

THE SYOSSET MESS

Moves and Countermoves As News of Scandal Spreads Among Clergy & Laity

Stung by allegations of financial corruption, personal misconduct, misuse of charitable funds as well as insider details of an ongoing cover-up that have been leveled against the current administration of the Orthodox Church in America by its former Treasurer, Protodeacon Eric Wheeler, the Primate of the OCA Metropolitan Herman has agreed to a limited audit. Following the November 9, 2005 Metropolitan Council meeting the OCA website reported: *“His Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman, addressed numerous concerns that arose in response to information and statements circulated in recent weeks, primarily on the internet. Emphasizing that all financial matters are his responsibility, Metropolitan Herman informed council members that he plans to order independent audits by an outside CPA firm licensed within the State of New York. He further reported that the results of the independent audits will be made available to the Church at large.”* The report continued by stating that the OCA will now employ “Best Practices” guidelines for non-profit organization as of January 1, 2006.

While many welcomed the change, other disappointed Council members point out that the Metropolitan only agreed to an audit for the last two years, that is 2004 & 2005. The Metropolitan will not allow any audits for the years before he was Metropolitan, nor any of the years in question from 1992-2003.

New Questions Surface

In a context of charge and countercharge, new questions were leveled concerning the 2004 Charity Appeal on November 18th. According to the OCA, some \$372,000 was raised, but a website pie chart showing “100% distribution of collected funds” totals only some \$272,000. When challenged about such a large discrepancy, David Lucs, Assistant to the Chancellor, “promised to look into it” by referring the issue to Fr. Stavros Strikis (OCA Comptroller) and Fr. Paul Kucynda (Acting OCA Treasurer). As of the time of this posting, no further information has been forthcoming.

Silence is the Policy

To address the growing discord, spreading through Orthodox clergy and lay chat rooms the OCA clergy list has asked clergy not to share posted emails about the scandal with laity. The official policy is that those who do so will be de-listed.

Coincidentally, the OCA also announced that “The Orthodox Church Newspaper” (TOC) will only be published on-line for November-December 2005; and was further contemplating no longer issuing the paper in a printed format at all. Reacting to “strong opinions” that such a move would disenfranchise those, many elderly, who are not on-line the OCA announced November 29th that it would continue making the TOC available in print, but “would adopt an 32-page news magazine format instead of the oversized tabloid format used since the publication made its debut four decades ago.”

Syosset also announced that the interval between All American Councils has now been changed from every three years to every five years. Both moves were explained by the OCA as being required for “financial reasons.”

Refusing the Party Line

One priest, Fr. Jason Kappadnadze (Elmira NY) refuses to be silent. Despite receiving a letter from the Metropolitan ordering him to cease discussion of the scandal, Kappadnadze, in a recent post on the clergy list, (later reposted on several Orthodox chat rooms) wrote:

“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.... At age 61, I am willing to lose these precious gifts (of the priesthood) 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 (that) ensues.”

Other priests have joined the chorus for an audit. Retired military chaplain and current Dean of SS Peter and Paul Cathedral in Detroit, Fr. Michael Simerick, wrote:

“Some have taken sides as to whether to believe or disbelieve Fr. Deacon Wheeler. I really don’t think that’s the real issue at this time. We now have an absolute reason to investigate these issues thoroughly and it behooves us to do so immediately.... Some brothers of the clergy have argued that it is not our place to question the bishops of our Church with these requests for investigation and audits. Although I would agree because we are bound by obedience to our bishops, I would remind my brothers that some bishops of the Holy Synod have themselves made known their frustration with the lack of financial transparency in official financial reports, and they have also desired full disclosure of all accounts and a legitimate professional audit...”

Episcopal Ranks Begin To Crack

Simerick’s reference is to the fact that at least two OCA bishops have discussed the allegations in meetings with their clergy. According to one participant a “relatively open discussion of Wheeler’s letters“ took place in the Eastern Pennsylvania diocesan meeting on November 19.

More significantly, Job, Archbishop of Chicago and the Midwest, largest of the OCA’s dioceses, has begun a series of meetings with his local clergy to discuss the scandal. Following a previously reported meeting of the diocesan deans in Chicago on November 3rd, the Archbishop has discussed Wheeler’s allegations in substance and details to shocked local clergy in three deanery meetings in the past two weeks: in Dayton (Columbus Deanery) and Detroit (Michigan Deanery) and Chicago. Future deanery meetings are scheduled in Minneapolis, as well as in Cleveland in the next two weeks. Archbishop Job has been quoted as saying that “ if the allegations are proved to be true the Holy Synod has been misled”; and that “ a limited audit of only two years will do no good.”

-Mark Stokoe (11.21.05)

