THE FUTURE OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA:
A NORMATIVE APPROACH

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Established in 2004, the Orthodoxy in America Lecture Series is the largest annual lecture of its kind and is the only one housed within a university setting. The lecture series is intended to explore the intersection of the Orthodox Christian tradition and American religious experience. Because Fordham University is a Roman Catholic institution, the lecture series provides an unparalleled opportunity for an advanced ecumenical conversation about the common issues facing the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a certain audacity in talking about the future and seeking to predict it. At the same time, talking about the future sometimes influences it in some way. All the utopias in literature failed to predict the future, but without question, they influenced what others thought and, in some cases, what others did. The assumption that this is true justifies the topic of this presentation. I will speak of the future after speaking of the past and the present, but much less in a predictive mode than in a normative one. So, what precedes either prediction or normative discourse is an assessment of the past and present.

In 1890, Frances Elizabeth Willard, the founder of the World’s Women’s Temperance Union, in a talk titled “Work Done for Humanity,” said, “Let us then learn a wise humility, but at the same time a humble wisdom, as we remember that there are but two classes of men—one which declares that our times are the worst the world has seen, and another which claims our times as best.” Of course, in the dominant enlightenment spirit of those times, she claimed that he who holds the latter view “is right and will be right forevermore.” We have much less confidence today about the future, or even the present. But to speak of any future, it is necessary to begin where we have been and where we are at present.
In the Orthodox Church in North America, a cottage industry of sorts has lately arisen which seeks to assess where we are as the Orthodox Church in America, with our specific history, culture and ethos. It seeks to understand what the Orthodox Church is today, complemented by a number of prognostications about where the Orthodox Church in our country will be in the future. Among the surveys there is a remarkable upbeat sense, but with some trends that are worrying. Reporting primarily on the “Faith Communities Today” Hartford Institute for Religious Research project, Eleni Makris focused on the Orthodox jurisdictions in America in a recently published work, edited by Aristotle Papa-nikolaou and Elizabeth Prodromou. Under the heading “Parish Worship and Participants,” both attendance and frequency of reception of Holy Communion were comparatively high, as was the primary use of English (74.2 percent) in worship. Clergy are well educated. But the rate of church growth was deemed troubling. She writes: “. . . the majority of Orthodox parishes are making very few, if any, visits or phone calls in order to reach out to prospective members, worship visitors, or newcomers in the community.”

Another survey, titled “The Orthodox Church Today,” which focused on the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Orthodox Church in America, was conducted by Alexei D. Krindatch, a researcher at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley, Ca. In the summary produced by the institute, it is pointed out that the Orthodox are no longer an immigrant church. Ninety percent of Orthodox in the United States are American born. The summary also indicated that there is a range of stances within the Orthodox of these mainline jurisdictions. About 40 percent consider themselves “traditional,” while 28 percent think of themselves as “conservative” and 31 percent think of themselves “moderate to liberal.” Certainly, this is a finding that does not auger well for the future unity of Orthodox Christianity in this country unless it is addressed forthrightly.
Nevertheless, loyalty to the Orthodox Church is extremely high with ninety percent of the respondents claiming that they could not conceive of themselves as being anything but Orthodox Christians.

However, there is widespread subjectivism as to what this means, so Orthodox Christians tend to seek out parishes that are compatible to their desires. There is significant respect for the clergy, and “more than three quarters of the respondents ‘would encourage their sons to become priests.’”

In addition to these scientific pollings, there are also a significant number of individual commentators about the past, present and future condition of the Orthodox Church, primarily circulating opinions in articles, often on the Internet. For example, Fr. John A. Peck, in his article “The Orthodox Church of Tomorrow,” presents a pessimistic view of the past and present and calls for radical change! He foresees in 20 years vastly diminished parishes both in size and number, while expecting a great improvement in Orthodox media and apologetic ministries. He expects more (and younger) bishops, a very different demographic of clergy (converts, reverts, sons and grandsons of clergy), improved Orthodox biblical studies, a much higher moral standard from all clergy, and that vocations will explode, while “philanthropy will flow like the floodgates of heaven.” He predicts that this new Orthodox Church will have a different face, will be ready for contemporary challenges, and will have begun to penetrate American society at every stage and on every level.5

