

St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary

# THE ARCHBISHOP'S WIFE

ARCHBISHOP AFTIMIOS OFIESH OF BROOKLYN,  
THE AMERICAN ORTHODOX CATHOLIC CHURCH

AND

THE FOUNDING OF THE ANTIOCHIAN ARCHDIOCESE

(1880-1934)

by

Andrew Stephen Damick

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## Abstract

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Aftimios Ofiesh (né Abdullah Ofiesh) of Bikfaya, Lebanon, was the son of a local village priest. He showed an early tendency toward piety and enrolled in seminary. He excelled in his studies, but was known as a contentious student who often rebelled against the school authorities. This rebellious nature continued during the beginning of his ecclesiastical career as an archdeacon and later as a priest.

After immigrating to America, within a few years Aftimios became the bishop of Brooklyn under the Russian-American archdiocese from 1917 to 1930, succeeding Bishop Raphael (Hawaweeny), who died in 1915. During his time as bishop of the Syrian diocese of Brooklyn, he struggled against multiple factors attempting to divide his diocese, including a visiting bishop from Lebanon, Metropolitan Germanos (Shehadi) of Zahle. He also served as the first vicar of the Russian archdiocese.

From 1927 to 1933, Aftimios was the head of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America (also known as the American Orthodox Catholic Church), an autocephalous jurisdiction signed into existence by the hierarchs of the Russian-American archdiocese whose design was to unite multiple ethnicities and customs together in one independent church. The project spawned a periodical, *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, which only lasted for seven issues, being closed for lack of funds within its first year.

Before the new jurisdiction could form into anything substantial, support for it was withdrawn by the Russian hierarchs, especially the local primate, Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), who refused to allow the consecration of Fr. Leonid Turkevich as an assistant bishop to Aftimios, despite having elected him to the task in 1927. Aftimios was soon joined by assistant bishops, Emmanuel (Abo-Hatab) and Sophronios (Beshara). By 1930, there was open enmity between Platon and Aftimios, and the two disavowed each other's authority. In the same year, Emmanuel left Aftimios and returned to the Russian archdiocese. In 1932, Aftimios consecrated two new bishops, Joseph (Zuk) to lead Ukrainian parishes and Ignatius (Nichols) to do Western Rite work for Americans.

Aftimios eventually became so frustrated with the lack of success of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, which was recognized neither in America nor abroad, that he began to behave somewhat erratically. In late 1932, he met Mariam Namey in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and against the canons of the Church, married her in April of 1933. He soon left public life and retired in Kingston, Pennsylvania. A number of the various groups spawned or influenced by his work eventually formed together to become the Antiochian archdiocese, which fully united finally in 1975.

For my father William,  
who taught me that history matters

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings.

*Richard II*, Act III, scene ii

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To all those whose lives are touched upon in these pages and have passed from this life, most especially to the truly memorable Aftimios, may their memories be eternal. To God be all glory.

## Introduction

The life of Aftimios Ofiesh, Archbishop of Brooklyn, makes for fascinating study to the student of Orthodox Christian history. Reading the tale of the successor of St. Raphael Hawaweeny in the see of Brooklyn, watching the controversies unfold, witnessing the establishment of the first attempt at an autocephalous Orthodox Church for America, and then ultimately seeing the whole project collapse, ending in Aftimios' marriage to Mariam Namey, reveals a story perhaps worthy of novelization or even film. Yet Aftimios remains a relatively unknown figure in Orthodox history in America, a shadowy name from a chaotic period, best forgotten.

Because the Orthodox Church in North America remains uncanonically fragmented, coming to an appreciation of its history is difficult. Many conflicting agendas rule American Orthodox historiography, and even apart from the usual sorts of disagreements which historians have among themselves, writing history for American Orthodoxy often includes with it a claim to some form of primacy or jurisdiction. In recent years, some historians have attempted a more sober approach, presenting American Orthodox history in all its difficulties and ambiguities as part of the Church's common inheritance. As American Orthodox Christians come closer together to the formation of a united community, their appropriation of their common history, without the need for agendas and claims to jurisdiction, will make the picture of their history come into sharper focus.

Aftimios Ofiesh is one such figure whose legacy belongs to no particular existing jurisdiction (though it is perhaps most clearly seen in the Antiochian archdiocese). Like most American Orthodox Christians in the early twentieth century, he came to the United States as an immigrant, serving in the jurisdiction of the

Russian hierarchy present at that time. When he became the bishop of the Arabs (“Syrians”) under the Russians’ care in 1917, it was on the verge of the utter chaos which would be brought about in American Orthodoxy by the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the rise of nationalism throughout the world in the wake of World War I. The Church in America was already fragmenting, but it accelerated at the time of his consecration.

Ten years later, in 1927, with the official proclamation of the Russian synod in America, Aftimios formed the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America, also called the American Orthodox Catholic Church. With the formation and subsequent dissolution of this jurisdiction, the various threads of the tenuous tapestry which Aftimios attempted to weave scattered and reformed into some of the various jurisdictions which exist in our own day. Aftimios Ofiesh’s legacy is therefore the common property of all Orthodox Christians in America, and his call for American Orthodox unity eighty years ago is one which continues to ring in the ears of those who yearn for the overcoming of the uncanonical distortion of Church life which reigns in Orthodox America.

Where Aftimios Ofiesh, Archbishop of Brooklyn, is not entirely unknown or ignored, there are essentially two approaches that have been made in attempting to assess his life. The first is both marginalizing and condemnatory, relegating Aftimios to the pages of history, a sort of momentary blip on the radar of the student of the history of Orthodox Christianity in America. In this approach, Aftimios has no real appreciable legacy except perhaps as a cautionary tale of an ecclesiastical career gone horribly wrong. This approach is the one largely taken by historians in what may be termed “mainstream” Orthodoxy. As a result, the details of his life and ministry are scattered throughout multiple sources, and parts of his story have never been told.

The second approach is associated typically with those identifying themselves as Orthodox Christians who are outside the canonical mainstream. These believers are those who regard themselves as Orthodox yet remain often purposefully estranged from or without any historical connection to mainstream Orthodoxy. Their approach, when dealing with Aftimios, has mainly been to appropriate him as a source of legitimacy for their episcopacy's claim to apostolic succession. In doing so, these independent groups (e.g., the "American Orthodox Patriarchate," the "Russian Orthodox Church in America," the "Roman Orthodox Church," etc.) will often lionize Aftimios, some even going so far as to canonize him as a saint.

While the writer of this thesis is ecclesiastically within the mainstream of Orthodoxy in America, he will attempt to synthesize and transcend these two approaches, neither disregarding Aftimios nor canonizing him, but rather attempting a fresh examination of his life and its legacy. This thesis will also show that his spiritual and historical significance is visible beyond what may be seen with either of these two lenses. His ecclesiastical career has had a lasting impact on the community of Orthodox Christians in America, particularly in the Antiochian archdiocese, and most of it has ultimately been positive. Over time, the chaff has been sifted out from the wheat, and what remains constitutes a valuable contribution to the Church in America.

In the first chapter, we will examine the early life of Aftimios, his initial stirrings toward piety and ecclesiastical service, and how he became a priest. The second chapter will deal with his coming to America and service under Bishop Raphael (Hawaweeny), the sainted bishop of Brooklyn. The next chapter covers the arrival in America of Metropolitan Germanos (Shehadi), the consecration of Aftimios as bishop of Brooklyn, and the developing strife between the two men. The fourth chapter's scope is of the first years of Aftimios' episcopacy, his ongoing battle with Germanos, the fracturing of the whole community of

Orthodoxy in America, the formation of the “English-Speaking Department,” and the entrance of the Antiochian patriarchate itself into America. Chapter five is concerned with the establishment of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, Aftimios’ vision for the healing of American Orthodox schism. The sixth chapter treats in detail the attempt to have Fr. Leonid Turkevich consecrated as a Russian bishop for the American church. Chapter seven chronicles the dissolution of Aftimios’ jurisdiction and how he came to meet Mariam Namey, who became his wife. Chapter eight is a summarizing epilogue, tying up the loose ends of the various factions that surrounded Aftimios or were created by him, and how several of them coalesce into the Antiochian archdiocese. Following chapter eight will be a section of conclusions, further analyzing the legacy of Aftimios Ofiesh.

## Chapter I:

### Father Aftimios

Forty years before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the future Archbishop Aftimios was born on October 22,<sup>1</sup> 1880, as one of its citizens in the small Christian town of Bikfaya in the Mount Lebanon region of the Levant not far from Beirut. The sixth of ten children, his birth name was not the Greek *Aftimios* which he took later in life, but rather the Arabic *Abdullah*, a common name meaning “servant of God.”<sup>2</sup>

His father Gabriel Ofiesh<sup>3</sup> was an Orthodox parish priest in Bikfaya, where he was well known and regarded, having led a major project to demolish and rebuild the parish church in 1900.<sup>4</sup> The town was Christian, but not exclusively Orthodox. Bikfaya also had a long history of the presence of Maronite Catholics and members of the Cilician catholicosate of the Armenian Apostolic Church (one of the Oriental Orthodox churches). Both the Orthodox and the Maronites had monasteries in the town, built next to each other on the same hill, together forming a complex known as Deir Mar Elias Shuwaya.<sup>5</sup> By the time of Abdullah’s birth, the Jesuits had also had a presence in Bikfaya, dating from at least 1833.

The early years of young Abdullah Ofiesh thus found their context in a multicultural and religiously pluralistic world, much like modern day Lebanon. In his home town were at least three major groups of

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1 All dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar (“New Style”).

2 Mariam Namey Ofiesh, *Archbishop Aftimios Ofiesh (1880-1966): A Biography Revealing His Contribution to Orthodoxy and Christendom* (Sun City West, Arizona: Aftimios Abihider, 1999), 7.

3 The family name is also sometimes Latinized as *Ofeish*.

4 Father Melhem, *The Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos: Historical Background of the Parish*. (Brumana, Lebanon: Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of Byblos and Botrys (Mount Lebanon), 2006). On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.ortmtlb.org.lb/mouhaidseh.htm>, accessed 28 March 2007.

5 *Mar Elias* is the Arabic term for the Prophet Elijah. *Deir* means “place,” while *Shuwaya* is the Arabic word for “little” and is a reference to one of the names for the area in which the monastery is located, Dhour al-Shuwayr.

Christians, with Arabic Muslims and Druze in close proximity, all under the aegis of the Turkish Ottoman Sultanate. Christians, though divided, were still the majority in Lebanon in the late 19th century.

