

THE NATIONAL CONVENTION
OF SELF-RULED Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese
of All North America

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*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ
Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)*

Your Eminence, Sayedna Philip, Your Graces, Right Reverend Fathers,
Very Reverend Fathers, Reverend Fathers, Deacons and beloved in Christ.

Christ is in our midst!

THE OVERALL theme of this blessed gathering of our Archdiocese is
“Building up the body of Christ, until we come to the unity of the faith”
from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

A single heart, a single breath, a single spirit characterizes the life of the Church. The world looks and sees Christianity in confusion and division, but the eyes of the Orthodox see only one Church, one life, one Baptism, one Lord, Jesus Christ.

It is perhaps only the simple eyes of a child that can see that clearly in our modern computerized world, a world that moves rapidly across the skies and peers into intergalactic space, classifying and categorizing everything it sees. What makes the child’s eyes so different? Why can he see so simply and easily a truth that would seem to hide itself from the world?

It is humility. To a child everything seems larger than he is. Everything seems to be a mystery and marvelous, and so he still sees giants in the clouds, and dragons in the deeps. The adult, so cosmopolitan and urbane, has learned to judge and analyze everything so that there is no longer any wonder to what his eyes behold. We might well recall the words of our Lord when He said of those who heard the gospel from His own lips, “seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not...”

To see the truth of the unity of the Church, we must first of all be like the little children and be humble. We must be able to stand and behold a mystery which is, by its nature, beyond anything we can possibly imagine, for the Church is nothing less than the literal Body of Christ. It is not an organization, but a living organism which breathes and lives and grows. Being the jaded 21st century people we are, we don't see this, so we miss the deeper mystery of the Church's unity.

Imagine, we, members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, are grafted into the Body of Christ, becoming literally his own flesh walking this earth, continuing to do the work which He did two thousand years ago.

Yet in a marvelous way our unity is not a forced uniformity. We all hold the same Faith, the same life—living by and in the same Holy Spirit, but we don't necessarily express these gifts in exactly the same way. As the great apostle Paul wrote, "are all apostles, are all evangelists?" Each of us, personally, receives the gifts of Christ and manifests His glory in a way that is unrepeatable. Some of us are teachers, some bishops, some priests, some council members, some ushers, some mothers, some fathers... each expressing even those unique gifts in a marvelously varied manner while keeping the essential unity of life together.

But as the world sees us, it has its own reality too, because we live in this world and need to be ready to make a defense of what we believe. The world sees the Orthodox Church as an ethnically oriented church which caters only to its own ethnic origins. They believe that is why there is a Russian Orthodox Church here, and an Antiochian Orthodox Church there, a Greek Orthodox Church. The faithful child of the Church sees only *one* Church.

But can we make an answer to the slapping view that we are merely ethnic communities? Sometimes, God help us, we seem to be only that, and when this is the case we must repent and change.

Now it is pretty common for we Orthodox to say that we aren't really ethnic. And that is one of the greatest errors that we could ever make. We are ethnic. Christianity will always be an ethnic religion. It is impossible for it not to be ethnic.

Ethnicity is nothing less than the Faith of Christ being fully expressed in the cultural genius of real people. The degree to which the Faith has become real

in a culture is the same degree that that culture will manifest the Faith. If our Faith is real then it will be expressed ethnically.

But then do the words of St. Paul to the Galatians become vain? How can this be reconciled with his words: “*There is neither Jew, nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*”? The great apostle didn’t say that there were no Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, nor males or females in the Church. That would be a ridiculous statement. What he said was that these things—which are wonderful in themselves (isn’t a mother wonderful, and therefore all of womanhood?), but they are not as important as the unity of life they bear in Christ.

This is a dangerous and difficult way. Dangerous because the world constantly wants to divide us, it being united to *Diabolus* himself, who tries to divide us from God, from each other and even from ourselves. It is difficult because it makes clear that we are in a spiritual war and that we too easily fall into the hands of the Evil One when we begin to make sides of us and them.

But there is cause for rejoicing beloved. We need not to fear the shadows that seem to grow. We are in the one, singular, holy, Orthodox-Catholic and Apostolic Church in which the essence is life in the Holy Spirit. That is what makes us one.

We are also blessed because we are in the Antiochian Archdiocese which has struggled constantly to keep its eyes looking at Christ like the little child who was held in the arms of Christ and made an exemplar: Saint Ignatius of Antioch. We still, on our best days, see the Church in her mysterious and overwhelming life.

Metropolitan PHILIP and Patriarch IGNATIUS IV, like faithful children and fathers in the Church, said, “Welcome home!” to the former Evangelical Orthodox. This was not without detractors and nay-sayers, but with courage they forged ahead and extended the life of the Holy Spirit to more of God’s creation. This was part of the essence of the Antiochian Spirit, that holy and blessed characteristic of the Christians of the Middle East—the warmth of hospitality. The doors were opened, not to pretend that there was no difference, but to actually *let them in* to live in the same house of Faith.

In like manner, even the very answer of ethnicity has been overturned in the world's eyes, and correctly glorified in Christ's eyes through His Eminence's continuing support and encouragement of the Western Rite Congregations.

After all, the Western Rite is nothing less than the organic, historical expression of Christianity as it was lived among those of the Church in the western cultures. It is the genius of Western Christians, whose liturgy and worship were formed during the years it was still in communion with the rest of the Orthodox Church, which in them has been restored. Now, even we westerners need not be afraid to offer what we have to Christ, just like our eastern brothers.

And the wonder of wonders! What is seen? One Church. One Faith. One Lord. Is there variation? Yes indeed. Thank God! Are there minor customs that are unique to particular parishes? In every place and time! Thank God! Is the faith fully held and expressed—although in different cultural manners and different ethnicities? Glory to God, Yes.

Because Christ has not called mankind through a parsimonious and puritan gift, He has freely opened His arms to the world that would embrace Him in His one True Body, the Church.

Let the world die in its own confusion and categories of division. But let not a single thought of this enter the Church whose life is from the Holy Spirit, for this would bring down the judgment of God as blasphemy against the Holy Ghost! Let the world rot in its denominations and divisions, for none of that is of God. Let it die on the last day and find its utter destruction at the hands of its prince.

But as for us, we shall see, like little children, one Church and one Body, the One, Holy, Orthodox-Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Amen.