

## **Prospects, part 2: Bad News before the Good**

*Note: at the OCA Midwest Diocese Priests' Convocation in Chicago this past week, 3 presentations were made. They are posted herewith --*

1. *Prospects, part 2: Bad News before the Good*
2. [Prospects, part 3: the American Genius](#)
3. *Prospects, part 4: the American Gospel -- Orthodoxy at the End of the Sawdust Trail*

*"[Prospects, part 1: Ebb Tide](#)" is a sort of prequel to Parts 2 through 4. Parts 3 and 4 are coming, but haven't emerged from the editing and self-censuring (errr, that would be "censoring") pen.*

### **Bad News before the Good**

Your Eminence, Reverend Fathers, Clergy and Faithful: Glory to Jesus Christ!

Thank you for your kind invitation. I am honored for this privilege of speaking to you today on Orthodox evangelism and the modern American society.

Some of you know that I grew up in the revivalist part of Protestantism. We were rightly named, as my father's church put on two revivals every year, consisting of nightly evening services that lasted for one to two weeks.

We had a strange expression that involved those services. It was "the saw dust trail." It stood for the invitation or the "altar call" that was issued by the evangelist at the end of the service, in which sinners were called to come forward to the front to pray and take Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.

We called that walk up the aisle the sawdust trail because in the old days, revivals were held outside under a tent. Sawdust was put down on the ground to keep it from getting too muddy. Hence, "sawdust trail" became a symbol of "finding religion," hearing the Gospel and getting saved.

That was a long time ago, and we Orthodox were very far away – at least most of us were. That expression, "sawdust trail" seems so odd for us who are used to incense and iconostases.

Today, I'd like to think with you for a while on what it means to bring the Gospel to America as the Orthodox Church. We are going to start out reflecting on the meaning of the Good News in the context of the particular Bad News that America knows all about.

Then we will have a strange talk on the distinctiveness of the American religious consciousness. I like to call this the "American Genius," and I believe that we must know more about this genius in order to evangelize the people it represents.

And finally, we will wrap up our talks on just what it means to present the Orthodox Gospel to that American Genius.

To start off, I'd like to ask this question:

Has Orthodoxy arrived in America? And has America arrived in Orthodoxy?

We can say yes to both questions, in a way. There are many Orthodox Christians in this country, and there are many more parishes now than there used to be. There are seminaries, magazines, internet communities, organizations and even controversies that serve (at least) to make us more self-conscious. Admittedly, there are not enough monasteries, but now, at least, we have a nice translation of the Scriptural Canon.

In another way, no, for it has not yet arrived completely. Orthodoxy disembarked on these American shores in a piecemeal fashion. It was not like the deliberate mission of Sts. Cyril and Methodios to a single culture. The coming of the Orthodox Gospel to this land has been more a complex series of introductions to various settings and groups of people. In Alaska, the mission was deliberate and apostolic. On the east coast, however, waves of immigrants arrived, feeling the necessity of the Church keenly, and frequently establishing and building their own missions without much support or guidance.

The arrival of Orthodoxy in America is an ongoing process of introduction that is far from over. Sts. Cyril and Methodios, as did all the Apostles, established the fullness of the Christian faith at the very heart of their destination. For St. Paul, this obviously meant Athens and Rome. For the American Orthodox Christian, however, this destination remains unknown. We probably know more about America than we did a century ago. But we do not know nearly enough, not yet.

“America” is a term that defies capture. It is an elusive word, like a greased pig. Fall upon it, squeeze it, and it shoots through your arms.

So just what, for our purposes, is “America”?

Is "America" the new New Rome? For many reasons, America is the center of the world's agora. America is the place of worldwide commerce and the global “commercial culture” – this truly is the real name and character of the culture in which we now live. Whatever the term “globalization” means, the meaning of that term must be anchored in this nation, as we are being blamed not only for Hollywood all over the world: now we are blamed also for the excesses of Wall Street. The America of Madison Avenue, Hollywood, Silicon Valley and the chattering news is, whether we like it or not, the "America" the world thinks it knows: "first world" nations in Europe and Asia may huff and puff about this juvenile, sophomoric culture, but despite its complaints, the world has become this American brand of secular commercialism whether it likes it or not: nobody will stop buying at WalMart or eating at the Golden Arches.

