

# **The Moscow Council of 1917/1918 and The American Orthodox Contribution**

## **I. Introduction**

At the conclusion of his thorough and esteemed study of the Moscow Council of 1917-1918, Father Hyacinthe Destivelle states the following;

The application of the Council of 1917- 1918 is difficult to evaluate for two reasons: On the one hand the Russian Orthodox Church in the soviet period was more preoccupied with its survival than with its internal reform. On the other hand it is currently too soon to see to what degree this same Church is going to make the most of what G. Schulz calls a 'potential of ignored reforms.' Nevertheless, with the providential upholding of the patriarchal office and the functioning, even if purely symbolic, of the conciliar institution... along with an intense parochial life of semi-clandestine communities, the Russian Church profited from certain essentials gained from the Council of 1917-1918. <sup>1</sup>

These words, written in 2006 continue to ring true as life unfolds for the Orthodox Church in Russia. However, I would like to suggest that a partial assessment of the Council can be made based on the vision and life of the North American Metropolia.

What is often overlooked when discussing the Moscow Council and its comprehensive focus on church reform is the contribution made by the Russian American Exarchate. American life, characterized by the "democratic spirit", religious and ethnic pluralism and the separation of State and Church was being gradually synthesized into the growing concept of sobornost or conciliarity that traced its roots to the Russian theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This synthesis, envisioned and implemented by the Russian missionary bishops in collaboration with their clergy and faithful, precipitated the comprehensive configuration of bishops, priests and laity making up the Moscow Council. It is this comprehensive model of conciliarity that became one of the characterizing features of the North American Exarchate and its journey to autocephaly.

From the outset it should be stressed that the relationship between the Moscow Council of 1917-1918 and the Orthodox Church in America rests on the shoulders of the Russian missionaries to America. Among them were those who foresaw the challenges and opportunities America offered the Orthodox Church. Without exaggeration, it can be said that were it not for these larger than life persons the American mission would have risked, following the revolution, assuming an identity that would have inextricably associated it with a politically divided post imperial Russian Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Le Concile de Moscou (1917-1918), Cerf, pp. 235-236.

## II. A Vision For An American Diocese

Two outstanding laborers who forged a vision for a local Church in America are Saint Innocent Veniaminov (1797-1879) and Saint Tikhon Bellavin (1865-1925). Both were missionary bishops in America who later assumed the highest ecclesiastical office within the Russian Orthodox Church. During their respective tenures in America<sup>2</sup> each helped to implant within the psyche of the American mission a common vision that helped to establish the path leading ultimately to autocephaly.

During their respective sojourns in America (Innocent: 1824-1853; Tikhon: 1898-1907) each envisioned the potential and even need for a local Orthodox Church in America. When Russia ceded Alaska to the United States in March of 1867, Alaska was part of the diocese of Kamchatka, the Kurile and Aleutian Islands with an auxiliary bishop residing in Sitka. Innocent, who at that time was Archbishop of Kamchatka and residing in Blagoveshchensk, wrote to the Ober-procurator of the Holy Synod, D. A. Tolstoy extolling the sale and outlining how he envisioned missionary work to continue in America. Innocent's letter is dated December 5, 1867.

Rumor reaching me from Moscow purports that I wrote to someone of my great unhappiness about the sale of our colonies to the Americans. This is utterly false. To the contrary, I see in this event one of the ways of Providence whereby Orthodoxy will penetrate the United States (where even now people have begun to pay serious attention to it).

Innocent then continues with his suggestions for the American mission. Among these are the following:

-Rather than New Archangel (Sitka), the residence of the vicar bishop should be located in San Francisco, where climatic conditions are incomparably better and from where it is at least as convenient to have connections with the Churches in the colonies as it is from Sitka.

-The present vicar and the whole New Archangel clergy except for one sacristan should be recalled to Russia, and a new vicar should be appointed who has knowledge of the English language. Likewise his entourage should be comprised of persons who know English.

-The bishop should choose his own staff and be permitted to change members of his staff as well as to consecrate to the priesthood American citizens who will accept Orthodoxy with all its traditions and customs.

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<sup>2</sup> Innocent was missionary priest and later bishop in Alaska from 1824-1853. Tikhon was missionary bishop in America from 1898-1907.

-The ruling bishop and the clergy of the Orthodox Church in America should be permitted to serve the Divine Liturgy and other Church services in English and, as is self evident, translations of the service books into English must be made.

