

## **A Challenging Vision For Orthodox Christians in America: An Interview With Father John Meyendorff**

In 1990 the late Father John Meyendorff, renowned church historian, patrologist and dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, was interviewed in Paris by Antoine Niviere. The interview was subsequently published in *Service Orthodoxe de Presse* (no.146, March 1990). Some 20 years later it was reprinted in *Le Messager Orthodoxe* (no. 148, 1-2009).

Father John's responses to Niviere's poignant questions help to provide, in a very condensed format, an historical and theological backdrop for evaluating the recent Episcopal Assembly convened by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The interview also provides a vision for its work in the future. This historic assembly, held in New York City on May 26-28, 2010 was a response to the decisions of the fourth Pre-Conciliar Pan Orthodox Conference held at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambesy, Switzerland (June 6-9,2009). Focusing on resolving the various ecclesiological anomalies caused by the so-called "diaspora," the Chambesy conference was the result of the gathering of primates representing fourteen autocephalous churches invited to Istanbul by His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (June 6-12, 2009). Missing from the list of invitees was His Beatitude Metropolitan Jonah of the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America (OCA).

Father John's interview is as strikingly fresh and challenging now as it was when first given. It covers a range of diverse but interrelated topics relative to ecclesial unity: Orthodoxy in the West; The State of Orthodoxy in America; New Challenges for the Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe; Orthodoxy and Ecumenism and Orthodox unity vis-a-vis the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

From the outset of the interview one can sense that Father John is more than slightly vexed with those who relegate Orthodox Christianity to being geographically and ethnically locked into the East. This myopic perception has helped to support the idea of "diaspora" and its accompanying unorthodox ecclesiology of jurisdictional pluralism driven by ethno-phyletism. Though not explicitly stated, one can glean from the interview that the issue of "diaspora" and therefore Orthodoxy in the West is related to a spiritual and psychological disposition that confines Orthodox Christianity to an ethnic ghetto. Father John stresses that the viability of Orthodoxy in the West is not dependent upon the

perpetuation of ethnic enclaves but on its witnessing to the Apostolic Tradition. Orthodoxy in the West can neither sustain itself nor fulfill its missionary mandate by pretending to exist in Byzantium or pre-revolutionary Russia. For Father John, Orthodox Christianity is also a Western phenomenon as it witnesses to the universality of the Gospel, and he insists that it is responsible for contributing to the spiritual, cultural and intellectual life of all societies and countries.

Since the time of the interview until now, attempts to discuss and ultimately resolve the “diaspora” problem through a conciliar process have ironically maintained the status quo of Orthodox disunity. In the case of America, the creation of the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA), while laudable, has not resulted in the transformation of the American bishops into a single synod with its own primate free from the influence or barriers imposed by the mother churches. The only exception to this ecclesiological impasse fueled by jurisdictional pluralism is the Orthodox Church In America (OCA) which received its autocephaly from its mother church in 1970. This unilateral act of the Moscow Patriarchate and the North American Metropolia continues to be viewed as a canonical anomaly among many if not most of the Orthodox world.

Twenty years ago Father John stated that those of the “diaspora” had been accorded only a limited participation in preparing for a future Ecumenical Council which would provide a blueprint for establishing new local Orthodox churches in the West. Last week Metropolitan Philip Saliba, primate of the Antiochian Archdiocese in North America expressed a similar frustration to the other fifty-five bishops attending the Episcopal Assembly in New York. He highlighted the fact that none of the canonical Orthodox bishops of North America, including the chairman of SCOBA, were invited to Chambesy.

If the “diaspora” is to contribute towards achieving Orthodox ecclesial unity in the West it must be encouraged by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to offer its voice to the conciliar process leading to a resolution of its own unique problem. As for the “diaspora” in North America, it must encourage the Ecumenical Patriarchate to become involved in using its primatial ministry to finally put an end to jurisdictional pluralism and to lead the way for establishing a local autocephalous church. To this end the Orthodox Church In America (OCA) has much to contribute and should not be marginalized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate or any other of the old world churches since it alone identifies itself and has functioned as an autocephalous church for the past forty years.