And even in this economic Ice Age, I should add that the latest profit figures from the fast food companies are looking very good indeed.

Unfortunately, that base culture is the very thing taken as "America" even by Orthodox Christians – who, of all people, should know better. This misapprehension or "debasement" of America produces a number of evangelistic confusions, or worse, "missionary shipwrecks." On hand there are misbegotten entrepreneurial forms of evangelicalism that litter our highway with unfortunate billboards like "Got God?" instead of "Got Milk?" Or -- a classic from the 1970's -- "Godweiser," instead of the malt product from St. Louis. And my personal favorite that once stood over the Parkway into Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle: "Tired of the Old Church? Try Jesus Instead."

But we are accustomed to these deployments from the evangelical school of church growth advertising.

The mistake that is more likely for us is a "substitutionary mission ethic," where not only the old country faith is proclaimed, but also old country devices like language, ethnic custom and political agenda are packaged confusedly with doctrine. The result is that the usual American who is, in reality, unchurched (despite whatever protestant exposure he has accumulated) will assume that the Trinity must be some Eastern European or Mediterranean invention, instead of the crucial foundation of human life that it is.

The America that is described by commerce and politics can never become our missionary destination, and cannot be the aim of the Gospel. In other words, the American genius is not to be found in Washington DC or in New York ... certainly not on Wall Street, Madison Avenue or in Hollywood. This sort of America is easy to be criticized, and easy to be hated. But it is an America that exists only on glossy pages, cardboard and on TV screens. It is a cliché, a production of smoke and mirrors.

It seems to me that this deceptive facade of America has been responsible for the unsettling and the overthrow of many evangelistic plans. One may look to the sorry state of the Dobson enterprise, which started out as a decent resource for childrearing, but stands now as one of the jostling mouthpieces of the remnants of the Moral Majority on the political scene. One may also look at the constant rise and fall of televangelists like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Benny Hinn, and Robert Tilton.

They were only doing what their consultants told them to do in the Church Growth Seminars: "it doesn't matter so much what you preach -- what matters is how you preach it and the experience you provide."

More importantly, they were only doing what their own *religion* demanded: the Gospel, for them, is only a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their own personal, individualized Lord and Saviour. This is the famous old Baptist doctrine of "soul competency," in which the individual -- not the Church, not the family or parish or fellowship -- walks with alone with Jesus in the forty days after the Resurrection. He

never ascends and reigns in the Millennium. He stays, and the individual has God all alone to himself.

Some of you remember the old revival song, "I come to the valley *alone* while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on *my* ear, the Son of God discloses: And He walks with *me* and He talks with *me*, and He tells *me* I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there *none other* has ever known."

The goal, then, for American revivalists, from the very likeable Billy Graham down to the less reputable "name it, claim it, lay your head on the TV screen so I can lay my televised hand on you" televangelists (some of whom are in trouble for having golden commodes) -- the goal for American revivalists is to get Americans to sing this song: which is a song of personal salvation ... alone-ness with Christ, a release from this worldly vale of sorrows in an envelope of individualized ecstasy ... a song which is a thirst for experience at the expense of Trinitarian meaning and Incarnational dogma ... a hunger for affirmation at the cost of repentance, sacrament and communion ... a demand for up-to-date-ness, novelty, being brand-new at the complete dismissal of Tradition.

Let us try to think differently of the place we want to go. Let us lay aside, at the nonce, the earthly cares of administrative unity, or autocephaly, or autonomy, or the American Patriarchate. Let us think of these shores, and what and who lie between.

It is possible to think of America without WalMart or CNN, without assaulting the land or its people with plastic templates, corporate charts and partisan colored maps.

