divorce, separation or abandonment—and the dispersion

of its members. Finally, the human personality itself is breaking apart, even to the point of disassociation. Mental disease is epidemic; normalcy is unknown, uncertain, misunderstood, or even denied. With each new scandal, assault, catastrophe, and bizarre, unprecedented spectacle, we see in our day a greater realization of St. Anthony's prophecy, warning us that: "There will come a time when men will be mad. If they see someone who is not mad, they will rise up against him and will say, 'You are mad,' because he does not resemble them in their madness."¹

We who share the invaluable privilege of membership in the Church should not imagine that we are exempt from these issues. Not only was the world our former home; its image animates the "old man" that wars against us, both as individuals and as a fellowship of believers.

So it is that the same fault lines around us, undermining secular society, have penetrated the Church, threatening our faithful, families, parishes, dioceses, and even synods. Though the Apostle warned that there "must be heresies" (I Corinthians 3:3) amongst us, I do believe that extraordinary events of an unprecedented scale are occurring amongst our Hierarchs and in our Synodal administrations. During the last century, the Orthodox Church has seen its liturgical life fractured, its national Church administrations ruptured, and its Patriarchates enter into shameful, even childish competition with one another, imagining themselves, in an astonishing fall to neo-papalism in the guise of Patriarchalism, ecclesiastical potentates, understanding their administrative powers to be somehow spiritual or doctrinal, and thus threatening the absolute equality of *all* Orthodox Bishops. Even those of us in resistance, sadly enough, fall to seeking titles, prerogatives of office, unique vesture specific to the highness of some office, and trappings that suggest that administrative superiors are somehow of greater authority than other Bishops, once again subtly tempting the egos of those who forget that all Bishops are equal and that the Bishop of Bishops is Christ Himself. Of late, Orthodox Church leaders of every kind are enticed, despite the fact that they are servants, to give "orders," rather than to exhort; to fancy themselves "princes" and to look at the People of God as their vassals; and to reckon themselves—servants of the Master—more than just a fall-en image of the Master Himself, Christ our Lord.

These lines of fracture did not occur in a vacuum. They came in the midst of one of the most violent centuries humanity has ever known, a century in which it is estimated that, unbelievably, more than *a hundred million souls* perished in raging revolutions and world wars. Sacred and time-honored institutions were abolished. Empires fell. Society was transformed and distorted. Traditions were discarded and the very idea of tradition was brought into question.

Slowly, the reverberations of these traumatic events crept into the Church and provoked the aforementioned disruptions within Her internal life. Most recently, we saw with our own eyes what many had thought impossible: the capitulation of the venerable Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russian to the Moscow Patriarchate in the most unprincipled way and under humiliating terms.

Let no one dismiss this event as insignificant. This was a Church with a treasury of spiritual resources: pious and devout laity, true monastics, martyrs, ascetics, intellectual giants, undaunted apologists, saints, and holy hierarchs. On the international stage and in the New World, no Church, let alone one of such relatively few numbers, gave such a clarion witness to Orthodoxy. Her magnificent Churches reflected the priorities and sacrifices of her clergy and faithful. In contrast to the comfortable pews, theatrically inspired architecture, and organs of the surrounding modernist Orthodox Churches, Her traditional architecture and iconography and her open naves, free of the seating of the theatre and filled with faithful either standing or prostrating in repentance, reflected the Church's genuine ascetic ethos, testifying to the externals of tradition that bespeak the Church's internal authenticity. Similarly, her clergy and faithful, more than any other jurisdiction, respected the clergyman's *rason* (cassock), his uncut beard and hair, and the proper, modest apparel appropriate to the prophetic ministry of the Priesthood and to the peculiar, otherworldly calling of the people of God, the Royal Priesthood.

Again, unlike any other Orthodox Church, ROCOR's mission, proclaimed by her Hierarchy and apologists,

was crystal clear. First, she was to preserve and share, in the diaspora, the legacy of the same Orthodoxy into which Rus' had been baptized, producing a millennium of sanctified believers now populating heavenly mansions. And second, she was to facilitate the restoration of Orthodoxy in Russia by the Church's traditional means: repentance and a salvific Orthodox confession that would include, among other things, a disavowal of the atheistically inspired betrayal of Sergianism that so compromised the soviet Church's internal life.