Needless to say, this offering provoked much comment and criticism. One commentator described it as a “curious mixture of pessimism (empty parishes) and buoyant optimism (vocations will explode),” adding that “although the future does sound great, let’s not push change for change sake… If the Orthodox Church as it now stands attracted you and caused you to leave wherever you were to join it, why try to change until it is unrecognizable?”6
The syndicated columnist and convert to Orthodox Christianity, Terry Mattingly,7 published an article titled “What Do Converts Want?” His answer is that the church should remove all ethnic and cultural aspects from its life and focus on the desire for expanded and comprehensible and participatory worship. For him, worship is the fullness of Orthodoxy. Referring to a Paschal Service in which no one in the congregation sang even the hymn of the Resurrection, “Christ is risen,” he writes, “My friend saw this and, trust me, this was not what he was looking for. He wanted Orthodoxy, for himself and for his family. He wanted more, not less. He still does.” He closes with his look into the future: “If there is to be unity in Orthodoxy in America, that unity will emerge out of the sacramental life of the church. We will sing unity into existence. We will pray unity into existence. We will confess unity into existence. It can happen no other way. We must live the faith and then give it away.”8

At a recent conference in Boston on the Future of Hellenism,9 the dean of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Fr. Thomas Fitzgerald, made a presentation on “The Future of Orthodoxy in America.”10 He discerned various dimensions of the American context, an amalgam of freedom, secularization, variety of religious options and inclusiveness. In Fitzgerald’s view the future of Orthodoxy in America lies in the quality of parish life and the need to “realistically see our church in relationship to the wider society.” Moving to a more theological and pastoral sphere, he asks, “What does the Orthodox faith and the Greek Orthodox Church say to American society today?” His answer is the “love and mercy of God” and the “dignity of the human person.” But the emphasis in the sharing of Orthodox Christianity to others, in other words, prescriptively, is the cultivation of an outreach mentality. He writes, “It is not enough for us to speak of ‘preserving’ our Orthodox Church, our Orthodox faith. Preservation is not enough; the church is not meant to be a museum! The Orthodox Christian faith must be appreciated, it must be shared.” He thereby highlights the results of the survey about minimum outreach to others by Orthodox Christians and parishes in this country. He is concerned for the future as a consequence of the apparent lack of outreach endemic to the Orthodox Churches today.
All this points to radical changes in larger American social patterns in the last half century. Those who have lived through this period in the United States have seen Christianity, and more particularly, main-line Protestantism and post-John Courtney Murray Roman Catholicism slowly erode from the spiritual foundation of the American ethos, to what appears to be an increasing marginalization of Christianity in the public sphere. It is not complete, of course, but its dominant position has suffered in the face of a resurgent and all-pervasive secularism.

For example, in New York’s city council earlier this month, an ordinance was submitted to remove a discriminatory practice of the New York City school system that permitted the display of the Star of David and the Muslim Crescent, but prohibited Christian symbols. For better or for worse, it is inconceivable that such action would have been necessary during the presidencies of Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower.

The secularist ideal, of course, has been promulgated on every level of American society, from the university to commercial enterprise and to the entertainment industry. It pervades the intellectual climate, while religious, and specifically Christian beliefs and values, are given a measure of lip-service; but, in substance, in many areas of public life, they are deliberately undermined. This secularization is not without consequences. It also has deep roots in recent European culture.

Almost sixty years ago, Alexander Tsirindanis, a professor at the University of Athens, Greece, coming out of the ravages of the Second World War, analyzed the malaise of western civilization and culture. Tsirindanes wrote, “the man of today is a failure. He has not only failed to solve any of the basic problems which interest man, (but)... (t)wentieth century man deeply senses the internal fragmentation which makes up his inner being.” For Tsirindanes, the cause of this is
“negation,” the negation of spiritual values and for the western world, the negation of the spiritual foundation of Christianity. In the midst of a worldwide crisis, both economic and social, his analysis speaks volumes. Writing in 1956, I penned this inadequate summary of his thought and his analysis of “the present age”:

It was this sort of anti-Christian negation which in the past years guided the affairs of men. On the one hand, therefore, our age has been characterized by a material and cultural failure; on the other, this selfsame age has allowed itself to come under the guidance of negation. This is the crux of Tsirindanes’ thought… “It is time that we learn,” he writes, “that these two facts which characterize the form of modern history do not stand separate one from another, but they have a relationship between them, a causal relationship.” The first fact is the result of the second, a result that is inescapable.

