

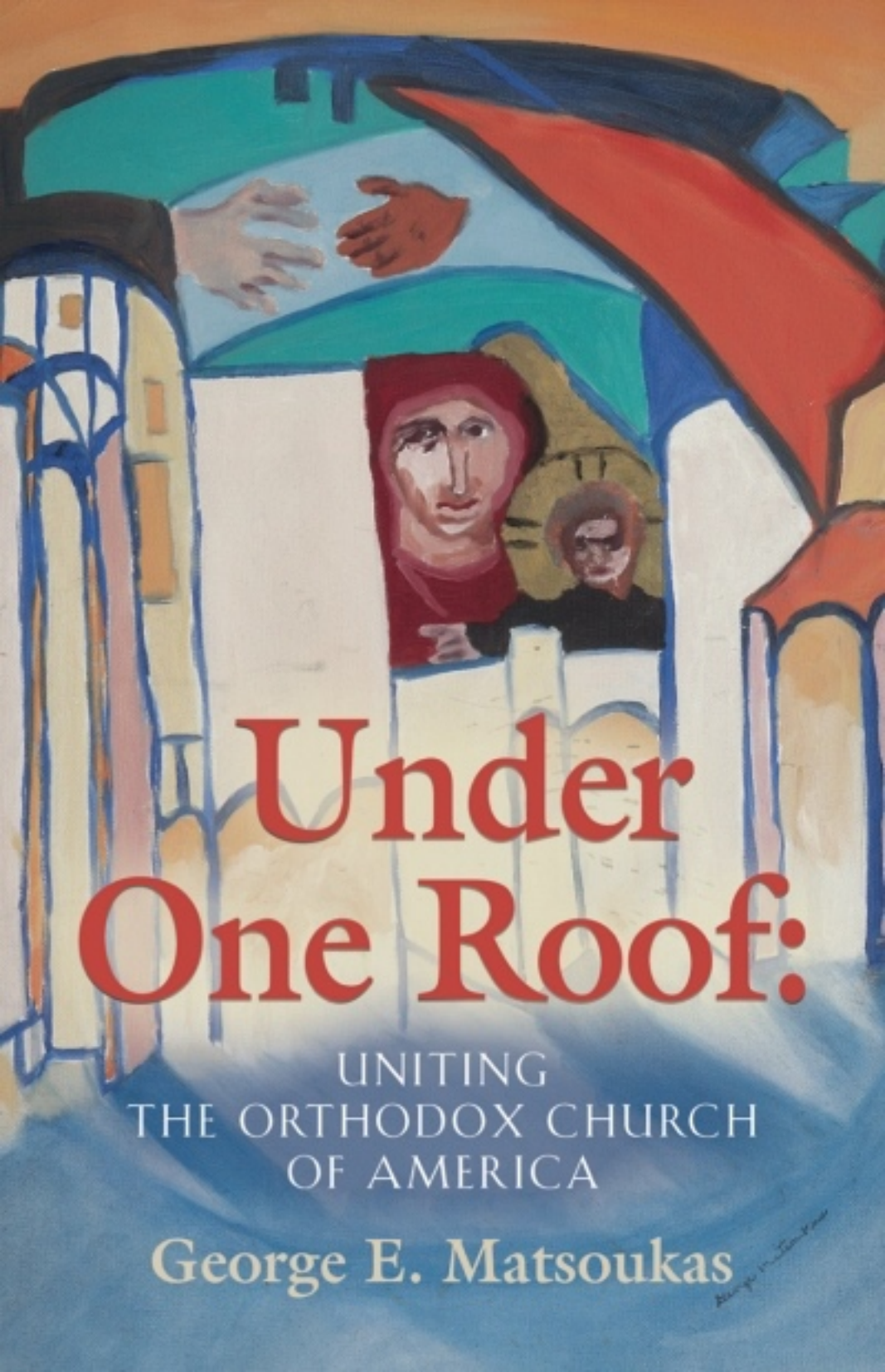
This collection of essays written between 2012-2020 addresses the status of the Orthodox Church in the U.S. and emphasizes the mission of Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL): unity, accountability, conciliar governance, education and renewal.

