

21<sup>th</sup> Triennial Church Assembly-Sabor of Serbian Orthodox Church in North and  
South America - Bishop Maxim's address

Your Eminence, our dear honored Guest – Archbishop Demetrios of America,  
most honorable Exarch of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans,

Your Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco,

Your Graces Bishop Longin and Bishop Mitrofan,

Distinguished priests,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. I give glory and thanks to the Triune God for granting me the great blessing of welcoming you all in this City of *Segnora de Los Angeles*, on behalf of the hosting Western Diocese of Serbian Orthodox Church, on the occasion of the 21<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Church in North and South America. I offer You the assurance of my deep brotherly love and admiration, as well as my commitment to the holy task of furthering and deepening the unity and common work of our Dioceses.

2. I cordially greet you, the delegates from parishes throughout our Church, from all of our five Dioceses—Midwestern, Eastern, Western, of Canada, and of Central and South America—who have come here to take part in this Assembly-*Sabor* of Serbian Orthodox Church in USA and Canada. For a number of years, this brotherly exchange has brought together representatives of our Church, a Church that owes its existence to the Grace and Love of the Triune God. The first such *Sabor* was organized by Bishop Mardarije Uskokovich, September 1-5, 1927 in St Sava Monastery in Libertyville. It is therefore an honor for me to address this historic Assembly, the *Sabor* of the Serbian Orthodox Church on this Continent, which for nearly one-hundred years has represented the significant affairs, not just of the Serbian Church on this Continent, but of other Christian communities in this part of the world. It is my belief that only an organic unity between all the “charismata” or “tagmata,” in the Pauline sense of the word—not only the clergy and laity (but a variety of orders and ministries)—can bring spirit and quality to this blessed country. The unbroken unity of the people of God and the voice that resonates the Eucharistic dialogue should be the mission of each Parish, which will achieve in a most superb way not as another objectified social structure—since the Church is not a democracy—but as a charismatic event of communion within the Church.

Yet, if we want to do justice to the Church, we have to appreciate the laity, as those in fact who finally implement all progress and growth in the Church's life.

3. The theme of this savor is *Servant Leadership* (“*whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant...for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*” –Matthew 20:27-28). Best examples of this type of leadership were Bishop Mardarije Uskokovic and Arhimandrite Sebastian Dabovich. However, the values of servant leadership inspired by *theology of priesthood* are not moral monuments, sculpted millennia ago, fixed and inert. They are refreshed in each generation by priests who seek to keep their practice in tune with Christ's model (cf. γνῶμη Χριστοῦ, St Ign., *Ephes.* III, 2) and the prevailing existential needs of its flock. The Church does not aim to captivate the individual with psychological appeals, but rather to include man into a liberated space-time where he or she will acquire freedom from all individualistic priorities and become acquainted with the incarnate Logos through communion with the Spirit and in personal freedom and love. In order to reawaken a true sense of the Eucharistic offering as something genuine and truthful—a chaste fruit of a community experiencing Resurrection—we, as priests, should deprive our sermon of rhetorical excursions into non-ecclesial thematic. Our homilies today should truly gather the community and eliminate our forgetfulness of the eschatological coming of the Risen One. A homily that does not refer to the Person of Christ is a sermon that refers to the corrupted world.

4. Our dear honored Guest is His Eminence, Metropolitan Demetrios, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America and Chairman of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North & Central America. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, but also the Assembly of Bishops in USA continues, with the same zeal under the pastoral, spiritual and ecclesiastical guidance of His Eminence to be spiritually re-baptized in the waters of the evangelical life handed to us by the Apostles, as this is experienced continually by the Orthodox Church. We are grateful to them for providing witness of the Orthodox life and tradition to the New World.