Tsirindanes saw the malaise of the age as a direct result of a conscious negation of the Christian worldview and style of life, which philosophical existentialism turned into a hopeless nihilism without foundations and the meaninglessness of a rudderless culture.\(^\text{12}\)

Over twenty years ago Alexander Solzenitsyn diagnosed the situation in a similar fashion in his address “A World Split Apart” on June 8, 1978, given at the Class Day Afternoon Exercises at Harvard University.\(^\text{13}\) His critique included the dissolving Soviet culture of the East and the western malaise of culture. Among other things, in his biting critique of the West, he speaks of “destructive and boundless freedom,” and the “tilt of freedom in the direction of evil.” In describing the western world of his time, Solzhenitsyn speaks of “the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness.” He then defines what is at the heart of his critique:
To such consciousness, man is the touchstone in judging everything on earth – imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity and dozens of other defects. We are now experiencing the consequences of mistakes which had not been noticed at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings and machinations of the ruling party. In the West, commercial interests suffocate it. This is the real crisis.

In similar fashion Fr. Alexander Schmemman, in the third of his searching articles on the “Problems of Orthodoxy in America,” published in 1964, warned of an ever-increasing threat of secularism in the United States for the future of Orthodox Christianity here. He spoke of it, like others previously mentioned, under the rubric of “The Spiritual Problem.” His solution, however, seems to be limited to liturgical practice, which in the present context, sociologically speaking, seems to be a retreat into a kind of liturgical sectarianism.

A contemporary and insightful assessment of secularism is made by Roman Catholic theologian George Weigel, in his 2005 book The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God. The book analyzes “Europe’s problem” by contrasting two buildings in Paris, France. The first symbolizes the grandeur of a civilization of faith that produced Notre Dame Cathedral. The second is the modernistic and characterless “cube” of the Great Arch of La Defence produced by the secularist mindset. Weigel argues, “that Europe’s embrace of a narrow and cramped secularism has led to a crisis of civilizational morale that is eroding Europe’s soul and failing to create the European future.” Weigel notes, “The profound question raised for the United States and every other democracy by ‘Europe’s problem’ is whether there can be any true ‘politics’—and true
deliberation about the common good, and any robust defense of freedom—
without God.” Weigel’s answer is an emphatic “No,” “because in the final
analysis, societies and cultures are only as great as their spiritual aspirations.”16
In the final chapter he speaks of Europe’s malaise as “boredom—a boredom on
a transcendent, even metaphysical plane, a kind of boredom with the mystery
of life itself.” He quotes David Hart who says, “A culture—a civilization—is
only as great as the religious ideas that animate it; the magnitude of a people’s
cultural achievement is determined by the height of its spiritual aspirations.”17

So, what does this mean for America, for the future of religion in America, and
more concretely for the future of Orthodox Christianity in America? To be sure,
Europe and America are far from being the same on the issue of secularism and
religious values.

In his “Sightings” e-magazine piece for November 3, 2008, Martin E. Marty, pro-
fessor of church history emeritus at University of Chicago, speaks of secularism
in Europe and secularism in America. He points out that religion and Christian
theology are studied in universities in Europe, but this does not translate into
praxis, there being very low church attendance. Marty tells that:

(The Europeans) one meets are puzzled when they look at the
United States, where there is no established church, where the
Constitution is silent about religion, where church and state are
putatively separate and religion is not part of curricula – but there
are mega-churches, reasonably high attendance at worship and
wild if not weird contention about religion in politics here. Obvi-
ously, he surmises, “secular” means something very different as
one compares nation to nation, ethos to ethos. The debates over
what “secularity” and “secularism” means are not over, but are
intensified among those who compare the contexts.18
But it would appear that we are not far behind the European situation, if we are to take seriously the rhetoric of the just concluded presidential campaign in which we heard repeated calls for America to become more “European.” The next decade should see religion generally in America become significantly more marginalized and threatened by more and more European style secularism, barring some radical intervention by events.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCH AND “NOT CHURCH”

If we assume that these accumulated assessments have a measure of accuracy to them, what course of action must religionists in general take to preserve a semblance of spiritual authenticity for America? Indeed, what should the Orthodox leaders and people do to preserve ecclesial identity and contribute to the sanity and salvation of the faithful and to the health, vitality and spiritual well-being, not only of our own believers, but also of the nation as a whole?

