

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL, MORAL, AND SOCIAL ISSUES



MATERIAL IN PREPARATION FOR THE 16TH ALL- AMERICAN COUNCIL CONTEMPORARY ISSUES WORKING GROUP, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The purpose of this “Read-Ahead” is to provide participants in the All American Council (AAC) with the benefit of the initial thinking that has been done to date on this important issue in the life of the Church. It is meant as **STARTING POINT FOR YOUR OWN DISCUSSIONS AND DELIBERATIONS** and does not represent *official* Church positions. Please feel free to add to, modify, take away, correct, or challenge any of the ideas in here. It is through your collective inputs and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we will be able to discern the best path forward in this area for the life of the Church during the next decade.

1. INTRODUCTION

Each generation of Christians is called to witness to the eternal truth of the Gospel in the cultures and times in which it finds itself. To get a better initial understanding of what this might mean in 21st century North America, the Strategic Planning Committee formed a Working Group consisting of:

V. Rev David Brum
V. Rev. Michael Oleksa
Rev. John Schroedel

Janine Legg
Michael Matsko
Daria Petrykowski

Their initial thoughts on the next steps we, the Orthodox Church in America, might take in addressing the contemporary cultural, moral, and social issues of 21st North America are given in Section 2. With this as background, Section 3 invites us to add our own thoughts on these areas.

2. SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS AND PROPOSED STEPS FORWARD

ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL ISSUES

As Orthodox, we are called to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:18). Early on St. Paul realized that to do this he had to meet people ‘where they are’. We must seek to understand them and to communicate with them in terms and frameworks they understand. In St. Paul’s words “I have become *all things to all people* so that by all possible means I might save some” (1Cor.19:22). We are called to do the same. In doing so we must understand first seek to understand the culture of the people we are reaching out to whether it be from different countries, different age groups, different educational backgrounds, different economic classes, etc.

In the words of Fr. Michael Oleksa: “Culture is a difficult concept to grasp. I realized that when I first came to rural Alaska forty years ago. I soon came to realize that communication between myself and my young school students regularly broke down because, as I came to understand it, my students did not see the world the same was as I did. This was hard to spot, since they all spoke English, ate pizza and wore Nike shoes. Their grandparents spoke their ancestral language, their parents both their language and English but I had the first generation of English-only speakers. But "the way they saw the world" was still basically Alaskan.”

One metaphor for understanding this difference in perception might be useful: walk into a shed or barn on a sunny day and close the door. Everything inside is too dark and you can't see anything right away. What you can see clearly are the beams of sunlight that

penetrate the interior darkness of the structure, and within that brightness, you can see every particle of dust, floating in the light. You can look AT the light. But then you can step into the light and look out along that shaft of sunlight. Once you're there, you can see the world outside, the sun, the blue sky, perhaps the tree that overhangs that side of the barn, and even birds or insects flitting past. But here's the point: when you are in the light, you cannot see the light. Once you step into the sunlight, the barn disappears and the beam of light also disappears. The beam of light along which you see the world is your culture. But you cannot see it. You don't know how "American" or "Canadian" you are until you leave your country!

Most minority communities are aware (sometimes painfully) that their way of seeing is different from the majority population. They struggle to find words to explain how their perspective is different from others. Orthodoxy in North America seeks to find words adequate to our spiritual and theological experience. In a sense, our mission in the New World is a continuing effort at cross-cultural communication. Our frustration in ecumenical encounters originates precisely in our uniquely Orthodox experience of Christ and the Church. The same words mean something different to us, within our "beam of light" than what the same words mean to Western Christians, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.

Within the Church on this continent as well, we have many cultures and many worldviews, all shaped and inspired by our common Orthodox Christian heritage. We have indigenous communities, especially in Alaska, and immigrant communities, especially on the east and west coasts. We have converts entering the Church from every possible racial, ethnic and cultural group, and our churches stand in neighborhoods filled with an every changing population. How do we relate to each other within our parishes? How do we open our doors, make accessible to our neighbors in ways they can understand and accept, our ancient Faith, the love, joy and peace we know especially during Holy Week and Pascha? How do we communicate and share Paschal Joy across barriers of ethnicity and culture?

Alaska has been a living laboratory for this sort of effort for over two hundred years. The early missionaries learned the languages, embraced the cultures, loved the people, each in their unique tribal homeland, translated Scriptural and liturgical texts, celebrated the sacraments and feasts and ordained local clergy. They made the Church a vibrant and sacred presence in the lives of the Alaska Native people, so that when the territory passed to US rule, the Church not only survived but grew, even flourished. Today the diocese includes parishes founded by St. Herman, St. Innocent, St. Jacob, St. Juvenaly, St. Tikhon, and St. Seraphim (Samoilovich) and served by indigenous as well as immigrant clergy, worshipping in as many as seven different languages in the same parish."

