

# PRIMACY AND SERVICE

Metropolitan Tikhon  
St Tikhon's Seminary Fall Lecture Series  
October 8, 2019

Your Eminence, Archbishop Michael,  
Your Eminence, Archbishop Mark,  
Very Reverend Abbot, Archimandrite Sergius,  
Very Reverend Dean, Archpriest John,  
Venerable Fathers, Distinguished Faculty,  
Beloved Seminarians,  
Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is in our midst!

It is a great joy for me to offer the first talk of the 2019 Annual Fall Lecture Series here at the Orthodox Theological Seminary of Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk. It is always a blessing to return to my alma mater and to the sacred place where I was first immersed in the theological, pastoral, and liturgical beauty of our Orthodox Faith. Although I served as instructor and rector of this Seminary and still maintain regular contact with the community here, it has been some time since I have offered an actual lecture in a setting such as this gathering this evening. I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you a few words on the topic of Primacy and Service.

It is fitting that this lecture series, dedicated to the important theme of autocephaly, should be held in the newly renovated Convocation Hall, the site of the first All-American Council which took place fifty years ago this month, from October 20 to 22, 1970. Earlier in that very same year, two significant events had also taken place. The first was the granting, on April 10, of the *Tomos* of autocephaly, given by Patriarch Alexis I of the Russian Orthodox Church to Metropolitan Ireney of what was until then known as the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Metropolia.

The second significant event of 1970, made possible by the first, was the glorification, on August 9, of St Herman of Alaska as the first saint of the Church in North America. Thus, when the Church gathered in this very room, fifty years ago, it was with the blessing of a

powerful new heavenly intercessor. It was with that blessing that the young autocephalous Church took her first steps, acknowledging and receiving the new status of autocephaly and formally adopting her new name.

These administrative actions, of course, were the fruit, not simply of a few years of intense negotiation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Metropolia. They were the fruit of a mission that had been planted almost two centuries before—on September 24, 1794, to be precise—a mission that was initially led, and primarily inspired, by the newly glorified St Herman and his fellow monastics. It is therefore also fitting that this series of lectures on the topic of autocephaly, the fruit of the monastic mission, are taking place on the grounds of the oldest monastery in North America, where both the universal principles of Orthodox ascetical life and the particular North American expressions of that life as modeled by St Herman and his companions are preserved. Saint Herman was a simple monk who never received holy orders and yet, through his prayers, humility, and service, he is among the first of those who provide us today with a most fiery model of apostolic labor.

So, as we gather this evening, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, it would be good for us to offer thanksgiving to Almighty God for the very fact of our gathering and in recognition of the reality that we, you and I, are here, 225 years after the arrival of St Herman, 195 years after the arrival of St Innocent, and 125 years after the arrival of St Tikhon on these shores. We are here, as a faithful community of bishops, clergy, monastics, and faithful Christians, to receive their blessings and to strive to emulate their example, so as to offer an Orthodox presence as a genuine local church here in North America. This earthly life is fleeting and the things of this earth pass quickly away, like grass burned up by fire or smoke scattered by the wind. And yet, here we are, relying on the prayers and blessing of these great saints of our Church, who together with all those who labored, prayed, and served with them and after them, stand as solid pillars of faith for us on our journey as a North American Church. Their legacy is a great gift that we are all called to nurture and preserve and it is something for which we should always be grateful to God.

The lectures you will hear in subsequent weeks will provide more perspectives relating to the canonical, historical, and missiological aspects of autocephaly. For this evening, I would like to speak with you about the more narrowly-defined aspect of primacy. Primacy and autocephaly, of course, are bound together in Orthodox ecclesiology, since an autocephalous church by definition will have her own primate. It is one of the marks of an autocephalous Church, as confirmed in our own Tomos, to *be independent and self-governing with the right of electing her own Primate and all her bishops, without confirmation or the right of veto over such elections on the part of any other church organization or representative of the Eastern Orthodox or any other confession.*

