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Fordham University
Romanian Youth Symposium
The Very Rev Dr Chad Hatfield

Your Eminence, Your Grace, Bishop Ion Cassian, Very Reverend & Reverend Clergy, Distinguished Professors and Symposium Participants, Glory to Jesus Christ! I am here today not so much as a seminary chancellor/CEO, and evil administrator, but more in my capacity as a sessional professor of Evangelization & Missiology. It is from this discipline that I might have something to contribute to our efforts today. I want to begin with these words from Col.1:21-23....

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

St Paul, in writing to the Church in Colossae, takes the term “Fullness”, as it was used by the Gnostics, with their “secret” or “superior” knowledge and re-directs the term to Jesus. The Apostle to the Gentiles is telling us that Christ Jesus IS the fullness, Himself. Jesus is everything, God in the fullness: and in His human nature, resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father. He is the created and glorified Head of all creation. It is through Jesus Christ that the perfect “communion” that we were created for in the beginning and lost through our disobedience is not possible. “It is finished!” proclaims Christ from the Cross, the work to save mankind is now complete. Nothing more needs to be done. But a response is required from you, and from me, to this act of sacrificial love that makes our perfection as humans possible.

As we gather in these final days of the Great Fast of 2016 to contemplate what lessons we have to learn from the wisdom of the early church, and how we apply it today, it is very important that we remember that to seek wisdom is to seek Christ and the Mind of the Church. The Word Incarnate is the true wisdom of God revealed to us in the Incarnation where God become a Servant, taking on our weak and mortal nature but remaining Lord of all.

The followers of the Nazarene have always been considered “Counter Cultural” and yes, even strange. Why would you interfere and remove babies left on rocks to die of exposure and raise them as your own when infanticide was the “cultural norm”? Why feed lepers and provide care for the sick, those in prison and the dying? Why create hospitals and

universities, all of which have Christian foundations? These so-called Mathew 25 ministries are not an option for Christians. They are the standards set for our own Day of Judgement.

We, who have “put on Christ”, are odd. In their 1989 publication titled “Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony” Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon provided us with “a provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong”.¹

This book had a profound influence on me as I began to understand, as a priest in the Episcopal Church, when I first read this book, the saying that: “he who weds himself to the *zeitgeist* soon finds himself a widower”. This German word, *zeitgeist* can be rendered in English as the “spirit of the age” that is passing away. It has been said, even in podcasts, that former Episcopalians or Anglicans, like me, who are now part of the Orthodox Church, are like “Viet Nam Vets, suffering from flashbacks when signs of the *zeitgeist* appear in the Orthodox world.” It has been said that these converts keep the Orthodox Church from having conversations about any of these issues for fear that they will once again find themselves without a “safe harbor” to escape changing times. I reject this type of polemic. What I accept is that there are lessons for those of us who are Orthodox to learn when we come to terms with the fact that our faith makes us “odd” and indeed, counter cultural. We are radically out of step with the so-called mainstream of our day when we are faithful to the “*paradosis*” that we have received down through the ages.

Let me return to Resident Aliens. In the section under the title: *People Who Follow a God Who is Odd*.

“...many Christians do not fully appreciate the off way in which the church when it is most faithful, goes about its business. We want to claim the church’s “oddness” as essential to its faithfulness. ...whenever a people are bound together in loyalty to a story that includes something as strange as the Sermon on the Mount, we are put at odds with the world. This makes necessary the demanding business of being the colony of God’s righteousness in a world that refuses to acknowledge God as sovereign. Our assertion of the indispensability of the church for Christian living is more than the practical observation that life is difficult and thus we need a little help from our friends. It is also a claim about how the church enables us to be moral in the first place. The church not only gives us the support we need in being moral, it also teaches us what being moral is. To put the matter in the words typical of a couple of professors: The church is crucial for Christian epistemology. We would not know enough to be

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley & Willimon, William H., *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something is Wrong*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. 1989

moral without the colony.From a Christian point of view, the world needs the church, not to help the world run more smoothly or to make the world a better and safer place for Christians to live. Rather, the world needs the church because without the church the world does not know who it is. The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people. The way for the world to know that it needs redeeming, that it is broken and fallen, is for the church to enable the world to strike hard against something which is an alternative to what the world offers.