**Under One Roof:
Uniting the Orthodox Church of America**
By George E. Matsoukas

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Under One Roof:

UNITING
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH
OF AMERICA

George E. Matsoukas

George E. Matsoukas

Cover: The original painting, by the author, reflects the diversity and multicultural witness symbolizing Orthodox Christian unity with outreached hands in a contemporary world.

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1. PRESENTATION MADE IN IASI, ROMANIA AT INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING

January 2019

What is Orthodox Christian Laity?

Orthodox Christian Laity is a grassroots movement that sees itself as a catalyst and advocate for the renewal of the Church by empowering the laity to exercise its responsibility for the spiritual and administrative life of the Church. Elements of renewal include transparency, accountability and Orthodox Christian unity in the geographic areas that were not traditionally Orthodox, such as the USA, Canada, South America, Europe, Asia and Australia. The synodical system, which convened the Holy and Great Council in 2015 after hundreds of years, needs to be employed on a regular basis. Thought should be given to establishing a multicultural Orthodox Christian Secretariat. Coming to grips with the reality in which we function requires more communication amongst bishops. More meetings focused on unity. Fragmentation is a form of marginalization. OCL is gratified to see that the hierarchy shares its insights but does not understand how or why the bishops cannot move forward in unity to make unity a reality.

Working Together Locally

We welcome the recognition that the Orthodox Churches in pluralistic societies that consist of multiple ethnic jurisdictions are uncanonical. The laity have understood this fact for a long time because we see our time, talent and resources are squandered. The Assemblies of Bishops established 10 years ago must move forward to bring about unity by teaching unity to their clergy and empower local clergy associations to work together. Patriarch Bartholomew in 2014 instructed the Assembly of Bishops meeting in Dallas, TX, *“to move beyond what is ‘mine’ and what is ‘yours’ to what is ‘ours’.* *From now on, this is how we should conceive and conduct all of our ministries and resources, all of our departments and initiatives. Otherwise, we do not practice what we preach. It is really up to us to accept the challenge or refuse the call.”* The laity in pluralistic societies know where unity is practiced – for example, in Cleveland, OH – so much more of Christ’s mission is accomplished. The laity have come together to form International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC), and in unity have transformed lives in Christ.

Lay Theologians Have a Role to Play

We celebrate the establishment of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) and from our inception, we have called for lay theologians to be active participants in leading the Church to unity. As laypersons, we can assist the hierarchs to move ahead because we are not impeded by their historical circumstances. Lay theologians need to educate the hierarchy, clergy and laity in direct and active ways utilizing social media, print and video media to get their insight beyond the academic community. They need to be active change agents.

OCL is an independent non-profit educational ministry incorporated 32 years ago in the city of Chicago, IL. Many of its founders were organizers of the Greek Orthodox Youth of America GOYA movement which was started by returning veterans of the Second World War and Council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of the Americas (CEOYLA), who in 1966 hosted a meeting in Pittsburgh, PA, bringing together 13,000 Orthodox Christian young people. The hierarchy was taken aback by the organizational enthusiasm of youth for unity and systematically slowed down the momentum.

Facts About OCL

OCL today consists of 15,000 friends, supporters and benefactors. It hosts one of the oldest and largest Orthodox Christian websites: www.ocl.org. In addition to the website, it employs social media to educate those interested in accessing worldwide Orthodox news. OCL has hosted 31 annual meetings and 68 open forums in different geographic areas of the USA, addressing issues related to uniting the jurisdictions and administrative accountability and transparency. Clergy and laity addressing these issues are noted for their work and expertise in these areas. Many of their talks are videotaped and can be viewed on the website. Links to many of the other Orthodox Christian websites are listed and can be accessed through the OCL website. OCL archives of primary resources are maintained at the John T. Richardson Library at De Paul University Chicago, IL. Materials in the collection have been accessed by students seeking graduate degrees.

A list of nine OCL Occasional Papers, dealing with such topics as monasticism in the USA, Orthodox Christian unity and governance and the role of the laity in the life of the Church, as well as five books published and sponsored by OCL, can be found on its website.

OCL is governed by a board of directors, executive committee and advisory board members who represent different jurisdictions and reside in all

geographical areas of the USA. Members include distinguished hierarchs, academics, business professionals, high tech personnel, journalists and attorneys. They participate in the sacramental life of their local parish and offer their time and talents as chanter; Sunday School teachers; parish, diocesan and national board members; and participants in parish service groups.

