

THE ROLE OF LAITY IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Victor Hetmanczuk

May 29, 2008 Toronto

Thank you for inviting me to speak this evening at the annual meeting of the Order of St. Andrew –combined Toronto and Long Branch Chapters. In light of the Special Sobor that UOCC will be holding this August in Saskatoon, it is incumbent to understand Laity's special role when it comes to monitoring order and truth in the Orthodox Church

My goal this evening is to challenge you to start a dialogue among the Laity in Canada about what direction UOCC should take in the next 10 years so we are still a united growing UOCC on our 100th anniversary in 2018.

The first topic could be:

Are we the Ukrainian Orthodox Church **of** Canada (as per the 1929 Charter)
or

Are we the Ukrainian Orthodox Church **in** Canada (as per the Ukrainian version of the Statute in 1951)

The implications of just one word: “**of** ” or “**in** ” are vitally crucial for determining what direction the By-Laws will take.

We are either an Independent stand alone Orthodox jurisdiction in Canada or the Canadian branch of some other external Orthodox jurisdiction.

Now let us will turn to the main item of my talk today:

The word for “**laity**” comes from “**laos**” or the “people of God”.

The Vision of UOCC (adopted at the 2000 Sobor) states as follows:

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada , by clearly communicating Her teachings and values to us, Her Faithful, as individuals and as a community, will foster an environment of love and caring that will challenge us to pursue our fundamental human calling of deification (obozhennia/theosis) - the process by which human persons grow God-like. Thus, together we may become” a chosen generation, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy nation, His own special people, that (we) may proclaim the praises of Him who called (us) out of the darkness into His marvelous light... “ (1 Peter 2:9)

We become members of the Royal Priesthood through the Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation. Everyone – Laity, Clergy and Bishops are equal at the beginning of their spiritual journey here on Earth.

In Christian doctrine, the Church is the assembly of all the people who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior: clergy and laity; men and women; young and old; rich and poor; whatever their language, color, or ethnic origin; whatever their rank in society or their station in life. St. Paul says, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:2).

Everyone is called forth or summoned to join the Church and to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In fact, the Greek noun *ekklesia* is derived from the Greek verb *ekkalein*, which means to call forth or to summon. Although everyone is called to join the Church and assemble in the name of Jesus Christ, not everyone leads the Church. Jesus Christ as founder and head of the Church chose only twelve apostles as leaders, and they in turn chose others as the need arose; in later generations others still were chosen in apostolic succession by the laying on of hands — and continue to be so chosen to this day: by the divine grace of the Holy Spirit they are ordained as deacons and priests, and consecrated as bishops.

The clergy of the Orthodox Church are chosen to lead the believers, but they do not constitute the Orthodox Church. They are an important part of the Orthodox Church but they are not the whole Church; the other important part of the Orthodox Church is the laity. Without the laity, there is no Church; and without the clergy there is no Church either. Both laity and clergy are needed to constitute the Church; they are both needed to form the assembly of the people who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; they are both needed to build up the body of Christ. St. Paul says, "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment [the preparation] of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

The role of the clergy in the Orthodox Church is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to strengthen faith in the hearts of the people in the community, and to confirm them in righteousness and saintliness. Their role is to guide the religious community, defend its faith against detractors, and lead those who go astray back to the Truth. Their role is to preserve the teachings of Jesus Christ, maintain the apostolic tradition, and perpetuate the faith until the second coming of Jesus Christ. Their role is to minister to the spiritual needs of the community through regular prayer and through the sacraments and, inasmuch as spiritual needs are related to bodily needs, their role

also is to care for the social wellbeing of their community and its unity and prosperity.

The first role of the laity is to keep the faith, maintain the beliefs of the Church, sustain its traditions, observe its practices and rituals, and in every perfect manner persist in a spiritual life pleasing to the Lord in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Furthermore, the role of the laity requires that its members support one another as one body of believers; they should help one another, give guidance and advice to one another; and in every good way, they should act as members of one body feeling the pain of the other members, rejoicing in their joy, and expressing full solidarity with one another in words and in deeds.

In order to perform their role in the best manner, the laity needs to organize themselves in groups with specific functions, depending on the necessities of the society in which they live. They can establish and run Sunday schools and Bible study groups; they can organize and operate educational institutions, colleges, and schools; they may form charitable associations to care for the poor and the homeless, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the lonely, the sick, the suffering, and the prisoners, to minister to the aged and the handicapped, and to look after the health and social needs of their community and others; they can found social clubs to create venues for their members to meet one another, and places to find social entertainment, cultural betterment, athletic and youth activities. They may start publications such as church newsletters or journals to discuss community problems, to highlight public issues of concern to their members, and to foster the good of the community and give it a sense of unity and purpose.

In short, the laity's role is to watch for the well-being of the Church as an assembly of people who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This role includes the duty to see that the Church is well served by the clergy. This duty is a great responsibility because the clergy need theological education prior to ordination, they need to be financially supported after ordination and enabled to represent the Church with dignity.

This is why it is important that the laity participate in the administration of the Church and help their bishop in his regional responsibilities and their priest in his local obligations.

The laity must play the key role in the administrative and financial conduct of Church affairs at both the National, diocesan and local level.

The laity are not second class Christians who only “pay, pray and obey”.