Indulge me, then, with a little sentimental journey:

I love America, but I do not put my trust in mortal princes, or parties, or new management techniques, or shiny business designs. I am fervently patriotic because my country shines through my father's arms. I hear him singing about the little brown church in the vale from his pulpit at revival meetings, cutting grass in June and eating hot dogs in July at minor league baseball parks. I disagree over and over with politicians and I am petulantly bored with every political party (both parties signal the first decline of patriotism into boorishness, and soon become a systematic rejection of classic and civic education). But I imbibe American history and her literature, and love the people and the land. I grow sentimental when I sing "America the Beautiful," even though my voice cannot range the rigor of the "Star-Spangled Banner." I read, like Chesterton did, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* whose pages are chock-full of Americans busy at planting, plowing, piloting barges and driving teams, cooking on hot stoves and picking corn. I read the mystic sonorities of natural law, family and the ages in the images of Faulkner's *Big Woods*. I join the throngs at football and baseball games and note, in its sublimity, the myriad display of a single, fractured human nature, whose persons are known to and called each one by the Word to participation in Triune Grace.

I mention this personal excursus because I have found these ways helpful in my search for America, and the place where Orthodoxy must go. The Orthodox Church is “here” without having yet “arrived.”

The American language that Orthodoxy *does* speak already is really the gross tongue of “television American.” It does not yet know the grammar of the back yard, the church parking lot, or the town or union hall. We Orthodox, in our Greek-ness and Russian-ness or whatever-ness, are too practiced at looking upon the *hoi polloi* as just so many bumpkins. We either follow the mainline tradition of trampling down the grass roots and taking up the ghastly modernistic tongue of academic crusade against blue-collar, hill-billy piety. Or, if we're still Christian, we adopt a Greek or Russian accent, and preach Orthodoxy as if it were a new alternative (and very chic) ethnicity, and present it in a fashion that is most calculated to throw down the maximum number of obstacles and scandals in front of your usual truckdriver who listens to Willie Nelson, your retail associate who walks down the Mall texting on her iPhone, your burger-flipper who spends his days at Burger King and his nights on meth or ecstasy or whatever's in his neighbor's medicine cabinet, or your Dilbert-reading telemarketer, trapped for life in a cubicle.

When these people respond to the call, “In the fear of God, with faith and with love come forward,” they need to fear only God, and not how scary, or offensive, or scandalous, or incomprehensible, we are.

The Gospel means “good news” ... the main reason why America has not heard the Orthodox Gospel of repentance and *theosis*, of Trinity and Incarnation, is not because the Gospel is in any way deficient, nor is it because we Orthodox do not have the Gospel, because we do ... but only because we have not yet come to America ... we are here, but in many ways, we are still immigrants from the Old World to the New ... we have not yet arrived at the center of America

I think we need to “get there.” And to make that journey, we need to comprehend the American “need” for the Gospel. If we were to experience a “Macedonian vision“ like that of St. Paul's, what would an American say beyond “Please help us”? Just why is the Good News so good for an American? I think historically we have answered that question in particular for the Roman and the Greek, for the European and, perhaps, to other ethnic groups in other lands. But oddly enough, it may turn out that this question was never really answered for the American.

Why is the Good News so good for an American? The American himself certainly doesn't know the answer to this question. And he is demonstrating that ignorance by his departure from the Protestant and Roman Churches in droves. According to [the US Religious Landscape Survey of 2008](#), the fastest growing religious group today, by far, is not the Pentecostals, the Baptists, the Moslems or the Mormons. It is a group that counted for less than 5% back in 1972. Now it counts for 16% of all adult Americans (as compared to 1.7% for Mormons, 0.6% for Muslims, and, for our particular interest, 0.6% for Orthodox). This group, growing faster by leaps and bounds than any other religious

group, is called “unaffiliated.” They are neither for Church or God or against Church or God. They simply don’t care: and in my mind, that is worse than honest atheism. At least an atheist respects belief enough to reject it: the unaffiliated don’t even believe in *belief*.

