

ADDRESS OF THE CHAIRMAN  
HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP DEMETRIOS OF AMERICA  
At the 6<sup>th</sup> Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops  
of the United States of America  
Chicago, IL  
(September 15, 2015)

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1. Your Eminences, Your Excellencies and Your Graces, Beloved Hierarchs of the Assembly of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, what a great joy it is to be together again and to sing praise to the Lord, repeating the words of yesterday's great feast: *We venerate Your Cross, Master, and we glorify Your Holy Resurrection*. As we convene our 6<sup>th</sup> annual General Assembly Meeting and reflect upon the Life-giving Cross, we realize that the only way to authentically perceive the world around us and to move forward with our apostolic mission is through the intense contemplation of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

Indeed, only through the life-giving Cross can we move beyond self-preservation and find joy in self-sacrifice; only through the Holy Cross can we move from the darkness of isolation into the light of communion; only through this blessed instrument of salvation are we liberated from the snares of death and are guided to the glory of the Resurrection!

Now, empowered by the vision of Cross and Resurrection, let us consider our work and properly understand our common mission. And let us do this by seriously considering four major contexts or conditions—both local and global.

2. The first is that of a global perspective. Such an angle reveals to us that humanity has entered a most serious existential crisis, in which people have lost all sense of identity and purpose. In a world where one's value is largely found in his career and socio-economic status, it is no wonder that countless men and women have been lost in the abyss of despondency, apathy, and depression during these past several years of global socio-economic unrest. For years, humanity's thirst for wealth has led to the abuse of the environment, of our planet, of our home. And the abominable desire for absolute power and authority over others has led to unprecedented levels of extremism, violence, and death. This has been most vividly felt in the Middle East and North Africa, while in other parts of the world, including Ukraine, society is witnessing nothing less than fratricide. The Church in America cannot ignore this calamitous global context.

3. Context number two: Although we are all Hierarchs with local flocks in the

United States—a region of the world that has largely remained unaffected by the major global crises—we must not forget that our local communities are profoundly connected to “Mother Churches,” some of which are facing exceedingly challenging conditions. Our faithful are most concerned about the massive displacement of people and the massive number of refugees forced to flee from the Middle East—their ancestral homeland—and the heavy affects this is having on our Patriarchate of Antioch. Our people are fervently thinking about the countless military conflicts around the world, including Ukraine, and praying for peace and reconciliation. Our people are also paying attention to the evils perpetrated, not through bombs and mortars, but through more deceptive mechanisms. Our people are also paying close attention to human rights violations perpetrated against Christians around the world, especially those in Turkey.

4. Context number three: Not for one second should we think that our own land is immune to this existential crisis. Certainly, we have been blessed by God to live in the United States, a country that is not facing military conflict on its soil. However, this does not mean that ours is a perfect condition. More and more, our children are becoming victims of widespread gun violence, not only on their local neighborhood streets, but also in their homes and in their schools—places that should be their safe havens. Racial tension has once again erupted in inner-city neighborhoods around the nation, allowing mistrust and even hatred to come between neighbors. And in the name of tolerance, understanding, and acceptance, our society has been forced into uncharted territories. For the first time in the history of humanity, marriage is no longer only understood as a special relationship between a man and a woman, but is now manipulated to include same-sex relationships. Dear brothers, if we wish for our faithful to view us as more than just local representatives of our Mother Churches, it is vital that we systematically study, discuss, and respond to these and other social challenges affecting the lives of all US citizens.

5. Context number four: Our work during the next few days, as well as the months that follow, also need to be viewed in the context of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which has been planned for over 50 years and is now scheduled to be convened on Pentecost 2016. Dear brothers, we find ourselves in a unique position to bear witness to a most important moment in the life of Orthodoxy. Thanks to the labors of countless Hierarchs, Priests, Deacons, and Laity, the world will witness the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church manifested in synod! It has taken over 1000 years for the Church to reach this point. It is very possible that many of us will be invited to attend the Holy Council as members of a particular autocephalous Church’s delegation. If we are

in attendance we must be prepared to bring forth the concerns of Orthodoxy as experienced in our pluralistic environment and not simply go along for the ride as mere spectators. Our experience has taught us that the people of this blessed land are desperately thirsting for the truth of our faith. Orthodoxy in the United States, and in most of the western hemisphere, has a great deal to contribute to the evangelical mission of the Church. Our experiences as Hierarchs beyond the borders of historically established Orthodox Churches is unique and may actually assist the Church avoid falling victim of extreme esotericism. After all, the calling to share the Holy Gospel has been and always shall be an exercise that requires we move beyond our narrow selves, that is, an unconditional invitation to the entire world to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

6. The recent visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate by our Assembly's Executive Committee underscored the importance of our knowledge and experience as Hierarchs of the so-called diaspora to the overall life of the Church. During our meeting with His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, he commended our Assembly for its efforts and systematic work. We know that there are several areas in the life of our Assembly requiring additional attention, and I am sure that eventually we will find a way to overcome some of our challenges. Having said this, however, the Patriarch recognized that our efforts not only constitute a model for imitation by other regional Assemblies, but also for pan-Orthodox cooperation among the Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches. For this, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to each of you. I recognize that in spite of your busy schedules and commitments to your local communities, each of you has made an effort to contribute to the life of our Assembly. I would be remiss, of course, if I do not recognize and thank His Grace Bishop Basil, His Eminence Metropolitan Antony, and His Grace Bishop Maxim, our Secretary, Treasurer, and Coordinator for Committees, respectively. On top of their other Assembly responsibilities, they participate in monthly meetings together with the other committed members of the Secretariat—a Secretariat for which we are very proud indeed.

