

Dear Brothers: In the joy of the Feast

I remembered our OCA Chancery leadership by name in the Great Entrance yesterday and this morning, and found myself choking-up from the grief that was in me. So it is with no joy that I write this to account to you, dear brothers, in all candor for what I've written on this List in an attempt to penetrate the fog in which we are enveloped because of the current crisis. I write to you on this List because this matter involves, and can affect, all of us.

Apart from the allegations of Protodeacon Eric Wheeler, there is the silence that has followed them; the willingness to ignore the allegations until they became public; the willingness to put a bishop of the Church in his place for making a simple and most appropriate request for information; the willingness to install defenses instead of giving answers; and the willingness to literally jeopardize the credibility of the entire Church for years to come. Whatever else is alleged, these behaviors exceed the boundaries of what is ethical, legal, accountable and responsible. And they leave me with a diminishing trust in our leaders -- my sincere, personal affection for them notwithstanding. The matter before us is not about affection for personalities, but about the protection of those personalities, and the Church, from legal jeopardy and any other harm.

As some have pointed out, we have pledged allegiance and obedience. But that pledge is to obey those who obey God. Is there not a connection between our obedience to God and our respect for the law of the land? We pray to God for the Civil Authorities, that they may keep good order in society by which we will be able to live and worship "in all godliness and sanctity." To disobey the laws which keep order in society, is not consistent with our obedience to God. Neither in the military nor in the Church are we obliged to follow any illegal order, including the order to relax when the life of the Body of Christ is placed in danger.

Some have said that this matter can be handled within the Church. While the holy innocence that inspires this idea is admirable, I believe it to be based on a most wrong-headed assumption -- the assumption that this matter will remain in the Church for the Church to deal with it. The OCA is not only the Church, it is a corporation to which Ceasar has granted the grace (not the right) of tax exemption. When Ceasar grants a privilege, Ceasar makes the rules. So all of our nuanced thinking about ecclesiastical procedures, Scripture and Holy Fathers, could be swept aside if and when Ceasar came in to turn Syosset upside-down. Deacon Wheeler, and all of us, can remain completely silent and turn nothing over to any one, but the government can still show up on the doorstep tomorrow. If and when that happens, God forbid, no one of any rank will be able to dodge the questions, even "for the good of the Church." No one will be able to withhold an explanation. No shred of paper will remain unexamined. If tax exempt funds were mishandled, every parish under the umbrella of the OCA could lose its exemption also. Hypothetically, if \$1-million were misused 6 years ago, so that the government would now declare them to have never been tax exempt, can you imagine the taxes, interest and penalties that would be owed today? Be very afraid! This is not "their" problem for "them" to take care of. This is "our" problem, one that could bring all of us down, and one to which every one of us must pay careful attention.

Should the government visit us, our only defense would be that we had exercised "due diligence" in dealing with possible wrong-doing when it became known. But this was known years ago, and when it was brought up now, the first reaction was to ignore it. The minutes of the Holy Synod meeting showing that the report of Dn. Eric Wheeler was ignored, if seen by the government, would be devastating to our entire Church. The Metropolitan Council's acceptance of only a two-year audit of unknown dimensions with no desire to look into and answer allegations dating back to the 90's, would be viewed as a dismal failure of due diligence

required of those who are stewards of tax exempt funds. So those who counsel acceptance of whatever is done are indeed enabling our leaders, administrators and Metropolitan Council members to sit today in an extremely vulnerable position -- a personal and corporate liability, a ticking time bomb. The assumption that this matter will remain in the Church for the Church to deal with is a very dangerous and fool-hardy assumption to make.

The principle of due diligence -- protecting our leaders, administrators and the entire OCA from harm -- demands of us a full airing of Dn. Wheeler's allegations; a full, independent audit of that entire time span; full and complete, point-by-point answers to every allegation (as innocent parties would be eager to provide). Further deliberations of the Metropolitan Council must be in the presence of, and with the advice of, an independent attorney whose task is the protection of the Church's interests. Anything short of this leaves our entire OCA vulnerable, in jeopardy and under a cloud. What shepherd could ever allow this? As an unworthy and sinful priest of this Church, I cannot abide anything less; I cannot cooperate with or support a Church that will not act forthrightly and in due diligence in this matter.

Now please don't yell at me or threaten me for writing the above. It's the truth. It is reality. I expect no one to agree with me or be with me in this. I am not starting a movement. I'm just one priest speaking his mind and accounting for his words. On a personal note, the privilege of serving at the Holy Altar is most precious to me. My current parish -- so willing to discard the status quo and to set out on a painful road hopefully leading to its survival -- is pure joy to me. But at age 61, I am willing to lose these precious gifts if that's what results from standing firm on this issue. I've morphed into Rosa Parks, and I will not move to the back. I will continue to speak out and post pertinent messages on this List. We get paid for serving as priests, but we also pay a high price just to survive -- the price of silence in the keeping of a false peace. I know that in saying this, I am probably committing ecclesiastical suicide, but I can no longer pay that price and am willing to accept with joy any punishment, slinging, recitation of my sins or whatever ensues.

I believe with all my heart that the Lord has answered our prayers and given us an opportunity, at this moment in time, to set aright and heal our most dysfunctional house, and set the OCA on a healthy course; or, if we choose not to, to drive it right into the ground. God help us! Most Holy Theotokos save us!

With love and respect to all!

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