

WEEKLY MEDITATION

The coming week is the week of the 15th All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America. In light of the fact that ours is actually a continental church, with an Archdiocese of Canada and an Exarchate of Mexico, some in the church are calling for these gatherings to have the title 'All North American Council'. While this may be a better turn of phrase in some ways, you might think, as I do, that there is a certain grandiose quality to whichever title is used. We might do well ask ourselves: in what way does our Council represent 'All America' or 'All North America'? The fact is that our OCA is a smallish church, with perhaps - just perhaps - 150,000 faithful. We might barely - just barely - represent about one fifth of the total number of Orthodox in America. Not only are we just a fraction of Orthodoxy in America, the truth is that many, many of the most interesting and exciting and dynamic things going on in North American Orthodoxy are going on outside the Orthodox Church in America. The wind seems to have gone from our sails. The recent administrative scandals of which we have been made aware have not only been a big blow, but the ramifications of the scandals have revealed a sort of deeper cultural problem in our church life and history. By culture I mean our lived spirituality, the typical ways in which we think and act, how we express our sense of self. It is a question of identity. One the one hand we have generated from within a narrative that places our church on the canonical high ground. We have talked about 'the vision of St Tikhon' as if it were our unique patrimony. We have claimed the mantle of autocephaly (but seem unable to wear it!) We have acted as if we were the unique, privileged, enlightened bearers of Orthodoxy in America - and as if the Greeks and the Antiochians and the Russians and others were somehow not really a part of what it truly means to be Orthodox in America. We have inflated our numbers - as in the claim of a million or more members! - and we attempted to sustain ourselves as an autocephalous church in the image of the very ancient or very big autocephalous churches, with ruinous financial - and I am afraid ruinous spiritual - consequences. Why couldn't we have modeled our sense of what being autocephalous means on, for example, the modest Church of the Czech and Slovak Lands, rather than the extremely impressive Church of Russia? On the other hand, while all this was going on and pumped up by our leaders and church press, we just accepted it. We just accepted the many distortions and half-truths, the improbable claims and assertions, the presumption of some ecclesial 'high ground', the 'vision' and all that it assumed and called for. Why? Probably because these things flattered us. It feels good to be part of the cutting edge, to have the high ground, to think oneself more and better than one really is. We did not like to hear criticism, let alone rumblings and hints of rot. And thus it is a spiritual problem, a problem in seeing ourselves clearly and honestly for who and what we really are. It is my fervent prayer that a deep and genuine spiritual impulse will, at our Council in Pittsburgh this week, cut through all the boosterism and hoopla to a clearer grasp of what is real and true and worthy and possible. There is no 'manifest destiny' for the Orthodox Church in America, or even for Orthodoxy in North America. There is only our destiny 'in Christ'.

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