What would, what should a "united" Orthodox Church look like culturally, linguistically? Do we anticipate that eventually all the Old World and indigenous languages will die out, to be replaced exclusively by English? Or do we foresee the use of Greek, Slavonic, Arabic or Romanian continuing indefinitely into the future? How do we help converts accept and adapt to these "exotic" practices and languages? To what extent

do we prepare seminarians to evangelize among our new immigrant communities? If the Hispanic population is growing rapid north of the border, what sort of outreach do we need to consider for bringing Orthodoxy to Spanish-speaking seekers and catechumens? If our older urban parishes are now surrounded by Hispanic neighbors, how do we welcome them, reach out to them, make the Paschal experience accessible to them?

If the harvest is potentially plentiful, how are we preparing laborers for that harvest in our pluralistic multi-lingual society? What texts need to be prepared in what languages? If we are truly here to baptize all nations" what is our evangelical "strategy" to fulfill that mission?

Internally, within our existing community, how are the descendents of the immigrants who came a century ago relating to those immigrants who just arrived? How do we step out of our own "beam of light" and at least glimpse into theirs? What sort of preparation, at the parish, deanery or diocesan levels needs to be considered for the outreach we certain hope to undertake in the next three, five, ten years?

How do we prepare priests, deacons and bishops for leadership positions in this new, multi-cultural Church? What models already exist to guide or inspire us? How do we set priorities for the mission we hope to undertake? Where do we start? Who does what?

Our Exarchate in Mexico clearly present a challenge to our identity as the Orthodox Church in America. They are, in many ways, in a situation similar to Alaska forty years ago, in need immediately of theologically educated clergy. Our solution was the foundation of St. Herman's Pastoral School, which in time matured into St. Herman's Seminary. What plans should we now be making to repeat our successful revitalization of our mission in the far north to support our mission south of the border? What do our leaders there now have to tell us about their needs, priorities, the kind of personnel they will need? Are we engaged in this conversation?

Before we can tackle the particular social and moral issues that we face in North America, we need to develop ways for achieving a unity of "one heart and one mind" among ourselves. How do we relate to the other jurisdictions, each with its own traditional and often ethnic identity? How do we combat the temptation to become triumphalistic about our administrative independence seeing ourselves as somehow "ahead" of the others, with little to learn from their history, their traditions, their cultures?

What do we need to know to communicate with appropriate humility and respect to those in other Orthodox communities and those outside the Church? What are the probable and predictable pitfalls we should anticipate? How do we communicate our message more effectively, articulate and proclaim our Faith? To whom? Where? When? At what expense? Using what media and means?

These are all questions the working group on Contemporary Ethical/Moral Questions and Contemporary Cultural Social issues hope we will more seriously and substantially discuss as we gather in Seattle this November.

ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY MORAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

As Orthodox Christians, we are called to reflect our life in Christ in how we reach out to the world around us. The society around us is confronted by a multitude of issues including beginning and end of life issues; social justice issues involving poverty and the growing inequality between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’; the understanding and role of human sexuality; the belief that all values are relative, protection of the environment, and many more issues. One important way of witnessing to Christ is by how we bring our faith to address such current issues – not only what we teach but what we actually do as Orthodox Christians. To that end, this goal initially picks a small number of these big social issues and proposes some concrete actions than we can take. With time, we will expand the number of issues to be addressed – but for now, we start with two: the sacredness of life; and, social justice.

Cultivate a ‘sacredness of life’ culture in the Church and in the world by witness of the Church

All of life – from the moment of our conception to our falling asleep in the Lord -- is a gift from God and, as such, is beautiful and sacred. The Church has taken some significant steps to witness to this truth – including position papers; designation of Sanctity of Life Sunday and the associated March for Life; and the formation of organizations to deal with the tragedy of abortions, to provide meaningful alternatives to abortions; and to help counsel and support abortion survivors. Possible next steps include:

Objective 1: Develop a collection of prayers for use at appropriate services and in our personal lives.

Objective 2: Encourage and support those who are doing sacredness of life work. Organizations such as Zoe for Life, Martha and Mary House, Orthodox Christians for Life, and crisis pregnancy centers are addressing the tragedy of abortion, providing meaningful alternatives, and supporting the survivors of abortion. We need to use appropriate venues to make these groups known.