It must be affirmed at the outset that there has to be an acceptance that the life in the church and the life in society which is “not church” cannot be ultimately identified. No one in Orthodox thought has articulated this truth more fully than the late historian Georges Florovsky. In at least four of his articles, those on “Faith and Culture,” the “Antinomies” found in the historical life of early Christianity, and his reflections on Christianity’s relationship to civilization and social issues, he always preserved a delineation between the life lived in the ark of the church and the church’s outreach to the world, which I like to refer to as that which is not church. Christians, it must always be affirmed, live in a paradox of relationships with that which is not Church, well described in the title of Albert Jordy Raboteau’s lecture in this Fordham University “Orthodoxy in America Lecture Series”: “In the World, Not of the World, For the Sake of the World.”

So there is a danger the church needs to be aware of, and to be ever vigilant against being co-opted by the culture in a way that distorts, compromises or
diminishes its own integrity. There is a danger of striving for political correctness and acceptance by the culture at a cost of our own integrity. We were reminded of this important caution in October 2008 when Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, the Russian Orthodox representative to European institutions, lectured at the University of Toronto’s Wycliffe College. He urged changes to the teaching of theology and liturgy to eliminate trends towards “political correctness” that he says “brings theology and liturgy into line with modern ways of thinking.”

WHAT DOES BEING AMERICAN MEAN?

Given such cautions, where can we find guidance for the future of Orthodox Christianity in 21st-century America? We cannot venture forth in seeking to normatively speak about what needs to be done if we at least do not seek to strip to the core our understanding of what it means to live in America and to live as Americans and to seek to become the Orthodox Church of America.

No one has adequately captured what it means to be American, and even if the various Orthodox jurisdictions would come to agreement on the common goal of forming some kind of American Orthodox Church, it would not be clear what is meant, because there would be no agreement on the fundamental question, what does being American mean?

This is not just our problem. Time magazine columnist James Poniewozik, in his November 3, 2008, article, lifted up the issue for all in this nation: “. . . real Real Americans defy stereotypes. The real America has become both more homogeneous (more chain stores, less local flavor) and more heterogeneous (the ‘exotic’ is less exotic—McDonalds sells lattes and chipotle wraps). This is America today: the real people borrow from the fake people, Dunkin’ Donuts from Starbucks, and vice versa.” Whatever the case neither chain stores, nor local stores, nor McDonalds nor Dunkin’ Donuts, nor Starbucks are what constitutes the real Real America. There is another, more elemental and fundamental understanding of the core of America.
In my view, being American, at its core, simply means the acceptance of the fundamental principles of freedom in community. We simply must believe that we are free to be Orthodox Christians and will be “good Americans” if we affirm our identity as Orthodox Christians, while acknowledging that others have the same potential. Neither secularism, nor capitalism, nor socialism, nor any other “ism” is a component of what is American. Freedom of belief, worship, speech, and political exercise are the only things that are authentically and irreducibly American. In order for Orthodox Christianity to thrive in America we must more and more be ourselves. People give content to the American idea, not the other way around.

That means that as the European secular spirit invades the United States, it should not be perceived as the essence of America—it is one more of many variant ideologies seeking hegemony. As a church and as Christians, we must not succumb to it, though we need to engage it with what it needs most. If the previously mentioned thinkers are correct, we must engage it with the truth and spiritual way of life that is Orthodox Christianity with internal consistency and integrity.

**NORMATIVE GUIDANCE FROM THE PAST**

However, to act with Orthodox Christian integrity and consistency, we need to look at ourselves in our context carefully. Our “American context” is “the world” in its concrete and complex sociological, ideological, economic, political and multiform expression and lifestyle. So the penetrating and searching question arises, “What guidance from our past do we have to move in the direction of a desired future for Orthodox Christianity in America?” I propose that there is an answer to this question from our deep past that shares in many ways with the social dynamic we are experiencing in the present and the imminent future here in America.

I have long been intrigued by an idea of an analogy between the church in America and the church in fourth-century Alexandria, Egypt. They are, of course, different in many respects, especially political and technological, and they have
similarities with other periods and locations in history. But in broad strokes one could make the case that there is a striking identity between our present situation here in America and that of Alexandria, Egypt, in the early Christian era.