The OCL board has provided informational, financial and moral support to organizations and programs that relate to its mission. We are excited about the future work of IOTA!

27. PERSONAL MUSINGS ON THE HOLY AND GREAT COUNCIL

July 31, 2016

I had prepared myself to go to Chania, Crete, and see, as a reporter, the events and hear the commentary and behind-the-scenes events that would be part of the excitement and surroundings of this monumental historical event, the Holy and Great Council (HGC) of the Orthodox Church. I sent in the information that was necessary to be approved as an observer. The approval came. I was excited about going. I have been an advocate for the council for 28 years. In 1994, I was a member of a delegation sent to meet with His All-Holiness Bartholomew. He expressed his determination to call the council. I have written many articles since 1994 about the need for the council. Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL) has provided coverage on its website (ocl.org), of the developments pertaining to the council since 2008. Two days before my departure, I fell doing yard work and broke my wrist. I had to cancel my trip. Indeed, I was disappointed.

Courage to Convene. Where is the Courage to Change?

For the past three months, I was following the developments and preparations. We know that His All-Holiness had the courage to proceed with the council even though four churches backed out within the month immediately prior to the council. They were committed to the council since 2008 but found excuses not to participate, including the seating protocols. The positive is that it did take place. The staff of the patriarchate was efficient and visionary. The agenda that was agreed upon was adhered to. His All-Holiness kept the meeting going and kept it focused. All those who wanted to speak had the opportunity to speak.

My last published article in *The National Herald* stated that the world would be watching the work of the council; and indeed, we have watched. Reuters, the Associated Press and *The New York Times*, as well as other newspapers around the world, reported on the event. Having tried to digest reports from around the world, I agree with the conclusion reached by Victoria Clark in her interesting book, "Why Angels Fall." The bishops have fallen from the "sublime ideal dreamed up in Byzantium" because they cannot give up their parochial and nationalistic ways. They are prisoners of history. Some bishops still want to conceal their spiritual treasures from the world. Clark writes, "That heinous religious nationalism with its persecution and martyr complexes and longing for death and suffering, that targeting of enemies and dangerous emotive habit of

spinning pretty patterns from the past — mythologies instead of histories — will have to go.” *Symphonia* was not what the bishops wanted; and therefore, the achievements of the Council were limited. The bishops cannot even come to terms with the concept of consensus. The Holy Spirit was hard-pressed to be heard.

Where is the Leadership?

It is time for others to come forth to move the church forward. In the lands outside the traditional Orthodox nations, the laity must move forward together in all the parallel jurisdictions to help the bishops move ahead. The situation in these lands is uncanonical, and the “new ecclesiology” of trying to rationalize the ethnic, national point of view to keep the church in a colonial state is unacceptable. Our faithful keep walking away. Some archdioceses have lost 38 percent of their stewards in 20 years. The divide and conquer strategies of the patriarchates are not working in nontraditional Orthodox lands. It is time to create autocephalous churches in the USA, Europe, Canada and Australia. New ethnic metropolitanates in these lands are not a solution and will not work. The laity must stop being enablers of what does not work. In the USA, we need to see how we can work to bring more of those leaving to transfer to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The HGC called for the continuing work of resolving these discrepancies within the “diaspora” Churches. Let us hope that the gauntlet is picked up by our hierarchs **with layperson involvement** in the USA and around the world. It is our duty and responsibility to help the hierarchs move forward.

31. BLUEPRINT FOR A UNIFIED ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES: WHERE ARE WE? A LAYPERSON'S OVERVIEW