Sadly, the union of the ROCOR with Moscow, at a time when its strong witness and observance of the Faith had begun to wane, was anything but "crystal clear." Issues of repentance and Orthodox confession were obfuscated, principles were compromised, and even though it was muffled by the distractions and confused rhetoric of the dialogues, ROCOR suffered a violent rupture with her past. By her union with Moscow, she annulled her previous Synodal acts and proclamations and committed to a course of historical revisionism. Having been a Sister Church of our former Synod in Resistance for ten years, it broke relations with us, as its more forthright Bishops told us, because Moscow demanded this. Of course, our Bishops would not have agreed to a union with Moscow under any circumstances anyway. But the *dictated* rupture in communion was significant.

We are still witnessing and measuring the consequences of this tragedy, an event that Bishop Photiy of Triaditza, from our Sister Church of the Old Calendarists in Bulgaria, likens to a descent from the Cross—a dreadful seduction by the last temptation that our immortal enemy hurled at our Lord at the time of His crucifixion. His Eminence's analysis is haunting:

To me, this was the cruelest truth: becoming convinced that these people had begun to resemble internally, in spirit, the Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate. This means cunning; it means aspirations towards the benefits of officialdom and of worldly recognition, towards material profits and advantages. It means embarking on the path of ecclesial diplomacy and politics, flexibility dictated by self-interest, of double standards and the language of ecclesiastical politics: 'It may be both this way and that way. What matters is whether it serves our political line.'²

Of course, not only the ROCOR hierarchy was harmed. A venerable and seemingly invulnerable institution had fallen in the believers' eyes, and their faith was shaken. For every believer who looked to the "Synod"—even from outside her jurisdictional boundaries—for inspiration and guidance, the tragedy begs important questions: If a bastion of Orthodoxy can suffer such a fall, who is safe? Were we wrong to have such high expectations for the ROCOR hierarchy, counting on them always to follow the right course and to set the golden standard? Were we wrong to trust our hierarchy? One can imagine the same tempting spirit that assailed our Lord now screaming with delight, "No one is safe; your expectations were naive; your trust unfounded! The Church this Nazarene founded is broken, schism and disunity will prevail!"

The challenge of our generation of Orthodox will be to rediscover and reaffirm the Church's answer to these difficult questions and to refute the slanderous replies of the tempter. Since the Apostolic Succession of our own Church derives directly from the ROCOR, this challenge is especially important for us.

As we labor for our response, we should not be surprised that temptations towards easy answers already encompass us.

On the left, numerous voices seem to follow the disruptive forces infecting the Church to their logical end. They no longer trust the Church's traditional protocol or her hierarchy, let alone the promises of her Divine Founder. Facilitated by the troublesome medium of the Internet, without inhibition they protest and expound on lofty and difficult matters, as though in their own persons they carried the full panoply of spiritual gifts and synodal authority. They and their black-and-white, simplistic opinions become the personal and rational criteria of tradition and authenticity. In essence, they eventually come to a Protestant mentality.

On the right, we are tempted by a backlash. Rather than succumb to the divisive forces invading the Church,

we imagine that we must shirk certain personal responsibilities and worship the idol of authority, pomp, and institutional gravitas for its own sake, blindly offering up our obedience and fidelity to the Church authorities who garner the praise and respect of various worldly rulers and who, accordingly, appear to be the most official and enduring of Church leaders. These are the Patriarchates, which unhesitatingly proclaim themselves “official,” “canonical,” and even “spiritually supreme,” despite the meaningless and unproven nature of these claims. In such a spirit we have been primed to recognize, before the fact, the Orthodox Synod scheduled to convene in 2016 as “Œcumenical” and inspired, even if no one knows its outcome, suggesting that the decisions of the convocation have been scripted in advance.

Our first duty is to avoid these pitfalls as immature, as importations from Protestant and Catholic principles that do not adequately express the unique mind-set of Orthodoxy, and as solutions that violate the historical witness of the Church.

In the past, the Orthodox Church has always solved her controversies by a conciliar process, founded on the local Synodal system, where difficult issues were first adjudicated. It was driven by the prophetic Spirit of God that spoke through particular luminaries—a Saint Athanasios, Cyril of Alexandria, or Maximos the Confessor—who provided clarity and inspired resolutions for the conflicts at hand. In particularly difficult circumstances, the proposed resolutions were legislated in universal, Œcumenical Synods. And in all cases, the resolutions were given final ratification with their approval by the people of God, the Royal Priesthood, who were the true “Rational Flock” and who, in their virtue, recognized the voice of their True Shepherd resonating through the proclamations of their hierarchy.

Everyone played his role in this ecclesiastical system. And of course everyone had a responsibility to make sure that his or her character facilitated, and did not oppose, the sacred system’s mind-set and dynamics.