Alexandria was founded in 331 B.C. by Alexander the Great and quickly rose by the time of Christ to a high stature, just behind Rome. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, “(Alexandria) was the administrative, military and ecclesiastical center of the eastern Mediterranean”\(^23\) with high levels of commercial activity, both in imports and exports. Its population at the beginning of the Christian era was about a half million people who spoke numerous languages, especially Greek and Coptic. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* it “has generally been characterized by a cultural ambivalence inherent in the city’s location—extending along a spit of land with its back to Egypt and its face to the Mediterranean.”\(^24\) Throughout most of its history “Alexandria has thus remained a cosmopolitan town, belonging as much—or perhaps more—to the wider Mediterranean world as to its hinterland. It was a “flourishing intellectual and cultural center”\(^25\) in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Intellectually, it harbored numerous Greek, Roman and Asian schools of thought, with neo-Platonism a dominant school, and religious traditions of numerous varieties. Like the United States today, Alexandria in the first few centuries of Christianity was a pluralistic place, full of variety and, within the Christian fold, of a wide range of contrasting beliefs, especially about the person of Christ, with Arianism and what came to be called Orthodoxy, being the most prominent.

In that vibrant and pluralistic context so similar to our own, the life of St. Athanasius stands out as a model for the Orthodox Church to prepare for the future of the church here in the United States.\(^26\) Athanasius (296-373) seems to have been brought early in life under the immediate supervision of the church of his native city. A story has been preserved by Rufinus,\(^27\) telling that bishop Alexander had invited a number of fellow bishops to meet him at breakfast after the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. While Alexander was waiting for his guests to
arrive, he stood by a window, watching a group of boys at play on the seashore below the house. He had not observed them long before he discovered that they were imitating the elaborate ritual of Christian baptism. He sent for the children and, in the investigation that followed, he discovered that one of the boys (none other than Athanasius) had acted the part of the bishop, and in that character had actually baptized several of his companions in the course of their play. Alexander determined to recognize the make-believe baptisms as genuine, and decided that Athanasius and his playfellows should go into training in order to prepare themselves for a clerical career.

This event in the early life of Athanasius points, perhaps, to the most decisive instructive and normative requirement for the future of the Orthodox Church in America. The story or legend of the child Athanasius points to the absolute necessity of an informed and committed laity.

On the first level, it involves the training of our children in the Orthodox faith. This is a wide and comprehensive endeavor that has been part of our tradition from the earliest years and throughout the thousand-year history of Orthodox Christianity in Byzantium. But, central to the formation of an Orthodox identity and consciousness, though not exclusively so, is participation in worship.

Some of us involved in the religious education of children some forty or fifty years ago remember the obsolete pattern of Sunday religious education of our children. The children would be paraded into the sanctuary for a “children’s service” and sermonette. The service resembled a nondenominational exercise. Its only positive element was that the children sang or read responses, but it was devoid of any sacramental elements. Then, the children were escorted to their classrooms as the Divine Liturgy, reserved for adults, was conducted in a non-English traditional Orthodox liturgical language.

Later, in my own experience, there was an improvement of sorts: The children were brought in for the Liturgy of the Catechumens and were escorted out of
the church for classes after the Gospel Reading, as if they had never been baptized! Or, another pattern that I participated in as a visiting priest, was for the children to be brought into the church after the Lord’s Prayer, just before Holy Communion, but actual participation in the Eucharist by the children was rare. Fortunately, this has changed so that the children worship for the whole of the Eucharist, receive the Sacrament, and then go to classes for learning.

In my judgment, one of the most important keys to the formation of a strong Orthodox identity in children is immersion in liturgical worship. It is not everything, but if we do not immerse our children in the worship experience, unconsciously, semi-consciously and ultimately consciously, with active participation in the liturgical life of the church, there will only be a tepid future for Orthodox Christianity in America. Children learn from exposure to worship. The example of Athanasius the youth and his playmates was wisely affirmed by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, provoking him to further education and training of Athanasius and his playmates.