By all accounts, Abdullah showed a predilection toward piety even as a young boy. In the biography written by his widow, it is recorded that at the age of ten, when an 1890 outbreak of smallpox plagued Bikfaya and most of his family had fled to Beirut, Abdullah voluntarily returned to the town and ministered to the sick and dying along with his father, who found him in one of the houses of the sick as he was making his pastoral visits. When questioned by his father why he had returned, Abdullah said that he was concerned about all the services his father had to perform and that there was no one to help him. He also was known to give away his meager allowance to visitors to the family home, who were numerous, given the charity of Fr. Gabriel and his wife Badrah.<sup>6</sup>

With such a predisposition for piety and charity, it was no surprise when in 1891 Abdullah began formal ecclesiastical education with the permission of his father at Mar Elias Shuwaya, studying Byzantine chant. The monastery's abbot, Fr. Mattias, recognized Abdullah's vocal talent and progress in his studies, along with his desire to enter church service. The abbot thus invited him to become a novice at the monastery, which Abdullah gladly accepted. Abdullah's acceptance was made without the knowledge of his father, however, and he did not learn of his son's entry into the monastery's life until a traveling salesman witnessed Abdullah clothed as a novice at the monastery and subsequently informed Fr. Gabriel.<sup>7</sup>

Upon hearing of the impending reception of his eleven year old son into the monastic rank, Fr. Gabriel immediately ran to the monastery chapel, arriving during the service of tonsure. Before Abdullah could be tonsured, his father took him by the ear and led him to the back of the chapel.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Father John Warren Morris, "The Episcopate of Aftimios Ofesh, Part One: Archbishop of Brooklyn," *The Word*, February

service, Fr. Mattias approached Fr. Gabriel and his son to inquire regarding the former's actions during the service. Fr. Gabriel indignantly rebuked the abbot for accepting his son into the monastery without his father's knowledge or agreement. The parish priest's protestations possibly also had another basis. According to the biography written by his future wife and based on Aftimios's accounts, Fr. Gabriel said to the abbot, "I fear that if he were to live a God-fearing life, with a pure conscience, he would become your victim. On the other hand, should he deviate to the practices of you and your colleagues, I'd rather see him dead this instant!"<sup>9</sup>

After his father brought him back home, Abdullah's oldest brother Dimitri (a lawyer) and his brother-in-law (a tobacco merchant, husband of his oldest sister Tlayga) tried to convince the young man to accept secular employment, describing the many problems of the monastic life. Unable to convince him to accept secular life, the family decided in 1892 to send Abdullah to the Middle Eastern Orthodox Ecclesiastical Seminary, which had an outstanding reputation and was founded and administered by Metropolitan Gabriel (Shatila), a native of Damascus and the bishop of Lebanon and Beirut.<sup>10</sup>

The twelve year old seminarian<sup>11</sup> was apparently well-loved by his peers, and he even claimed later in life that he became a catalyst among the seminarians for ending regional rivalries.<sup>12</sup> Abdullah excelled as a student, but in time found the strictness of the seminary too confining for his expansive talents. He thus organized several of his classmates into an association meant to influence the administration of the seminary, not using a religious name for their group but calling themselves "The Young Syrians."<sup>13</sup> The

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1981, 6.

9 Ofiesh, 9.

10 *Ibid.*

11 It is still common even in the modern period for potential clergy and monastics in the Middle East to begin their theological education while still in adolescence.

12 Ofiesh, 10.

13 *Syria* at the time had a broader geographic meaning than the modern Syrian Arab Republic, founded in 1946.

society planned to produce a publication to support their cause to be entitled *Mizan al-Hakk* (“The Balance of Justice”).<sup>14</sup> The publication’s intention was to “provide a salutary climate for the development and uplifting of the students’ mental capacities and cultural horizon,” hoping that “their backward school would be upgraded to that of contemporary, higher-rated schools.”<sup>15</sup>

Abdullah and his associates put together an outline of the Young Syrians’ scheme, including “principles, objectives, and bylaws,” and submitted it for approval to the seminary’s headmaster, Fr. Musa Kattini. Kattini refused recognition of the organization and forbid Ofiesh and his friends from continuing their activities. The Young Syrians bitterly resented the rebuff, regarding it as a “tyrannical restriction,” and they “decided to disregard the suppressive, unjust decree.”<sup>16</sup> Abdullah therefore decided to work diplomatically with Fr. Musa, who finally relented to a degree and allowed them to reorganize under his supervision with the name *Al-Zahra al-Madrasiya* (“The Scholastic Flower”), adopting less radical goals and naming their publication *Al-Jadd* (“Diligence”), which frequently featured writing by Ofiesh.<sup>17</sup> Among the writings of Ofiesh published in *Al-Jadd* were poetry and essays on various topics, marked with the sentimentality and triumphalism common to the writing of young men.<sup>18</sup> With this early clash with authority and an attempt to persist in spite of rejection, “the future Archbishop showed signs of a spirit that would lead to his final rebellion against the authority of the Church.”<sup>19</sup>

Abdullah graduated in 1898, aged eighteen, as the class valedictorian.<sup>20</sup> Upon graduation, Abdullah

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14 *Mizan al-Hakk* may also be translated “The Balance of Truth.”

15 Ofiesh, 11.

16 *Ibid.*, 12-13.

17 Morris, 6.

18 In her biography of Aftimios, Mariam Ofiesh reproduces several examples which had been republished by Ofiesh’s friend and fellow seminarian, Nicholas Lawiesce. See pp. 13-23.

19 Morris, 6.

20 In her timeline of Aftimios’s life, his widow lists his graduation date as 1897 (p. 233), but in the text describing the

was offered a scholarship to study theology at the University of Kiev, but he instead chose to give it to a needy classmate and joined the staff of Metropolitan Gabriel of Beirut, the seminary's principal, who ordained him to the diaconate and made him his secretary.<sup>21</sup> He apparently had also been offered a post as administrative assistant to Fr. Musa Kattini, which he declined due to the latter's "oppression and tyrannical abuse of younger students and cruelly punitive actions against older boys."<sup>22</sup> It was upon his ordination to the diaconate that Abdullah took the name *Aftimios*, and because he was not married, according to centuries of Orthodox tradition and canon law, his ordination sealed him as a lifelong celibate.<sup>23</sup>

Two years after Aftimios's ordination to the diaconate, Gabriel died, thus releasing the young deacon from his service. In 1900 Aftimios took up secretarial service with Metropolitan Arsenios (Haddad), the bishop of the prestigious diocese of Latakia, Syria. Arsenios had been a friend of Gabriel and knew well the life at the Beirut seminary. His choice of Aftimios as his secretary was thus based on Aftimios's fine reputation as Gabriel's secretary and also his knowledge of the formation the seminary provided, in which Aftimios had excelled.<sup>24</sup> Aftimios took his new post with energy and diligence, soon earning him elevation as the metropolitan's archdeacon, the only deacon holding that rank in the diocese.<sup>25</sup>

After his elevation as archdeacon, Aftimios became Arsenios's dean and vicar, and the bishop gave him wide latitude and authority over the diocese's charitable institutions and schools, which he administered skillfully. The archdeacon regarded this post as the opportunity to pursue ambitions of reform which had

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surrounding events (pp. 23-24), the context seems to suggest 1898. In any event, Morris gives 1898 as the year (p. 6).

21 Ofiesh, 23.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Morris, 6.

24 Ofiesh, 24.

25 *Ibid.*

been frustrated at the seminary. The area was marked by significant sectarian rivalry and hatred,<sup>26</sup> and so Aftimios worked to bring peace between Muslims and Christians, even working with Melkite Greek Catholics.<sup>27</sup> He worked to address social and economic problems and also to raise educational and moral standards. His performance in his new responsibilities garnered for him a monthly stipend from the bishop's own income.<sup>28</sup>

In 1902 Arsenios ordained Aftimios to the priesthood.<sup>29</sup> The young priest's desire for reform again turned to agitation as it had in seminary, and he soon founded another brotherhood for the purpose of organizing and pursuing his aims. As he had done in seminary, he also named this society "The Young Syrians." Its reach extended even beyond the Latakia diocese, as the group extended invitations for membership to progressives in Beirut and Damascus. The Young Syrians also drew members from the newly-founded Balamand Seminary in Al-Koura, which had been founded in the wake of the closing of the seminary in Beirut, which disbanded after its founder, Metropolitan Gabriel, reposed.<sup>30</sup>

The society's membership grew quickly over a broad area, perhaps because of a nationalist appeal: "Many were stimulated by it, and fervently wished for the alliance and advancement of the Arab nations,"<sup>31</sup> which were under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. Opposition soon emerged, however, in the person of the patriarch of Antioch, Meletios II (Doumani),<sup>32</sup> who learned of the society from a student at Balamand. Metropolitan Arsenios supported Fr. Aftimios's Young Syrians, but the patriarch threatened the students at

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26 Morris, 6.

27 Historically, the Melkites represented an 18<sup>th</sup> century schism from the Orthodox.

28 *Ibid.*, 25.

29 1902 is the date Morris gives (p. 6), but the date in Mariam Ofiesh's biography is 1905 (pp. 38, 233).

30 Ofiesh, 26.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Patriarch Meletios was the first Arab patriarch of Antioch in the modern era, ending a long period of Greek domination of the hierarchy. His opposition to the nationalist activities of the Young Syrians may have been due to fears of harming relations with the other Orthodox churches in the Ottoman Empire and especially with the Turks themselves.

Balamand with expulsion and other members of the society with excommunication if they did not cease all activities and dissolve the society.<sup>33</sup>

Aftimios again bitterly resented having his designs stymied, writing to one of his friends at the time and referring to the patriarch as “that iniquitous corner,” using language again colored by nationalist sentiment: “Had a kinder fate allowed this plant to live, we would have seen it become a mighty tower sheltering a large number of the sons of ancient Phoenicia, and rousing them from their deep slumber.”<sup>34</sup> In one lugubrious passage, Mariam Ofiesh says that Aftimios was “[f]elled by this devastating blow which was dealt by ‘the rulers of the darkness of this world’ (Ephesians 6:12)” and “became ill, and was confined to his bed for a long time.”<sup>35</sup> Aftimios’s rage at the patriarch’s opposition was couched in a letter to a friend in strong terms: “I stand upon the threshold of a cruel departure, and I am pained at seeing humanity outraged while the sons of darkness conceal corruption with hypocrisy, deadening the conscience of mankind with chicanery and equivocation.”<sup>36</sup>

Aftimios attempted again a few years later to begin a reform movement, aided by his friends Alex Attalla, George and Dimitri Dumani, along with other young clergy and seminarians. Its purpose was to modernize the administration of the patriarchate and its monasteries, but also to establish graduate-level theological education in the patriarchate. At the time, Antiochian theological students had no choice but to study abroad in Greece or Russia if they desired advanced academic training in theology. Fr. Aftimios and his friends were again opposed by Patriarch Meletios with a threat of excommunication, thus ending Aftimios’s third attempt at founding a progressivist reform movement.<sup>37</sup>

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33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, 27.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 Morris, 6.

Having been deterred repeatedly by the patriarchal authorities during his five years of service in the Latakia diocese, Fr. Aftimios, “afire with zeal” and feeling “stifled in the narrow limitations of routine activities,” began to turn his thoughts across the Atlantic Ocean. He told his bishop, Arsenios, of his desire for “the *beacon of liberty* ‘beside the golden door’ of America, and his ‘yearning to breathe free’ within its shores.”<sup>38</sup> Arsenios, who had always supported Aftimios, sympathized with his vicar, giving him leave to transfer to America and offering him elevation to the rank of archimandrite.<sup>39</sup> Aftimios refused, saying that this was too high an honor for him, and prepared to depart for America. He said farewell to his friends in Latakia and Beirut, but did not return to his home town of Bikfaya to see his family, remembering his father’s strong objections to his vocation and not wanting to witness their grief at his departure.<sup>40</sup>

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38 Ofiesh, 37, italics in original.

39 It is at this point that Ofiesh on p. 38 says Aftimios accepted ordination to the priesthood instead of becoming an archimandrite.

40 *Ibid.*, 38.

## Chapter II:

### Aftimios and Raphael

On December 13, 1905, the twenty-five year old priest Aftimios arrived in New York City, having set out by boat from Beirut. As he stood on the dock, he turned back toward the Atlantic Ocean with tears in his eyes and muttered “poor, wretched Syria.”<sup>41</sup> He spent the night in a hotel and the next day presented his letter of release from Metropolitan Arsenios to Bishop Raphael (Hawaweeny) of Brooklyn,<sup>42</sup> the head of the Russian archdiocese’s North American diocese for Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians. Raphael immediately recognized the intelligence, energy and abilities of the young priest and made him his assistant and the dean of his diocesan cathedral in Brooklyn, dedicated to St. Nicholas.

Shortly after his arrival, Bp. Raphael asked his charismatic dean to go on a fund raising tour for the diocese. Funds were needed for an expensive ongoing litigation between Maronite Catholics and the Orthodox, arising from a situation in which the brother of a Maronite priest had been killed, leading at one point to the arrest and brief detaining of Raphael. Although Aftimios found distasteful both the tour and its cause, he obeyed his hierarch.

