

CHAPTER FOUR: A SEMBLANCE OF UNITY (1943 - 1960)

“The Federated Orthodox Greek Catholic Primary Jurisdictions in America” can legitimately be described as the 2nd serious attempt to unify in some fashion the Orthodox in America. It was certainly more modest in scope than the ill-fated attempt to establish a North American Synod for English-speaking Orthodox in America and on the other hand it was more ambitious in the sense that it was an effort to unite—on a principle of federation—all Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States dependent on their Mother Church, that is: the Greeks dependent on Constantinople, the Russians dependent on Moscow, the Syrians dependent on Antioch, and the Serbians dependent on Belgrade—as well as two other groups both dependent on Constantinople consisting of some Ukrainians and some Carpatho-Russians.

It would be pleasant to record that the initial impulse and impetus for the Federation was a concrete result of a greater sense of church consciousness on the part of the Orthodox Hierarchy, Clergy, and Faithful in America to cooperate on ecclesiastical matters of common concern—but such is not the case. The fact of the matter is that the initiative was caused by a completely non-ecclesiastical body: the Selective Service System, an agency of the United States Government responsible for drafting men for military service.

It may be a cause of some bewilderment that neither the Selective Service Headquarters nor the local Draft Boards were able to cope with the problem of Eastern Orthodox Clergy who expected exemption from military service which was provided for clergy of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths. Many local draft boards took the position that Orthodox clergy were not recognized by the Selective Service agency and therefore subject to the draft like any other male who otherwise met the qualifications for military service. In these circumstances, a young Orthodox priest, Father John Gelsing, decided to make a “test case” of his ordination by Metropolitan Antony (Bashir) of the Syrian Archdiocese. It was from this very modest beginning that the idea of an Orthodox Federation developed which would make the Orthodox Church a “recognized” major religious body not only in the eyes of the Selective Service governmental agency but in the eyes of the American people as well. (It should be noted that Father John was eventually successful in receiving a deferment on the basis of his being an Orthodox priest).

Semblance of Unity

The original initiators of this new movement for Orthodox cooperation and unity on a practical basis were Father Michael Gelsinger of the Syrian Archdiocese of Brooklyn (and the father of Priest John Gelsinger) and Father Boris (Burden) of the Russian Patriarchal jurisdiction. Fr. Michael was able to enlist the support of his own Hierarch, Metropolitan Antony, and also was successful in enlisting the support of Archbishop Athenagoras of the Greek Archdiocese (presently the Patriarch of Constantinople) while Fr. Boris was assured of the support not only of his own Hierarch, Metropolitan Benjamin, but also persuaded Bishop Dionisije of the Serbian Diocese to cooperate. With the assistance of a prominent Greek attorney of Buffalo, George E. Phillies, a Bill was drawn up to have the Federation recognized legally by the State of New York, which in this case required that the New York State Legislature—both the Senate and the Assembly—would have to approve the Bill which then also required that the Governor of the State agree to approve the Bill and by his signature it would become law.

Mr. Phillies proved to be a person of considerable talents and influence and proved to be of considerable help in the drafting of an acceptable Bill and getting the necessary legislative machinery operating so that after several months of preparation the Bill was successfully and finally passed in mid-March 1943 (with a good word from the authorities of the Episcopal Church¹ with the opposition of the Uniate authorities² and the apparent indifference of Roman Catholic authorities.

The Bill³ in very precise language, which is both legally and canonically acceptable, defines the Federation, its purpose, and the means by which parishes may affiliate. Not unexpectedly, the organizational and administrative aspects of the new Federation were less precise—particularly as regards the election of and qualifications for officers of the Federation (as we shall see).

A very impressive signing of the Bill by the New York State Governor, Thomas E. Dewey, took place in the State Capitol in Albany on the 25th of March 1943 followed by an Orthodox Service of Thanksgiving (Molyeben) celebrated in the Senate Chamber of the New York State Legislature in which four Orthodox Hierarchs participated with Metr. Antony as the chief officiant using English. It seemed to be an auspicious start for the new Federation. (It is interesting to note that after the signing of the McBurney Bill—the Bill legalizing the Federation was called this because it was introduced by a legislator of that name—the authorities of the Metropolia felt they had to protect their interests and so they introduced a Bill that was eventually passed that gave recognition to the Metropolia as an independent Russian Orthodox body.⁴

¹ Letter of Episcopal Bishop Cameron Davis to Phillies, AAMG.

² Letter of Chancellor Philemon Tarnavsky to legislator Charles J. Tobin, AAMG.

³ For the major provisions of the Bill, see the Appendix.

⁴ Letter of Phillies to Advisor of N. Y. Governor, 2 Apr '43, AAMG.