

SUNDAY OF THE HOLY FATHERS OF THE FIRST SIX ECUMENICAL COUNCILS
“We do not have a lasting city in here, but we seek the one which is to come”

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil’s Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY 12189, July 16, 2023

At the OCA All-American Council in Atlanta in 2015 (at which I was present), Archpriest John Parker, who became Dean of St. Tikhon’s Seminary in 2018, posed a question to the chairman of the Assembly, who had served as a career chaplain in the US Army. Fr. John’s question, it seemed to me, was a very sensible and apropos question to pose to an Orthodox chaplain. Fr. John asked, “What are we doing to protect the dignity of our women with respect to front-line battle?” The career chaplain proceeded to parrot American secular “religion.” His response would have seemed fine if it came from a secular US Army chaplain, but it was incongruous and missed the mark coming from an Orthodox priest, whether or not he had served as a military chaplain. The chairman of our OCA Council began his response by taking the microphone and saying, “First and foremost, this is America.”¹ St. Paul points out in his epistle today that for Christians, first and foremost our homeland is the Kingdom of Heaven, and *not* whatever earthly nation we happen to abide in, including the United States of America. In his written dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Ministry, Fr. Parker points out that nowadays the statement “This is America, Father” often trumps the statement “We are Orthodox Christians.”

Christians may be found living in virtually every nation on the earth. St. Paul exhorts us to obey and respect the laws and customs of our land.² In other words, we should be good citizens. First and foremost, however, St. Paul teaches us that our energies should be primarily directed towards being good citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. The former citizenship is temporary and passing. The latter will last for eternity. Christians serve their respective nations in mostly all walks of life and professions. Conflict arises only when we are expected to behave in a manner which contradicts or challenges our faith in Christ. It has been like this since apostolic times. Today, the tension between Christianity and contemporary American and European culture and lifestyle has reached exponential proportions as society divests itself more and more from traditional Christian beliefs. Orthodox Christians, you can say, follow two constitutions. They follow the constitution of the land, but first and foremost they follow the “constitution” of the Kingdom of Heaven. St. Paul likens us to sojourners in a foreign land. Christians virtually everywhere endure all manner of hardships, because our way of life in so many ways contradicts what is considered to be “normal” and acceptable in society. Christians do not make demands on the earthly authorities. St. Paul points out that God allows them to rule. We should try to be good and grateful citizens, but our humble obedience ceases when doing so would cause us to betray or to deny our Savior.

We marry the same as everyone else, but we are faithful to our husbands and wives. We do not foster hatred and division, but we return hatred with love, for we love all mankind. We do not boast about our achievements, but we repent for our sins. Our goal in life is not to amass earthly treasures, but instead to seek the spiritual treasures that “moth and rust cannot consume” (Matthew 6:19). We prefer to share and to give to others rather than to receive for ourselves. In today’s epistle reading from St. Paul, we heard that “We do not have a lasting city in here, but we seek the one which is to come.” We do not live for earthly pleasures, but instead each of us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, carries a cross of self-denial. When we are reviled, we bless. When we are insulted, we offer respect in return. The world hates the Christians because we wage spiritual warfare against the flesh and against carnal pleasures. In an early Christian writing called the “Epistle to Diognetus” the author writes that we live in the world as in a prison, but it is the prayers and sanctity of the Christians which holds the world together. We uncompromisingly confess and live by the truth of Christ, and it is for this reason that the world hates us. You see, how the world lives and what the world believes in contradicts what is written in the Holy Gospel. We Christians abide by the Word of God and

our goal is the Kingdom on high, to which may all of us attain, by the mercy of God the Father, the love of His Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

1. See the footnote on page 18 of “Radechesis: A Radical Return to the Roots of Christian Catechism,” Doctoral dissertation by the Rev. John Edgar Parker III, 2017, St. Vladimir’s Seminary, Crestwood, NY.
2. See St. Paul’s discussion on the relationship between Christians and the civil authorities in Romans 13:1-7.