April 25, 2014

Worldwide Canonical Disorder

In 2008, a meeting of patriarchs of the autocephalous Orthodox churches convened in Switzerland under the auspices of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and charged the bishops in the lands outside of the traditional Roman Empire to meet together in Assemblies of Bishops. The purpose of these meetings of Assemblies of Bishops is to develop blueprints to establish canonical order within their geographic areas. The churches in these areas have bishops of different Orthodox Christian groupings overlapping in the same geographic areas. There is no comprehensive directory of priests. There is great duplication of administrative and educational services which dissipates the stewardship of the laity. The missionary mandate of the church is subjugated to the idea of the church as an ethnic, cultural preservation society for food, dance and social activities. The statistics of the church in the United States show that there are fewer Orthodox adherents than there were in the 1920s. The spiritual needs of the third, fourth and fifth generations of Orthodox are marginalized. The focus of the bishops still remains on new immigrants now coming to the U.S. from former communist lands. The lands outside of the former Roman Empire are blessed to be within pluralistic societies, without established state churches, and contain multi-cultural Orthodox Christian traditions. The bishops must address these realities and bring together – within **one administrative and self-governing Church body** – these traditions, and make Christ the cornerstone of the blueprint.

Can the Assembly of Bishops Bring About Order?

The Assemblies of Bishops worldwide have been meeting almost in secret for nearly five years now. There is little progress in building the blueprint for a unified Orthodox Church in the United States to report. Four years ago, the Assembly of North America requested that Canada and Central America be made separate assemblies, and it has taken the patriarchs four years to address this issue. In March 2014, the patriarchs once again met, this time in Istanbul, and fast-tracked the convening of the Great Council of Orthodox Bishops for the

year 2016. They expect blueprints from the Assemblies of Bishops worldwide by the first quarter of 2015.

Where are we, from what we know about the work of the Assembly of Bishops of the USA (AOB)? The Antiochian Bishops have been withdrawn from the work of the AOB since February, because the patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem are in disagreement, both claiming the country of Qatar within their respective jurisdictions. Supposedly, because Patriarch Bartholomew was unable to help resolve the conflict, the Patriarch of Antioch withdrew all bishops under his jurisdiction from participation in the worldwide assemblies. How smart is that action? Bishop Basil of Wichita, KS, was the competent chairman of the Secretariat of the U.S. Assembly, and he is not participating. This is a major setback for the American Assembly. The Youth Commission established by the AOB to bring all youth of all jurisdictions together met in February. There was no bishop to meet with the Youth Commission, because the Antiochian Bishop Thomas, who is chairman, was withdrawn, and other bishops were not available. One step forward and two steps backward is the way things are going at this moment.

The Committee of the Assembly of Bishops on Regional Planning presented its overview to the AOB at the fourth meeting of the full assembly's 2013 Fall Meeting. They presented options, and **hopefully, they will present one concrete blueprint at a future date.** The AOB website reports that the options that were presented include: "Restructuring Models: The Committee discussed different potential approaches for the ecclesiastical governance structure in the USA, ranging from unified canonical restructuring to transitional ethnic reunions, an expanded operations role for the Assembly, and to the maintenance of existing overseas jurisdictional authority. A restructuring model for the formation of 'ecclesiastical provinces with ethnic vicariates' received general approval. However, other approaches will also be presented to the Assembly IV for discussion – together with this particular restructuring proposal."

Old World Patriarchs Undermine the Process They Set Up

The Bulgarian and patriarchal Russian bishops, representing their patriarchs, made it clear at that fall meeting, following the report of the Regional Planning Committee that their patriarchs are not in favor of a unified Orthodox Christian Church in the United States. The patriarchs are worried about their immigrant constituents in the United States who do not want to separate from their ethnic

origins. It should be noted that these two groups have new ties with Orthodox Christian History in the United States since the fall of Soviet Russia. They have not been part of the American experience for the last 200 years. Sadly, this lack of experience is not a consideration in the organizational affairs of the work of the present Assembly. The Orthodox Church in America (OCA), which has been an essential part of the history of American Orthodox Experience and which oversees the greatest Orthodox Christian Seminary in the western world, has a back seat to the work of the Assembly of Bishops. The AOB is organized according to the order of diptychs of seniority of the patriarchates, and by not being included on that list, the OCA is relegated to the end of the line.

The greatest undercurrent hanging over the AOB here in the United States and worldwide is the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch in the whole process. Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, is professing to be the universal authority of Orthodoxy worldwide. The Ecumenical Patriarchate wants world-wide political recognition as the overseer, feeling that this status will give it leverage in the struggle to survive in Turkey. Greek interests worldwide are supporting the patriarchate on this issue and are the advocate for this status for the patriarchate. The self-governing patriarchs are sympathetic to the Patriarchate in Constantinople and regard him first among equals but not first over all of them. They have a more collegial understanding of his role. They do not want their faithful to be under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. How do we break this Gordian knot?