Objective 3: Compile resources for teachings on issues of bio-ethics. The goal here is to go beyond providing the resources to actually, albeit gradually, articulate a comprehensive authentically Orthodox vision of life. This project would lead to a means for people to ask questions and receive answers from trusted, qualified, representatives of our Church’s teachings.

Objective 4: Train personnel to educate and encourage witness to the Church’s teachings on moral issues. Provide conferences – both virtual and live – to reach out broadly.

Objective 5: Engage young people in the Church to participate in the development and achievement of objectives 1 through 4. Use their expertise in modern venues of communication.

Objective 6: Work with the OCA departments to identify additional resources on moral issues.

Address health disparities of Orthodox living in poverty here in North America.

Unknown to many of us, there are a significant number of Orthodox who are living in poverty, or in environmentally polluted areas, or are suffering from the lack of health care – and as a result are experiencing ‘health disparities’, poorer health than the ‘average North American’. To help address these disparities, we propose that the OCA develop a network of priests, physicians, social workers and public health professionals to evaluate and assist communities in need. Some possible objectives for accomplishing this include:

Objective 7: Develop and train a network of network of priests, physicians, social workers and public health professionals to provide a cohesive response to health and social needs of Orthodox suffering from health disparities. Encourage, support and build-on the efforts of the Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology and Religion (OCAMPR) and the Parish Nursing Ministries that have arisen in a number of parishes.

Objective 8: Develop a health screening program model for local churches to implement. Suggested screening includes prostate cancer for men, breast cancer and ovarian cancer for women, and diabetes and heart disease. Screenings can be performed at health fairs or other community-based activities.

Objective 9: Establish programs to address alcoholism prevention and violence prevention.

3. AND NOW IT IS YOUR TURN TO INPUT!

The preceding sections have given you some initial thoughts from the Working Group on continuing education for clergy and laity. Now it will be your turn to help revise, modify, refine this goal and the top level steps to actualizing it. During the AAC you will participate in two three-hour Breakout Sessions focused on this Goal. Breakout Session I will focus on what the Church as a whole (parish, deanery, diocese, Church-wide all together) should do. Breakout Session II will focus on the specific programs/projects you and your colleagues in the room, networked together could do to advance this goal.

During Breakout Session I, you and your colleagues will be asked :

- What are the most critical things that need to be done by the Church as a whole to achieve this goal?
- To list up to four specific initiatives for achieving the goal.

During the second Breakout Session, you and your colleagues will focus on specific action steps (concrete projects or programs) that you and your colleagues, connected together in networks, can do to actualize the objectives identified in Breakout Session I. Specifically you will be asked to:

- List up to three specific programs and/or projects that we in this group should commit ourselves to. You will be asked to consider the answers with the context of “What could we do with the Lord’s help? What is “impossible with men but possible with God?”
- For each program/project list the specifics of the program/project, i.e. what it will achieve, how will it be achieved, and what people need to be involved.

In preparing for these discussions, you might want to consider the questions below and to solicit input from your priest and the people in your parish as well as from other parishioners and clergy that you know, as well as your own Diocesan Bishop. Space has been left here for you to jot down your comments and bring them to the AAC for your personal reference during the discussions.

- Each of us is shaped by a culture. What culture do you think you belong to and how does that shape/influence your thinking and actions? How does that affect the way you hear the Gospel message?

- The Orthodox Church has taken a clear stand against abortion for many centuries. As the most public moral issue on which the Church has spoken, we hope discussions at the AAC will include not only reiterating what we are against, and why we oppose it, but finding ways in which the Church can actively reach out to those directly involved in such ethical/moral predicaments. For example, the Zoe House in Ohio offers a specific way in which Orthodox Christians have responded to the issue, not just by demonstrating and preaching against abortion, but by assisting in an atmosphere of loving kindness, those considering ending their pregnancies and providing them with the emotional, spiritual and material support they need to raise their child. What other ways can the Church pro-actively intervene in society to bring her message of life to our neighbors in North America?

- We live in an age where the tension between economic development and ecological sensitivity are often at cross-purposes. As the Church blesses the lakes and rivers, as each parish invokes God's Blessing upon the ecosystem surrounding each parish, what does the Church have to say about the sanctity of the earth and the Christian responsibility for maintaining it? How can the Church, in a positive way, proclaim her vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" (not as the replacement of the world which God so loved, but as its ultimate fulfillment), and protect the earth from pollution and destruction while affirming the human quest to use the resources of the earth in order to survive and prosper?