7. In light of all this, the work of our Assembly must be shared with others. We have already begun sharing our studies, reports and statements with the faithful. Our people look forward to learning about our concerted efforts to enhance our cooperation and establish a common Orthodox witness. We have made significant strides in these two areas.

Regarding the cooperation between the Hierarchs of our Assembly, I believe that we have come a long way since our first meeting in 2010, when many of us met for the very first time. Six years later, I believe that our shared experiences have

made us much more familiar with each other and has fostered the fraternal love and respect for one another.

Second, regarding our effort to establish a common Orthodox witness among our communities and in the public square, we have made significant efforts to present a unified Orthodox voice as it relates to a number of social issues; we have stood together as members of our Assembly as we advocate for the most vulnerable members of society. Our commitment to dialogue with those outside our faith will shortly bear fruit with the reconstitution of the Orthodox-Catholic Bishops Committee and with the dialogue between the Assembly and SCOCH (The Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches). Of course, the Committee on Pastoral Practice has led the way forward for a common approach to a number of pastoral issues. I would like to thank His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph, our First Vice-Chairman, for his leadership. Your Eminence, the work of your committee will surely lay the foundation for greater cooperation among our communities.

8. Lastly, regarding the work toward producing proposals for overcoming canonical anomalies in our land, essentially the *raison d'être* of all 13 regional Assemblies, I am glad to say that our Assembly is the only one to propose plans to bring canonical order to its region. Through the leadership and patience of His Eminence Archbishop Nicolae, our Assembly has now review three proposals and we are going to dedicate a significant part of our efforts during the present General Assembly Meeting to examine a fourth proposal. On behalf of the brother Hierarchs, I thank you, Your Eminence, for your methodical work and significant contribution to our Assembly. I also express wholehearted thanks to the brother Hierarchs who have submitted in writing suggested ways to enhance these proposals. I would like to specifically mention His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion of ROCOR and His Grace Bishop John of the Moscow Patriarchate for submitting relevant suggestions on two separate occasions. Furthermore, thanks is expressed to His Grace Bishop Daniil of the Bulgarian Patriarchate for his related commentary, His Grace Bishop Gregory of Nyssa and to the OCA for their pertinent written comments. All of the above have helped guide our discussions thus far and will surely be part of our work on Canonical Regional Planning during the next few days. I want to commend each of you for your relentless desire to discuss this subject and to engage in open and honest examination of all aspects related to it.

My prayer is that we will continue to find new ways to grow in each of the aforementioned areas of engagement. In spite of our differences of opinion along the way, we ought to be proud in the Lord of our efforts. Our work together will

constitute the backbone for the future of Orthodoxy in our land and may very well serve as a guide for other Assemblies. This past month, as part of the Synaxis of the Hierarchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, I had the opportunity to study the initiatives of other Assemblies of Bishops. Indeed, our work on social witness, pastoral practice and administrative cooperation has much to offer to our brethren around the world. For this reason, I would like to propose that our Assembly prepare and send an official dossier of its work to the Secretariat of the Holy and Great Council for consideration during the Holy and Great Council in 2016.

9. Dear brothers in Christ, we have much work in front of us. Given that we are the largest of the Assemblies of Bishops, it is difficult for us all to meet as frequently as we would like. This means that our committees need to be revitalized and assume their work with a renewed spirit. We must especially enhance and support the Committees on Youth, Pastoral Practices, and Canonical Regional Planning, and we must finally initiate the work of the Committee on Church and Society. Without minimizing the importance of our other committees, when held together under the same light, these four committees help us best advance and serve our core mission in America, that is: to nurture our youth, shepherd the faithful, organize and administrate the Church according to the canonical tradition, and speak the truth with love to the world. The work might be overwhelming, indeed, but we undertake it with the inspiration and power of the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord.

Before closing, let us extend our heartfelt gratitude to His Eminence Metropolitan Iakovos for hosting the celebration of the Divine Liturgy at his Saint John the Baptist parish, and to His Grace Bishop Longin, who will host the Assembly's Youth Rally and Forum at his Holy Resurrection Cathedral. We praise and glorify our Lord Jesus Christ for the abundance of His love. Truly, we are blessed; truly, now that we have once again come together as brothers in Christ, the words of Saint Paul the Apostle resonate in our hearts more than ever, *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8: 35-39). To Him blessing and wisdom and glory and thanksgiving and honor forever and ever! Amen (cf. Rev. 7: 12).