-In the pastoral schools, which will be created in San Francisco and elsewhere for the preparation of candidates for missionary and priestly duties, the curriculum must be in English and not in Russian, which will sooner or later be replaced by the former language.<sup>3</sup>

With the sale of Alaska to the United States and the suggestions offered by Innocent, the American mission continued to evolve. Consequently, by 1870 the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church created a new diocese of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska. and by 1872 the episcopal see was transferred from Sitka to San Francisco.

### **III. Saint Tikhon Bellavin: American Ecclesial Life And Diocesan Restructuring**

It was the young Bishop Tikhon Bellavin who would be a major contributor in writing the next chapter of the American diocese and who would become the American Church's tightest link to the Council of 1917-1918.

As the Russian Church reflected more intensely and critically on its relationship with the state and as it was awakening to the reality of modernity, American life was concurrently presenting new challenges and opportunities for the growing and geographically expanding Russian diocese of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska.<sup>4</sup> In turn these challenges and opportunities accelerated developments within the Orthodox American context that prefigured the participation of bishops, clergy and laity comprising the Moscow Council of 1917-1918.

By the time Bishop Tikhon arrived in San Francisco in 1898 he found himself the archpastor of a multi national and multi cultural flock spanning the North American continent. Native Alaskans, Russians, Galicians, Carpatho-Russians, Arabs, Greeks, Serbs, Romanians and Albanians as well as American converts made up the profile of an expanding local church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In Barsukov, *Letters of Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna, 1865-1878*. Vol. III, St. Petersburg, 1901, PP. 139-140. Translated by Bishop Gregory (Afonsky), *A History of the Orthodox Church In Alaska (1794-1917)*, St. Herman's Theological Seminary Press, Kodiak, Ak., 1978, p.78. See also Paul D. Garrett, *St. Innocent, Apostle To America*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> With the creation of the new diocese of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska in 1870 the bishop's see was transferred, most likely due to the suggestion of Archbishop Innocent Veniaminov, from Sitka to San Francisco in 1872. In 1900 the diocesan title is again changed to the Diocese of the Aleutian Islands and North America.

<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that between 1891 and World War I nearly ninety thousand Eastern Rite Galicians and Carpatho-Russians made their way into the American diocese. See

Within this energizing and challenging environment Tikhon began to develop ideas relative to church reform in America that would impact the proposed Moscow Council. Not the least of these reforms would be the participation of clergy and laity in local, diocesan and national councils. It has been implied that while visiting Russia in the summer of 1903 and having been summoned to attend the meetings of the Holy Synod in Saint Petersburg, Tikhon shared some of his developing ideas ranging from parochial and diocesan reorganization to conciliar representation.<sup>6</sup>

In 1905, a pivotal year for the Church in Russia, the Episcopal see of the American diocese was again transferred – this time from San Francisco to New York with Tikhon elevated to the rank of archbishop. That same year the Holy Synod sent out a questionnaire requesting the bishops to offer input concerning issues related to reform that would be discussed at a future local council. As is generally known, these responses helped to provide the needed impetus that led to the Moscow Council of 1917-1918.

Initiated by the state controlled Holy Synod, the questionnaire allowed for free discussion that invariably focused on the relationship of State and Church. The replies of the Russian bishops attested to the living legacy of Orthodox spiritual and intellectual life that continued to develop in spite of the Petrine reforms. Writing on this inherent though *restrained* legacy, Father John Meyendorff argued that the near unanimous consensus for ecclesial reform affirmed the spiritual and intellectual creativity that continued to prevail within the Russian Orthodox Church.

This consensus indicates that independent thought – an important condition for spiritual freedom – had remained alive even within the rigid framework constructed for Russian Orthodoxy by Peter and his successors. Moreover, the *Replies* disclose the educational and intellectual background of their authors, their spiritual genealogy in the preceding decades and even centuries, and their remarkable willingness to recognize and grapple with the theological and canonical issues of the day...<sup>7</sup>

Tikhon was a recipient of and contributor to this legacy. In his response dated November 24 and which appeared in the American Orthodox Messenger, Tikhon included among his opinions suggestions for the Church in America.<sup>8</sup>

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Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime 1917-1982, Vol.2, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984, pp. 280-281.*

<sup>6</sup> See Leonid Kishkovsky, *Archbishop Tikhon In America*, Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly, vol. 19, no. 1, 1975, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> *Russian Bishops And Church Reform In 1905*, in *Russian Orthodoxy Under The Old Regime*, ed. Robert L. Nichols and Theofanis George Stavrou, Minneapolis, 1978, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> *Amerikansky Pravoslavny Vestnik*, 1905, no. 23, pp.460-466. English translation in *St. Tikhon of Moscow Instructions and Teaching for the American Orthodox Faithful*