An eyewitness relates an account of one of the stops on this fund raising trip: while he was near Pittsburgh, Fr. Aftimios asked if anyone in the local community had been missed for a visit to request money, and his local guide told him that they had skipped the home of a poor widow. The guide said it would be a waste of his time, since she was incapable of contributing to the cause. Aftimios nonetheless

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<sup>41</sup> Morris, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Bp. Raphael (Hawaweeny) of Brooklyn was the first Orthodox bishop consecrated in the New World, having served as a priest there since his arrival in 1892. After his consecration, Raphael served as vicar to the Russian archbishop in North America as the head of the Brooklyn diocese from 1904 to his death in 1915. Bp. Raphael was canonized as *Saint Raphael of Brooklyn* by the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) in 2000.

insisted on seeing her, and the guide reluctantly complied. Aftimios visited with her for some time, expressed his condolences on the loss of her husband, and blessed her home and her family. After the visit, Aftimios asked his guide to loan him the train fare for his next destination, which the man felt sure would never be repaid. He later went enraged to the widow's home and apologized for the priest's behavior, saying that he had tried to prevent Aftimios from collecting money from her. She then revealed to him that shortly after their departure, she had discovered a roll of cash in her cupboard that Aftimios had left there. The embarrassed man received the money he had loaned to Aftimios in the next day's mail.<sup>43</sup>

A few weeks after the fund raising tour of the diocese, Bp. Raphael sent Aftimios on another mission on his behalf, to bring peace to the divided community in Montreal in response to an appeal by its pastor, Fr. George Mahfouz. Aftimios claimed that the division had "been incited by Father Basil Kerbawy who had cast a covetous eye on this flock while on a previous diocese mission to Canada."<sup>44</sup> It had been the case for at least a year, however, that there were two separate Syrian groups in Montreal striving to found their own church.<sup>45</sup> Because the pro-Kherbawy faction had been incapable of having Mahfouz removed (not having any valid grounds for his dismissal), they were threatening to divide the community and start their own parish in Montreal. While he was there, Aftimios also learned that Mahfouz had already been planning a return to his homeland of Syria in the near future.<sup>46</sup>

Aftimios met separately with the members of the two factions to urge them to reconcile. He pointed out that the parish had been meeting in a rented hall for services, which was evidence that the community was too poor to be able to afford dividing into two parishes. He also told the dissenters of Fr. George's

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43 Ofiesh, 42-43.

44 *Ibid.*, 43.

45 Archpriest Antony Gabriel, *The Ancient Church on New Shores: Antioch in North America* (San Bernardino, California: St. Willibrord's Press, 1996), 166.

46 Ofiesh, 43.

plan to return to Syria, which opened an obvious way to peace. Thus successful in bringing peace to the parish, Aftimios returned to Brooklyn and reported on his mission to the bishop. Mahfouz departed for Syria a few weeks later, and the parish was thus without a pastor for three months.<sup>47</sup> Aftimios's success in bringing peace to the parish was such that, after Fr. George left for Syria in July of 1906, members of both factions began sending letters to Bp. Raphael requesting that Aftimios be sent to be their new pastor.

Raphael did not immediately comply, however, as he did not wish to lose the services of his vicar in Brooklyn. Eventually, he yielded a few months later when the congregation threatened to join the Greek jurisdiction if he did not send them the priest. He thus appointed Aftimios both to pastor the community in Montreal and also to provide priestly ministrations to all the flock in Canada, meanwhile making Fr. Basil Kherbawy his assistant in Brooklyn.<sup>48</sup>

In that same year, Patriarch Meletios II (Doumani) of Antioch died. According to the account given by Mariam Ofiesh and presumably based on what Aftimios told her, before he departed from Brooklyn for Montreal, Aftimios received a telegram from one of his former classmates, informing him of the patriarch's repose. Ameen Khairallah, editor of *Al-Kalimat* ("The Word"), the diocesan publication founded by Raphael, was present when he received the telegram. He asked Aftimios why he did not then congratulate Raphael on his election as patriarch of Antioch.<sup>49</sup>

Raphael allegedly had harbored the ambition to succeed Meletios as patriarch and attempted to maintain ties to both the Antiochian patriarchate from which he originally came and the Russian church under whose jurisdiction he administered the Brooklyn diocese. This dual loyalty was expressed by

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

Raphael's commemoration of the names of both the Antiochian and Russian synods during divine services.<sup>50</sup>

Whether Raphael actually had such an ambition or took the extraordinary step of commemorating both synods in his services,<sup>51</sup> there was some ambiguity regarding his status at least from other quarters. In 1904, when Raphael was consecrated as bishop of Brooklyn by the Russian authorities in America, Patriarch Meletios sent a letter to Archbishop Tikhon,<sup>52</sup> the head of the Russian-American mission archdiocese. This letter was a formal *praxis*, a letter granting administrative authority to a bishop on behalf of his superior. The *praxis* was dated March 11, 1904, and published in May in the *American Orthodox Messenger*, probably translated by Raphael himself.<sup>53</sup> The letter granted authority for Raphael's being considered a bishop of both Antioch and Russia:

Since His Grace, Bishop Raphael, having received the grace of the episcopate through the laying-on of your blessed hands, became a bishop of our Syrian children within the boundaries of North America, and since We, together with our brothers, the Metropolitans of the Holy See of Antioch, do still consider him as a member of our body, since he comes from our midst, and we number him as one of us in faith and in virtue of his responsibilities over our Syrian children, dispersed in North America, we consider it our most important duty to send the present Patriarchal letter to you, in order to bestow our blessing, from the depth of our heart, upon that election, which occurred through the inspiration of the most Holy Spirit; and also in order to express our very deep gratitude to the Most Holy Ruling Synod of Russia which... also cares for our Orthodox children who live far from us in the Western world, thus fulfilling all the rules of Christian brotherhood.<sup>54</sup>

Archpriest Antony Gabriel, in his history of Antiochian Orthodoxy in North America, *The Ancient Church*

50 Ofiesh's account here of Raphael's alleged ambition and its liturgical expression is doubtful on two counts. First, there is no corroborating evidence to back the claim of Raphael's desire to become patriarch. Second, all other accounts of Raphael's saintly and humble character are such that Aftimios' accusations against the saint's character through the biography of his widow are without much credibility.

51 Standard Orthodox liturgical practice is to commemorate only the names appropriate to the jurisdiction under which one serves. Canonically, it is impossible to be functioning in two jurisdictions at once.

52 Archbishop Tikhon (Belavin) served as the head of the Russian-American archdiocese from 1898 to 1907. He later became the first Patriarch of Moscow in the modern period and suffered under Communist rule. He was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989.

53 Gabriel, 296, note 4.

54 Quoted in Gabriel, 172-172.

on *New Shores: Antioch in North America*, cites various archival references to Raphael's continued involvement with the affairs of the Antiochian patriarchate, "confirming the complex status of the Syrian Orthodox Church in North America."<sup>55</sup>

That this should be so is not surprising, given Raphael's lengthy campaign while in Kiev to free his homeland's patriarchate from Greek domination and to support Patriarch Meletios' election. If he had had patriarchal ambitions as Aftimios alleges, however, they would have stood in contrast to his refusal to be elected bishop of Zahle in 1901. This refusal came on the heels of two similarly declined posts in the Antiochian patriarchate, one as the auxiliary to the metropolitan of Beirut and the other as assistant to the patriarch in Damascus.<sup>56</sup> In any event, no matter what Raphael's own intentions for himself may have been, it is clear that his mission in America was "sanctioned by both Russia and Antioch."<sup>57</sup>

Raphael's intimate, ongoing connection with the patriarchate, coupled with the attitude of the patriarchate toward him, no doubt contributed to Aftimios' impression that Raphael may have desired the Antiochian throne for himself. Following on the question from Ameen Khairallah, Mariam Ofiesh relates that her husband told her of this conversation:

...Aftimios answered, "But the election is limited to the bishops of the Antiochian Diocese."<sup>58</sup>

Somewhat nettled, the bishop spoke up saying, "I am considered to be one of them in accordance with the understanding between the patriarch and me. I am momentarily expecting to receive a telegraphic formal announcement of the death of the patriarch—with a call for me to go up there."<sup>59</sup>

Aftimios's reply, "I think not," was followed by speculation that the next patriarch would be Metropolitan

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55 *Ibid.*, 198, note 11.

56 Father Andre Issa, *Our Father Among the Saints Raphael, Bishop of Brooklyn* (Englewood, New Jersey: Antakya Press, 2000), 40-41.

57 *Ibid.*, 43.

58 *Diocese* is used here in the more ancient sense, i.e., the territory of an autocephalous Orthodox church.

59 Ofiesh, 45.

Gregory (Haddad) of Tripoli, whom Aftimios had known during his service in the Latakia diocese and who was eventually elected. Aftimios then paints an unflattering picture of Raphael's alleged response:

Raphael placed the blame for his exclusion from the ranks of the Antiochian bishops on Gregorios, and tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent his election to the patriarchate. Furthermore, he publicly disavowed any loyalty to the Antiochian See, declaring total subjection to the jurisdiction of the Russian Synod.<sup>60</sup>

Aftimios's account of Raphael's character differs markedly from other contemporary descriptions, and his apparently clairvoyant prediction of Meletios' successor, recorded long after the fact, is not independently corroborated.

After this incident, Aftimios departed for Montreal and served as the pastor of St. Nicholas Church there for the next eleven years. During his pastorate, however, factionalism within the Syrian Orthodox community in Montreal resurfaced, which Aftimios again blamed on Fr. Basil Kherbawy's involvement. Kherbawy had supposedly grown bitter not only at his defeat in his activity against Fr. George Mahfouz but also at his being made Raphael's assistant, where his activities were now under close scrutiny. He also found himself in competition with the bishop for the performance of services such as baptisms, weddings and funerals, which usually carried with them substantial remuneration from the laity. He thus began writing "insidious questions to his correspondents in Montreal... renewing bigotry and rivalries for dominance and influence."<sup>61</sup>

Aftimios again attempted to calm the strife. The issue at hand was the creation of a charitable organization whose membership Aftimios wanted open to all persons of Arabic background (perhaps due to his nationalistic tendency), but his opponents preferred membership to be limited only to those of

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>61</sup> Ofiesh, 46-47.

Orthodox faith. Aftimios's idea was to merge the Orthodox Benevolent Society (limited to Orthodox Christians) and the Arab National Association. It was the members of the Orthodox Benevolent Society who objected to the merger and opposed Aftimios.<sup>62</sup> The Society had been the original founders of the Montreal parish in 1896.<sup>63</sup>

They eventually telephoned the bishop to report that Aftimios was threatening to take the parish out of Raphael's jurisdiction and into the Antiochian patriarchate. At this, Raphael summoned Aftimios to New York to defend himself against the charges, telling him that he had received numerous complaints by letter, telephone and telegram. Even the official diocesan publication, *Al-Kalimat*, had been publishing criticisms of Aftimios. The priest, after several meetings, was able to persuade his hierarch of his loyalty, blaming Kherbawy for the division, and returned to Montreal.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the endorsement of the bishop, the anti-Aftimios faction in 1908 insisted on separating from him. Thus, when the pro-Aftimios group began the legal process of incorporating the church, the other faction claimed priority to the proposed name of *St. Nicholas Orthodox Church* and took the issue to the courts. The "stormy" legal proceedings involved not only Aftimios and the two factions, but the bishop himself, along with the Russian Consul, who appeared on behalf of the Holy Synod of the Russian church. The result of the court battle was that both groups won the right to incorporate and received charters in 1910, with the pro-Aftimios group taking the name *St. Nicholas Syrian Greek Orthodox Church of Montreal* (later changed to *St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church*) and the other faction taking the name *Syrian Greek Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas of Canada*.<sup>65</sup> After the lawsuit, Aftimios raised \$14,000 to build a

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62 *Ibid.*, 46-47, 53.