Since 2002, I have been serving as priest at a mission church in Brooksville, Florida. The truth of the necessity of early, consistent and intense formation of children and youth came home with powerful clarity recently. A convert parishioner, who because of family difficulties is the caregiver for four of her grandchildren, told me recently about one of the children, two and a half years old, who attends church every Sunday. She reported that the child frequently sings the shorter hymns of the liturgy in church and at home. On an evening just before a major judicial hearing that would determine the future of the children and by extension, their future in the Orthodox Church, the little boy turned to his grandmother and declared that “Jesus would have to do His work” if the proceedings would have a good conclusion. And on another day, the boy asked his grandmother if he could hear some music. Willingly, she turned on the radio, switching from station to station. But at each one, the little boy indicated his dissatisfaction. Finally, grandmother asked the boy what music he wanted to listen
to. He answered, “the quiet music.” She finally realized that he wanted to listen to the compact disc of Byzantine church music! Athanasius’ life teaches us to pay attention to the inner formation of our children, not only with books and classes, but with the practice of worship and faith.

In about 319, when Athanasius was a deacon, the presbyter Arius came into a direct conflict with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. It appears that Arius reproached Alexander for what he felt were misguided or heretical teachings being taught by the bishop. Arius’ Christological views held that Jesus Christ as the Logos and Son of God was a creature and, therefore, not divine. Arius, of course, was heavily influenced by Alexandrian Platonizing thinkers, especially Origen, receiving support from the powerful bishops of Caesarea and Nicomedias. Athanasius may have accompanied Alexander to the First Council of Nicaea in 325 and anathematized Arius and his followers.

I see in this segment of Athanasius’ life the parallel reality existing between 4th-century Alexandria and 21st-century America. The pluralism of Alexandria of that day was deep and wide in the culture. It was not just the heresies of Arianism, Apollinarianism, and incipient Monophysitism and Monolothetism that made up the cosmopolitan character of the place. It was also a philosophical seedbed of Platonism, Epicureanism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism and their Hellenistic variations, together with the presence of Asian beliefs, as well as continuing indigenous Egyptian folk beliefs and culture.

In the face of such diversity, Athanasius functioned as the voice of Orthodoxy, the focus of which was on the core beliefs regarding the Trinitarian reality of God. For the Orthodox Church in this nation, the example of Athanasius requires us to keep the faith clear before us unaltered and unadulterated. We need to drum in the minds of our parishioners the fundamental creedal affirmations of the church—what has come to be known as “the canon or rule of the faith.”
Consequently, we ought not elevate anything else as more important. Unfortunately, reducing the Orthodox faith and tradition to our most favorite and compatible preferences is endemic to many who bear the name Orthodox Christian. For some, Orthodox Christianity is identified with partial aspects of the Holy Tradition. There is widespread reductionism of Orthodox Christianity to just some of its beliefs and some of its praxis. Thus, we have those who reduce the Orthodox faith to the Eucharist; others to liturgy, others to monasticism, others to ethics or social concerns, others to mysticism, others to the Jesus Prayer, and some to icons, prayer ropes and incense, to name just a few examples.

In contrast, it is important to remember what the church itself has defined as essential. The message for us from the life of Athanasius is his full and total and unbending commitment to the core affirmations of the faith and his resolve to fight for that faith with vigor and full commitment. In Orthodox theology, we call this rule of faith by the name “Holy Tradition.” In the past I have distinguished this from “lower case ‘t’ tradition,” and “minuscule ‘t’ tradition.” George Bebis has given it a description that I feel is close to being definitive:

*Holy Tradition is the constant, unvarying, essential core of the Christian faith, present in every genuine ecclesial Christian “Tradition.” It can be conceptualized, but it is more than a collection of concepts. It can be written down, but it is more than any book. It is distinguished from Scripture, which it interprets, but is itself rooted in Scripture. It was expressed in the life of the Church in the past, but is a present living reality. It is found in Christian history, but opens Christianity to the future. It is “handed down” and “lived up to” in the Christian life. It is the “rule of faith,” “the apostolic teaching,” the “ecclesial mind-set” the on-going and developing, yet consistent and paradoxically coherent “life in the Spirit.”*
Tradition is a dynamic process in history and above history, a genuine renewal of humanity, a mobile power, a vivifying light, that in the Holy Spirit makes concretely available to the created world, and to humanity in particular, the justifying, redeeming, saving, sanctifying purpose of God for His people.\textsuperscript{30}

If the communication of this “Holy Tradition” is not central to our endeavor, our education, our outreach, our mission in America, then we will be reduced, it would seem to me, to one of those oddities of religious life, hanging on the coattails of an ever dwindling religious presence in America.

