



## 218. May 29/June 11, 1976 Apodosis of Ascension

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Daniel,

We send you our heartfelt greetings on the Feast of our Lord's Ascension and on the Feast of Pentecost. May God preserve you in His grace!

Your question about "zealotry" comes at a time when we also have been giving much thought to such questions—and in fact, it is now becoming a basic question facing our Church. Especially with the passing of Archimandrite Constantine and Archbishop Averky one stops and wonders: who will now be our guides in the difficult days ahead, and give us the right tone and ideology? Bishop Laurus begged the monks at Archbp. Averky's funeral to promise, while giving him the farewell kiss, to be faithful to his teaching and to keep Jordanville as it was under him; but it may not be too easy to keep this promise in the storms ahead.

Such giants as Vlad. Averky and Vladika John have guided us up to now, and their teaching will remain a beacon in the days ahead; Vlad. Averky especially has given us some practical pointers which will help us over some difficult hurdles ahead. (We are trying to compile some of them presently from his many books.)

Before going ahead, we must stop and find out where we are. We wish to be zealots for true Orthodoxy, and our Church leaders have indicated clearly that we must have no contact with the Moscow Patriarchate and similarly enslaved Churches; must refrain from participating in ecumenist activities and must be aware that ecumenism is eating away the very Orthodox fiber of most of the Orthodox Churches, beginning with Constantinople; and must be zealously pursuing a path of true Orthodoxy ourselves, not only in outward acts but especially in spiritual life, but without falling into false zealotry "not according to knowledge"—a point that Vlad. Averky especially emphasized. About the latter danger we have been learning much of late from the situation of the Old Calendarists in Greece, which can help us to avoid some mistakes "on the right side."

Here, briefly, is the Greek Old Calendar situation as we have it from Dr. Kalomiros who seems the most moderate and sensible of the Old Calendarists with whom we have any contact, and as confirmed from a somewhat different point of view by our own Bp. Laurus:

The "Mathewites" preach absolute "strictness": since 1924 all New Calendarists and all those in communion with them are without grace; hence the "crisis" which caused Bp. Mathew to consecrate successors by himself—he and his followers believed that he was then the only Orthodox bishop remaining in the world. It is therefore astonishing that they could have been



persuaded to have any contact with our Church at all, as at the Sobor of 1971, and Dr. Kalomiros tells us that this was because Fr. Panteleimon of Boston told them that our bishops had “repented” and now were willing to accept the Mathewite position. Once they saw that this was not so, the Mathewites resumed their attacks on our Church, and the last we heard they were almost resolved to give our Church over to anathema. Dr. Kalomiros calls this group extreme legalists and “scholastics,” and this is our impression also from our small contacts with them. Obviously, if they are correct one must quit the Synod altogether and join them. But their “strictness” really seems a little too close to sectarianism to be the answer for us today.

The jurisdiction of Archbishop Auxentios, on the other hand, has been closer to our Church in its acceptance of “economy.” But last year they also proclaimed the sacraments of New Calendarists invalid—not because they are legally and technically “schismatic” (which is the Mathewite thinking), but because now (in their view) ecumenism has become a conscious heresy, and therefore the New Calendarists are formal heretics. They asked our bishops to make the same decision, and our bishops refused, on the grounds that this is a question beyond their competence to judge. Bishop Petros of Astoria refused to accept the Auxentiite decision and was therefore excommunicated. Our bishops have not accepted this excommunication and continue to serve with him (as five of our bishops did at the funeral of Archbishop Averky). In February of this year, as Vlad. Nektary recently informed us, one of the Old Calendar groups solemnly anathematized our Church—I don’t know which group, but doubtless both of them will be doing it soon. However, the Auxentiite group itself is in danger of splitting into several jurisdictions, chiefly over questions of pride and power (as Dr. Kalomiros himself tells us).

As if all this is not bad enough, there are zealots on Mt. Athos who are part of none of the existing Old Calendar jurisdictions, because of their particular views about “strictness” and “economy.” Dr. Kalomiros tells us that our friend Fr. Theodoritos is now in communion only with his own group of four or five monks and is being considered as a candidate for bishop by one group of Auxentiites; although Fr. Theodoritos himself does not mention any of this to us in his letters to us. At any rate, the Mt. Athos zealots are themselves more and more divided and some of them pride themselves on not speaking to those of other shades of belief.

All of this should be sufficient warning of the danger of going overboard on the question of “strictness” and “zealotry.” The danger of going astray on the “right” side has become so great now that Metropolitan Philaret, when counselling Fr. Alexei Poluektov two years ago in his publishing of *Vera i Zhizn*, cautioned him not to use the word “zelot” at all (the milder word “revnitel” is sufficient).

I think the lesson of this is, first of all, to teach us not to be too certain of defining things (especially “strictness” and “economy”), and not to be too quick to “break communion.”

