

Upholding the Spirit of the Orthodox Church of Antioch Very Rev. George Kevorkian

We are the Orthodox Christian Church of Antioch. The same Church which was founded by Our Lord Jesus Christ on the rock of faith, which was the confession of the Apostle Peter that Jesus Christ is “The Christ, The Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16-18). The same Church which was born on the day of Pentecost in the year 33 AD as the Apostles were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4). The same Church which was founded by the Apostles Peter and Paul, and later led by the bishop-martyr St. Ignatius the God-Bearer. The same Church whose members were first called Christians in the great city of Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:26). The same Church which launched the missionary journeys of Sts. Peter and Paul and which supported them with great vigor and energy as they established churches through Asia Minor and beyond.

It is safe to say that we have inherited a sacred tradition and that we also have inherited a truly awesome responsibility. The question for us is: “Are we upholding this awesome and sacred tradition today, in the midst of a secular culture which seeks to destroy all that we believe?” I think that if we are honest about the answer, we will say: “No – there is much work to be done.”

Let us explore more specifically these traditions of Antioch which we are called to uphold:

A Missionary Church

The Church of Antioch was the home base for St. Paul as he embarked on his monumental missionary journeys to establish new church communities. The growth in the early years of Christianity was nothing short of miraculous (not surprising since it was guided by the Holy Spirit!) The Church at Antioch was the first church to send out missionaries in an intentional way. St. Paul planted new churches in a way that was designed to ensure their growth, and as he planted those churches in larger communities, soon the churches spread to the surrounding smaller communities. We are told that the fruit of these labors was that “the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” (*Acts 16:5*). Clearly, the early Church of Antioch possessed a missionary spirit which was grounded in the teaching of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and which she pursued with zeal and enthusiasm, sparing no resources that were required for the support of the newly founded churches.

An Incarnational Church

From the earliest days of the church, the Christians of Antioch stood fast in the traditions which were delivered by our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His Apostles, and they continued to practice their Christianity as they had for hundreds of years. The priority for the Antiochian Christians was emphasizing the truth that The pre-eternal Son and Word of God became incarnate in human history in the person of Our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ. This truth was not so much reflected in theories and philosophies, but rather manifested in the living experience of the God-Man. Their strong emphasis was on the love that Jesus Christ has for us and our responsibility to return that love to those who we encounter in our lives. This represents a life of faith and love which follows the command of Jesus Christ: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (*John 13:34-35*). The Christians of Antioch remained rooted in the traditions of the church, as St. Paul taught them: “Therefore brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

A Church Which Embraces all with the Love of Jesus Christ

We read the following in the Book of Acts regarding the earliest days of the Church in Antioch:

But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. (*Acts 11:20-24*)

It is clear that the Church of Antioch was the “Church of the Gentiles,” which presented a unique and serious challenge to the Antiochian Christians to assimilate people from many cultures and diverse religious backgrounds into a unified Orthodox Christian faith. The Church responded, not with hesitation and resentment, but rather by pouring out a large measure of love and compassion which had been commanded by our Lord, Jesus Christ, through His teaching and His example. It is also clear that

the seal of Apostolic authority, represented by the arrival of Barnabas, was required in order for the new church to be integrated into the Universal Church.

The Challenge for us in North America

It would be no surprise to anyone to admit that we live in a culture which does not embrace God but rather seeks to obliterate God from our lives. It is a culture where the word “sin” is no longer used because it would interfere with the spirit of “anything which makes you feel good and makes you happy is acceptable.” Having explored what we might call the “Spirit of Antioch,” what can we say about the challenges that we have in the midst of our post-Christian, secular culture. How do we rekindle that spirit in our church communities, and truly follow the tradition which has been given to us by our Lord and His Apostles?

First and foremost, we must attend to our own houses of worship. We all know that when we are expecting beloved guests to come to our houses, we take great pains to make sure that all is in order and that their experience in our home will be a memorable one. We clean, decorate, arrange, and of course, we make sure that our guests are fed very well. It is essential that we follow this same model in our churches. We must make ourselves completely prepared to receive those who are now strangers, but who will become beloved members of our church families. We must prepare ourselves spiritually through worship, prayer, fasting and education in our Orthodox faith. Our churches must be a place of refuge, peace, and comfort to all who enter their doors. Newcomers must find a pious, worshipping community, which takes its faith very seriously and behaves with decorum and respect in the church. We must be educated in our faith so that we can witness to others in an accurate and effective way. Our churches must be free from gossip, judgment, and dissension, so as not to scandalize our newcomers. In short, we must be holy people, shining with the same light that shone from all of the Saints and Martyrs of the Church. This is truly the Spirit of Antioch.

Second, we must be very generous in our giving to the church – both in material giving and the giving of our service to the church. A dramatic shift must occur in the way we think about giving to the church – not giving what is simply left over, but giving the first fruits of our labor, and in a sacrificial way. Likewise, our service to the church must be strong and generous. The early Church of Antioch did not hesitate for a moment to materially support the work of St. Paul and to send assistance to the newly founded churches which were in need. Only in this way can we move beyond hopeless

discussions around the material needs of our churches and focus on the real work of the church, which is the salvation of every soul.

Third, we must be churches which embrace our visitors and newcomers with the abundant love with which our Lord loves us. From the moment that a visitor or newcomer enters the doors of our churches, they must feel an overwhelming sense of belonging. They must quickly be brought from the status of “stranger” to the status of “loved one”. The power of this behavior cannot be overstated. It is the very thing that our secular culture cannot give to people and the single thing that will capture the hearts and minds of all who enter our churches.

It is the Spirit of the Church of Antioch which was instrumental in the growth and expansion of the earliest churches. It is the Spirit of the Church of Antioch which has upheld the teachings of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His Apostles in an unwavering manner, against all of the worldly forces which have sought to assault and destroy her. It is the Spirit of the Church of Antioch which not only survives to this day but thrives through her witness to the Orthodox faith. It was the Spirit of the Church of Antioch that animated the missionary activity of St. Raphael of Brooklyn, the decisive leadership of Metropolitan Antony, and the visionary ministry of Metropolitan Philip, and it continues in the focus of our Metropolitan Joseph on saving the souls of the faithful. And it must be the Spirit of the Church of Antioch which will once again reach out to all people and bring them home to the Orthodox Faith.