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# Opening Address, Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA, January 2023



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America  
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Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA  
January 30, 2023  
Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral  
Los Angeles, California

My Beloved Brothers and Concelebrants in the Holy Spirit,

I greet you with a spirit of optimism and confidence in this New Year of 2023, and I pray that it shall be for each of you, a year of blessings for you and the Faithful Orthodox Christians entrusted to your guidance and leadership.

We are very blessed indeed to be gathered together here in Los Angeles, where we have been in prayer and fellowship with one another the past days. I believe that these opportunities to come together as Hierarchs of the Holy Church are precious and few; so let us take full advantage of this *καιρός* that the Lord has granted us. I am particularly grateful for the Executive Committee and the way we have functioned over this past year – not always in agreement, but always in a fraternal spirit of love. I also want to note that last Friday, the 27th, was the Tenth Anniversary of the Enthronement of Metropolitan Tikhon as Head of the OCA. We all wish you “Many Years” of continued good health and a fruitful ministry for your beloved Faithful.

I begin today by reminding us all of our purpose, stated eloquently in the Rules of Operation of the Assemblies, Article Two:

The purpose of the Episcopal Assembly is to manifest the unity of the Orthodox Church, to promote collaboration between the churches in all areas of pastoral ministry, and to maintain, preserve and develop the interests of the communities that belong to the canonical Orthodox Bishops of the Region.

First and foremost among lofty intentions for our Assembly and all the Assemblies

is the manifestation of our unity as the Orthodox Church in this region, the United States of America. Our light of unity cannot be hidden under the proverbial bushel – it belongs on the lampstand for all to see to help illuminate their own path.

And yet, we know that there are differences, even fault lines, in our worldwide Orthodox Church; perhaps none so bitter and distressing as those that have emerged around the war against Ukraine. The lack of recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine under Metropolitan Epiphanius by the jurisdictions in this room, except those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, continues to be source of conflict and disagreement. The current and rather amorphous status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Metropolitan Onufry, now that his autonomous Synod has severed formal relations with the Moscow Patriarchate, creates even more dissonance.

And there are other controversies which sap the strength of our witness. Around the social media sphere, there are often as many opinions as there are blogs, where everyone feels entitled to not only share their views, but often insist on their own correctness. So, my brothers, this makes our ‘manifestation of the unity of the Orthodox Church’ all the more challenging. Indeed, the Faithful are within their rights to expect of us a consensus patrum for their own spiritual orientation.

This is why our participation in the Assembly is so important. Precisely because this is not a place to press our differences, but rather a place where we can – with dignity and fraternal love – work those differences out. And when we cannot agree, and we remain in disagreement, we do so without being divisive. Because this Assembly is much more than the sum total of the individual Hierarchs who are members. We have agencies, ministries, and countless souls who depend on our synergy and cooperative will. We will hear later from some of these organizations that function under our aegis – particularly our six Agencies, including the new Orthodox Youth and Young Adult Ministry (OYM) and the Orthodox Volunteer Corps (OVC). These apostolates function across all our parishes, and they represent to the Faithful a coordinated manifestation of Church unity.

Each of us has to ask himself the question: How does my ministry, my attitude, my presence, contribute to this unity of the Church right here and right now, in America. That is why I am committed to bringing our Russian Brethren back to the table, despite our differences. Each of us has an allegiance to our Mother Church, and our OCA brothers, in their independent status, have an internal allegiance to one another. There is nothing wrong in these allegiances, as long as they do not inhibit our allegiance to Christ! That is why the Assembly works by consensus, not by mere majority. Article Ten of the Rules of Operation state it most clearly:

“The decisions of the Episcopal Assembly are taken by consensus.”

Therefore, while we may differ in our own opinions, or hold to positions that are not in ostensible agreement, our work as Assembly is to be brothers of dialogue, of lending an ear to one another, and of seeking paths to consensus that may not reflect compromise, so much as they do mutual understanding.

Although our Assembly in no way acts or serves as a Synod – since we all belong to our own ecclesiastical authorities – the principle of synodality remains a powerful force for good in our work together. As His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stated only last December:

“The synodal institution derives its origin from the depths of the mystery of the Church. It is not merely a matter of canonical tradition, which we have received and preserve, but of fundamental theological and doctrinal truth, without which there is no salvation. By professing through the sacred Symbol our faith in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, we are simultaneously also proclaiming its synodality ... Therefore, it is not coincidental or insignificant that synodality has always permeated all the basic dimensions of Church life, from its local to its universal expression.”\*

In other words, we cannot separate our affirmation about the Lord Jesus Christ from our responsibility to act in a synodal way. For *συνοδικία* means that we journey together in companionship – that we stay together, even when the path is difficult – that we help one another along the Way.

