

Starting from the end

from the series of Reflections for
The 18th All-American Council—
How to Expand the Mission
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“I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning” [Isaiah 46:9-10].

Entering New York City’s Church of Saint Nicholas for the first time on December 13, 1898, Bishop Tikhon already was thinking about how to expand the Mission: He would begin from the end. Having been greeted by the pastor, Father Alexander Hotovitzky, he stated that his personal prayer as he entered his diocese was “Thy Kingdom come,” and that “missionary work is precisely work for the coming of the Kingdom.” By starting from the end — with the proclamation of the Kingdom — Bishop Tikhon knew he was in good company, for this is how both John the Baptist and Jesus had started their own ministries and first sermons [Matthew 3:2; 4:17].

Christians are often accused of being so oriented on a future Kingdom that they miss or are disinterested in the daily needs or issues of those around them. But our focus on the Kingdom is worked out and anticipated ever more fully throughout a lifetime of daily experiences — both within our liturgical and individual communities — in which we increasingly grow in coming to “know Christ and the power of His resurrection” [Philippians 3:10] by these encounters. The Kingdom to come has already begun; it can be experienced and tasted already. It is “within” us [Luke 17:21]. It is “at hand” [Matthew 3:2; 4:17]. Our experience now is only partial and incomplete; yet, even in the world to come, we will continue to grow “from glory to glory” [2 Corinthians 3:18].

A hologram — a three-dimensional image — “allows us to view a recorded scene or object from different directions.... So even small fragments of a shattered hologram may let us see the entire scene that it records, though only from one vantage point” [*National Geographic*, March, 1984, pp. 366-367]. When appreciated this way, any moment of our liturgical and sacramental lives can bring us to an encounter with the whole journey, the whole story. Indicators and paths to the Kingdom are presented from the beginning of our lives in Christ, are reinforced at every place along the way, and are proclaimed in prayer once we have fallen asleep in Him. For Father Alexander Schmemmann, “The Church,

actualized in the sacramental mysteries, especially in the Holy Eucharist and the liturgy generally, is the experience of the world as God's Kingdom in Christ to be fully revealed in the age to come."

On the eighth day after birth, as part of the "Naming" Prayers, it is hoped that the child, "having lived according to Thy commandments, and having preserved the seal unbroken, may receive the blessedness of the Elect in Thy Kingdom." We pray that the one being baptized would be "no more a child of the body, but a child of Thy Kingdom" and "a child and an heir of Thy Heavenly Kingdom" [Chrismation Prayer]. Every Divine Liturgy begins with the words, "Blessed is the Kingdom," affirming our destination and goal — to which the congregation replies, "Amen." At the end of the Liturgy, following the reception of Holy Communion, we pray that "we may more perfectly partake of Thee in the never-ending Day of Thy Kingdom" (a hymn from the Matins of Pascha). After removing the crowns from the couple during the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony, the priest prays that they will fulfill their vocations as witnesses (martyrs) and thereby receive their crowns in the Lord's Kingdom. In the prayers offered during the celebration of the Sacrament of Ordination, the bishop beseeches God to enable the newly ordained priest to be "worthy to stand in innocence before Thy holy altar and proclaim the Gospel of Thy Kingdom." One is anointed during the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Unction for the "perfect remission of sins, and for inheritance of the heavenly Kingdom." At the end of our lives, the community asks of Christ that we may receive "the mercies of God, the Kingdom of heaven, and the remission of sins."

When every sacramental moment is recognized as an opening or portal to the Kingdom, then every place in which it is celebrated — whether in the most ornate and established parish or the most recent and simplest mission facility — can be the starting point for this encounter. It can likewise be received by every person at any point throughout his or her life. The proclamation of the Kingdom is offered to those who indeed hear it for the first time, as well as to those who have been made new by truly hearing it — for the first time.

I once learned of a clergyman who had grown despondent about the mediocre "success" of his ministry. After some soul-searching, he stood in front of the congregation and told them, "You need a new pastor. *And I want to be your new pastor.*" The work of "expanding the Mission" involves a need for new pastors and parishioners, but with some soul-searching and recommitment of our own, we can be those people.