To a large extent Archbishop Tikhon's responses were derived from what he considered to be the uniqueness of the Orthodox Church in its American context. He began by strongly suggesting that the North American Diocese be "reorganized into the Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America." For Tikhon, creating an exarchate would help meet the needs of the various ethnic communities making up the church in America. Consequently, Tikhon envisioned a local church in which each ethnic community would have its own bishop subject to the authority of the Russian exarch. He envisioned how

... an entire exarchate of Orthodox national Churches might form in North America, with their own bishops headed by an Exarch – a Russian archbishop. Each would be independent in his own area, but matters common for the entire American church would be dealt with by way of a council (*sobor*) under the chairmanship of the Russian archbishop. Through him the connection of the American Church to the All-Russian Church is preserved, along with a certain dependency on her.

Tikhon went on to write that given the "peculiarities" of Orthodox ecclesial life in America, the local Church should be granted a "greater degree of autonomy" if not autocephaly than that accorded to the other "Russian metropolitan provinces." Following this bold statement Tikhon proceeded to outline the diocesan structure for the North American Exarchate. With the exception of Alaska the diocesan parameters were based primarily on ethnicity and not geography.

1. The Archdiocese of New York ... would have all the Russian parishes in the United States and Canada under its authority;
2. The Diocese of Alaska ... would include the churches of the Orthodox inhabitants of Alaska (Russians, Aleuts, Indians, Eskimos);
3. The Diocese of Brooklyn (would have all the Syrians);
4. The Diocese of Chicago (would have all the Serbs); and
5. The Greek diocese (?)<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. The American Conciliar Model**

As has already been mentioned, in his 1905 response to the Holy Synod Tikhon stressed how American pluralism driven by a democratic political system advocating the separation of church and state was cause for the reorganization of

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(1898-1907), Alex Maximov and David Ford, St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2016, pp.214-229.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp.216-217. The parenthetical question mark in no. 5 appears in the original. At that time it was not clear if the Greek Orthodox in America would accept being under the Russian exarch or if the Patriarchate of Constantinople or the Church of Greece would allow them to be part of the above configuration.

church life on both the parish and diocesan levels. Though it is not spelled out explicitly in his response to the Synod, Archbishop Tikhon did take care to stress to his American flock the need for clergy and laity to jointly engage in addressing the questions and issues facing the local Church. This is clearly stated in his address to the clergy participants of the Cleveland, Ohio clergy conference dated June 2, 1905, that convened four months before his response to the Holy Synod. It is clear that Tikhon used the Ohio conference as a platform on which to structure what would become the first All American Council. Father Leonid Kishkovsky summarizes Tikhon's address that was printed in the American Orthodox Messenger:

The archbishop said to the participants of the conference that he considered regular meetings of the diocesan clergy to be desirable for discussion and *conciliar resolution* of questions affecting the mission's life and activities: he specified that one of the important questions to be considered was the active involvement of lay people in the up building of church and parish life in America. This proposal was greeted with enthusiasm. It was resolved to convene a clergy conference in Old Forge, Pennsylvania, on August 2, 1905, to settle on an agenda for the proposed Council.<sup>10</sup>

On February 23, 1907 (Old Calendar) what is known in the OCA as the First All-American Council convened in Mayfield Pennsylvania. Comprised of clergy and laity the Mayfield council provided the framework for future diocesan and national councils. Given the separation of church and state in America, the Mayfield Council was perceived by Tikhon and other leaders within the American Exarchate as a return to a form of ecclesial life that was more inclusive and theoretically a more authentic configuration of conciliar life. Unlike the state driven ecclesial bureaucracy established by the Petrine reforms of the eighteenth century, the American context helped to reawaken the mutual responsibility placed on the clergy and laity for promoting the Gospel and carrying out the Church's missionary vision. Freedom from the state and the restoration of conciliarity were perceived as *ideals* ensuring that the Church's evangelical message would not be influenced by or succumb to political ideology. Setting the tone for the Mayfield Council, Archbishop Tikhon sought to direct the attention and energy of the council to *how the Church could expand its mission in America*.