Continuing with some aspects of Athanasius’ life, on May 9, 328, he succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria. However, the Arian controversy continued for years. For his unwavering commitment to the Orthodox faith, Athanasius was exiled many times to the West where he received support and honors. Yet, even from afar the Bishop of Alexandria kept in touch with the flock, especially the monks of the Egyptian desert. Athanasius was restored to the See of Alexandria on at least five separate occasions.

There is a lesson here for the church in 21st-century America. Athanasius knew who his allies were in his struggles with the enemies of the faith. He sought out assistance and collaborated with like-minded Christians in the West, even though there were Arians and other heretical groups in the West. This is a signal for a new kind of ecumenism for the Orthodox Church. The institutional ecumenism of the past, such as our relationships with the WCC abroad and the NCCC here in this country, have not been particularly fruitful for the interests of Orthodox Christianity on the level of the faith, though in other spheres institutional ecumenism has been helpful to Orthodoxy. But in the sphere of the “canon of the faith, rather than leading to closer and deeper theological unity, we have seen both bodies move further and further away from the primary Orthodox goal of ultimate ecclesial unity. The only real exception was the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document which has had only transitory influence.” \textsuperscript{31}
And worse, we have frequently been co-opted by these bodies to support views and positions by association that are far from Orthodox doctrinal beliefs and teachings.

The point, it seems, is not to burn any bridges, but to begin to select those with whom we would do well to forge temporary, issue-focused alliances. For example, in seeking as an Orthodox Church to go head on with the anti-life, pro-abortion forces, we need to join with Roman Catholic pro-life efforts and those supported by evangelical Christians. Ecumenism that seeks to overcome doctrinal differences, with the exception of a few ongoing efforts such as the Orthodox – Roman Catholic dialogue, have proven ineffective, other than in giving some exposure to the Orthodox faith, which would not otherwise have occurred.

Returning to Athanasius, we note that whether at home or in exile, he tenaciously spent a good deal of his energy on educating his clergy and laity. Most of these writings were simultaneously antiheretical and instructional, such as his Orations Against the Arians, and his defense of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. His book On the Incarnation became a powerful tool in ensuring the acceptance of Orthodox Christology. Perhaps his most read work is his biography of the founder of Christian monasticism, The Life of St. Anthony. This biography later served as an inspiration to Christian monastics in both the East and the West. His teaching impulse was also seen in the issuance of the annual Paschal Letters to his flock which not only announced the date for celebrating the Resurrection of Christ, but also served as a catechetical means for every local Egyptian church. He was a teacher of the faith.

The application from this aspect of Athanasius’ “Life and Polity” to the agenda of the Orthodox Christian Church in 21st-century America is clear. We must not only attend to the education of children, we must continue to maintain and expand an effective educational program of lifelong dimensions. In many ways, we are well on our way in this direction with websites in nearly all of our churches, publications, music, and instructional and educational programs on
all levels. The only thing I see missing is the further development of fiction in the form of short stories and novels together with children’s books and videos that convey the Orthodox ethos and mindset functioning in a pluralistic world. Such literature serves to inspire and entertain believers as an alternative to the increasingly sordid and corrupt so-called public entertainment on television, in the theater, the cinema, the internet and novels.

Another incentive for us comes from the fact that St. Athanasius was also the first person to identify the same 27 books of the New Testament that are in use today. Prior to that, various lists of works to be read in churches were in use. A milestone in the evolution of the canon of New Testament books is his Paschal letter from Alexandria, written in 367.

This in itself provides an impetus for a deeper and more authentic enrichment of the lives of Orthodox Christians with the Holy Scriptures in the framework of the patristic patterns of understanding as opposed to the often subjective rewriting and subversion of the message of the Word of God that passes for biblical scholarship in some quarters today. I would refer the hierarchy, pastoral clergy and educators of the future to such works as the recently published first complete *Orthodox Study Bible,* and the beginning of a corpus of exegetical volumes of handy and useful collections of patristic commentary in accessible and readable English, such as the *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures.*

There are so many other aspects of the life of St. Athanasius that can guide us as we seek to live out and propagate the Orthodox faith. One final example is perhaps the most important. St. Athanasius stands as a supreme model of successful surviving, learning and living for Christians in a largely hostile world. His battles for the Orthodox faith, his acceptance of repeated exiles, and his unrestrained persistence against forces in high places earned him in history the description “*Athanasius contra mundum*” or “Athanasius against the world.” His *Life of St. Anthony* — first of the monks who lived lives committed fully to Christ characterized by an ascetic style of living—is a battle manual for Orthodox Christians.
in the struggle against the “principalities and powers” (Colossians 2:15). There we find disciplined Christian lives, marked by serious patterns of prayer, fasting and worship that foster spiritual and moral growth. The reader is led to a way of life characterized by self-control in the Christian journey of growth toward God-likeness, which we refer to as growth toward *Theosis*.