In the next presentation, we will look more closely at this Unaffiliated group, and their particular message for Christianity. So stay tuned.

Why is the Good News so good for an American? We Orthodox do not know, yet. Maybe it would be helpful to look at the bad news first. What is it about the American Bad News that makes the Orthodox Good News so good?

There is no doubt that “bad news” can be found in spades, all over the compass and in various lines of analyses.

Let’s take a quick tour of the morning news (probably not in print form, since we are told that the city newspaper is fast on its way toward becoming a thing of the past).

The *demographic* forecast is pretty dire. Mosques are popping up in well-known places, and population forecasts look like a replay of the eighth century. But Mormons are even more numerous, and are just as expansive in demographics, and are even better placed in the military and the intelligence apparatus of the country. Besides, Christians are never called to fight religious foes for the sake of religion. There is only one thing to do about scary Assyrians, Muslims, Mormons or secularists, and that is to repent and pursue deification. The prophets would add something, doubtless, about justice: taking care of the poor, suggested Amos, is the best way of tackling the Assyrians.

The *economic* picture looks bleak enough, and we don’t need to dwell on it. You’re here on retreat, after all, and so we don’t need to attempt a dubious impression of CNBC or Jim Cramer. Besides, recessions and depressions do not sufficiently explain the current “Bad News for Modern Man,” or for America.

The *geopolitical* outlook is another negative forecast. It is now a commonplace to worry about old enemies like Russia again. Venezuela and Hugo Chavez are the new Nicaragua and Cuba. Every day, pundits mutter darkly about India and China growing in power, and taking world preeminence away from America.

But is that the “bad news” that the Gospel overturns? If we thought so, then we would be making the same mistake made by the Zealots of old Palestine – they and many others assumed that the Messiah’s Gospel should have been all about a liberation movement, at least a “consciousness-raising” political struggle. The Preaching of Christ during Holy Week made it very clear that the Gospel went beyond the material goals of both capitalists and Marxists, of both the politically advantaged and the economically depressed.

How about the always depressing topic of *moral decline*? This subject is always good for a blog post or a cranky sermon. It was everything I could do to resist ranting about the

lady who gave birth to octoplets, after having 6 children already, all under the age of seven. Even now, in this discussion of contemporary American Orthodoxy, it is a near-overwhelming temptation to launch out on a jeremiad on the decline of morals: the constant rejection of natural law by society ... the constant decay of marital stability ... the rise of sexual activity outside of the bounds of heterosexual marriage – especially in the adolescent population ... the material greed of corporate captains and consumers alike that has landed this nation in its present economic miasma, filled with corporate dinosaurs flailing about in the LaBrae tarpits of bailouts and bankruptcies.

But is that that Bad News? We generally stop here at this level of analysis and say “yes.” But today, I say “no.”

Frankly, we’d be hard pressed to tell people celebrating the breakdown of natural law that they are worse off. Anyone who has ever worked with chemical dependency and sexually active youth knows that it’s no use telling a sinner that sin is miserable. No, it is not: the aftermath of sin certainly is – the wages of sin is death, after all. But in the mean time, there is fun and games, “eat drink and be merry” and all that.

In order to appreciate the particularities of proclaiming the Orthodox Gospel to Americans, who are busy “marrying and giving in marriage in the mean time, as in the days of Noah,” we must explore the depths of the Bad News that Americans understand so well ... especially late at late at 3 am, in the dark when the house is quiet but the mind is loud with the clamor of anxiety, complaints, and dread about the end of days. At this pre-dawn moment when the night is darkest and most heart attacks occur, every American knows that we stand at a watershed and a turning point, when one age is evaporating into history and nostalgia, and another age is taking its place.