#### **IV. The Call For A Free Church**

The stages of development in American Church life up until the Moscow Council coincided with the call for reform taking place throughout the entire Russian Orthodox Church and, by extension, the Russian empire. By 1905 the Russian Church was feeling the brunt of what Paul R. Valliere referred to as "the vast and complex process of social change called modernization." He goes on to state that the process of modernization, linked to the expanding secularization of Russia's political

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<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit. p.23.

and intellectual life and the “toleration of religious pluralism,” brought the question of State and Church to a crescendo.<sup>11</sup>

By the time the Moscow Council finally convened it had become overwhelmingly clear that 1) the Russian Church could no longer function under the Petrine system and that it had to separate itself from the government 2) that separation from the government required the restoration of the patriarchate and 3) that conciliarity or sobornost would include bishops, priests and laity. Inherent in these reforms on church governance and administration was the desire and need for the Russian Church to begin responding to the challenges and opportunities of modernism.

Adding his voice to the many others who favored these reforms Archpriest Leonid Turkevich, a member of the American delegation<sup>12</sup> to the council and who from 1950-1965 was metropolitan of the North American Metropolia<sup>13</sup>, stressed before the general assembly the difficulties of doing missionary work in America when the Church was seen as an agent or extension of the (Russian) government.<sup>14</sup>

Based on Turkevich’s remarks, Americans interested in the Orthodox Church were at the same time reluctant to become part of an institution whose clergy were known to be representatives of the tsar. Turkevich went on to point out how unless the Church was free of government control and unless there followed the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Idea of a Council in Russian Orthodoxy in 1905*, in *Russian Orthodoxy Under the Old Regime*, ed. Robert L. Nichols and Theofanis George Stavrou, Minneapolis, 1978, p.186.

<sup>12</sup> Leading the American delegation was Archbishop Evdokim Mischersky who never returned to America. In 1919 he was appointed Archbishop of Nizhegorod and in 1922 joined the Living Church. The third representative of the American delegation was Protopresbyter Alexander Kukulevsky.

<sup>13</sup> After becoming a widower, Father Turkevich took as his monastic name Leonty.

<sup>14</sup> Already in 1896, Nicholas Zyorov, bishop of the Aleutians and Alaska (1891-1898) reported to the Holy Synod that “the commemoration of the Emperor and the Reigning House during the divine services brings forth dismay and apprehension among Orthodox in America of non-Russian background. This practice is also a hindrance to the propagation of Orthodoxy among Russian Uniates who came to America from Austria-Hungary.” See Afonsky, *Op.Cit.* p.10. Ten years after Zyorov’s report the Holy Synod gave its formal consent to commemorate the American president during the divine services.

<sup>14</sup> Turkevich went on to point out a new dilemma faced by the Church, mainly that the developing political climate in Russia posed the real possibility of curtailing the Church’s missionary enterprise in America and elsewhere. Cf. James W. Cunningham, *The Gates Of Hell: The Great Sobor Of The Russian Orthodox Church 1917-1918*, Minnesota Mediterranean and East European Monographs IX, 2002, p.57.

restoration of the patriarchate Russian missionaries in America would be hindered in convincing their audiences that Christ was the head of the Orthodox Church. James W. Cunningham succinctly summarizes some of Father Turkevich's remarks on the difficulties of missionary work in America.

Every *ukaz* (edict) that came from the synod was issued in the name of His Imperial Highness. Missionaries insisted that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Head of the Church, only to have their argument undercut by schedules and calendars which indicated that the tsar stood at the head of the church...<sup>15</sup>

As for implementing a conciliar model that included bishops, priests and laity Father Alexander Kukulevsky, another delegate from America, submitted to the Council's Commission On Parish Life a copy of the North American Statute. A collaborative effort by clergy and laity, the North American Statute, approved in 1909 by Tikhon's successor Archbishop Platon Rozhdestvensky, provided a working paradigm for the organization of all parishes in the American Archdiocese. In his memoirs Father Kukulevsky recounted how the Statute from America was "utilized in the formulation of the Russian Parish Statute" which sanctioned the election of the parish council (including women) and the administration of parish finances for the improvement and expansion of parochial life.<sup>16</sup>

For the Church in Russia freedom from the government was short lived. Following the collapse of the provisional government the work of the Council could not continue and the Russian Church with its restored patriarchate entered another oppressive and repressive period of captivity that created adverse conditions for the American Exarchate. Not the least of these conditions was the loss of funding to support local parishes and promote missionary outreach and the gradual dissolution of the Exarchate into independent ethnic jurisdictions that placed themselves under the care of their respective mother churches abroad. Like the Church in Russia, the Church in America had to concentrate on its own survival.

## **V. Some Concluding Remarks**

Separated from its mother church and faced with an administrative and financial crisis, the North American Metropolia gradually, and often painfully, sought to plot a course to retain and bolster its canonical integrity as a local church. This entailed securing the legal and canonical status of its parishes and dioceses.