So, we must commit ourselves to plumbing the depths of the Church’s experience and rediscovering a mind-set which, for two millennia, has genuinely governed her life. It is the true solution for our controversies. It alone heals our divisions. It alone secures a genuine unity.

What, in our poverty and infancy, can we say about this mind-set?

1. First of all, the notion of a common mentality that is reflective of healthy Church life is not an innovation. It is scriptural, patristic, and at the very core of the Christian message. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the first Christians “were of one heart and of one soul” (Acts 4:32). St. Paul refers to having the mind of Christ. And he specifically instructs the Corinthians to be renewed by the transformation of their minds. From the patristic exegesis of Scripture and from a corresponding exegesis of the writings of the Church Fathers themselves, we derive the vast majority of the Church’s theological texts, illustrating the simple fact that faithful children of the Church have always striven for a commonality with their predecessors: to think, to say, and to do what came before. In theological literature we refer to this goal as the acquisition of the “mind of the Fathers.”

2. Secondly, this commonality in a shared mind is not mimicry, even if some of our fledgling efforts may make it appear as such. As Saint Paul hints, the acquisition of this mind is accomplished by an internal “renewal” and “transformation” (*cf.* Romans 12:2) effected by communion with our Lord Himself, Who “yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8), with His Unbegotten Father and His Life-giving Spirit, remains available to every believer. As a fount of living water, a fire, a vine onto which we are grafted, He inhabits our soul’s temple. The acquisition of the “Mind of the Fathers” is also not intellectual, the equivalent of “book knowledge”—though, as I will mention below, studying has its place. This communion is a gift of God. It is the mind that we acquire through union with Christ, Who, as St. Athanasios the Great affirms, “became man, so that man might become God,” “partaking,” as the Apostle Peter tells us in his second catholic epistle, “of the Divine nature” (1:4). While we have clear duties in cultivating and receiving this gift of communion and union, its origin and workings remain mysterious, as the Lord Himself makes clear when He compares the acquisition of the Kingdom of

Heaven to a man casting seed into the ground and then, after sleeping and rising night and day, seeing the seed, without his knowing how, “spring and grow up” (*cf.* St. Mark 4:26–27).

3. Thirdly, we must commit ourselves to perennial remedial education in the Faith. This is not only a motivational exercise, though surely we are responsible for stirring up our flagging spirits by a recollection of the mercy we have received and a consideration of the good example of others. It is also our *sacred duty* to “search the Scriptures” (St. John 5:39) and to “study,” to show ourselves “approved” (II St. Timothy 2:15), and to be ever ready to “give an answer to every man that asketh...a reason” (II St. Peter 3:15) for the hope within us. Furthermore, ignorance and forgetfulness are vices that rob us of our spiritual treasures and open the door to the Evil One, whose cunning minions are arrayed against us, and about whose devices the Apostle warns that we must not be ignorant. Our unsleeping enemy is a liar, a murderer, a slanderer, an obfuscator, and a deceiver. The world, understood as the passions that captivate and rule over men, is Satan’s realm. To the extent that we must be in but not of this world, we must train ourselves to see through its deceit, lest it entangle us in its nets.

From a personal experience, I will give you a minute example of understanding these evil devices. In my formal doctoral studies in liturgics, I used to wonder about the ultimate motivations of some of the scholars who invested entire careers to resolving the smallest minutiae of Christian worship. From a human standpoint, the returns seemed minimal (perhaps one might receive a standing ovation at a conference—there is no Nobel Prize for liturgics!), and the materials on which these scholars focused always seemed dry. Then one day I read an article by Metropolitan Chrysostomos, addressing contemporary anti-religious polemics from some scientific writers. He mentioned the simple but poignant fact that, for these people, the notion of a Divine guidance of history, what we call Providence, is anathema. Forgive my own simplemindedness, but just as in mathematics, where one is tasked to reduce a complex equation with multiple variables into its simplest expression, the tangled arguments and analyses of these problematic liturgical writers all fell apart in my head, and I saw the driving force behind them: analyze in such a manner that there is no room for God!

It was a small insight, but the experience reinforced a broader principle that His Eminence has stressed for his readers and students: it is in the nature of evil for it not to disclose its existence or mechanisms. Like a viper, once it acts, it quickly retreats to its nest. Combined with our own vices of neglect, ignorance, and forgetfulness, we face a dangerous, even lethal scenario. Through vigilance and training, *we* must be as wise as the wily serpent lurking within the confusing temptations of the world, and then go for its head, forcing it to reveal its master and disclose its strategy, thereby inoculating ourselves against further strikes.