Now we have a recent example in our own Church: Fr. Basile Sakkos of Geneva. Seeing that his own bishop had not broken all contact with the “ecumenist” jurisdictions, he broke off communion



with him and asked our 1974 Sobor to answer unambiguously two questions (he sent us a copy of his appeal): (1) Are ecumenists and new calendarists heretics? (2) Do we have communion with them or not? Our Sobor did not give him a satisfactory answer, and he apparently now is with the Mathewites.

We at first were sympathetic to his desire to have our bishops make matters “clear” and “consistent,” especially realizing that Archbishop Anthony of Geneva is indeed probably too “liberal” in his views and contacts. But on further reflection we find several considerations which make the issue quite complex and not subject to an easy answer:

(1) Ecumenism itself is not a clear-cut heresy like Arianism, or a clearly-distinguishable body such as the Roman Catholic church. It is seldom preached boldly in so many words by its Orthodox participants, and even when outrageous statements are made by Patrs. Athenagoras and Demetrius, or by the new “Thyateira Confession,” they are often accompanied by at least a verbal confession that Orthodoxy still is the one true Church of Christ. There is therefore some justification for those who refuse to break off with ecumenist hierarchs, or who do not know at what point they actually become “heretics.”

(2) Ecumenism, rather than a formal heresy, is more like an elemental movement, an intellectual attitude which is “in the air” and takes possession of individuals and groups and whole Churches to the degree of their worldliness and openness to intellectual fashions. Thus, it is in our Church also, and even in our minds, unless we are waging a conscious warfare against the “spirit of the times.” All the more difficult, then, is it to define it and know exactly where the battle-line is.

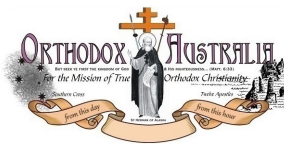
(3) Our own flocks, to the degree that they are worldly, don’t understand these matters, and a decision to formally “break communion” with all ecumenist Orthodox Churches would simply not be understood by many.

(4) There is a fear, increased by knowledge of the Greek Old Calendarist situation, of falling into a sectarian mentality—that “we alone are pure.”

What, then, should we do?

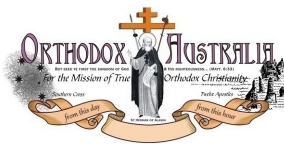
Let us first of all take guidance from our hierarchs who are most aware of the spiritual situation of the Church today and have spoken out. We have especially Metr. Philaret, who speaks rather about the spiritual essence of ecumenism than about its formally heretical nature, and warns other hierarchs and his own flock against participating in ecumenist activities and ideas; and Archbishop Averky, who viewed the whole matter also not in terms of formal heresy but rather as an elemental movement of apostasy, the answer to which is first of all a return to spiritual life.

In general, as long as our Church is one and united, let us trust the judgment of the local bishops; if something they do is disputable, let us be guided by the judgment of our most spiritual bishops



(and preferably not just one), but without making a “demonstration” if this disagrees with the local bishop. But let us beware of the conclusions of our own logic and “definitions.” I’m afraid that Fr. Panteleimon of Boston has fallen into this latter trap, and is pursuing a course which none of our bishops approve, even while he tells others that our bishops’ position is synonymous with what he thinks it should be (sometimes the politics of the Greek Old Calendarist situation apparently forces him to do such things in order to “save face”). He and the Greeks who follow him have formed a kind of autonomous psychological “diocese” within our Church, and it is obvious that they trust and respect none of our bishops; they look for their authority rather to Greece—and in Greece the situation becomes more confused every day, so it is Fr. Panteleimon’s thinking alone that becomes their authority. This is a terribly dangerous situation, and it seems inevitable that unless our Greeks change the tone of their “zealotry,” it is only a matter of time until they leave us, whether for the Mathewites or to form their own jurisdiction—which will only confuse matters more. Already Fr. Panteleimon practices “selective communion” with our Church, as when he refused to serve at the funeral of Archbishop Averky, but stood in the Altar with a group of his priests and monks. Fr. Panteleimon of Jordanville, when he saw this, told Fr. Herman (who was able to be present to bid farewell to his Abba): “Look what kind of monks we have now. They came here to make a demonstration. It must be the end of the world.” That is typical of the attitude of our Church to the too-eager “zealots” of our day: without bitterness or indignation, but with a deep and calm awareness that this is not the answer. It is to us a bad sign that Fr. Panteleimon was in a state of “strained communion” with Vladika Averky in the latter’s final months of life, and that for the same cause (Bishop Petros, which our bishops seem to view as merely a question of “competition”) he would not serve at his funeral. Vladika Averky was the greatest pillar of our Church, and he wrote to us in his distress over Fr. Panteleimon a heartbreaking letter which shows how great the gulf is between the great elders of our Church and the younger generation which has not received its guidance from them and now thinks it “knows better” than they.

