

Statement on the Church in North America
Adopted Text

Standing Conference of Canonical Bishops in the Americas, Ligonier,
Pennsylvania, USA, November 30-December 2 1994

Published in: *Journal Syndesmos: A journal of Orthodox Unity, Witness and
Renewal*, Issue N°1, spring 1995 - Syndesmos Publication

We, the Orthodox Hierarchs in the United States and Canada, assembled at the Antiochian Village, Ligonier, Pennsylvania from November 30 through December 2, 1994, do first and foremost offer most sincere gratitude to the venerable Fathers and Brothers, the Hierarchs of our Mother Churches beyond the seas for their love and concern, exhibited by the prominence given to the "diaspora" on the agenda for the forthcoming Great and Holy Council evidenced in the Adopted Texts of the Interorthodox Preparatory Commission.

We await the next meeting of the Commission referred to in the Adopted Text of November 1993. We maintain that it is critical that the Church in North America be directly and concretely represented at that and future meetings. How is it possible for there to be discussion about the future of the Church in North America in our absence? We must be present to share the two hundred years of experience that we have had of preaching the Gospel and living the Orthodox Faith outside of those territories that have historically been Orthodox. We would humbly ask His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch to seek a way, through the venerable Hierarchs of the Standing Conference, to accomplish this representation. We also humbly request the Primates of the other Mother Churches to support this initiative. The demands upon our Church's life by an unbelieving society do not allow for any further delay in this process. Therefore this Episcopal Assembly supports the repeated requests of SCOBA for its officers to be granted an audience with His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch and the other Patriarchs and Primates of the Mother Churches to discuss the North American reality.

Furthermore, we have agreed that we cannot accept the term "diaspora" as used to describe the Church in North America. In fact the term is ecclesiologicaly problematic. It diminishes the fullness of the faith that we have lived and experienced here for the past two hundred years.

Moreover, as we reflect on the ways in which the Church in North America has matured, it is important to recognize that much has been done as the natural and organic response of Orthodox Christians who share the same faith while living together in one place. We celebrate and build on already existing structures. Some are formal. The first of these is SCOBA itself. There are in addition various agencies of SCOBA such as the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), the Orthodox Christian Education Commission (OCEC), the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA), the Orthodox Christian Missions Center, and other North American-wide pan-Orthodox efforts. There are also less formal structures such as the joint meetings of our theological schools and seminarians, the joint monastic assemblies, the local councils of churches and clergy brotherhoods, and sacred art and

liturgical music associations. They give witness to the strong foundation upon which we continue to build.

To this end, all our efforts should be coordinated within an overall ecclesial framework. This would provide the freedom and flexibility to allow us to organically become an administratively united Church. As in any Orthodox ecclesiological framework for a local Church there are three levels. The first is the national, or in our case the continental. The second is the regional or diocesan. And the third is the local or deanery. All of these depend upon and grow out of the parish which is the primary place where Christians express and encounter their faith.

On the national or continental level the body which coordinates the life of a Church is the Synod of Bishops. We have had in SCOBA an Executive Committee that has guided Church life in North America for over thirty years. In convening this present Conferences of Bishops, we find ourselves to be an Episcopal Assembly, a precursor to a General Synod of Bishops. We express our joy that in addition to the regular meetings of SCOBA, this Episcopal Assembly will convene on an annual basis to enhance the movement toward administrative ecclesial unity in North America. The regional level presents a special challenge because this is one area in which few models of cooperation presently exist. Bishops who live within a given region of North America should meet and concelebrate regularly. They should coordinate activities, encourage clergy and laity to get to know one another and to work together, and initiate concrete joint programs. In essence, they should duplicate regionally what SCOBA has pioneered on the continental level for the past thirty three years. The local level is where the greatest diversity of models presently exists. These range from very informal clergy or lay associations to highly structured clergy brotherhoods or clergy and lay councils of churches. The bishops of a given region should continue to encourage the clergy and laity of their parishes to work together with other parishes in their area. Without imposing anyone model, bishops should seek to formalize and regularize those models that already exist. In areas where there are as yet no such structures, bishops should work with the clergy and laity to develop a model that is appropriate in that locality. The principle is to encourage diverse models within a broader canonical ecclesiological framework.

The Church in North America also benefits from our various monastic communities. Their meeting together should be encouraged by their hierarchs so that the monastics might share their spiritual experience and wisdom with one another and with the whole Church of a given region.

We would like to emphasize again: this is presented as a broad outline or framework within which the whole Church in North America can grow to manifest the deep unity of faith that we share in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father who sent Him, and the Holy Spirit who continually makes Him known to us. The visible unity of the Church is a profound witness of our love for Him and for one another .

Finally, we would like to thank and bless our Christ-loving flocks: the pious priests, deacons, monastics, and laity -who, praying and laboring together, incarnate the oneness which our Church on this continent already enjoys. We ask for their prayers and support, as we pledge to work with them for the glory of God and His Holy Church.