Father John clearly supports the pivotal role played by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Orthodox ecclesiology. Yet, he candidly states the need for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to be truly ecumenical and that its candidates not be limited to a particular ethnicity or subject to the restraints of the Turkish government. Father John reiterates the need for a permanent committee or synod, made up of representatives of all the autocephalous churches, to be part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This would enable the Patriarchate to properly exercise its primatial responsibilities in a conciliar context that is not exclusively ethno-centric. For all intents and purposes, Father John saw the need for what was known in the Byzantine and Ottoman empires as the *synodos endemousa*. The composition of this synod included the Patriarch, patriarchal bishops, bishops, who for various reasons including political/religious exile resided in Constantinople, and the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem or their representatives. Historically, the *synodos endemousa* helped to restore and maintain proper ecclesial order and unity during those times when ecumenical as well as local councils could no longer be convened.

Given the need for ecclesial order and unity, Father John was also well aware that the various manifestations of church unity could not depend solely on ecclesial institutions. He stressed that the Apostolic Tradition, lived out through a vibrant and growing faith, was fundamental to the life and structure of the Church. Father John warns against putting trust in authoritative structures and institutions that are divorced from the life given and sustained by the Holy Spirit. This warning poses the greatest challenge for any and all attempts to forge ecclesial unity in America and throughout the “diaspora.” Orthodox unity cannot be forged by structures of authority, even those structures which strive for the most inclusive configuration of conciliarity, i.e. bishops, clergy and laity, if there is no involvement of the Spirit.

Even though Father John does not detail the relationship between the Spirit and the Church’s conciliar structure, his words remind us that too often trust is placed in institutions rather than in God. Without the Holy Spirit all canonical structures of church order and unity are destined to fail. Only with and in the Holy Spirit will the Church be able to generate and nurture the unity needed to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it works for the salvation and transfiguration of the world.

Father Robert M. Arida

# **An Interview with Father John Meyendorff**

(Translated by Father Robert M. Arida)

**Interviewer Antoine Nivier (A.N.):** Last January you offered many lectures in Paris where in one of them you posed the question: “Is the Orthodox Church Still Eastern?” Why this question and what is your answer?

**Father John (F.J.):** Western Christians very often tend to identify Orthodoxy as a religion of Greeks, Russians, of certain peoples of the Middle East or the Balkans. They identify Orthodox tradition with one or some of the cultures which are a little peripheral relative to my culture of the West. Nevertheless we find ourselves in a period where that division no longer has a *raison d’être*, simply because there are Orthodox who live in the West, not only in the sense of “diaspora” or “dispersion,” as they are sometimes called, but very often they form an integral part of Western culture. Given this fact, they are no less Western than the other Westerners.

From another perspective, if one speaks of theology, of thought processes, one is able to say that the Orthodox of Western Europe, in fact already since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have adopted certain scientific conceptions, certain methodological approaches that are unique to Western civilization. Consequently, it is no longer as in the time of Byzantium where those of the East and West were speaking two different languages, had very different social structures and lived in a different intellectual world.

Presently, we better understand one another than was the case at the end of the Middle Ages or the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, we are better prepared for discussing Christian unity, to be able to separate that which is truly the Apostolic Tradition and that which is human tradition. Today, Orthodoxy is only of value and interest if it presents itself as a witness of the Apostolic Tradition... and not simply as the inheritor of Byzantine or Russian civilization.

## **The Orthodox “Diaspora” and Preparation for the Council**

**A.N.:** At this time what does this new situation imply culturally and sociologically, in particular for those communities throughout the world, notably in the countries not traditionally Orthodox, and for their witness? What is the future for these young communities?

**F.J.:** Their future and their mission are to witness to Orthodoxy in an atmosphere of dialog, apart from wholly participating in the development of the life of the countries, of societies, in the intellectual world in which they are developing.

I would underline however that there exists a certain problem in the midst of Orthodoxy itself pertaining to the subject of these communities. There are, all the same, some people not here in the West, but in the traditional Orthodox countries, who, when it comes to the standard of ecclesiastical responsibilities, occasionally do not express total confidence in those Orthodox of Western formation. There are also those who identify Orthodox tradition with local cultures.

We in the West have, on this precise matter, to confront them in their dissent and to ask them if they truly believe that the Orthodox tradition – the tradition of the Church – is a universal and catholic tradition, not to be limited to some eras of human culture. At the same time, our witness obliges us to say the same thing to those in the West. Our Orthodox communities in the West are obliged to speak to both parties, they are obliged to speak to all those who would place fetters on the witness of Orthodoxy.