Eventually, it was due to the inclusive conciliar structure implemented on the parochial, diocesan and national levels that helped restore stability to the American

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<sup>16</sup> Many thanks to Father Alexander Garklavs, former chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, who kindly read and commented on my first draft and for sharing his unpublished paper, *The Church On The Ground Of Liberty*, where he refers to Father Kukulevsky's Memoirs.



Church. Yet, given the many administrative and financial accomplishments of the All American Councils over the last one hundred years and given how, since the time of Father Alexander Schmemmann, they became more centered on the liturgical life of the Church culminating in the daily celebration of the Eucharist, these councils remain limited in responding to the pressing issues of the day.

The assessments of the Moscow Council made by Fathers Georges Florovsky, Nicholas Afansieff, Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff help shed light on some of these deficiencies. As a whole their evaluations expressed an inherent lack of cohesion among the participants of the Moscow Council. Partisan divisions gave rise to an unhealthy tension between clergy and laity. Those who favored a broader representation at the council included those driven by the “democratic ideal” of the day and who perceived the Council as a constitutional body in which matters of ecclesial life were to be settled legislatively. Consequently, based on the observations of Father Afanasieff, the charismatic role of the Holy Spirit in nurturing and manifesting the unique gifts of the participants for the building up of the local church was compromised by the democratic process and the will of the majority.<sup>17</sup>

It was Florovsky who pointed out how much of the pre-conciliar and conciliar discussions and arguments focused on organizational reforms with little emphasis on the need for an internal spiritual revival of the entire Russian church. At the same time he was aware that the religious, philosophical and political upheavals in Russia did not allow time for the needed reform. For Florovsky the end of the synodal period and the restoration of the patriarchate began a new page in the history of the Russian Church. An unknown and dark path awaited it – a path upon which the Church, restricted by a new and atheistic government – would not be able to adequately reflect upon and respond to the challenges and opportunities of modernism.

The Moscow Council left the Church to face these difficult challenges as they arose with carefully measured responses intended not to jeopardize its own survival. In describing this way of life Father John Meyendorff made the following observation:

[The Church] had prepared and accomplished its internal reform, but its attitude towards the diverse phases of the Russian revolution were determined *ad hoc* by the conscience of its leaders, and most particularly by its head, Patriarch Tikhon.<sup>18</sup>

Like the Moscow of 1917-1918, the All American Councils have yet to address in any guiding or definitive manner the relationship between State and Church. Many, including myself, would say that given the current American political climate, which

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<sup>17</sup> See Destivelle, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 264-278 for a review of the assessments of Florovksy, Afanasieff, Schmemmann and Meyendorff.

<sup>18</sup> *L’Eglise Orthodoxe, Hier et Aujourd’hui*, Paris, Ed. Du Seuil, 1995, p.100. Quoted by Destivelle, *Op. Cit.* p. 274.

continues to be influenced by Protestant evangelicalism, it is best that the OCA remains silent. Yet, the need for the Church to articulate its relationship to the state is becoming more acute since the line between ideology and theology is becoming less defined as Orthodox Christians in America become more involved in national and local culture wars.

In addition to taking on the challenge of State and Church relations, the All American Councils will need to continue developing Archbishop Tikhon's call for expanding the mission. For this to occur the bishops, clergy and laity will first need to respond intelligently to the myriad issues and challenges of the modern/postmodern secular age with its religious and cultural pluralism. The Church's response to the culture also demands a rigorous examination of its living Tradition. Unfortunately, today within the American Orthodox context Tradition is often used to avoid discussing, probing and responding to the issues.

I would like to conclude with some encouraging words from Father Florovsky's *Ways Of Russian Theology*. Though they do not explicitly speak about conciliarism they nevertheless provide a lens for understanding the conciliar dynamic of the Orthodox Church throughout the world.

A prayerful entry into the Church, an apocalyptic fidelity, a return to the fathers, a free encounter with the West, and other similar themes and elements make up the creative postulate of Russian theology in the contemporary circumstances. They also represent a testament of the past – our responsibility for the past and our obligation before it. Past mistakes and failures should not cause embarrassment. The path of history has still not been fully traveled; the history of the Church is not yet finished; Russia's path has not yet been closed. The road is open, though difficult. A harsh historical verdict must be transformed into a creative call to complete what remains unfinished. "And with many afflictions one must enter the kingdom of God." Orthodoxy is not only a tradition, it is a task; it is not an unknown quantity, but a given. At the same time it is an assignment, a living yeast, a germinated seed, and our duty and calling.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Part Two, Volume VI in the Collected Works, trans. Robert L. Nichols, Belmont, MA, p.308.