Intimately connected with this is the example and the role of hierarchs, priests and deacons in the Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States. The recent examples of sexual impropriety, child molestation and financial embezzlement in high places do not reflect the high moral standards of Athanasius and serve to justify people’s exodus from the church, while at the same time erecting barriers to people seeking to enter the church. Clergy immorality is not only a sin against the church of today, but also a serious impediment to the future life of the Orthodox Church of America.

**CONCLUSION**

In brief, my contention is that Athanasius is a useful model for Orthodox Christians as we prepare for our future in this country. We can learn from Athanasius as we face the future. Three things arise from this presentation: (1) In all likelihood the secularizing spirit in Europe will continue to spread in the fabric of American life; (2) being American is not defined other than by the principles of freedom; (3) the mission of Orthodox Christianity in America is to be as fully and completely Orthodox as we can be in forming our children, youth and adults with authentic Orthodox faith, worship and ethos.

I would like to conclude with one more normative indicator, which St. Athanasius could not have provided for us. Recently the question “Can Orthodoxy Be American?” was raised in *Again* Magazine, whose subtitle is “The Ancient Christian Faith Today.” Father Michael Gillis, in his editorial, describes the increasing presence of Orthodox Christianity on the American scene and asserts that
“Orthodoxy is (slowly) coming to America,” with many examples, such as the more frequent use of English in the liturgy. He says, “My favorite piece in this issue is saved for last: Father Michael Oleksa’s regular column on the essence of the Orthodox mission to America. He states the obvious, ‘You cannot save what you do not love.’”

In his regular column titled “From up here… in Alaska” Oleksa writes: “Our task is to love America. You cannot save what you do not love… This is what we have to offer to America, the fullness of paschal joy. But America cannot hear our message as long as we present it in alien and unintelligible languages, ethnic customs or politics, or withdrawal from modern society in distain or disgust.” Oleksa affirms that immigrant parishes are adjusting, and that canonical diversity will normalize. “But” he adds,

... none of these necessary developments will guarantee success unless we embrace this land and its people, its culture, its life with love... which must arise from the context of a deep humility, presenting Christ not unto judgment or condemnation, but unto the healing of the soul and body of America – unto sanctification, transfiguration, and eternal salvation – and our own.

How much more normative can you be than that?

I wish to conclude with the Dismissal Hymn of St. Athanasios and St. Cyril, patriarchs of Alexandria, hoping that in it you will see reverberations of this message for today: “With the works of Orthodoxy, you did shine forth and extinguished the false opinions, becoming triumphant and clothed with victory. And having enriched all with true worship, and adorned the Church with great adornment, you worthily found Christ God, granting to all, through your prayers, the Great Mercy.”
This is an expanded version of a lecture in the “Orthodoxy in America Lecture Series” at Fordham University, Bronx, New York on Tuesday, February 17, 2009.


The study can be printed out from the website of the Athenagoras Institute. Numerous comparisons with the U.S. Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are made. www.orthodoxinstitute.org/orthodoxchurchtoday.html


John Douglas rodanis@yahoo.com Sept. 18, 2008.


Unpublished article, presented in Boston, Nov. 22, 2008. Used with permission.


See http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/sightings/ for the full “Sightings” archives.


See also, http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=26869

p. 31.


This simplified account reproduces the Wikipedia entry on St. Athanasius with significant modifications for the sake of simplicity and clarity.


33 Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Twenty-eight volumes are projected. In part, the project is described on the overleaf in this context: “Today the historical-critical method of interpretation has nearly exhausted its claim on the biblical text and on the church. In its wake there is a widespread yearning among Christian individuals and communities for the wholesome, the deep and the enduring. The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture seeks not to replace those excellent commentaries that have been produced in the twentieth century. It supplements them with interpretive voices that have long sustained the church and only recently have fallen silent… The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture is a post-critical revival of the early commentary tradition known as the glossa ordinaria, a text artfully elaborated with ancient and authoritative reflection and insights.”