**A.N.:** The Orthodox Church is entering the final preparatory phase of its future council in which is found at its center the question of the canonical organization of all the new Orthodox Churches in Europe, America, Australia, Japan – what is called the “diaspora.”

**F.J.:** If the preparation continues as it has until now, it has no chance to succeed in so far as those who are primarily involved with this problem are not invited. I believe that everywhere this is beginning to be understood a little. Certainly, in practice, those primarily involved, i.e. the Orthodox of the “diaspora,” are participating in this preparatory work: they write, they speak, one recognizes that they exist; but their participation remains extremely limited. Certain traditional centers of Orthodoxy do not consider it acceptable to accord them a place. It is altogether deplorable.

I hope that the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is the first in being responsible for the preparation of this council, will find the means to unblock these impasses that are rather artificial and that preparations for the future council will be facilitated.

### **Orthodoxy In America**

**A.N.:** Presently, where is the Orthodox Church in America? What is the state of the Orthodox Church in America?

**F.J.:** We have a permanent conference uniting the bishops of different jurisdictions, but it does not function very well. In fact, the different priorities, which stand out among the members of this organization, arouse certain tensions.

For its part, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of America (d’Amerique) does not consider itself to be part of the “diaspora,” but a local Church. The attitude of the Archbishop of the Antiochian Patriarchate in America – Orthodox Americans of Syro-Lebanese origin – equally tends to refuse this notion of “diaspora.” Our priority consists in defining the existence of Orthodoxy in America in terms of a local Church. Elsewhere there are many Greeks who agree with this principle, and therefore this vision is not limited only to those two jurisdictions. But, on a parallel plane there exists a different vision which tends to take more seriously the priorities of the old-world Churches than the realities in America.

Within the context of preparing for the visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios to the United States in July 1990, the Orthodox Church of America should, by the way, go soon to the Phanar, the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

### **The New Challenges of Eastern Europe**

**A.N.:** Given the upheavals of the last year, how do you see the situation in Eastern Europe? And most especially, how do you see that which concerns the life of the Church in Romania, Bulgaria and in the Soviet Union?

**F.J.:** Until the present the hierarchy in these countries is, to a certain extent, more or less compromised. Whether they want to or not, they are obliged to participate in the chorus of praise for Ceausescu, Jivkov, Stalin... It is evident that the Church will have, hereafter, the possibilities of spreading anew. The Synod of the Romanian Church came to publish a declaration where it expresses its repentance and hope for renewal; I still do not know of similar declarations in Bulgaria or in the USSR.

Nevertheless, the main problem is knowing if the leaders of these churches are going to be able to exercise their ministry... I hope, in spite of everything, that there will be a certain continuity, i.e. that there will not be

a violent revolution in the Church as had taken place at the political level. Obviously, there were at times some deplorable cases, but as a whole, the hierarchy did its best during the course of these long decades. It is always easy in this regard to judge, especially when one lives in the West.

In any case, I hope that the unity of the Church will be maintained and that the solution will not be schism. That certain bishops, that certain personalities in place ought to leave is one thing. But the creation of a parallel Church is something else.

The atmosphere in the USSR – I know less well the situation in Romania and Bulgaria – is very dangerous. It is possible that the Church in the USSR is entering into a period similar to that which existed in the 1920's, with all the schisms which had been in place at the time.

Moreover, this is being played out by the adversaries of the Church. Besides, an ultra-nationalist and ultra-monarchist element having a fascist character, represented by the movement “Pamiat,” is actually expanding in the Soviet Union, and I do not think this is for the wellbeing of the Church.

The fact that Patriarch Tikhon has been canonized seems to me quite important for he represents the image and the model of an authentic leader of the Church. It is from this model that the unity of the Church is derived, instead of that which we are presenting, as one sees it nowadays, in the creation of all sorts of groups. St. Tikhon had been very firm vis-a-vis [the exercising of] authority and, when necessary, he was known to adopt a more conciliar attitude for he desired, above all else, to preserve the unity of Church. He shows himself to always be the fierce adversary of all schisms whether it be that of the Renovationists or the Synod Abroad. He was truly convinced that the unity of the Church is something essential, that it is not an institutional unity, but a mystical and organic unity.