Unfortunately, an accommodationist church, so intent on running errands for the world, is giving the world less and less in which to disbelieve. Atheism slips into the church where God really does not matter.²

We Orthodox Christians have much to learn by looking at other groups of Christians and their churches, in particular, those who have chosen in recent decades to wed themselves to the spirit of the age in order to be relevant. Many of these churches, known by the title "Mainline Protestant" were often much admired and imitated by Orthodox who saw the power and prestige of the Episcopalians in American Society as goal for the transplanted Orthodox of the so-called "diaspora". Presbyterian Sunday Schools were good for our children the Methodist have nice after school programs, etc. The decline of these once thriving American denominations has been rapid, endowments of money left by deceased members, keep things going. Decades of low call theology produced animic followers and depleted numbers. Hauwerwas and Willimon have been proven to be prophets from the 1980s.

Let me give you some statistics to help demonstrate just how fast the decline in membership runs, parallel with the revisionist theology that began to dominate these churches, in the 1960s.

US membership per 1,000 US population:

United Church of Christ – 1960 12.4 – 2010 3.2

Episcopal – 18.1 – 6.1

Presbyterian USA – 23.0 – 8.7

United Methodist – 54.7 – 24.9

Evangelical Lutheran – 29.3 – 13.6³

Just one example of things going the other way would be the 6-year old Anglican Church in North America, a traditional group of Anglicans in official dialogue with the OCA has grown

² Ibid. pp. 93-94

³ Stark, Rodney, *The Triumph of Faith*, ISI Books, Wilmington, DE, 2015, p. 193

larger than the entire Anglican Church in Canada and has planted over 515 new congregations in six years.

So, is the lesson to be learned here today is that secularism has won the fight? It is game over? Last year a Pew Research Survey, announcing a sharp rise in the number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation, so called “nones”. Not “nuns” NUNS but NONES – caused quite a stir. Increasing cases in the courts involving issues of “religious liberty” and what appears to be a rise in anti-Christian actions in this land of the free and home of the brave made many wonder if “life in the colony” was the only place for Christians. The “Benedict Option”, a phrase made known by Orthodox author, Rod Dehrer this past year also gained traction. This is a dramatic change from the 1980s & 1990s when the Orthodox churches in North America were growing with large numbers of new converts. Martin Marty even predicted that the 21st-century might well be the “Orthodox Century” as people sought out the Church of the Apostles. What happened in our Orthodox Churches that has brought the zeal and growth of the 80s & 90s to a flat line? Has the “God is Dead” movement finally overtaken Christian culture in our land?

A recent book by a Sociologist with a specialty in matters of Religion, Rodney Stark, a professor at Baylor University in Texas, titled: The Triumph of Faith: Why the Word is More Religious Than Ever, makes the case that Pew got it wrong. Naomi Schaefer Riley comments that in reading Stark we see that “God is not dead. Despite the predictions of academics and liberal religious leaders, the world is becoming more faith-filled, not less.”⁴ Stark documents that there is “no increase in the number of the world’s self-professed atheists and no triumph of reason over revelation.” Stark is critical of the Pew results claiming an increase in the number of Americans with no religious affiliation citing that the response rates are too small to justify Pew’s claims. Riley notes that Stark’s real battle “is with the intellectual elites of the West, who have been declaring the demise of religion for centuries and have been advancing a secularization thesis for decades. For them, religious belief is a susceptibility of the illiterate and ignorant. With education, in their view, people see the foolishness of their ways and abandon their beliefs.

So, who is right Pew or Stark? Let me share a personal habit of mine that demonstrates that religious belief is alive and well in North America. My wife has learned to accommodate my sometimes quirky ways. She knows that whenever we go into a major bookstore that I always head towards the section that is usually labeled “Spirituality”. We have all heard our friends and relatives say that they are “Spiritual but not religious”. Spiritual remains largely undefined in this context. This is why it is used by major book sellers as a catch-all term. This portion of the store is often quite large. This tells us that

⁴ Riley, Naomi Schaefer, “The God Profusion”, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2016

people are searching the spiritually/religion shelves. I always look to see what is new and what is selling. This tells me what people are interested in at the moment. I will then look, often in vain, for a book about the Orthodox Church or Orthodox Christianity. It is rare but sometimes I find one. Maybe, an Orthodox Study Bible in the Bible section. Educated people, people who read and like books are buying these books or these major bookstores would not have them for sale.