63 Gabriel, 165.

64 Morris, 7.

65 Gabriel, 166.

new church. When Raphael came to consecrate the new temple, he raised Aftimios to the rank of archimandrite in recognition of his accomplishments.<sup>66</sup>

The group which disavowed Aftimios's leadership came to be pastored by Fr. Agapius Gholam, who served there until 1917. Aftimios's parish remained under the Russian authorities via Raphael, while Agapius's parish was "in the Antiochian camp," which was an ambiguous status at the time, considering that in 1910, there were as yet no bishops exercising authority in America on behalf of the Antiochian patriarchate. Kherbawy continued to insert himself "within the Montreal community and for a time there was tension between the two clergymen that Bishop Raphael was compelled to resolve."<sup>67</sup> That Raphael interceded between Aftimios and Agapius indicates that the latter probably still regarded him as his bishop.<sup>68</sup> At one point, however, Patriarch Gregory wrote to Aftimios asking for confirmation of the rumor that he and the Canadians were planning to defect to the Antiochian patriarchate, to which Aftimios sent a "swift negative reply with an unequivocal declaration of the inviolability of the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Church Synod over the Orthodox Mission in North America."<sup>69</sup>

The situation developing in Montreal, that a parish regarded itself as belonging to the Antiochian "camp," soon began to be common throughout Raphael's diocese. The kind of division in Montreal which had engendered the creation of two separate parishes with the same name came to be reflected in multiple parishes, and "many Arab-American Orthodox considered the Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus their true spiritual home. Indeed, even Bishop Raphael and his followers never totally renounced their allegiance to the ancient Throne of Sts. Peter and Paul."<sup>70</sup> The unity which Aftimios had attempted to pursue in

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66 Morris, 7.

67 Gabriel, 166.

68 There is perhaps a certain poetry to the fact that both St. Raphael and Fr. Agapius are buried in the same grave at the Antiochian Village in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. See photo in Appendix I.

69 Ofiesh, 53.

70 Morris, 7.

Montreal under the aegis of the Russian-American archdiocese was beginning to fracture in the Syro-Arab Orthodox community throughout North America.

### Chapter III: Germanos Shehadi

In 1914,<sup>71</sup> the year of the outbreak of World War I, Germanos (Shehadi), Metropolitan of Seleucia and Baalbek, the Antiochian bishop of the Archdiocese of Zahle in Lebanon, arrived in the United States. The purpose of his visit was to raise funds for an agricultural school in Zahle, in the village of Amm'iek. Bishop Raphael graciously received him and gave his blessing for him to visit the parishes of the Syrian diocese.<sup>72</sup>

Germanos was no stranger to the New World, though in the southern hemisphere, from 1895 having served as a missionary to the Arab Orthodox communities of Brazil prior to his consecration to the episcopacy in 1900. He also had been a major leader in the successful movement to return Arabs to the Antiochian patriarchal throne after 175 years of Greek predominance in the Antiochian episcopacy.<sup>73</sup> A significant number of the Syrian Orthodox in the New York area were from the Zahle region, so Germanos was well-known to much of the flock when he arrived.<sup>74</sup> This familiarity, coupled with his famously powerful and impressive baritone voice in celebrating liturgical services, endeared him quickly to the Syrian Orthodox in North America.<sup>75</sup> He was treated as something of a celebrity.

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71 Some sources list 1913 as the year Germanos came to America.

72 Ofiesh, 53-54.

73 In the Melkite schism of 1724, many of the leading Arab clergy united with the Roman Catholic Church, creating the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. The Church of Constantinople reconstituted the episcopacy of the remaining Orthodox of Antioch, supplying them with Greek clergy and with a patriarch (Sylvester) who antagonized the Arabs, increasing the size of the schism as many of them aligned with the pro-Roman faction. In time, the Greek clergy dominated the patriarchate, often refusing theological education for the native Arabs. Not until 1899 did an Arab again become patriarch of Antioch, Meletios II (Doumani).

74 Gabriel, 39.

75 In the *Byzantine Music Project* compiled by Fr. Basil Kazan and used throughout the Antiochian Archdiocese, the music for Holy Friday evening includes a setting of the famous and complex Byzantine hymn commonly called "The Stranger," sung during the procession with the burial shroud. This is the only piece of music in the multi-volume set which indicates a source: "This melody was adapted basically from an Arabic Musical Masterpiece as sung by the thrice Blessed Memory

Germanos used his influence to raise money for the project in his archdiocese in Lebanon, but he also sensed a growing unease among the American Syrian Orthodox with the care they were receiving from the Russian-American archdiocese. Their bishop, Raphael of Brooklyn, had maintained his loyalty to the Russian hierarchy which consecrated him, but he also made no secret of his filial connection with Antioch, even commemorating Patriarch Meletios and then directing for memorial services to be held for him when he died in 1906.<sup>76</sup> In this way, he was able both to maintain canonical order with the local Russian synod and to retain the loyalty of his American flock, who often did not understand why they should be under Russian authority.

As noted above, even under Raphael, there were already stirrings of a firmer reconnection of the Syrian Orthodox in America to the canonical authorities in their motherland. While the Syrian diocese was part of the Russian archdiocese in America, its clergy and laity addressed large amounts of correspondence to the Patriarchate of Antioch, even letters asking the patriarch for his advice on relatively trivial matters. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian patriarchate had provided protection and support for the re-Arabization of the Antiochian patriarchate while not encroaching on Antioch's authority in the Middle East. No doubt many Syrians in America regarded their relationship as essentially continuing on the same terms, that the Russians in America were essentially just "protectors."<sup>77</sup> The arrival of Germanos from Lebanon increased these stirrings, and as he toured the Brooklyn diocese, he encouraged the flock to think of themselves not as members of the Russian archdiocese, but rather as Antiochians.

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Metropolitan Germanos Shahade" (p. 74). Germanos' chanting ability is also said to have attracted an offer of a singing contract from the director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York (Morris, 7). He additionally made some of the first recordings of Byzantine chant in the New World and employed as his "literary mouthpiece" Fr. Seraphim Nassar, who later produced the *Divine Prayers and Services* (a.k.a. "The Five Pounder"), a landmark English service book still in use (Gabriel, 199, note 1).

<sup>76</sup> Gabriel, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Gabriel, 199-200, note 5.

When Raphael learned of Germanos' factionalist activities, he demanded their immediate cessation. As factions had formed within numerous parishes, however, many were already embroiled in litigation for control of parish properties. Raphael thus wrote to Patriarch Gregory IV of Antioch protesting Germanos' subversive activity and expecting that the patriarch would recall him to the motherland.<sup>78</sup>

The patriarch thereafter attempted to recall the wayward metropolitan several times, but with the onset of World War I and then the Russian Revolution in 1917, communication and travel were difficult, and Germanos opportunistically took advantage of his being "stranded" in the United States, claiming to be the representative of the patriarch of Antioch and continuing to woo the parishes of the Brooklyn diocese to become part of the Antiochian patriarchate. He stayed in North America a full nineteen years, only returning to the Middle East in 1933. Meanwhile, his absence from his archdiocese in Lebanon prompted his replacement by another bishop.<sup>79</sup>

Early in the morning of Saturday, February 27, 1915, after multiple bouts with illness and exhaustion from his long labors, having spent two months in bed unable to rise, Raphael, the saintly bishop of Brooklyn, died in New York City. The next day, Alexander (Nemolovsky), the Russian bishop of Alaska,<sup>80</sup> came to St. Nicholas Church, the Syrian cathedral in Brooklyn, to serve the week of liturgical services for Raphael's funeral, attended by many of Raphael's clergy, along with some Russian clergy.<sup>81</sup> Fr. Aftimios was in attendance, serving as the most senior priest after the bishop, as can be seen from a photograph at

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78 Ofiesh, 54.

79 Gabriel, 41-42.

80 Alexander (Nemolovsky) would eventually head the Russian archdiocese from 1919 to 1922. He then returned to Europe and later served as the head of the Russian parishes in Western Europe, first under Constantinople (1929-1946) and later under Moscow (1946-1960).

81 Issa, 64-66.

the funeral.<sup>82</sup>

The divine liturgy was celebrated every day for a week, with Alexander presiding. The following Sunday, March 7, Alexander again celebrated the liturgy at the cathedral, and Germanos joined him in concelebration. As Raphael was interred beneath the altar at the cathedral, Germanos proclaimed the departed bishop's sanctity, referring to him as a "saint" and to his body as "a holy relic and a holy shrine," a "precious treasure."<sup>83</sup>

A few months after Raphael's death, Germanos sent a curious letter to Archbishop Evdokim (Meschersky), the head of the Russian archdiocese in America and the late Bishop Raphael's superior. The letter, dated June 14, asks a number of questions which, if taken together, could constitute a questioning of Raphael's canonical status. The letter included questions as to whether and when Raphael had exchanged his Ottoman citizenship for Russian, when he was consecrated to the episcopacy, whether there were recorded discussions or reports regarding the consecration, whether the local Syrians had been consulted, and whether documents regarding these various issues could be produced. Germanos alleged that he had been instructed by Patriarch Gregory IV to ask these questions.<sup>84</sup>

When Raphael died, Evdokim placed the Brooklyn diocese temporarily into the care of Bishop Alexander, while Archdeacon Emmanuel Abo-Hatab (who had served as Raphael's deacon) and Fr. Basil Kherbawy managed the affairs of the diocese.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, the debate that Germanos had sparked within the Syrian parishes continued to grow, exacerbated by the death of Raphael and the major vacuum left by the absence of his authority. There was no clear successor, though it was believed by some that Raphael's

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82 See Appendix I.

83 Issa, 65-68.

84 Morris, 8.

85 Gabriel, 36.

preference had been for his archdeacon to succeed him.<sup>86</sup>

Some of the Arab-American press began to publish editorials dissociating the Syrian parishes from the Russian authorities, such as two articles in *Al-Nasir* (“The Eagle”), the first addressed to Bishop Alexander (who at that point still had temporary care of the Syrian diocese) and the second addressed generally:

Reverend Bishop, our Church is a Syrian independent Church and is not subordinate, with its priests and its people to the Most Holy Russian Synod as you have stated. How can it be Syrian if all its business is Russian? We do not recognize any other authority over us except that of our Patriarchate of Antioch (October 4, 1915).

Let us say from all our soul may all foreign powers which desire to enslave us, leave us alone and long live our Holy Patriarchate of Antioch and our Most Holy Patriarch Gregory IV (October 8, 1915).<sup>87</sup>

Other Arabic language news publications in America, notably *Mir’at al-Gharb* (“Mirror of the West” or “The Daily Mirror”) and *Al-Sa’ih* (“The Traveler”), along with the official Brooklyn diocesan magazine *Al-Kalimat* (“The Word”), instead took the side of the pro-Russian faction.<sup>88</sup> Thus what came to be called “The Russy/Antacky Division”<sup>89</sup> now came into full, public view, and with the absence of a ruling hierarch for the diocese, the two parties began competing furiously for power. Germanos began campaigning to have himself named as the successor to Raphael, presenting himself as the official representative of the Antiochian patriarchate.

Party lines cut across families and parish communities, and the press rang with charges and counter-charges between the two parties. Another editorial from *Al-Nasir* dated October 22, 1915, expresses the passion with which the Antacky party regarded its cause:

[W]e give our names to our beloved paper *Al-Nisr* with our greatest gratitude for the

86 Donald E. Shadid, “The Antiochian Archdiocese of North America: Traditions, Missionary Tasks, and Vision of the Future” (M.Div. thesis, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1984), 23.

87 Quoted in Gabriel, 40-41.

88 *Ibid.*, 41.

