

**Some Preliminary Thoughts
Regarding a Possible Merger of the OCA
with the Antiochian Archdiocese**

Respectfully offered for prayerful consideration to the hierarchs, clergy, and faithful of the OCA and the Antiochian Archdiocese, by Dr. David C. Ford, Assoc. Prof. of Church History, St. Tikhon's Seminary, S. Canaan, Pennsylvania.

July 30, 2008; revised August 5, 2008

A. *Precedence for the merger:*

1. The beautiful cooperation and common vision for Orthodox unity in North America shared and lived by St. Tikhon of Moscow and St. Raphael of Brooklyn from 1898 to 1907.
2. The willingness of St. Raphael, a native Syrian, to study in Russia and eventually join the Russian Church.
3. The willingness of the Syrian people of New York City to accept Fr. Raphael's stipulation that he could only come and serve them if they were willing to accept the authority of the Church of Russia.
4. The vivid example of 20 years (1895 – 1915) of St. Raphael's ministry to Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians, yet fully under the authority of the Russian Church administration in North America.
5. The support of the Russian Church for the election of a native Arab to be the new patriarch of Antioch in 1899, after over a century of Greeks holding that position.
6. The ongoing loyalty of many of the Arabic-speaking Orthodox in America to the Russian administration (the Metropolia from 1924 onwards), staying under Archbishop Aftimios (Ofiesh) even after the Patriarchate of Antioch in 1924 sent Bp. Victor (Abu-Assaly) to be the head of the Syrian churches in America.
7. The continuing good relations between the OCA and the Antiochians, as seen in the active presence of Antiochian students and faculty at St. Vladimir's Seminary, and their auditorium named after Metr. Anthony Bashir; and the increasing number of Antiochian students at St. Tikhon's Seminary, with several Antiochians on the Board of Trustees of the Seminary, including Bp. Basil, and with Fr. Elias Bitar and Fr. David Hester teaching here, and with visits through the years of Bp. Joseph of the West, Bp. Thomas of the Mid-Atlantic, Fr.

Alexander Atty, Fr. Constantine Nasr, and Fr. Joseph Shadid, and with many of our graduates serving as priests in the Antiochian Archdiocese, and with Metr. PHILIP speaking at our Graduation in May of 2007.

8. Significant use of Russian music in Antiochian parishes to this day, and a growing interest in Byzantine chant among OCA parishes.
9. More use of English in OCA and Antiochian parishes, generally speaking, than in most of the other Orthodox jurisdictions in this land.

B. *How it might be done:*

1. With ***much*** prayer, discussion, brainstorming, educating, and publicizing. A website could be established making available all kinds of relevant material, including current statements by hierarchs, clergy, and laity.
2. After Metr. HERMAN either retires or dies, let his successor be elected by the OCA not as “Metropolitan,” but as “Temporary Administrator” of the OCA, with the mandate to do all he can to lead the OCA parishes into organic unity with the Antiochian Archdiocese; and let him keep his current diocese.
3. Close down the OCA headquarters in Syosset, hopefully selling the property to pay off all the debts of the OCA.
4. Move key OCA staff personnel from Syosset to the Antiochian headquarters in Englewood, New Jersey, to augment the staff there, in whatever ways may be deemed appropriate.
5. Build a state-of-the-art facility at St. Tikhon’s Monastery for the OCA archives, or expand the archival facilities at Antiochian Village to house them there.
6. Rearrange the dioceses of the Antiochian and OCA bishops roughly as follows:

Metr. PHILIP – New York City area and Washington, D.C. area, as at the present time.

Bp. Nikon – his current diocese of New England (currently the Antiochian Archdiocese does not have a bishop for their 9 parishes and 1 mission in New England), and any other Albanian parishes desiring to stay under him.

Bp. Alexander – his current diocese of Ottawa, Eastern Canada, and upstate New York.

Archbishop Seraphim – Western Canada, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon (currently the Antiochian Archdiocese does not have a bishop for western Canada and Alaska); and appoint him as temporary administrator for Alaska.

Bishop Tikhon – Eastern Pennsylvania, and the rest of New Jersey not under Metr. PHILIP.

Bishop Thomas – Western Pennsylvania (the OCA currently does not have a bishop for western Pennsylvania), West Virginia, Delaware, and the rest of Maryland and Virginia not under Metr. PHILIP.

Bishop Mark – Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

Archbishop Nathaniel – Michigan, and any other Romanian parishes desiring to stay under him.

Archbishop Job – Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri.

Bishop Antoun – Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi.

Archbishop Dmitri – Texas, New Mexico, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

Bishop Basil – Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and the Dakotas.

Bishop Joseph – Southern California and Arizona.

Bishop Benjamin – Northern California, Nevada, and Utah.

Bishop Alejo – Mexico.

