

## Authority and Unity.

by

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*This article was written in 1959 when the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) was known as the Metropolia; nevertheless what Professor Verhovskoy says; "The only conditions for the continuous growth of our Church are a good will and an absolute faithfulness to our Orthodox Catholic Faith:" is a point well taken and is as applicable today as then. Why are the new calendar bishops and clergy so eager to meet with the Roman Catholics and Protestants, and even go so far as to say their mysteries (sacraments) are valid (a teaching never before heard from the Fathers and tradition of the Church), yet they will have no conversations with the traditional Orthodox (Old Calendar) and go so far as to call them schismatics. The laity must become knowledgeable about their Orthodox faith and demand their bishops and clergy remain faithful to the teachings and traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church. Professor Verhovskoy states that which has been forgotten: They (the laity) are deprived of but one right: to act against the Hierarchy, provided the latter does not violate the teaching and laws of the Church. When the Hierarchy violates the teachings and the laws of the Church then the laity must act against them as has been done in the past. Unity among the Orthodox will be accomplished only when we keep that which we have received without change. (Comment by Father John Fleser)*

Unity is of the essence of Christianity. We are not Christians if we live by ourselves. If a Christian community considers itself as independent and separated from the Church, is it not a sect? An independent parish is merely a secular corporation with religious purposes rather than a real parish.

What is the difference between them? A corporation is organized by a group of men in accordance with a statute which they make for themselves with the approval of civil authority. Consequently, the whole life of a corporation is ruled by the will of the majority of its members and the statute established by the same majority. If they recognize the authority of the Church, or its teaching and laws, they do so only in so far as they desire.

Some "independent parishes" pretend that they cannot accept the Statute of the Church because they are bound by their own statutes. This pretend is utterly hypocritical because every religious corporation can change its statutes so as to bring them into harmony with the Canons of the Church. If they do not want to do this, they only prove their bad will. '

Christians who openly and consciously recognize only part of the authority and teachings of the Church, while rejecting the rest, are clearly heretics or at least schismatic.

Those who do not recognize the guidance of the Clergy, or who arbitrarily limit it to the celebration of the services and personal relations with laymen are openly rebellious against the Church. If the members of these religious corporations are afraid of being deprived by the Clergy of their property or legitimate rights, they are wrong. Nobody denies that the property belongs to the parishes, and the Clergy can only control its use in agreement with the parish meetings and councils.

We stress that Orthodox Canon law energetically protects the laity from all possible abuses by the Clergy. Separatist tendencies among the laity, and even in the priesthood, were already known in the early Church, and many Canons threatened them with excommunication.

The true parish must have a consciousness of being an organic part of the Church, to be the Church as it exists in a given locality. A truly Orthodox community will never oppose its diocese or the rest of the Church. It will freely and gladly accept the authority of the Church and Orthodox tradition in its entirety. Among other things, it will accept the guidance of the clergy. A truly Orthodox parish will not be pervaded by the spirit of indifference and selfishness, but will wholeheartedly participate in the life of the Church and support it.

If there is mistrust among the laity, clergy and central administration, this mistrust must be overcome as soon as possible. If there are some weak points in the central organization, they must be discussed in a practical and concrete form without generalization or exaggeration, with sincere desire to improve the life of our Church. This mean toward improvement must be not only practical, but must also be free of all contradictions with our Faith. We must fight wrong ambitions and secular spirit in certain sections of the laity, but we must also rejoice in and encourage all expression by the laity of their desire to work for the Church and to take responsibility for its life. We can fight the defects of the Clergy or Church organization, but we must sincerely accept the necessity of the hierarchy, the unity and the central organization of the Church.

The decisions of the All-American Sobors, of the Council of Bishops, of the Metropolitan or of a Bishop in his diocese are absolutely obligatory for all the organizations and individuals in our Church. The Statute of our Metropolia, approved by the All-American Sobor has the force of law.

Every parish and each of us, as individual Christians, must strive to help in the realization of the plans adopted by our Church and to support them financially by regular donations. The poverty of our Church is astonishing. On the average, each member of the Metropolia gives less than one dollar to it per year. Is this simply lack of generosity, indifference or mistrust? Whatever the reason may be, it is shameful to spend less for Church than for ice cream, because, certainly, all of us spend much more than a dollar a year to buy ice cream. It is really unforgivable that we are unable to give even those few dollars needed for the necessary activities of the Metropolia. Unfortunately many priests and parish councils are indifferent to the needs of the whole Church outside their own parishes.

Unity and order are badly needed in our Church. Every layman, priest and bishop, every parish and diocese, must have a clear consciousness that they are living members of the whole Orthodox Church in America and they must do their best to make Orthodoxy in this land united, spiritually strong and influential. Every layman, priest, and bishop, every parish and diocese must realize that all of them have their own rights, duties, and responsibilities, but that these rights are determined and limited by the Church.

The highest value belongs to the Church in its unity, then to the dioceses, then to the parishes and finally to each Christian individually. The highest authority belongs to the episcopate, then to the priesthood and finally to the laity. If the laity considers itself to be on a higher level than the Clergy, and if the parishes separate themselves from their dioceses, and consider themselves higher than the Church, we are then no longer in the Orthodox Church but in a sectarian society.

The laity are not deprived of their rights. They have the widest possibilities of being active in the Church, in its administration, educational and welfare endeavors, in its social work and finances; they can be active members of their parish and diocesan assemblies and of the All-American Sobor. They are deprived of but one right: to act against the Hierarchy, provided the latter does not violate the teaching and laws of the Church.

The great majority of the members of our metropolia sincerely desire to be Orthodox and to see our Church prospering. Therefore, we really can hope that all misunderstandings will be dissipated and that the spirit of unity and Church discipline will prevail.

The vitality of our Church is great. The possibilities are almost unlimited. There is no reason to be pessimistic. The only conditions for the continuous growth of our Church are a good will and an absolute faithfulness to our Orthodox Catholic Faith.

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