89 From the Arabic words for *Russia* and *Antioch*.

services of that free paper to the Orthodox Syrians so as to prevent that their widowed church would fall into the hands of rapacious wolves who do not understand our language and we do not understand theirs. They are Russians and we are Syrians. Out of the depth of our sincere hearts, we join our voices to those of our brothers who demand independence and that our diocese be Syrian and not Russian, only spiritually submitted to our mother Antioch. May the Lord help *Al-Nisr* in its fight for saving the diocese and may He enlighten the minds of those who, until now, have not found the true path. Long live liberty everywhere.<sup>90</sup>

Evdokim meanwhile had been petitioned to consecrate a successor to Raphael, but he delayed, hoping to see peace within the Syrian diocese before choosing a new bishop.<sup>91</sup> Peace did not come about, however, due to growing nationalistic sentiment on all sides. The cultural sensitivity and solidarity with which Raphael had governed his Syrian flock was now replaced with the less sympathetic administration of Bishop Alexander.

The creative plan of Archbishop Tikhon to accommodate multiple cultural traditions within a single archdiocese, which had produced Raphael's episcopacy in 1904, was now replaced with a new emphasis. Archbishop Evdokim was something of a Russifier, advocating a Russian nationalism which the non-Russian members of his jurisdiction found odious.<sup>92</sup> When Alexander succeeded Evdokim as archbishop a few years later in 1919, his attitude toward his non-Russian flock would spur the formation of a separate Ukrainian jurisdiction in Canada when he declared in a pastoral letter that Ukrainians were "not a separate people or a nation but only one of the Russian political parties."<sup>93</sup>

In 1915, after the funeral of Bishop Raphael in Brooklyn, Aftimios received a phone call from Najeeb Diyab, editor of *Mir'at al-Gharb*, one of the "Russy" faction newspapers. Diyab had formed a committee

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90 Quoted in Gabriel, 42-43.

91 Ofiesh, 58-59.

92 Thomas E. FitzGerald, *The Orthodox Church* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 48.

93 Odarka S. Trosky, *The Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church in Canada* (Winnipeg: Bulman Bros. Limited, 1968), 18.

along with Abd al-Masih Haddad, the editor of *Al-Sa'ih*, and two others, William Catzeflis and Elias Attalla, and wanted to meet with Aftimios before the archimandrite returned to his pastoral duties in Montreal. Aftimios agreed to meeting and joined them along with Emmanuel Abo-Hatab. The committee members related to the two clerics that they were incensed at the activities of Metropolitan Germanos and wanted to put forward either Aftimios or Emmanuel as a candidate to succeed Raphael to prevent Germanos “from taking the Brooklyn Diocese over to the Antiochian Patriarchate to be milked like cows.” The two men had to agree between themselves as to which of them would seek candidacy, so that the “Russy” faction would be united in its campaign to oppose Germanos.<sup>94</sup>

Aftimios declared himself uninterested in campaigning for the episcopacy, saying, “I have nothing to say in this matter other than my belief that the bishopric is a sacred appointment which I leave in God’s hands.... You may support Emmanuel. I have a train to catch.” According to Aftimios, Emmanuel reportedly spent the meeting talking about his American-style political campaign plans.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Germanos began ordaining clergy and in 1916 established the “Syrian Holy Orthodox Greek Catholic Mission in North America” with the founding of a rival cathedral on Boerum Place in Brooklyn, New York, named for the Dormition of the Theotokos and colloquially called “St. Mary’s.”<sup>96</sup> Germanos nevertheless continued cordial contacts with the local Russian hierarchy, as evidenced by a handwritten letter in Russian which Germanos sent to Archbishop Evdokim on August 21, 1916, requesting promised reimbursement for travel expenses.<sup>97</sup>

At one point during the interregnum of the Brooklyn diocese, Germanos contacted Aftimios through

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94 Ofiesh, 57-58.

95 *Ibid.*, 58-59.

96 Gabriel, 44.

97 Metropolitan Germanos of Selekias, St. Paul, Minn., to Archbishop Evdokim, New York, 21 August 1916, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

a Toronto friend of the latter, Shaheen Saba, a native of Zahle who was thus also known to Germanos. Saba declared that the metropolitan had great respect for Aftimios and was strongly against the possible episcopacy of the young Archdeacon Emmanuel. Germanos proposed to offer his services to Aftimios in preventing Emmanuel from being consecrated. No doubt wishing to pursue unity among the Syrian Orthodox in America, but nevertheless suspecting duplicity on the part of the Lebanese hierarch, Aftimios agreed to the meeting, which was held at the home of another Zahle native.<sup>98</sup>

During the meeting, Germanos first declared that the Antiochian Patriarch Gregory IV had great affection for Aftimios. Further, he described the activities of Archdeacon Emmanuel and Fr. Basil Kherbawy in the diocese, saying that both had been campaigning against Aftimios and impugning his character. He also said that bribes had exchanged hands in order to get Emmanuel elected, while false rumors were being spread regarding Aftimios.<sup>99</sup>

Germanos then told Aftimios that most of the members of the Syrian diocese wanted Aftimios as their bishop, adding that the patriarch also wished Aftimios to succeed Raphael. The patriarch also allegedly regarded Emmanuel as unworthy for the episcopacy, saying that he had aligned himself with the “Russy” faction not out of nobility or adherence to canonical norms, but rather because he felt it would gain him the episcopal throne. Germanos then put forward his offer: if Aftimios would renounce his loyalty to the Russians in America and pledge himself to Antioch, then allegedly the patriarch would send another Antiochian bishop to America to assist Germanos in consecrating Aftimios to the episcopacy.<sup>100</sup>

Aftimios replied by repeating his allegation against the late Bishop Raphael, claiming once again that Raphael had schemed to become patriarch. When Germanos asked what that had to do with their

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98 Ofiesh, 61.

99 *Ibid.*

100 *Ibid.*, 62.

conversation, Aftimios responded by stating that it was another example of the political gaming in which Raphael, Emmanuel, Kherbawy and Germanos had been engaging, pursuing selfish ambitions without consideration for the interests of either the Russian or Antiochian churches. He again repeated his declaration that the episcopacy is an office chosen by God and not by political machinations. The meeting ended with this declaration.<sup>101</sup>

Soon after, Aftimios was called to another meeting to discuss his episcopacy, but this time from Brooklyn by the young archdeacon, Emmanuel Abo-Hatab. The meeting was held in Malone, New York, just south of the Canadian border and about eighty-five miles from Montreal, where Aftimios served as a priest. (Emmanuel allegedly did not want to be seen in Montreal.)<sup>102</sup> Emmanuel told Aftimios that he was withdrawing his candidacy, owing to his youth (Emmanuel was only twenty-five when Raphael died, a number of years below the canonical age for consecration as a bishop).<sup>103</sup> Emmanuel also said that he wished to intercede for Fr. Basil Kherbawy, who feared a reprisal from Aftimios for his activities against him should the latter become bishop. Aftimios assured Emmanuel that he would not take any such action, especially since he had not desired the office of bishop nor campaigned for it.<sup>104</sup>

While these various meetings were taking place, a campaign was mounting within the Brooklyn diocese to prevent the election of Aftimios. Germanos probably realized that the election of Aftimios was imminent, as he sent a letter dated April 24, 1917, to Evdokim stating that he had felt it necessary to act as bishop for the Syrian parishes and asking that the archbishop delay consecrating Aftimios:

Existing conditions in the Syrian Church and the demands of many churches have forced me to accept the position of an acting Bishop of Syrian Antiochian Orthodox Church in

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101 *Ibid.*, 62-63.

102 *Ibid.*, 63.

103 Shadid, 23.

104 Ofiesh, 63-64. Aftimios also claimed that the archdeacon spent part of the meeting declaring his advantage and popularity over the archimandrite's candidacy, which is inconsistent with the archdeacon's withdrawal of his own candidacy.

North America [*sic*].

Therefore I ask you in the name of Christ to delay consecration of Archimandrite Ofiesh until we will be able to communicate with our Patriarch in Syria.<sup>105</sup>

A letter dated two days before Germanos' was sent by Kherbawy, Emmanuel and the Committee of the Brooklyn Cathedral, deploring the conditions of division in the widowed diocese and begging Evdokim to consecrate Aftimios, "to save the congregation from further danger, and to condescend to announce your decision officially, in order to set the minds of the faithful at peace."<sup>106</sup>

The supporters of Germanos sent letters to the Antiochian patriarchate in Syria protesting the election of Aftimios as "unlawful," while supporters of Aftimios in Brooklyn sent a letter there confirming their choice of Aftimios despite "an opposing majority."<sup>107</sup> Besides letters sent to Antioch, the Russian archbishop, Evdokim, received some fifty letters and telegrams denouncing Aftimios, often accusing him of being a member of the Freemasons.<sup>108</sup> In a letter from the community in Montreal, dated September 28, 1916, the members of the Syrian Orthodox Benefit Society (with whom Aftimios had struggled when he first visited Montreal) wrote:

We urgently protest now again at these acts [i.e., the impression from Bishop Alexander, Kherbawy and Emmanuel that Aftimios was to be consecrated] and we earnestly appeal to Your Grace to consider this complicated matter very fully with your foresight [*sic*] and wisdom and at the meantime, we refer you to the list of Masonic names we sent you long ago including the name of the Archimandrite as a Mason Officer of high rank.

We, the representatives of a great party of the Orthodox faithful Syrians in Montreal and the Dominion of Canada, do solemnly declare that if the Archimandrit [*sic*] is to be elected Bishop, we shall never recognize him as our religious head in the Diocese of Brooklyn.<sup>109</sup>

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105 Quoted in Gabriel, 44.

106 *Ibid.*, 44-45.

107 *Ibid.*, 202, note 9.

108 *Ibid.*, 44-46.

109 The Syrian Orthodox Benefit Society, Montreal, to Archbishop Evdokim of Alaska & N.A., New York City, 28 September 1916, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

Another letter, sent from Chicago and signed by thirteen members of the local Syrian community, expressed that its signers “protest vehemently against the ordination of Father Ofesh for being uncanonical and hold accountable for any trouble or schism that may occur in the community [*sic*].”<sup>110</sup> A telegram from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, signed by Sind Sawyer on behalf of the Syrian Orthodox community simply reads “Will not accept your appointment of Office [*sic*, probably meaning “Ofesh”] as a bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church” [original in all caps].<sup>111</sup>

A telegram from the Syrian community in Pittsburgh goes beyond the mere rejection of Aftimios to support for Germanos, also putting forth the opinion that the Antiochian patriarch properly has input into the choice of the diocese’s new bishop:

We are over hundred Syrian Orthodox in Pittsburg and surrounding vicinity strongly protesting the appointment of Ofeish bishop to our church We are in favor of the acceptance of Metropolitan Germonos to us act bishop until we are able to receive a word from our beloved patriarch of Ontachia [“Antioch” is *Antakya* in Arabic] in this regard who we think has as much to do in this appointment as anyone However we think you are doing something against the wishes of the largest number of Syrian Orthodox through out the UnitedStates and Canada We know positively the appointment of Ofeish going to casue considerable reflection and it bounded to split the Syrian Orthodox Church into two different parts Now we would ask Your Emience with respect look into this matter carefully and to look at in in different light and you will agree with us that Ofeish appointment unsatisfactory at present [*sic*, original in all caps]<sup>112</sup>

Another letter, dated May 5, 1917, from Michael Saba, offers thanks to one “I. I. von Hentzel” for “choosing for the post Archimandrite Aftimios Ofesh, a man truly beloved and desired by all of us.”<sup>113</sup>

The impression in various parts of the diocese with regard to who laid claim to the majority of support was

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110 Syrian parish in Chicago, Illinois, to Archbishop Evdokim, New York City, 10 May 1917, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

111 Sind Sawyer, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to Archbishop Erdokim [*sic*], New York City, May 1917, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

112 Syrian Orthodox Community of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Archbishop Evdokim, New York City, 10-11 May 1917, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

113 Quoted in Gabriel, 45.

clearly mixed. Despite the chaos and protests, Evdokim decided to proceed with an election, including Aftimios' name as one of the candidates.

