

## **New Orthodox bishop sets his goals**

Interview with His Grace, Bishop Nikon in [The Boston Globe](#)

**By Rich Barlow | December 31, 2005**

Bishop Nikon Liolin wears several miters. He had been archbishop for the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese. Then earlier this month, the Southbridge resident was enthroned as bishop of New England for the Orthodox Church in America, which counts several ethnic Orthodox parishes as members and has its regional headquarters in Boston. Both elevations were milestones: The diocese of New England had been without a bishop for 13 years, the Albanian archdiocese for 23 years, he says. Liolin attributes the lengthy vacancies to a shortage of candidates because bishops are banned from marriage. (Liolin is a widower.)

It has been almost a millennium since Eastern Christian churches split from Western ones (today, the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches) over doctrine. "All of the faiths are under attack by some of society's changing morals and mores," the new bishop says. "And the churches and the faiths have to be bastions of morality. . . . There is a moral stance that God has revealed to us." Excerpts from a recent interview follow.

**Q:** What would you like your episcopate to be remembered for?

**A:** I have several mission parishes, mostly in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. I would like to integrate the Diocese of New England and have more activity between the two dioceses, so that we can have a greater impact on the community at large. To be a little bit more visible.

**Q:** Your goal is to increase converts?

**A:** To increase the number of converts to the church by having more visibility. Without a resident bishop, that made it difficult, because pastors had to work on their own without the on-site direction of a resident hierarch.

**Q:** Do you support any changes in [celibacy] rules to make the pool of [bishop] candidates larger?

**A:** No, I don't. Really, one has to be fully married to the diocese. I was married for 33 years, and if I were married, I don't think I could spend the time that I have to spend to administer a diocese.

**Q:** Why should [people] consider being an Orthodox Christian?

**A:** We want to begin with a relationship with God, a relationship with Christ. When I'm talking about outreach, I'm not talking about trying to reach people that are church-ed. Many people in the United States attend churches; however, there are more unchurch-ed in the United States than there are church-ed. So we're trying to reach people that really have no relationship with God, do not have any faith. The Orthodox do not proselytize for those who already have a Christian base.

Yes, there was a separation between the east and the west churches. However, there are continually dialogues to see how we can come closer. A few years ago, it was an Orthodox priest who was president of the World Council of Churches.

**Q:** Do you have a sense of what keeps unchurch-ed people away from religion?

**A:** There are so many diversions available to people. . . . Sports teams pull people away. When you have soccer and football on Sunday morning, you almost can't blame the children and parents for wanting to spend their time with their friends.

**Q:** As 2006 dawns, are Christians closer to unity or further away from it?

**A:** The churches are separated doctrinally. The major difference was the Nicene Creed, [which] as established stated that we believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father. A change came in, from our point of view from the influence of Charlemagne, when the creed stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded "from the Father and the Son," [because for Orthodox Christians] the Spirit proceeding from the Son technically would take away Christ's humanity.

**Q:** What about Christians and other religions? If you read the newspapers, it seems we live in a world driven by religious differences.

**A:** I despair over this conflict, but for years, people have begun religious wars -- or, in the name of God, have begun wars -- and this is totally contrary to God's teaching in any faith. God is a God of love in all faiths. And certainly God has been misused by all faiths through the centuries. We have the devil still operating to separate people from each other and from God.

**Q:** What is your view of the role of religion in political life?

**A:** From the Orthodox viewpoint, we don't tell people how to vote or who to vote for. Our hope is that we have instilled in them a moral value. On some political changes, such as gay marriage, this is not something that the church can bless at this time. But we don't say, "Vote for this person" because they are for or against abortion or gay marriage.