4. Fourth and finally, the imperative for us to recover the mind of the Fathers means that our labors must be focused inwardly, toward our own rational soul, just as much, if not more, than they are focused on those around us. Of course, one cannot be a Christian in a vacuum. We are incarnate, and all labors within this world, properly directed, impact our souls. But the inner life of self-focus is indispensable.

The Kingdom of God begins *within* each one of us. Our focus *must* be there, if we want to find both the cause and the cure for all illnesses. This orientation is richly illustrated in the lives of our Saints. Even those who were most active in public service were, nevertheless, also men of spirit who would, like the Lord Himself, withdraw for a time and be given to solitary prayer. And the fact that the root of evil is disclosed and battled internally is a recurring scriptural and patristic theme. St. James notes that wars and strife are the direct outcome of our *internal* passions. St. John Chrysostomos remarks that, in truth, no one can do us evil if we do not provide *internal* consent. In the life of St. Basil the Great, one of the Church’s most adroit and active administrators, we read that he would withdraw to solitary prayer and shed copious tears, accusing himself for the world’s calamities.

I have always been particularly touched by the thoughts of a contemporary writer, Professor Ivan Andreyev, who wrote the article “Weep!” in response to a mother’s brutal slaying of her two-year-old infant in their New York City apartment. Andreyev contemplates the horrors accompanying this inhuman act, but quickly moves

beyond the obvious guilt of the mother. As Christians, he notes, *we* must all assume responsibility for her horrendous act and offer contrite and burning tears of repentance. The paucity of our inner lives and our inattention to the struggle that it demands are the things that allow evil to go uncorrected and to slay innocent souls.

It is not God, but we ourselves that we must reproach for the evils surrounding us. One for all and all for one we are all guilty before one another.... We are all guilty before the face of this little tortured lamb found on West 84th Street in New York City. Since we are all sinners, we create evil and our evil becomes a part of the world's treasury of evil. This evil coalesces into a huge energy of evil which seeks vessels of graceless bodies to pour itself into, and when it finds them, it will be incarnated in them and they will do great acts of evil. We are all brothers and sisters. All mankind is one large family and this tortured infant is our brother and his "mother"-killer is our sister.³

Our inner lives are sadly and sinfully disconnected from those of others; however, just as illuminating our souls, as St. Seraphim of Sarov tells us, will prove successful in enlightening many around us, so by failing to acquire the mind of Christ by inward vigilance, we will invite disaster on those around us. We become in our sinful neglect complicit in their evil and in the loss of their souls.

With this in mind, I offer the humble thought that the true path to the mind of the Fathers—to an ecclesiastical mentality that promotes the healthy dynamic of the Church, safeguards us against evil and divisive threats, and promotes healing of division and fragmentation, no matter where there might be found—begins with our embracing the suffering of our fellow man as well as our admiration of his nobility. It is not enough to strive to see the image of God in one another. We must see our link to, and even our responsibility for, our neighbor's sins through our own genuine repentance and the discovery of the roots of sin and the wells of evil within our own souls. Such an orientation is appropriate for us who have been exiled from the paradisaical garden; it is productive for the virtues and deeds that our Lord expects when He seeks fruits worthy of repentance; it checks the perpetuation of contention and division by restraining us from judging others—for how do we dare condemn others for that to which we contribute? It is also consonant with the historical witness of the choir of saints and righteous ones who labored and were crowned, and it holds out for us the promise of healing, of restoration, and of exaltation, as was the case with the Canaanite woman who lamented her possessed daughter. For the sake of her humble self-conception as a dog begging at her Master's table, she received not only the morsels of nourishment and healing, but even our Lord's abundant praise as a woman of unsurpassed faith.

To quote the famous *Synodikon* read on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, "***This*** is the Faith of the Apostles, ***this*** is the Faith of the Fathers, ***this*** is the Faith of the Orthodox, ***this*** is the Faith which establisheth the whole world" (emphasis mine).

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us and save us.

Footnotes

1. *The Evergetinos: A Complete Text*, Book III, Hypothesis XXV, §A.7, ed. and trans. Archbishop Chrysostomos and Hieromonk Patapios (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), p. 177.

2. Bishop Photii of Triaditza, "On the Current State of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad" (2006), pp. 8-9 (<http://hsir.org/p/w6v>).

3. I.M. Andreyev, "Weep!" *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (March–April 1993), p. 41.