With the withdrawal of Emmanuel, Aftimios was elected by thirty-four out of forty-one clergy in the diocese, along with a corresponding majority of the laity. Evdokim reported the results of the election to the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, then under the temporary presidency of Metropolitan Sergius (Starogorodsky), the *locum tenens* of the patriarchal throne,<sup>114</sup> which ratified the results and gave its approval for the consecration to go forward. Bishop Alexander, who had been transferred to Canada the previous year,<sup>115</sup> was given the duty of announcing the results of the election to Aftimios. On May 13, 1917, at the Russian archdiocesan Cathedral of St. Nicholas in New York, Archbishop Evdokim of the Aleutian Islands and North America, assisted by Bishop Alexander of Winnipeg and Canada, consecrated Archimandrite Aftimios Ofiesh to the sacred episcopacy, giving him the title *Bishop of Brooklyn*.<sup>116</sup>

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114 A *locum tenens* is a bishop who holds temporary authority after another bishop has died or left office.

115 Constance J. Tarasar, ed., *Orthodox America: 1794-1976* (Syosset, New York: The Orthodox Church in America Department of History and Archives, 1975), 174.

116 Ofiesh, 65.

**Chapter IV:**  
**Archbishop Aftimios**

The consecration of Aftimios did not bring peace to the diocese. Indeed, “Aftimios spent most of his life engaged in conflict,” either due to his own weaknesses and intense personality or out of circumstance.<sup>117</sup> In a significant sense, Aftimios’ episcopacy was a product of his times, which were characterized by turbulence in the Church and in the world, following on the great political and social upheavals of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Yet much of the turmoil he experienced was of a directly personal nature.

Less than three months after the consecration in New York, Aftimios again found himself the target of difficulty, this time from Johan Von Hentzel, the personal secretary to Archbishop Evdokim. In a letter to Evdokim dated August 2, 1917, Bishop Aftimios expresses his dismay that he had received a letter from Von Hentzel on July 16<sup>th</sup> demanding 5% of the estimated \$500,000 value of all Syrian Orthodox properties in North America, along with 1% of his personal property as compensation, because of Von Hentzel’s claim that “through him [Aftimios] was made Bishop.” Von Hentzel also claimed, perhaps more distressingly, that Evdokim was fully aware of this demand and approved of it.<sup>118</sup>

A further complication in this affair was the disappearance earlier in the summer of 1917 of certain key documents from the files of the Russian chancery in New York, including the formal petition in favor of consecration for Aftimios and a letter to Evdokim from Patriarch Gregory IV of Antioch supporting the canonical status of Aftimios’ Brooklyn diocese against Germanos’ independent jurisdiction. The first

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<sup>117</sup> Gabriel, 46.

<sup>118</sup> Bishop Aftimios of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York, to Archbishop Evdokim of Aleutian Islands, New York, 2 August 1917, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

document had reappeared in photographic duplication as part of a package of propaganda denouncing the new bishop. The most likely source of these document leaks was Von Hentzel.<sup>119</sup>

Facing the claim of an alleged creditor on the one hand, Aftimios faced the renewed accusation of Freemasonry on the other. Fr. Nathaniel Irvine, a convert priest serving in the Russian archdiocese who had been ordained by Archbishop Tikhon but later served under Raphael, began writing editorials in the *Russian-American Orthodox Messenger* and letters to Bishop Alexander. These writings put forward essentially two complaints, that Aftimios and also Emmanuel had been members of the Masonic lodge and also that the chaotic state of the Brooklyn diocese was such that it cast into doubt the validity of the recent episcopal election. At one point, Alexander suggested that Aftimios may wish to suspend Irvine.<sup>120</sup> Whether Aftimios and Emmanuel had ever been Masons is not clear, but Aftimios had formally renounced any membership of that sort in public testimony to Raphael in 1914.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Irvine argued “Once a Mason... Always a Mason.”<sup>122</sup>

It was with these kinds of controversies that the episcopacy of Aftimios began. It is therefore a great testament to his energy, conviction and strength of will that he was nonetheless able to accomplish much during the first few years of his service as a bishop. He soon established a diocesan council consisting of delegates from his parishes and introduced the system of local parish council governance. He visited the twenty-eight parishes and one mission throughout his far-flung diocese, and organized Sundays Schools and choirs wherever he went, especially encouraging the youth to remain true to the Church. During his visits, he also worked to regain the loyalty of those who had gone into schism with Germanos. Aftimios

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119 Sean J. LaBat, “The Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America—1927-1934, A Case Study in North American Missions,” (M.Div. thesis, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1995), 12.

120 *Ibid.*, 13-14.

121 Gabriel, 201, notes 9 and 10.

122 LaBat, 14.

also encouraged the formation of Bible study groups and in 1923 founded an orphanage for children of Arabic parentage (regardless of religion) which housed forty boys and girls (funded significantly by Aftimios' selling of insurance policies).<sup>123</sup> In 1920, Aftimios also purchased a former Episcopal church on State Street in Brooklyn to serve as the new cathedral for the diocese.

He also ordained Archdeacon Emmanuel to the priesthood on December 30, 1917, and elevated him to archimandrite the following January 6, sending him to serve as his replacement in Montreal.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, he became widely renowned for his charity, brilliance, energy and integrity.<sup>125</sup> In many ways, Aftimios truly sought to act as a successor to the saintly Raphael, and for all these successes, Aftimios was elevated in 1923 by his superior, Metropolitan Platon, to the rank of archbishop.

By 1919, the energetic Germanos was expanding the influence of his “golden voice and fiery faith”<sup>126</sup> beyond the Arab Christian community. In 1918, the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of Canada had been formed, consisting of former Ukrainian Greek Catholics who wished to join the Orthodox Church. After an initial series of contacts with the Russian hierarchy in America, negotiations broke down when the Russian press protested the recognition of Ukrainians as “a separate people,” reflecting the political debates of the era as Ukrainian nationalism was beginning to surface in Ukraine itself. It was in response to these protests that Archbishop Alexander (Nemolovsky) of Winnipeg made his remarks quoted above regarding Ukrainians as being “only one of the Russian political parties.”<sup>127</sup>

The fury of the Brotherhood members at Alexander's remarks led them to sever all connections with

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123 Morris, 8.

124 Shadid, 23.

125 Gabriel, 46.

126 William Essey, “The ‘Antacky-Russy’ Dilemma,” *The Word*, September 1976, 8.

127 Trosky, 17-18.

the Russian ecclesiastical authorities. Having lost their hierarchical patronage but still seeking to be Orthodox, the Brotherhood was advised by the head of the newly opened Ukrainian Orthodox seminary in Saskatoon to contact Metropolitan Germanos. The bishop attended the Second Sobor (council) of the Brotherhood in Winnipeg on November 27, 1919, and there agreed to be “spiritual” head of the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada until such time as a Ukrainian bishop could be found. The temporal and financial matters of the new jurisdiction would be governed by the Brotherhood.<sup>128</sup> On December 12, Archbishop Alexander and Bishop Aftimios sent a telegram to Patriarch Gregory IV of Antioch denouncing Germanos as “interfering with Russian [*sic*] communities and sowing discord,” saying that they held Gregory “responsible.”<sup>129</sup>

Earlier that same year, in March, the Brooklyn diocesan council had also sent to Gregory an “itemized account” of “one hundred fifty pages of carefully compiled and documented acts of sedition and infractions of the church canons by Germanos.”<sup>130</sup> Three of the members of the Holy Synod of Antioch, the bishops of Akkar, Tripoli and Basara, also sent a letter that same year to Gregory demanding that Germanos be removed. Despite his previous multiple recalls of the wandering metropolitan, the patriarch replied that the flock in North America had apparently agreed to appoint Germanos as their bishop (no doubt an impression formed from the correspondence he had received).<sup>131</sup> Thus, even while seeing to the normal needs of the maintenance and growth of his diocese, Aftimios and his assistants Fr. Basil Kherbawy and Fr. Emmanuel Abo-Hatab “spent a considerable amount of time traveling from city to city and law court to law court trying to prevent Germanos and his followers from gaining control of the communities in the

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128 *Ibid.*, 18-19.

129 LaBat, 11.

130 Ofiesh, 71.

131 Gabriel, 202, note 13.

Diocese.”<sup>132</sup>

While Aftimios was battling Germanos for control of the Syrian Orthodox in North America, the remainder of the Russian archdiocese in America found itself in turmoil, mainly as a result of the upheaval in Russia itself due to the Bolshevik Revolution. Funding from Russia had been cut off, and communications were difficult with the newly formed patriarchal authorities under Patriarch Tikhon, who had ordained Bishop Raphael during his leadership in America. Further, besides the growing estrangement with the Syrians, the Russian hierarchs in America were also beginning to lose their unity with their non-Russian flock. The Serbian clergy had declared themselves loyal to the Serbian patriarchate as early as 1913<sup>133</sup> and were organized into a diocese of thirty-six parishes by 1921, receiving informal leadership from Bishop Nikolaj (Velimirovic).<sup>134</sup> As noted above, the Ukrainians were also separating themselves from the Russian archdiocese.

Archbishop Evdokim had gone in August 1917 to the All-Russian Council of 1917-1918 in Russia and not returned.<sup>135</sup> It was not until February 1919 that Bishop Alexander, who had been left in charge of the archdiocese, was named as Evdokim’s replacement.<sup>136</sup> In 1921, Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky) arrived in America, fleeing his episcopal see in Odessa after the defeat of the White Army by the Bolsheviks.<sup>137</sup> After he left Russia, Platon joined other exiled Russian bishops in Constantinople in 1920 in establishing the Higher Church Administration that eventually formed the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).<sup>138</sup> Along with Alexander, Platon returned to Europe to meet with the ROCOR

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132 *Ibid.*, 46.

133 FitzGerald, 148.

134 *Ibid.*, 48. Bishop Nikolaj was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2003.

135 Evdokim never returned to America and instead later joined the Soviet “Living/Renovationist Church” movement.

136 Archimandrite Serafim Surrency, *The Quest for Orthodox Church Unity in America* (New York: Saints Boris and Gleb Press, 1973), 28-29.

137 Tarasar, 180-181.

138 FitzGerald, 43.

bishops (but this time in Karlovci, Serbia), and there Platon was appointed ruling bishop of the American archdiocese.<sup>139</sup> Alexander, amid the financial ruin of the American archdiocese, returned to Europe in 1922.<sup>140</sup>

Thus it was that, at the prompting of some in the “Antacky” faction who had grown distrustful of Germanos,<sup>141</sup> when Patriarch Gregory IV of Antioch wished to discuss with the Russian church authorities the question of the Syrian Diocese of Brooklyn, he first addressed the question to the Holy Synod of Moscow and then later to the ROCOR synod in Karlovci, under whose authority the American church had now supposedly come. Gregory sought to regularize the relationship of his patriarchate with the New World Syrian parishes.<sup>142</sup> The Antiochian patriarch suggested that both Aftimios and Germanos could retire and Archdeacon Thomas Mallouf be elevated to the episcopacy to head a new jurisdiction under Antioch.<sup>143</sup>

Moscow’s reply in 1922 was that releasing the diocese to Antioch was “not ‘impossible’ within canonical norms,”<sup>144</sup> but Patriarch Tikhon himself said that the matter ultimately belonged to Aftimios and the Russian-American hierarchy to determine.<sup>145</sup> The Karlovci synod, after initially deferring the matter to Platon, eventually suggested in 1923 dividing the Arab-American flock into two separate dioceses, one under Russian control and the other Antiochian, essentially solidifying the “Russy/Antacky” split into permanent structures.<sup>146</sup> With various proposals and counter-proposals flying back and forth between

139 Rev. Father Alexey Young, *The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia: A History and Chronology* (San Bernardino, California: St. Willibrord’s Press, 1993), 33.