Let us not forget, that the first Christians identified the movement that they had made the ultimate commitment to was called “the Way” – ἡ Ὁδός.† We are all fellow sojourners and to travel well along the Way, we need to stay together – or to put it another way, apropos of our Assembly: manifest the unity of the Orthodox Church.

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With these thoughts and a prayerful wish, I would like to move on to note changes in our Assembly since our last meeting, by first noting the retirements of two brothers:

- o Metropolitan Joseph of the Antiochian Archdiocese, and
- o Bishop Basil of Wichita and Mid-America.

We wish them well in this new phase of their lives.

We also must officially welcome the new members of our Assembly:

- o Metropolitan Antonios of Zahle, Baalbek and Dependencies, who is Patriarchal Vicar of the Antiochian Archdiocese while they await the election of the New Metropolitan next month;
- o Metropolitan Nicholas, the new head of ROCOR;
- o Archbishop Daniel, now oversees the OCA communities in the Midwest;
- o And Bishop Constantine of Sassisma, an Assistant Bishop assigned to the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Denver.

Even as we welcome these brothers, let us remember in prayer and supplication our brethren who have fallen asleep in the hope of the Resurrection.

- o Metropolitan Herman, former Primate of the OCA;
- o Metropolitan Hilarion, Primate of ROCOR;
- o Metropolitan Ilia of the Albanian Diocese of the Ecumenical Patriarchate;
- o Archbishop Paul of the OCA Diocese of Chicago;
- o Bishop Tikhon, formerly of the OCA Diocese of San Francisco and the West.

May they find the reward of good and faithful servants in the Kingdom of Heaven, and may their memory be eternal.

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My friends, we have been through much in the past year, and we are still dealing with consequences of the pandemic. Each of us has dealt with unexpected contingencies as best we can. And we shall continue to do so, but it is my sincere hope that this Assembly becomes even stronger.

To be a true “band of brothers,” to borrow from Shakespeare, we must cultivate an open and sometimes vulnerable level of dialogue that seeks the best for our brother Bishops. The Church is subject to enough gossip, disinformation, and outright falsehoods – and this has been true since the days of the Caesars. But we have the chance to be better, and to act better. And to be an example to our flocks of the essential unity of the Body of Christ, where no member can dismiss another.

As the Apostle says:

For, just as the body is one but has many members – yet all the members are of one body even though they are many in number – the body is one. This is how Christ is as well. And the fact is that we were all baptized by One Spirit into One Body, whether we were Jews or Greeks, slaves or free. And we were all drenched in One Spirit. And so, the Body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, “I am not a hand; I am not of the body,” is it then something else than of the body? Or if the ear should say, “I am not an eye; I am not of the body,” is it then something else than of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would we hear? Or if the whole body were an ear, how would we smell? But as things really are, God has set the members in the body – each one of them – as He has willed. But if everything was just one member, where would the body be? As it is, the members may be many, but the body is one. How can the eye say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Or again, how can the head say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” Rather, those members of the body that seem to be weaker are much more necessary. Likewise, those members of the body which we deem less worthy of honor, we bestow upon them all the more honor.‡

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Beloved Brothers:

Let us embrace our work together as true brothers, bound not by race, not by ethnic or family origin; but as those who share the same Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, coursing in our veins and nourishing our inmost hearts.

We have so much to accomplish for our people. If they can see in us the unity of the Church, then they are better prepared to celebrate that unity for themselves. If they see divisiveness and estrangement, we justify their lack of love by our own shortcomings. Would that this never be so!

We celebrate today the Three Hierarchs, whose feast originated in a desire by the faithful not to rank these extraordinary Saints, but to celebrate them together. By their holy intercessions, may we find the path on which we abide together, to celebrate and manifest the unity of our Holy Orthodox

Church.

May it always be so. Amen.

\* Address by HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the International Conference on “WE BELIEVE: The Status Quaestionis and the Neglected Topics of Nicaea and its Creed” (Constantinople, December 2022).

† Cf. Isaiah 40:3; Acts 9:2, 19:9, and 19:23.

‡ I Corinthians 12:12-23.

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