Autocephaly and primacy are seemingly simple and straightforward concepts but they have historically generated frequent discussion and debate within the Orthodox world, particularly over the last several centuries. More recently, we have witnessed further division, and even breaks in communion between Churches, concerning the definition and interpretation of universal primacy and its exercise, as well as autocephaly and the protocols for its granting. I will not touch directly on these very complex global issues. I will, however, note that such conflicts, particularly in our own day, painfully strain the relations between the Orthodox Christians, affecting clergy and faithful not only within the affected regions, but also throughout the world, including here in North America. This unfortunate situation calls for us to offer fervent prayers for healing of the divisions and tensions. But it also calls us to reflect on our own local circumstances and to discern whether our own experience as a local church for the past 50 years might be able to make a small contribution, if not towards a resolution of global conflicts, then at least to a normalization of the canonical situation in our own region of North America.

Within the Church, discussions, conflicts, and arguments often arise not only from theoretical differences but also from the practical application of those theories. As one canonist reminds us: *I maintain a seemingly obvious principle: if the word canon refers to the norm, what is normal in Church life, or rule, ... the application of the canons cannot involve only esoteric library exercises of perusing dusty books for*

*obscure texts that prove or disprove a given point. Likewise, canons cannot be understood in isolation from either themselves or the life of the Church. Simply put, if something remains obscure, it loses its force for expressing or guiding the norm. Rather, canons retain their force by being understood from within the entire life of the Church, in the practice of its theological reflection, and in the context of the long tradition of their interpretation.<sup>1</sup>*

There are no easy paths to such self-understanding. For this reason, I will not be addressing the question of primacy from a purely theoretical or academic perspective but rather from a broader reflection from within the entire life of the Church. More specifically, I would like to offer some personal reflections as the young primate of this young autocephalous Church. I cannot claim to fully express the entire life of the Church here in North America, and yet God's providence and the election by the Holy Synod, has placed me in this position at this particular time. Too often, autocephaly and primacy are understood as concepts which grant or assure certain rights and privileges. I think it would be more fruitful to see them as obediences, in the monastic sense of something that has a purpose. The granting of autocephaly was not a reward or a recognition but rather a call to service: service to Holy Orthodoxy on this continent and to the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a dry and thirsty land. In a similar way, my election as primate was not the granting of a worldly title, but rather an obedience to serve the Church, to serve my brother bishops on the Holy Synod, and to be united with them in shepherding the flocks under our care.

The term "primacy" also carries with it notions of leadership, of power, of authority, often with a worldly character ascribed to those notions: leadership by an individual over a community, power of one person over many others, authority by a charismatic leader requiring loyalty from his subjects. In the Church, all of these notions, and by extension the concept of primacy itself, are turned on their heads by the spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Archpriest Alexander Rentel, *The Canonical Tradition: Universal Primacy in the Orthodox Church*, page 557

application of obedience. The canons themselves articulate this truth when speaking of the ecclesiastical structures of our Church. Apostolic Canon 34 reminds us:

*The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own parish and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him [who is the first] do anything without the consent of all. For thus there will be unity and God will be glorified through the Lord, in the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>*

So the bishops of each diocese can do nothing without the consent of the one who is first among them, but neither can the one who is first do anything without the consent of all. Meetings of the Holy Synod are one of the chief ways in which this canonical and spiritual principle of obedience is lived out. These meetings are often difficult, sometimes painful, but always inspiring in that they most often resolve into a consensus and to true unity. It is within the Holy Synod that we manifest the unity of our local church and tend to the matters that help the Church to grow and to flourish. It is this mutual obedience that is the sacred means of preserving the internal unity of our local church.

So, primacy (referring to him who is first among the bishops) is not about power and authority but rather about the preservation of unity. And unity requires both primacy and synodality. This is a principle of the hierarchical Church and it is my ministry as the primate to show concern for the “whole province,” that is the whole Church, which has within it any number of bishops’ districts or diocese. My role is not to govern those dioceses or to interfere in their internal life, but rather to maintain the unity of all of the bishops. Anything that would upset this unity falls under the ministry of concern that is to be exercised by the metropolitan. The canons direct me to maintain the unity of the bishops in two ways: overseeing the election and ordination of bishops, and presiding at meetings of the local synod. Without my presence, synods cannot happen,

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<sup>2</sup> Apostolic Canon 34.

episcopal elections may not take place; without my consent and confirmation, decisions cannot be taken, and elections are null and void.

