

## **I Will Drink No Wine Before Its' Time**

*Christ is Risen!*

In 1994 a large group of Orthodox Bishops representing the various jurisdictions met and openly expressed their desires for an administratively united Orthodox Church in America. This means one Archdiocese for the entire nation. The Bishops did not demand administrative unification but made a commitment to work toward this as a goal. There have been significant cooperative efforts realized through SCOBA (see below) over the past ten years. Our hierarchs have administratively united several national programs, but just as important is the state of pan-Orthodox relations at the local parish level. There are some fundamental issues that exist at the local parish level that are vital to aiding in the eventual administrative unity of the Orthodox Churches in America. It is my conviction that a new mind-set is necessary at the parish level for administrative unity to be realized in the future. Changes are needed but perhaps even more importantly, the gradual evolution of parish dynamics in Orthodox Churches need time to occur or else changes will appear forced and will not be embraced by the people.

1. Orthodox unity on the theological level is a given reality and should not be overlooked. In faith, doctrine and practice, Orthodox Christians living in America can drink from the same cup of the Eucharist and recite the same Creed. This is the sign of unity among Orthodox. Yet, with complete unity in Christ as a given, there still exist barriers between our communities. These barriers stem from the communities themselves and the various dynamics of each one.

More often than not, communities do not see beyond themselves. Good, bad or indifferent, the reality is that communities are either too busy with their own activities or they are so culturally different the perception of each other is that we are divided. These barriers are our making and until we acknowledge them and allow the Gospel of Christ to penetrate this limited mind-set, inter-Orthodox relations will not progress. For instance, how many parishioners are aware that they can receive communion in any Orthodox Church in America? When pan-Orthodox Lenten Vespers are held is an effort to attend made as an expression of love and unity with our fellow Orthodox?

2. An administratively united Orthodox Church in America will do nothing to strengthen the Church unless it is the natural consequence of the Churches evolving and acting as one at the local parish level. When the pan-Orthodox Women's Retreat is held about 60-80 women participate. This effort is very commendable because it is breaking down barriers but why aren't there hundreds of women desiring to come? The answer is some are ready and others are not. That is neither a bad nor a good thing. It simply illustrates the reality of our situation. When a noted Retreat Master is invited to the area and all the Churches are invited to participate very few attend.

The problem is not an administratively fractured and weak Orthodox Church in America but, Orthodox Churches that are in different stages of evolution and tend to isolated themselves from one another for various reasons. This trend toward isolation needs to be constantly countered with activities, programs and cooperative events that break down these barriers. As our Hierarchs have said we must first get to know each other before we can move forward together and friendships takes time.

Orthodox parishes are not homogeneous. The Orthodox Churches from the various jurisdictions are at various stages of assimilation. Some have newly arrived in this country and perhaps reflect a Greek Orthodox Church in the 1950s. There are even differences among the various Greek Orthodox parishes. Some still have dues as opposed to stewardship. Some celebrate the entire liturgy in Greek including the sermon because the majority of congregants are immigrants. Individual Orthodox parishes are dynamic; each is a reflection of its particular uniqueness, its converts, its immigrants and composition from the various jurisdictions, its priest and the particular community in which it resides. In Christ, these differences are over-come; we are one and share the same chalice and the same faith. A common goal for the local parishes should be to celebrate the Gospel of Christ by finding ways in which it can be expressed by our communities together through pan-Orthodox sponsored activities.

3. Organizations promoting Orthodox unity abound today as they never have in the past. Do you know what SCOBA stands for? The Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), established in 1960, brings together the canonical hierarchs of the Orthodox jurisdictions in America. The purpose of the Conference is to make the ties of unity among the canonical Orthodox Churches and their administrations stronger and more visible. The hierarchs meet twice annually for discussions and decisions on matters of common concern. Various commissions and committees have been established to implement the decisions of SCOBA. Among these are the Orthodox Christian Education Commission (OCEC); International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC); the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC); the Military Chaplaincy Commission; the Study and Planning Commission; the Scouting Commission, the Orthodox Campus Commission and the Social and Moral Issues Commission. This year SCOBA has published a Parish Directory including all Orthodox Churches from the various jurisdictions. The 2004 Directory may be ordered for \$9.95, plus \$2.50 postage and handling, from: OCCNET, P.O. Box 1128, Torrance, CA 90505-0128. For additional information call: 800-747-9245. Fax: 800-903-4266. Email: FESTAL@JUNO.COM

When I was serving in Los Angeles there was an organization called Orthodox People Together (OPT). Its mission was to foster relations between the various Orthodox churches. It sponsored pan-Orthodox retreats and seminars. It also published the first Parish Directory of all Orthodox Churches in America. When I was a seminarian over 14 years ago, we had an organization called Orthodox Inter-Seminary Movement (OISM) which was a gathering of students from St. Vladimir's and Holy Cross seminaries which met to discuss unity among our jurisdictions. Both groups shared a common understanding that unity of the jurisdictions would be the natural fruit of communities

coming together at the grass roots level. When this becomes a priority in our parishes and there exists tangible evidence through cooperative efforts among the various Orthodox; then the Orthodox Church in America will be ready for administrative unity and it will be the natural evolution of our church coming of age.

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+ Fr. Andrew