NOTE: According to this arrangement, only one hierarch would be asked to relocate his headquarters: Archbishop Seraphim. But this might not be so difficult for him since he originally hails from western Canada, and there is the precedence of a strong episcopal presence there in the ministry of Archbishop Arseny of Winnipeg in the 1920s and 1930s. (Bishop Benjamin has already moved the diocesan headquarters of the OCA Diocese of the West from Los Angeles to San Francisco.)

7. When Metropolitan PHILIP either retires or dies, allow any of the above named bishops to be considered as a possible successor.
8. Allow every parish accepting a new bishop to retain all its particular worship traditions.

9. Allow any parish of either jurisdiction to decide whether to accept their new bishop, if one is being designated for them, or to stay under their current bishop. If they decide to stay under their current bishop, it would be with the understanding that they would be expected to gradually move towards coming under the pastoral care of the new bishop of their territory.
10. Presentations could be made in all parishes, especially in those being asked to accept a new bishop, presenting the basic history of the interrelationship between our two groups in North America, giving specific reasons for the merger, and if possible, introducing the new bishop to them.
11. Encourage every OCA and Antiochian parish to study the lives of Saints Tikhon and Raphael, to celebrate their Akathist hymns perhaps once a month, to celebrate their Feastdays, and to have their icons displayed together in the church, accessible for veneration.
12. Encourage all OCA parishioners to visit the website of the Antiochian Archdiocese, to learn especially about each of their bishops, and vice versa.
13. Encourage every OCA parish to enter into a sister-parish relationship with the nearest Antiochian parish to them, and vice versa. Hold various worship, fellowship, educational, evangelistic, and public service events together as often as possible.
14. Encourage families of each of the sister churches to get to know one another through inviting one another over for meals, social activities, etc.
15. Have a prayer written for this unity, to be included in the Divine Liturgy celebrated in all the churches of both jurisdictions; and include in the prayer petitions asking St. Tikhon and St. Raphael to pray for this unity.

C. Good Timing for the Merger:

1. The current decline of the OCA in numbers, vision, and morale; the need for a renewed vision (a concern often repeated in the Preconciliar Town Hall Meetings).
2. The current financial woes of the OCA; this plan would offer a relatively straightforward solution, enabling us to more quickly put the scandal and its demoralizing repercussions behind us.
3. The growing percentage of OCA and Antiochian parishioners who are very interested in real action concerning Orthodox unity in North America.

4. The “Self-Ruled” status of the Antiochian Archdiocese gained a few years ago, giving them quite a bit more freedom to consider the idea of such a merger. And in fact, in light of the autocephaly that the OCA has had ever since 1970, it would seem to be appropriate for the OCA to respectfully request that the merger be dependent upon the Antiochian Archdiocese being granted autocephaly by the Patriarchate of Antioch.
5. The establishment a few years ago in the Antiochian Archdiocese of *territorial* rather than *auxiliary* bishops, along with a balanced emphasis on the distinctively important role of the diocese – something which has been lacking, it seems, in recent years in the OCA.
6. The advanced age and poor health of Metr. HERMAN and Metr. PHILIP; perhaps they would be inspired to endorse such a plan as a capstone to their long years of ministry in this land, and as a partial fulfillment of their repeated calls through the years for increased jurisdictional unity in this land.
7. The relative youthfulness of most of the other bishops in both jurisdictions, which presumably would make them more favorably disposed to such a plan, with the energy and vision needed to carry it out.
8. The current paucity of bishops in both jurisdictions, with the OCA having two dioceses and a former diocese without a bishop (Western Pennsylvania, Alaska, and the former diocese of New York and New Jersey), and with the Antiochian Archdiocese having two dioceses without a bishop (New England, and Alaska/western Canada). This arrangement would provide a bishop for all these vacancies except Alaska.
9. The unforeseen recent dramatic rise in gasoline prices, making it quite a bit more expensive for bishops to travel across their generally very large dioceses. And how much better pastoral care could be given by the bishops to their clergy and parishes if they had, on average, half the territory to cover, yet with still about the same number of parishes to care for.
10. The recent reconciliation between ROCOR and the Patriarchate of Moscow. This means that any parishes in the OCA that might not accept, for whatever reason, coming under the pastoral care of a bishop of the Antiochian Archdiocese, could join ROCOR and still be part of a canonically recognized jurisdiction.

11. The humble recognition of GOD's Providence in allowing the huge financial scandal in the OCA to bring us to this point – where we see, probably more clearly than ever before, that *divided* we can fall, but *united* in Christ we will stand. May we perceive, and accept with gratitude, GOD's Hand in all of this, as He continues to work within us all to bring great light and hope out of much darkness and despair.

“Weeping will lodge at evening, but great joy in the morning” (Ps. 29:6).

“Behold now, what is so good or so pleasant as for brothers to dwell together in unity?” (Ps. 132:1).

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:20-23).