Stark challenges the thesis that educated people will embrace a secularizing agenda. But, with education spreading further than ever through modern technology and affluence why has interest in matters religious not faded? Stark notes that during the Dark Ages, as we call them, in Europe the religious dominance of the day stifled the mind and prevented enlightenment. However, we must understand that 90% of the population lived in rural areas and churches were to be found mostly in towns and urban centers. Quoting Stark: "Therefore hardly anyone could have attended church. Moreover, even after most Europeans had access to a church, whether Catholic or Protestant, most people still didn't attend, and when forced to do so, they often misbehaved".⁵

We Orthodox are not part of the picture painted here, but we can still see that the poor and less educated are not by definition more pious. Stark goes on to show that today in many parts of the world it is the more educated who choose to lead a religious life. This is certainly true in the United States, where college-educated Americans are more likely to attend religious services than their counterparts with only a high-school diploma. It should be noted that in majority Muslim countries the attendance at the mosque is highest among those with a college education. In this context it also note that it is among the well-educated that find Western culture most offensive.

What else do we have to learn from the shifts and changes of our day? In the Christian World much is being written about the so-called "Global South". The Scholar, Philip Jenkins has been tracking this growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere for many years.⁶ The Gallop World Poll has been doing annual research since 2005 we see that the once dominant Catholicism of Latin America is being overtaken by large Pentecostal forms of Protestant Christianity. Dr. Stark argues that state-sponsorship of religion, is today, a hindrance to the growth of the faith community. It is never good when Ceasar is seen as the protector and the Gospel is seen as not capable of standing on it's own merit. Stark says that monopoly destroys competition, and competition causes growth and interest.⁷

⁵ Stark, p. 41

⁶ Jenkins, Philip, *The Next Christendom: The Coming Global Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2011

⁷ Stark, p. 57

Europe is another story. Churches are empty, especially in Western Europe where people have rejected a staid and lifeless Christianity often overtaken with mere cultural identity. Christianity lite has been replaced not with a triumph of secularism but with a growing Islamic presence that is quite demanding of its followers and a rise in a return to some expression of “supernatural belief”. Here are some current statistics:

In Austria 28% now believe in fortune tellers; 32% believe in astrology; and 33% in lucky charms. 20% of Swedes believe in reincarnation and half the population of Iceland have embraced a return to a belief in “Huldufolk” or hidden people like elves and trolls.⁸

In a recent trip to Scotland I was amazed at the rise of New Age religious expression and the abandonment of churches and Christianity.

If Martin Marty was right that this is, with the collapse of the communist yoke and the number of seekers in Western Society rising, that this is going to be the Orthodox Christian Century? Where are we 16 years in? I am not sure we are off to a good start?

What do we have to learn? I want to share something from my time this past August in Poland where I was chaplain to Synodesmos. Young Orthodox Christians from 16 countries were participants. Over and over I heard from them that what they want and need are stronger apologetics for the Orthodox faith. Especially those living in Western Europe said that they were defenseless when their friends called them haters and backwards when they expressed traditional Orthodox beliefs. They were not asking for the Orthodox Churches to “get modern”. They were asking for ways to better understand their own faith tradition and to articulate that faith, in love and charity, to other.

Do I have all the right answers? No. Our Orthodox ecclesiology, when it functions correctly does provide us with the forum to find our way in a very complete 21st Century. God-willing we have a small start today. But, please, let’s not get caught-up in second-guessing the Savior. Let’s remember the words from St Paul to the Church in Colossae that point us to Jesus as the “fullness” and to learn from the wisdom of the early Church that gives us our foundation to engage the world in our own time & place.

Our well-known seminary dean, Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann was once asked what the Orthodox Church needed to experience a revival. He responded that we need “nothing”. We simply need to begin to exercise the charisms, gifts, that we already possess. If this is true, then let us begin in earnest. Our time is now.

⁸ Stark, p. 45 & 6-7