So the primate has a lot of authority. But this authority is meant to be applied to the preservation of unity. The primate also is called to serve a similar role in manifesting the external relations of the local Church, in maintaining union and communion with all the other local Orthodox Churches. According to the Tomos, the Orthodox Church in America is *to maintain direct relations with all other Churches and confessions, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike*. From the time of my election as the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, I have made it a priority to maintain good relations with all the world-wide Orthodox Churches as well as all those churches as they are represented here in North America. Liturgical concelebrations have long served as visible, and truly beautiful and life-giving, expressions of our unity in Christ. At the same time, there is sometimes the painful reality (as we have today) of breaks in communion, a severing of liturgical concelebration, a hesitation in the bond of brotherly relations between local Churches. It is always a challenge to maintain the bond of unity in the spirit of peace, but it is a challenge that we must always rise to.

Over the past seven years, I have had the blessing of serving with most of the primates and patriarchs of the local autocephalous churches. I have served both with the primates of those Churches that formally recognize our autocephaly, with those who do not recognize that status, and with those who have not formally pronounced themselves on the question. Each circumstance of concelebration requires a particular form of navigation so as to both maintain the integrity of our status and yet maintain, strengthen or initiate a stronger bond of communion.

The clearest manifestation of my serving as the primate of a local Church takes place when I serve in Moscow, which I have done four times now, at the invitation of His Holiness, Patriarch Kirill. On those four occasions, I served in Christ the Savior Cathedral with the same dignity of place as the other patriarchs. At the same time, some inconsistencies were manifested: for example, on the first such occasion, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (a bishop, not the primate) objected to

my serving in such a position and withdrew from future concelebrations during that week-long event (it was the 1025<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the baptism of Rus’).

Several years later, however, I did concelebrate again with that very bishop who refused to concelebrate in 2015, when I served with Patriarch Bartholomew in Constantinople for the Sunday of Orthodoxy. However, to enable this, it was necessary for me to consent to serve in a liturgical position that was not appropriate for a primate of a church. Nevertheless, I agreed to this for the sake of maintaining the primacy of communion over protocol. More recently, in June of this year, I served again with His All-Holiness, this time in Cappadocia, and for this concelebration, I was asked to serve in a higher place.

I have also served, as Primate, with Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, with Patriarch Ilia of Georgia, and with Metropolitan Sawa of Poland. With others, for example, Patriarch John of Antioch, one of the churches that has not pronounced itself on our autocephaly, I have served both as a primate (in Moscow) and in a lesser position (here in America). All of these occasions, whether or not I have served with the dignity of a primate, offer our Church an opportunity to express our fundamental communion, even as disagreements remain concerning our status as an autocephalous Church. It should be noted that at the larger primatial concelebrations in Moscow, where representatives for all the Churches are invited, I am often the only bishop from North America. All other Churches that are geographically outside the territories of the historical local churches are not represented because they are part of the so-called “diaspora.” So my travels to the other churches are not simply for the purpose of being present, but rather giving visible expression to the existence, life, and mission of the Orthodox Church in America.

As I mentioned before, the exercise of leadership, of primacy, in the Church, is not an exercise of power, but rather of obedience: obedience to Jesus Christ through service to our brothers. It is a service at the altar of Christ, in the Holy and Divine Liturgy, reflecting both the unity of the earthly and heavenly worship and the unity of human beings around their head, Jesus Christ. The bishops of the Church each are called to make this reality present in their dioceses and the primate has the charge to confirm

and strengthen the unity of the dioceses and regions of the Church. But it is not an easy task, and as in all things, one must rely on the example and the models of those who are greater than us.