In reality, all of these factors relate to the Assembly of Bishops in the United States. Right now, the AOB is stymied by old-world disagreements among the patriarchs themselves. The bishops are thwarted by the claims of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the interests of the 14 self-governing patriarchates. The U.S. Assembly must make it clear to the patriarchs that they need to resolve the problems of their relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarch and themselves in order to proceed with creating good order in their own territories.

Mythology Rather Than History Undermines Progress

What is the AOB in the United States to do? The U.S. Assembly needs to: create and present the blueprint for the church in the United States that serves the spiritual needs of this geographic area and the faithful therein; be ready with that blueprint so that it is presented to the committee working on the Great Council; and, in finalizing the blueprint, base it on reality and not mythology. The history

of the church demonstrates that refusing to change and move ahead can be a heresy in itself. As Victoria Clark states in her excellent study of Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo, **“Why Angels Fall,”** “The Orthodox East will have to cut away the crust of kitsch that has been doing such a fine job of concealing its spiritual treasures from the world. The heinous religious nationalism, with its persecution and martyr complexes and longing for death and suffering, that targeting of enemies and dangerously emotive habit of spinning pretty patterns from the past – mythologies instead of histories – will have to go.” It is the duty of the Assembly of Bishops in the United States to let go and take stock of its own realities:

1. Unity under Constantinople is unacceptable to the patriarchs and heads of self-governing churches.
2. The status quo is unacceptable because it is uncanonical. The present state of the church cannot continue as is.
3. The patriarchs want unity but not under Constantinople.
4. Constantinople needs to act as the collegial mediator and facilitator of an open process, not dependent on its needs for survival, but on the spiritual needs of the faithful.
5. Autocephaly for the church in the United States is the status that all can agree upon. It is the only canonical and viable alternative. This reality needs to be factored into the blueprint for the unified church in the United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George E. Matsoukas is an active member in the sacramental and parish life of the Orthodox Christian Church. He served as executive director of Orthodox Christian Laity for the past 20 years. He has been a member of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) for 58 years and served as president of Chapter 18. Presently, he is the president of AHEPA Family Charities of the Palm Beaches and has been involved with the organization for 20 years. His activities extend to the greater community in Palm Beach County, including Paul Harris fellow, Lake Worth ROTARY; past board member and president of Palm Beach County Historical Society; board member of Gulfstream Goodwill Industries Palm Beach for 20 years; board member of Keep Palm Beach County Beautiful for 30 years; Community Action Council Palm Beach County. He is a retired educator who worked with special needs students; a high school history teacher; and Palm Beach Community College resource development officer; and a recipient of the Distinguished Service Award from the Florida Community College Association. He is an Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) grant recipient from the Center on Philanthropy. He has also assisted local nonprofit agencies in internal and external development to fulfill their missions. He is a published author, newspaper columnist and editor. He enjoys his family, watercolor painting, walking and yoga.

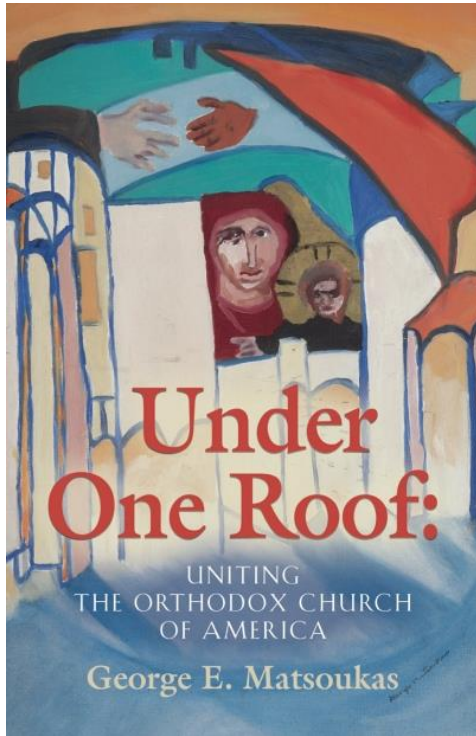
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