140 Surrency, 29.

141 Ofiesh, 72.

142 Gabriel, 47.

143 Father John Warren Morris, “The Episcopate of Aftimios Ofiesh, Part Two: The American Orthodox Catholic Church,” *The Word*, March 1981, 6. From here, references to the two-part Morris article will be designated as “Morris (Part One)” and “Morris (Part Two).”

144 Gabriel, 47.

145 Shadid, 29.

146 Gabriel, 47.

Damascus, Moscow, Serbia and New York, in 1921 Aftimios sent Fr. Emmanuel to Moscow to discuss with Patriarch Tikhon the idea of an independent American Orthodox Church, free of all foreign control.<sup>147</sup>

Although Emmanuel's mission to Moscow apparently yielded no results, Aftimios' idea for the formation of an American church led him to begin work on it immediately. In 1922, Platon put Aftimios in charge of a group of clergy who had come to be known as the "English-Speaking Department," tasked with presenting Orthodox Christian materials to the American public in English.<sup>148</sup> Since 1905 there had been a priest working on "English service and English work" in the Russian cathedral, the aforementioned Fr. Nathaniel Irvine (a convert and former priest in the Episcopal Church), but Irvine died in 1921.<sup>149</sup>

The new department took over the work not only of Irvine but also of others, headed by an archimandrite named Patrick, who was appointed by Alexander. Shortly before Alexander returned to Europe in August of 1922, he formed a new organization of English-language clergy:

[A]n inner circle organization for the permanent establishment of Orthodoxy in the English language in America and the ultimate union of all Orthodox in this country into one Orthodox Church for America was formed under the secret blessing of Archbishop Alexander in defiance both of the Russian Cathedral and Diocesan Council Clergy and of the then head of the English-speaking Clergy whose personal policy had to be revised radically.<sup>150</sup>

The two most prominent members of the department were Michael G. H. Gelsinger and Boris R. Burden, who were both ordained to the priesthood (the latter as a hieromonk) by Archbishop Alexander in 1922. The meetings of this "inner circle organization" were held in February, March, July and August of that year, with Gelsinger being ordained at the March meeting and Burden in July. When Alexander left

<sup>147</sup> Shadid, 30.

<sup>148</sup> LaBat, 17.

<sup>149</sup> Tarasar, 140.

<sup>150</sup> Hieromonk Boris R. Burden, *A Report on the State of Orthodoxy in America and the English-Speaking Clergy*, February 1, 1943, Holy Transfiguration Monastery Archives, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1.

America, he took Archimandrite Patrick with him, leaving Burden in charge of the department as “Continuation Secretary,” “with the whole charge of the secret program for American Orthodox unity and development from the official side of Diocesan organization and leadership resting upon him.” Gelsinger, a professor of Greek at the University of Buffalo, was given responsibility for “the academic development of materials, literature, and personnel necessary for the future of this work.”<sup>151</sup> Much of the work which Gelsinger accomplished is still in use in the Antiochian Archdiocese.<sup>152</sup>

Although Aftimios was put in charge of this group by Platon, the department’s members clearly regarded themselves as having a “trust of that secret commission from Archbishop Alexander.”<sup>153</sup> This sense of their own independence perhaps influenced Aftimios in December 1923 to relinquish control of the English-Speaking Department back to Platon, along with its constituent clergy. In the letter Aftimios (now an archbishop) sent to Platon, dated December 21, he does not explicitly mention his reasons for returning the department back to Platon, but simply attributes the action as “due to circumstances and events.”<sup>154</sup>

The following month, Burden wrote a letter to Platon as “prelate-in-charge” of the English-Speaking Department requesting to be discharged from the department and returned to the jurisdiction of Aftimios.<sup>155</sup> This departure was apparently a “final blow” to the commission which “effectively left the English-Speaking Department a ‘paper’ office under Metropolitan Platon, a ministry with no ministers, and few to minister to.”<sup>156</sup> Despite being returned to Aftimios’ jurisdiction in January, Burden was again

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151 *Ibid.*

152 Morris (Part Two), 8.

153 Burden, 2.

154 Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York, to Metropolitan Platon, New York City, 21 December 1923, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

155 Rev. Boris R. Burden, Brooklyn, New York, to Metropolitan Platon, New York City, 23 January 1924, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

156 LaBat, 17.

transferred back to Platon, as the archbishop of Brooklyn found it “inconvenient to longer retain him as my Secretary and Chaplain and I have no other position in which to place him.”<sup>157</sup>

Later documents show that, although the English-Speaking Department ceased to exist as such, its members remained in contact with one another, united by their commitment to Orthodoxy in English, to a united American Orthodox Church,<sup>158</sup> and also by a shared hostility toward the Episcopal Church, a topic often addressed in their writings.<sup>159</sup>

More than twenty years after the initial formation of the department “secretly” under Alexander, there was still understood to be an English-speaking Orthodox clergy “party line” determined and agreed upon by Gelsinger and Burden (who by that time were in separate jurisdictions, the New York Antiochian archdiocese and the Moscow exarchate, respectively).<sup>160</sup> By 1943, however, most of the clergy who had come to be associated with the Gelsinger/Burden group were jurisdictionally united, because they were “working in the Syrian Archdiocese, because Arabic [had] lost ground more rapidly than either Greek or Russian.”<sup>161</sup> The self-understanding of the importance of the English-Speaking Department and its informal successor association is summarized in a 1942 letter from Gelsinger to Metropolitan Antony (Bashir), written on the occasion of the formation of a federation of Orthodox jurisdictions in America:

[The Greeks] must accept all the English-language work done so far, and also the work now in progress. The whole future of Your Eminence’s position is bound up with the English-language work; the whole past and future of the American Clergy (Stephen [Upson], John [Gelsinger], and I) is bound up with Your Eminence’s position. The only chance our little Syrian Church in America has, is to go down in American Orthodox History as the one

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157 Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York, to Metropolitan Platon, New York City, 19 May 1924, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

158 Burden, 2;

159 Archpriest Paul W. S. Schneirla, telephone interview by author, 11 August 2006. Schneirla personally knew several of these clergy.

160 Burden, 4.

161 Archpriest Michael G. H. Gelsinger, *Brief History: The Training and Ordination of English-Language Orthodox Clergy in America*, 1943, Holy Transfiguration Monastery Archives, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2.

which established the work in English and which provided the books and music for all to use in English. The Russian end of things we need not worry about, for it is friendly; but we cannot afford to be swallowed alive by the Greek whale. Better to go on alone than to let that happen—for if we do go on alone, we shall certainly win [emphasis in original].<sup>162</sup>

The “friendly” “Russian end of things” was no doubt taken care of by Burden, who by that point was a member of the Russian exarchate and remained in close contact and agreement with Gelsinger.

In 1922, Patriarch Gregory in Damascus received an invitation from the Rev. W. C. Emhart, representing the Episcopal Church in America, to send a representative to attend its General Convention held in Portland, Oregon. Gregory thus sent Metropolitan Gerasimos (Messara) of Beirut, who brought with him his secretary, Archdeacon Antony Bashir, and Archimandrite Victor Abo-Assaley, arriving in New York in August of 1922. At the time, the Episcopalians, like the rest of the Anglican Communion, were seeking from ancient Christian churches recognition of their clerical orders and apostolic succession as valid. Therefore, at the convention, the Episcopal Church (from whom the Russians in America were also seeking assistance) easily agreed to pay for missionary work in America by Archdeacon Antony. Gerasimos then toured Syrian parishes in America, accompanied by Victor.<sup>163</sup>

Gerasimos had been received and welcomed by Archbishop Aftimios when the former arrived in New York. The two concelebrated church services, and a number of formal events were held in Gerasimos’ honor.<sup>164</sup> The visiting metropolitan had another agenda, however. Before he returned back to his see in Lebanon, on the orders of Patriarch Gregory, Gerasimos sent a letter to the Arabic newspaper *Al-Hadiab* (“The Guidance”), dated June 8, 1923, announcing that the Patriarchate of Antioch was extending its

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162 Michael G. H. Gelsinger, Archpriest, Buffalo, New York, to Metropolitan Antony (Bashir), 10 October 1942, Holy Transfiguration Monastery Archives, Brookline, Massachusetts.

163 Gabriel, 47-48.

164 Ofiesh, 77.

jurisdiction over the Syrian Orthodox in America and that the faithful should nominate three candidates for consecration to the episcopacy:

I have been favored by his beatitude with the joyful tidings announcing his esteemed determination to include the parish<sup>165</sup> of North America as related to the Orthodox Syrian, within the number of parishes, constituting the holy apostolic See of Antioch, and his fatherly readiness to ordain a regular shepherd who will work for their unity and take full care of their religious and moral needs.<sup>166</sup>

Gerasimos also included a copy of the standard Antiochian bylaws for the election of bishops. The two “Russy” Arabic newspapers, *Al-Sa’ih* and *Mir’at al-Gharb*, denounced the declaration, refusing to publish it, while the “Antacky” *Al-Nasir* welcomed and published it.<sup>167</sup>

By 1923 Aftimios claimed thirty parishes, while Germanos had eighteen, though parishes on both sides were plagued with internal turmoil.<sup>168</sup> As the conflict within the Syrian Orthodox community was about to coalesce into a third faction, American Orthodoxy in general was dividing and defining itself further into separate tribes. In 1921, the Greek Archdiocese was formed mainly out of parishes which up until that time had mostly functioned independently without reference to any hierarch. Archbishop Alexander (Demoglou) of Rodostolon had come to America in 1918 along with Meletios (Metaxakis), metropolitan of Athens and later Ecumenical Patriarch, and was placed in charge of the Greek parishes of North and South America under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Alexander regarded the New World as properly belonging to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, that Constantinople had primary responsibility for missionary activity outside ancient canonical boundaries.<sup>169</sup> Thus, in 1922, he also denounced Germanos’ poaching among the Syrian parishes, though clearly on different grounds.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Parish* is used here in the ancient sense of “diocese.”

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Gabriel, 48.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>168</sup> Essey, 8.

<sup>169</sup> FitzGerald, 38-40.

<sup>170</sup> Gabriel, 42.

The Russian archdiocese was also thrown further into its own turmoil. In October 1923, the Soviet “Living Church” movement appointed a suspended Russian-American priest, John Kedrovsky, as archbishop of America, and sent him to the United States. Kedrovsky, a married man, began a series of lawsuits to gain control of Russian parishes in America on behalf of the Soviet-sponsored church. It was in the midst of his battle with Kedrovsky that Platon received a letter from Patriarch Tikhon in Moscow, dated January 16, 1924, declaring him to be dismissed from governing the American archdiocese on account of “public acts of counterrevolution directed against the Soviet Power.”<sup>171</sup>

On April 4, the Russian archdiocesan sobor declared itself “a self-governed Church,” breaking administrative ties with Moscow but declaring itself still connected by “spiritual contact and communion.”<sup>172</sup> This choice not only placed Platon outside the authority of Moscow but effectively placed Aftimios and his diocese outside it, as well. Thus, both Arab Orthodox parties in America, “Russy” and “Antacky,” “were under questionable canonical jurisdiction,” out of communion with most of the Orthodox world.<sup>173</sup> Around this time, the Russian archdiocese under Metropolitan Platon came to be known colloquially as “the Metropolia.”

The announcement from the Antiochian patriarchate in 1923 via Gerasimos was rejected not only by the “Russy” Aftimios but also by the “Antacky” Germanos, the latter objection being a particular irony, since Germanos had for nine years been trumpeting the need for Antiochian jurisdiction in America. Aftimios wrote letters to Patriarch Gregory and published editorials in the Arab-American press challenging the patriarch’s authority in America and instead calling upon Germanos to return to the Middle East, the

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171 It was, however, widely believed that Tikhon tacitly intended Platon to continue as head of the archdiocese and sent the letter due to Soviet state pressure.