We do not wish to judge Fr. Panteleimon or any of the “zealots,” including the Mathewites; but it is clear that our path cannot be with them. Their “strictness” forces them to become so involved in church politics that spiritual questions become quite secondary. I know for myself that if I would have to sit down and think out for myself exactly which shade of “zealotry” is the “correct” one today—I will lose all peace of mind and be constantly preoccupied with questions of breaking communion, of how this will seem to others, and “what will the Greeks think” (and which Greeks?), and “what will the Metropolitan think?” And I will not have time or inclination to become inspired by the wilderness, by the Holy Fathers, by the marvelous saints of ancient and modern times who lived in a higher world. In our times especially, it is not possible to be entirely detached from these questions, but let us place first things first: First comes spiritual life and striving for the Kingdom of Heaven; second come questions of jurisdiction and church politics. And let us approach these secondary questions from right direction: not first of all from the viewpoint of legalism, canons, “strictness,” but rather spiritually. The chief danger of our times is not “lack of strictness,” but loss of the savor of Orthodoxy. “strictness” will not save us if we don’t have any more the feeling and taste of Orthodoxy, and love it with our whole hearts.



Dr. Kalomiros has written, in a letter to Alexey Young a few months ago, something which gives us a clue:

“Father Panteleimon and Father Nektas and those who are around them may be of Greek origin, but they are not Greeks. They are Americans 100% with all the American characteristics. I do not calumniate them, for that is natural. What is sorrowful, however, with them, is that their being Americans and insisting on their being Americans has cut them off from the Orthodox Tradition, which is not something theoretical, but comes from father to son in a continuous man to man handing down which is possible only when one is united in soul and love with those who are handing him down the tradition. But the American Orthodox have no American ancestors in Orthodoxy. If they declare themselves Americans and want to cut themselves off from their national background...they cut themselves in reality from the possibility of receiving living Orthodox Tradition. This is why I who am Greek and who in certain point of theoretical discussions may disagree with the Fathers of Platina and agree with Father Panteleimon, do not sense in him the “feeling of Orthodoxy, which makes the real Orthodox in spite of our many human errors, and I sense this “feeling” in your periodicals Orthodox Word and Nikodemos, and your practical tendencies are nearer to my heart than the whole atmosphere of The Orthodox Christian Witness, which is directed towards the world, and not from the world towards Eternity.”

I fear that our new Orthodox Word, with its attempt (in the introduction to Metr. Philaret’s epistle on the “Thyateira Confession”) to give the actual thinking of our bishops on questions of “breaking communion”—will be another of those “theoretical” points with which Dr. Kalomiros will disagree. I am sure that our “Greeks” will blast us for it, because they do not want it even to be known that our bishops have never officially broken communion with Constantinople and do not want to. But we cannot insist that we know better than our bishops in a sphere which it is their business to know. If we still have the “feel” of Orthodoxy (and we pray that we will not lose it in the difficult days ahead of us)—it is because we have trusted and loved those bishops and older priests who have handed the faith down to us and have not thought that we can teach them. If on some points we have “theoretical” differences with some bishops, this has not broken the bond of trust and love, and we would not presume to publicly declare such differences. But Fr. Panteleimon, quite frankly, thinks that he is called to teach our bishops, even to the point of publicly rebuking our Metropolitan (as he did at a banquet in 1974). With this we cannot agree, and we would indeed fear to lose the savor of Orthodoxy if we believed we knew better than all our bishops and elders.

This letter is already too long, and we haven’t yet “answered your question” about the Serbian hieromonk who serves in our church. On the question of the Serbian Church there has not been unanimity among our bishops. Archbp. Averky thought we should class them with the other Communist-dominated Patriarchates and have no communion with them; but most of our bishops haven’t thought so, and in fact Bishop Savva was so firm on this point that he said he would go into retirement if we broke communion with the Serbian Patriarchate. Our bishops apparently have made no decision on the subject, which means Serbia is classed more or less with the “canonical” Churches of the free world (probably a little better than they, because it is Old Calendar), with



whom our relations were strained or discouraged but not entirely broken. In the absence of contrary advice from one of our bishops, we would advise you to accept whatever the local bishop allows, even including the reception of Holy Communion; however, if you feel uneasy about receiving Holy Communion from this priest, for personal spiritual reasons you could easily receive communion in some other of our churches there without being guilty of judging the bishop. It is of course not for you to “teach” the people there, which would only result in confusing them and probably yourself. We expect Vladika Nektary to visit us in the next week or so and will ask his opinion. This, of course, is not a “zealot” position—but none of our bishops has handed down to us a position of pure “zealotry,” including Archbishop Averky, who always emphasized the spiritual aspect without insisting on the letter of the law, and whose chief worry about our Church was not our lack of “strictness” but rather the evaporation of spiritual life and allowing worldly and political considerations to dominate us.

Well, I have no time left to give you the information on the holy places of Switzerland and France—see how much “church politics” takes away from the spiritual side?! Forgive me. But I will write shortly with this information. Pray for us—and especially that we will finish on time our publications for the 10th anniversary of Vladika Johns repose. Let us ask him to help and guide us now!

With love in Christ,  
Seraphim, monk