As Philip Rieff notes in his great work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, we have already made a departure from the Judeo-Christian culture of Christendom, and we have entered a culture that is purely therapeutic. Rieff sees Sigmund Freud as the architect of this new order, in which man no longer strives for “the good, sane life,” but at “better living” – an objective that is much less than the once-noble aims of the West, much more debased than the anthropology of Orthodox dogma.

“Psychological Man” has now replaced “Philosophical Man”: the ideals of culture no longer have the power to impress their design into the character of a modern life. It used to be that culture transmitted the truths of at least Natural Law into the hearts of its children: this is no longer the case. Virtue has been replaced by “value.” And whatever is of value is whatever contributes to the well-being of the individual. Real “faith commitments” – i.e., the kind that are summed up by “taking up one’s Cross in self-denial” – are impossible for “psychological man.” Religion is good only insofar as it is valuable, as in: will it help me feel better? ... will religion make me more comfortable? ... what’s in it for me?

In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch extended Rieff’s grim pronouncement: the narcissistic personality was not that of an inflated egoist (like Trump

or Napoleon) whose self-love had reached astronomical proportions, but the narcissist is really that of the insecure soul who lacks the very requisites of selfhood. In this sort of deep, psychic insecurity, there is no possibility for real fulfillment or happiness. As Rieff wrote of this chilling prospect, the modern individual in the therapeutic culture “finds himself buried incredibly deep in a night he never consciously desired” (Rieff, *Triumph*, xxx).

In other words, the American – in his genius, in the national consciousness – already knows the bad news of sin, and he already knows the dread of the Last Day and the Hades that is leading up to it.

It is not enough to list sins and sinfulness, especially as there is no end to this particular professional and clerical hobby. I certainly can keep myself awake, with my attention on caffeinated edge, with Internet reports of Chlamydia and STDs increasing geometrically in retirement villages like Sun City in Phoenix. Or with reports on pornography consumption in private homes, coast to coast, with no shame from having to go to red-light districts downtown: now, all you have to do is get up late at night when everyone’s asleep and download the latest from the cyber-den of the Web. Or with reports of a majority of children in America, nowadays, who are growing up in confused, blended homes, with sets of parents, step-parents, caretaking grandparents and guardian ad litem.

It is not enough to be sad and despairing at the trouble around us. Our country, the nation that calls us in the Macedonian vision, has looked to religion for comfort and advantage, and that religion – whatever it was – has failed them. And her citizens find themselves “buried incredibly deep in a night they never consciously desired.”

In my old secular day job, before I was ordained, I served as a counselor in an adolescent psychiatry ward. I got my fill of dangerous, conduct disorder delinquents who beat up other kids, who tortured animals, raped and abused other children and who set fire to sheds and trailer homes.

I played an awful game those days. It was “Find the Deadbeat Dad.” The awful part of this game was that we frequently found him, and it was never very hard. We found him – or Social Services found him – sitting sprawled and plastered on a beatup Lazy Boy, beer-stained T-shirt, watching ESPN on his widescreen TV, his trailer ceiling leaking rain from the firehoses the night before.

The only difference money and education made was the size of the Lazy Boy and the condition of the room. The loss of discipline, the eclipse of Tradition, the betrayal of spouse and the abandonment of children, the long drawn out abortion of American childhood, was always, always the same.

But it is not enough to shake one’s head at a drunkard in a trailer park: what must needs be is an Orthodox parish that can teach the *son* of that drunkard, an unwed boy with children of his own how to grow up, finally, and become an Orthodox man. For it will soon be that the only way a boy can become an American man is through Orthodoxy: so

it will be for a girl to become a lady, a house to become a home, a social security number to become a Christian citizen, a pensioner to become an American Saint.

And God knows we need more of these.

It is this loyalty, this old-fashioned love of people and the land, and this devotion to the native Natural Law written in America's past and her majestic landscape that stand, as the man from Macedonia, as the modern call to the Orthodox Church: "Come and help us!" It is this love of the American people and the American land that the Orthodox Church must travail toward before the Church can lead American sinners to Jesus.