It is in this sense that I speak of the continuity which ought to be maintained. One is not able to purify the Church. One is to renew the Church from within, without dividing it. But this can only be done by those people who truly have the sense of this [mystical or organic] unity. At times the “professional” dissidents, the militant nationalists and also the bureaucrats do not have this sense. Consequently, unity is to go beyond bureaucracies, beyond nationalisms and beyond dissidence.

### **The Unity of the Church**

**A.N.:** One occasionally has the impression that Christians have settled themselves into their divisions... or into ecumenism. The division among Christians, is it not, nevertheless, a scandal? And, in this case, why hasn't unity been re-established among the Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants?

**F.J.:** This is so. In a way, ecumenism today has lost much of its dynamism. This is a fact. Here the concern is, above all, an institutional ecumenism, an organized ecumenism, a bureaucratic ecumenism with its large gatherings as was done in the 1950's... This sort of ecumenism doesn't end up with the results one was expecting. In my opinion, this was probably inevitable.

We are now in a period which demands patience as well as an attitude that is more honest, more deep, striving to envisage the problems from a more theological and spiritual level. This ought to be done at the local level and not only in the meetings between institutions.

It is well known that a Christian cannot be against unity which we are working towards realizing. Perhaps the Orthodox, precisely because they are a little allergic to all organizations and their large structures, have a message which consists in presenting an image of catholicity and of unity which is based on the faith and on experience more than on authority or institutions.

The unity of the Church is not accomplished by simply defining organs of authority. This is one of the temptations of the West. From this perspective, we are defining structures of authority before defining the faith. No, we do not proceed according to these criteria. For us, the faith comes first. On the other hand, there are the relativists who tell us that the faith is an indefinable given which then reduces the dogmatic union to a minimum enabling one to act as if one is united to the faith.

### **Orthodoxy Has Much To Learn**

**A.N.:** If there is a specific message of Orthodoxy to the other Christians, how is it to be received by them?

**F.J.:** We have much to learn. The temptation for the Orthodox is to be too eschatological, to reduce Christian life to liturgy, to have a sort of contemplation of the Kingdom of God to the point that all responsibility to the world is forgotten. At the same time, within the framework of universal ecclesial institutions, the Orthodox are very afraid when it comes to the papacy to which they react negatively with regards to any manifestation of unity or primacy, as when it comes to Constantinople. It's a pity. It would be necessary to acquire a healthier approach.

It is evident that we need an Ecumenical Patriarch, but he must be truly ecumenical and that he knows how to accomplish this ministry of primacy. If it is a matter of an institution which remains monopolized by an ethnic group based on historical reasons because of the Turks then this is not a solution... In the past several propositions were made for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to have an international staff and that located close by would be a headquarters for a permanent committee representing the other autocephalous Churches, in a word to have installed a dynamic and permanent conciliarity; but presently this does not exist.

**A.N.:** What message is Orthodoxy able to offer the agnostic world and to secularism which characterize the last decades?

**F.J.:** The message of Orthodoxy is the experience of the Holy Spirit, something essential, precisely that which makes the Church the Church. Only, the Orthodox do not know well how to transmit this experience, nor what are the presuppositions of that action of the Spirit in the world. Here, rather, is where the genius of Western Christianity intervenes and I believe that there is a certain complementarity between the two, a complementarity that has been lost because of the schism...

The Orthodox Church, not without reason, rejects all forms of ossification leading up to a certain dogmatism of institutions such as is the case in Roman Catholicism for example. But the Orthodox Church ought, for its part, to understand how its message should be presented to the world in a way that is at the same time dynamic and stripped of these institutional aberrations that she rejects.

But, in that case, how is it to be done? If one does not have the pope, then what does one have? How are we to function as one Church? How is it to manifest itself? Certainly it manifests itself in the unity of faith. The Orthodox do not put to the test the difficulties regarding this plan. They have among themselves a theological unity, a unity of faith which they carry through well. But, when it comes to ecclesial practice, they are most divided. The existence of parallel jurisdictions in the West is an illustration of that weakness of Orthodoxy which puts in peril the credibility of its witness.