In Canada, the laity must be on watch for any deviations to the original principles established by the pioneers of UOCC in 1918.

- This church shall be in communion with other Eastern Orthodox Churches and shall adhere to the same dogmas and the same church rites.
- The priests shall be married.
- The church property shall belong to the congregations and such congregations shall manage it.
- All bishops shall be elected by general church council, composed of priests and delegates representing church congregations and brotherhoods.
- The congregations shall have the right to engage and discharge priests.

In sum, the laity should be alert to the well-being of their Church. If Church leaders stray, the role of the laity is to criticize those leaders and call for redress. They should voice their opposition to such misguided Church leaders nationally and internationally, in local Church councils and in ecumenical Church circles.

When doing so, they are only following the example of Jesus Christ, who rose against the misguided Jewish leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem, against the chief priests, the scribes, and Pharisees, the Sadducees and all the Jewish religious establishment and those who cooperated with it. Jesus Christ taught the people, saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mark 11:17).

It is still not clear from the proposed Bylaw changes what the canonical status is of UOCC. Should we care?

The word **canonical** is just a word and if correctly used for the right reasons, does carry weight but unfortunately it is often misused by those who wish to impose their ecclesial politics on another jurisdiction.

When this word is used rightly, it makes reference to the correct way or ways that a jurisdiction conducts its affairs, e.g. **canonical age** makes reference to the age one must be before he can be ordained and serve in a specific manner within the Church. A **canonical act** is when a Bishop disciplines a member for disobedience to the laws of the Church, or when he might make a parish or parochial assignment.

What might appear to be canonical to one may not be the same to another.

So all Orthodox jurisdictions, that follow apostolic teachings, customs, canons, and preach the one faith of Christ God, having proper orders, are canonical.

Which law from the early Ecumenical Councils exists that says: you are only canonical if you are a member of SCOBA (Standing Conference of (Canonical) Bishops in the Americas)? This group was set up in 1960 only by the Greek Orthodox Church – by invitation. If we are now under the **canonical protection** of the Ecumenical Patriarch, why is UOCC still not attending the sessions?

Are we still in the Twilight Zone?

There have been 14 Ecumenical Councils called – but only Canons from Seven have survived intact. The others were rejected by the Laity of the time. Each Council was called by a Lay person – the Emperor – not by a Patriarch

When will the next Ecumenical Council be called and by whom? Who will set the agenda? Will UOCC be allowed to take part? Will laity be allowed to take part and have a meaningful role in the final decision making process?

Changes to jurisdictions of the Orthodox World are happening at a very rapid rate.

The most recent one is the proposed reunification of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Recently four priests of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America's (ROEA) Joint Dialogue Commission (JDC) presented a plan to the OCA's Synod of Bishops meeting on May 14th whereby the ROEA would leave the jurisdiction of the OCA in the near future. The plan envisions the 80 + parishes of the ROEA uniting with the 40 + parishes of the much smaller Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of the Two Americas (ROAA). The new "Romanian Exarchate" would have "optimal autonomy" under its own elected Metropolitan but would receive its chrism from Bucharest, not Syosset.

In canonical affiliation with the OCA for the past 38 years (and for a decade prior to that with the Metropolia) the ROEA move comes less than three months after commissioners from the Episcopate met with representatives from the Romanian Orthodox Church in Bucharest, and less than four months after the new Patriarch of Romania, Daniel (Cibotea), was elected.

What, or rather who, is pushing this move to leave the OCA? At the top of the list is the new Patriarch who has affirmed that it is his responsibility, or rather *duty*, to provide for all Romanian Orthodox who so desire to be served by Bucharest, no matter where they find themselves throughout the world, or in whose canonical territory. The Romanian Church recently re-established itself in Moldova, although that country's Orthodox parishes have been under the protection of the Moscow Patriarchate for the past seventy years. Ironically, the new Patriarchate's rhetoric parallels that of the Moscow Patriarchate itself, who has been busy

establishing Russian parishes throughout the world, such as in Finland, to the consternation of the local autonomous Church of Finland.

The Romanian Patriarchate is so determined to see the reunification take place, that he has written to his own Archbishop in America, Archbishop Nicholae of the ROAA, that should the proposed 'reunion' fail to take place by this July, the Patriarchate will establish yet another jurisdiction in the United States as a place where all those who wish to be an autonomous part of the Romanian Church may do so - even if this means gutting both the ROEA and his own existing ROAA.

So much is happening in the Orthodox World at the moment that a more prudent approach would be for the UOCC Consistory to slow down the approval process of the proposed bylaws until 2010. This will give us time to evaluate the changes that will occur in Ukraine among the various Orthodox jurisdictions in the next two years.

Having a meaningful discussion about our future direction will be beneficial to the psyche of the UOCC and stop a potential split of the Church into West and East factions.

We must leave the Sobor united.

The Church is not a democracy, in the common sense of the word, but it is more than a democracy because it is a communion of souls. It requires a deeper involvement of its members in its well-being. If in political democracy the people should remain alert to the acts of their leaders, in the spiritual communion of the Church the people should be even more alert to the acts of their leaders because, by being so, they are alert to the Truth who is Jesus Christ Himself.

Thank you for your attention and let the debates begin!!!

-----30-----

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author solely; and do not represent the opinions of the Order of St. Andrew, the St. Volodymyr Cathedral in Toronto or the UOCC Foundation.