It is fitting that I offer this lecture on this, the day of the commemoration of St Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow, Enlightener of North America and Founder of this Holy Monastery, not only because I bear his name in monastic tonsure but because he was the model of a genuine primate. It was his vision for North American Orthodoxy to function as a united church, ministering to all peoples, both immigrants and native peoples of these lands, and giving expression to a canonical unity that could serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of these lands. As his akathist reminds us, he was an example of meekness in authority and thus a model for all those who are given the burden of leadership in the Church. Above all, he was an example of a true shepherd and none of the canonical or administrative functions of a primate are of any value if they do not lead one to be a good shepherd.

What was, in fact, St Tikhon's vision? Was it to establish over 55 parishes and cathedrals as well as one monastery? Was to set the foundations for a united administrative Church in North America? Was it to foster cooperation between peoples of various ethnic heritages? While these may have been components of his apostolic work here in North America, I would suggested that the vision of St Tikhon was, in fact, an extension of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ from the very Gospel reading appointed for hierarchs, from the Gospel of Saint John:

*The Lord said: I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.* St Tikhon, as a true shepherd, knew his people, both in Russia and in America. When he arrived in North America, he offered his first sermon at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco on December 23, 1898. In that sermon he recalled the words of the prophet Hosea in reference to the calling of the gentiles and says: "By the will of God, I, too, in my unworthiness, was called to apostolic service here, and so now I too will say to those called 'not my people,' 'You are my people;' I will call 'beloved' the one called 'not my loved one.'" Until now, we had been strangers to each other, and



did not know each other. Henceforth, the Lord Himself is placing us into a bond of closeness, into a mutual relationship of bishop with his flock and flock with her bishop.”

With this understanding, St Tikhon reveals himself to be a shepherd and not a hireling in imitation of the Lord who said: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.* Saint Tikhon was no hireling but indeed a true shepherd who gave his life for his sheep in North America, just as he did when he returned to Russia to assume the heavy yoke of the first hierarch of the restored Patriarchate. Just as he did during those times of terrible persecution and temptation, so he remained steadfast in watching over his sheep and keeping them safe within the ark of the Church. In all of this, St Tikhon points us back to Christ, the source of all humility and the source of all primacy.

Primacy is a burden precisely because it does not follow the model of worldly leadership. Our Lord chose the path of extreme humility to raise up humanity to life. As the Holy Fathers remind us, Christ could have used any means to bring about the salvation of fallen humanity, but he instead chose the path of the incarnation, bowing down the heavens, and taking flesh of the Virgin Mary. At every step of His journey to the Cross, death, and burial, He manifested the power of humility. In that, he also showed us the path when he washed the feet of His disciples:

*So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a*

*servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*<sup>3</sup>

To whom is our service offered? I believe firmly that our service should be offered to all the people of these North American lands: from the farthest reaches of Alaska and the Great White North of Canada, to the broad expanses of the United States, and to the hottest areas of Mexico. And in what should our service consist?

Ultimately, service is something that we all can offer. Obedience is something that we all can offer. And leadership, and even primacy, is something that all of us can live out in our own lives, in our families, and in our communities. This is because all of these things depend not so much on what is external to us, as on what is within our heart.

Primacy, because it is given over to service must eventually lead us to Christ. St Tikhon ended his earthly life as the primate of the Church of Russia. At that difficult time in the history of the Church, as he faced false allegations and imprisonment, he nevertheless was able to cry out: “Let my name die in history that the Church may live!” He was willing to lay down his life for the sake of the sheep. Indeed, he fell asleep in the Lord in the midst of great darkness, a long and dark night of darkness. But we are here today to celebrate his name, which, in fact, did not die in history, but remains with us, not only as a name but as a witness to the power of Christ and the glory of the resurrection, as an inspiration to us who labored in that same land that he labored in, and that unites us with one another and with the hosts of heavenly powers and all the saints who are gathered in love around our Great and Good and Divine Shepherd, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom, together with His Father and the Holy Spirit, are due all glory, honor and worship, both now and ever and unto ages of ages.

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<sup>3</sup> John 13:12-17.