5. It is indeed a distinct privilege for me and my brothers and sisters in Christ from the Western Diocese, to stand together with you at this moment, as participants in a long tradition of “saborovanje.” Such a sacred custom reaffirms and deepens the bonds of love which unite our Church, and pave the way to even greater unity, which our Lord

demands from us. Once again, I am overjoyed and honored that we are all gathered together in my beloved Diocese and that our blessed labors in unity will renew and nourish with the spirit of Truth each and everyone of us.

6. Regarding the work of this Sabor, allow me to share brief points with you:

First, in view of a true Orthodox ontological realism, *the genuine mission* and task of the Orthodox Church in America is twofold in character and is of the utmost significance and substance. A), the Church must *bear witness to the particular ethos* of its Orthodox Tradition, and confront the ethos of Western Christendom and its culture, which is based on individualism. B), the Church in America must also interpret the so-called “Western” way of thinking for the Orthodox believer. An Orthodox American, who possesses native cultural credibility in his own land and who can therefore act as a bridge between historical Orthodoxy and Western culture, is best able to fulfill this task.

Secondly, that we are called today to preserve that most precious and greatest gift of the *unity and catholicity of the Church*. And the unity we speak about is both with the mother Church in Serbia, and with all other Orthodox Churches on this continent. In a world which is increasingly faced with the ethos and characteristics of Western Christianity and culture, Orthodoxy will not be able to offer its true testimony, if it is fragmented, but only through “one mouth and one heart.” This is the heritage of the Saint Nicholai of Zhicha. According to the Canon N. West, prior to the arrival of Archimandrite Nikolaj in 1915, the Anglican community had regarded the “exotic Orthodox faith” as something very remote. In his “Recollections of Bishop Nikolai”, he writes that it was actually Bishop Nikolaj who revealed Orthodoxy to the other branches of Christianity in both England and America.

The bitter experience of a long period of division in our Diaspora has made us all aware of the need to accelerate the process of restoring, not only our full eucharistic communion, as we have done, but also our administrative unity, so that the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era may find the Serbian Church visibly united.

Third, it should be underscored that in the final analysis, our Assembly is not only a service to the Church’s task of responding to the *social issues of our time*; it also has a *very important theological dimension*. That is, each one of you is important and deserves a great deal of care, for everyone is called upon to make his or her contribution, often through personal sacrifice, in shaping the Oikonomia or *Economy* of God.

So, we have to seriously consider the possibilities which this Sabor offers toward a constructive discussion of certain *fundamental ecclesiological questions* affecting our unity. We in the Western Diocese, will always be pleased to do our part in taking this *theological task* seriously in our effort to refresh our ecclesiastical organization, because we believe that dogmatic teaching (Truth) is the solid foundation for a lasting and God-pleasing unity among us.

America is a country longing for the Living Truth embodied in the Orthodox Church, mostly because of the negligence of the ontological question in the cacophony of its fragmented, individualized, technologized life, drowning as it does the Divine summons to communion and relation. Orthodoxy as Church, speaking *with one mouth and one heart*—within each jurisdiction, and all together—is able to offer that which is most needed: the fragrance of ecclesial con-celebration, a harmonized witness, a certainty of blessing of faith—in one word: a cross-resurrectional *testimony* to the True Life. That is the primary mission of the newly formed Assembly of the Orthodox Canonical Bishops in North and Central America.

7. Finally, I do anticipate its fruits, which should not be irrelevant to us or other Churches here in North and South America. We should, therefore, never be completely satisfied until our decisions on practical matters also reveal their broader significance for the life of the world. Only by an empathetic approach to the anxieties, sufferings, and problems of others, i.e., the neighbor of the Gospel, can we effectively bring the theory (theoria) of the new reality of inter-Orthodox relations on this continent to the light of the day.

Let us hope that in this *perichoretic* interpenetration the Faithful will feel the fresh waves of vitality through the episcopal expression of the common voice of the Orthodox Church on the American continent.

I ask you to be assured of my cordial greetings and fraternal regard for all of you. May God, who has begun a good work in us, bring it to completion. Amen.

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