172 FitzGerald, 44-45.

173 Essey, 8.

only sure path to peace in the diocese.<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, both parties suffered schisms, Germanos' more than Aftimios, as various members of the faithful accepted the patriarchal decree.<sup>175</sup> Conceptions of what was "canonical" were breaking down seriously throughout Orthodoxy in America. Gregory by at least some analyses was acting outside canonical norms, though it is also possible that he "foresaw that the only possible way to mediate the crisis in North America was to assert his authority over the claimants."<sup>176</sup>

When Gerasimos returned to Beirut, Archimandrite Victor stayed behind in America to visit relatives,<sup>177</sup> also serving some of the Syrian Orthodox community in Worcester, Massachusetts.<sup>178</sup> After Gerasimos' return, it was announced that Victor had been elected as the hierarch of the newly established Antiochian patriarchal jurisdiction. The patriarch then dispatched Metropolitan Zacharias (Ragy) of Hauran as patriarchal legate to consecrate Victor, while Archbishop Panteleimon of Neapolis (a bishop of the Jerusalem Patriarchate) was appointed as co-consecrator, over the protests of four members of the Antiochian synod. The division within the synod would later cause a brief schism resulting in two patriarchs being elected.<sup>179</sup>

When Aftimios learned that Zacharias had arrived in Worcester to consecrate Victor, he attempted to convince him to abandon his mission. Aftimios had briefly known Zacharias in the Middle East, while both had served as deacons, even interceding for him once before Patriarch Meletios (Doumani).<sup>180</sup> During a telephone conversation between the two bishops, Zacharias demanded that Aftimios sign a document pledging his loyalty to Antioch but eventually agreed to postpone the consecration of Victor

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174 Morris (Part Two), 6.

175 Ofiesh, 81-82.

176 Gabriel, 51.

177 Ofiesh, 81.

178 Morris (Part Two), 6.

179 Gabriel, 50.

180 Ofiesh, 83.

until negotiations could be held.<sup>181</sup>

Aftimios sent Fr. Basil Kherbawy on October 3, 1924, to speak with the metropolitan. Zacharias repeated his demand, offering to delay the consecration if Aftimios agreed. The archbishop of Brooklyn refused to give up his “Russy” loyalty, however, and negotiations broke down. On November 8, 1924, at St. Mary’s Albanian Orthodox Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, Archimandrite Victor Abo-Assaley was consecrated as the first Antiochian hierarch in North America with official patriarchal sanction.<sup>182</sup>

With the styling of Victor as *Archbishop of New York, Metropolitan of all North America*, there were now three Syrian Orthodox factions claiming jurisdiction in America, and the conflict “intensified as the supporters of each Bishop attempted to win parishes from the others.” Aftimios had claimed 11,591 followers in 1916, but by 1926, he had only 9,207.<sup>183</sup> Germanos meanwhile claimed twenty-four parishes by 1924.<sup>184</sup> At one point, Zacharias and the newly consecrated Victor entered a community in Pittsburgh to assert the Antiochian patriarchate’s jurisdiction there, installing a priest who had formerly been suspended by Aftimios. The parishioners broke out into a riot which had to be quelled by the police. Some later sued the patriarchal bishops, and the courts ruled that the parish belonged to the “Russy” faction.<sup>185</sup> During this same period, there was apparently an attempt to negotiate a settlement to the divisions between the three Antiochian hierarchs, but it did not come to fruition.<sup>186</sup>

The following year, Aftimios called a convention in Brooklyn, summoning the “General National Ecclesiastical Council of the Diocese of Brooklyn,” a pattern which would persist in later Antiochian archdiocesan governance. The assembly, which gathered in March 1925, after receiving an account of the

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181 Morris (Part Two), 6.

182 Morris (Part Two), 6-7.

183 *Ibid.*, 7.

184 Shadid, 21.

185 Ofiesh, 87.

186 Gabriel, 51.

history of the divisions in the diocese from Aftimios, published on March 14 a “Declaration of Protest,” condemning not only Metropolitan Germanos but also the patriarch of Antioch, protesting that neither Antioch nor Moscow had any right to interfere in North America.<sup>187</sup> The assembly also declared a severance in “spiritual fellowship” with the Antiochian patriarchate.<sup>188</sup>

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187 Morris (Part Two), 7.

188 Ofiesh, 92.

## Chapter V: The American Orthodox Catholic Church

In 1926 John Kedrovsky gained control of St. Nicholas Russian Cathedral in New York, having been awarded the right to use it by the state courts. Platon found himself evicted from his cathedral, which was now in the hands of the Soviet-sponsored church. He temporarily named St. Augustine's Chapel in New York (on loan from the Episcopal Church) as his cathedral, a situation which lasted until 1943, when he moved into another Episcopal church.<sup>189</sup> This major blow for Platon was compounded by another.

Although the synod in Karlovci had not approved Platon's declaration of autonomy for his archdiocese, his theretofore strained relationship with them broke in 1926 when he supported Metropolitan Evlogy of Paris in a dispute over jurisdiction with the synod. Both had been considered members of the synod up until that point, but then broke their ties. The synod responded by declaring Platon removed as head of the American archdiocese.<sup>190</sup>

While Platon was in Serbia meeting with the rest of the Karlovci synod, Aftimios was appointed as his vicar, being the next most senior hierarch of the archdiocese. While acting in this capacity, Aftimios heard of the removal of Platon by the synod, and he therefore called via night telegrams on August 31, 1924, for an emergency meeting of the Russian-American hierarchs to be held on September 8<sup>th</sup>. The telegrams were sent from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to Bishops Theophilus (Pashkovsky), Apollinary (Koshev), Arseny (Chagovstov),<sup>191</sup> and Amphilochy (Vakulsky). In the messages, Aftimios referred to "disturbance and interference" on the part of the Karlovci synod and called for "immediate action" from the bishops "before

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<sup>189</sup> Surrency, 32.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Archbishop Arseny (Chagovstov) is, as of this writing, under investigation for canonization by the OCA.

Metropolitan Platon returns.” Aftimios also sent a telegram to Platon in Paris informing him of the meeting and recommending that he delay his return by a month.<sup>192</sup>

The meeting was held on September 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, with only Aftimios and Theophilus (who was given authority to act as proxy for Arseny) as bishops in attendance. Archpriest Leonid Turkevich<sup>193</sup> took the minutes and later worked with Theophilus to perform a translation from English into Russian. The meeting issued a strong denunciation of a letter that the Karlovci synod had sent to the bishops of the Russian-American archdiocese asking for their submission. The twelve page proclamation from Aftimios and Theophilus also included a lengthy defense of the rights of Platon as having been appointed by both Patriarch Tikhon and the people of the archdiocese. The statement also repudiates the authority of the bishops in Karlovci and condemns any intruders into the American scene, using language reminiscent of that used in Aftimios’ condemnations of Germanos.<sup>194</sup>

Further, and perhaps most interestingly, the document declares the archdiocese under Platon to be “temporarily independent and autocephalous,” though that status is “subject to the subsequent review by “such valid, recognized, certain, canonical, free, and effectual administration of the Patriarchal Authority of Moscow and All-Russia.” That is, once it is clear that the patriarchate is free to act as it wills, then the independence of the American church may be ratified. The declaration ends with a call to all the Orthodox in North America to “support us in this determination to defend and promote the peace, honor, and welfare of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America<sup>195</sup> and to

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192 Archbishop Aftimios, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to Bishops Theophilus (Chicago), Apollinarius (San Francisco), Arsenios (Winnipeg), Amphilochius (Alaska) and Metropolitan Platon (Paris), 31 August 1926, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

193 Fr. Leonid, a widowed priest known after his consecration to the episcopacy in 1933 as *Leonty*, served as metropolitan of the Russian Metropolia from 1950 to his death in 1965. As of this writing, he is under investigation for canonization by the OCA.

194 “Memorandum: Official Minutes,” 9-10 September 1926, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

195 This is the official name by which the American Orthodox Catholic Church would later be called.

prevent those who cannot build from placing their hands to destroy the Church of Christ.”<sup>196</sup>

The ROCOR synod later appointed Bishop Apollinary (Koshev) in Platon’s place as the ruling hierarch for Russian Orthodoxy in America. Apollinary had previously served as a vicar under Platon, and he was soon joined by other bishops in America as a schism formed between those loyal to ROCOR and those who followed the independent path of Platon. Platon was able to claim well over 90% of the faithful and clergy, probably mainly because he had been well-known and loved during his previous service in America from 1907 to 1914.<sup>197</sup>

Aftimios was becoming more and more exasperated with the schisms that wracked nearly all the American Orthodox communities. In considering the question of how to heal the divisions within the Syrian community, it occurred to Aftimios that what American Orthodoxy needed was its own independent church. Even before the controversies generated by the break with the Karlovci synod, he wrote about this idea in an April 4, 1926, editorial in his magazine *The Orphan*:

[T]he only remedy for the epidemic of schism among the adherents of the Orthodox Church of various ethnic groups such as Russian, Syrian, Greek, et cetera, is their autonomy—independence from all outside leadership. This idea prevails among the leaders with their adherents, particularly those still inclined toward restoration of order within the church.<sup>198</sup>

Aftimios also sent letters to Germanos and Victor with his suggestions for the resolution of their crisis “by the establishment of an American Orthodox Church that would be neither ‘Russy,’ nor ‘Antacky,’ but American.”<sup>199</sup>

Two years earlier, in February of 1924, Aftimios had written a four-page letter to Metropolitan Platon

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196 *Ibid.*

197 Surrency, 32.

198 Quoted in Ofiesh, 114.

199 Morris (Part Two), 7.

proposing the formation of a multi-ethnic, autocephalous “American Eastern Orthodox-Catholic Church.” His rationale for the proposal was not only to care for the Orthodox already in America but also to be able to extend united assistance to Orthodoxy in the mother lands.<sup>200</sup> Its *de facto* existence would be by virtue of a unilateral local declaration of autocephaly, but its *de jure* legitimacy would depend, however, on “full, lawful, free, and canonical sanction and recognition by the lawful and canonically established and recognized supreme authorities of the Patriarchates of Moscow and All Russia and Constantinople.”<sup>201</sup> In the letter, he also called for legal incorporation and the drafting of a proper constitution and by-laws, suggesting that Platon could be made the president of the newly formed American Holy Synod. However, unlike the model proposed in 1905 by Archbishop Tikhon, Aftimios rejected overlapping dioceses based on ethnic identification.<sup>202</sup>

Though nothing directly came of Aftimios’ 1924 proposition to Platon, by 1927 Aftimios was clearly ready to bring his idea to the fore once again when he met on March 6<sup>th</sup> of that year with Metropolitan Germanos “to discuss the reunification of the splintered Syrian Orthodox in one organization.” Germanos was interested in overcoming the division but said that resolution would require the cooperation of Victor, as well. Four days later, Aftimios met with Victor in Brooklyn, along with Zacharias, who was still in the country. At first, the patriarchal bishops refused any negotiations with Germanos, who had renounced the patriarchate when the announcement of Victor’s election became known. Victor did eventually agree, however, to submit Aftimios’ proposal for an American Orthodox Church to the Antiochian patriarchate. The parties entered into multiple negotiation sessions over the following months, but Germanos would not

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200 LaBat, 19.

201 Quoted in LaBat, 19-20.

202 *Ibid.*, 20.

participate until Victor invited him to do so.<sup>203</sup>

What it seems Aftimios had not told the other Syrian bishops was that, more than a month before his initial meeting with Germanos, on February 2, 1927, Metropolitan Platon, along with his entire local synod, signed into existence “The Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church of North America,” also to be known as the “American Orthodox Catholic Church.” The signatories included not only Platon and Aftimios but also Bishops Theophilus, Amphilochy, Arseny, and Alexy (Panteleev) of San Francisco (recently consecrated to replace the gap left by the loss of Apollinary to the Karlovci faction).<sup>204</sup>

The document issued by the synod charges

one of our number, His Eminence, the Most Reverend Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, with the full responsibility and duty of caring and providing for American Orthodoxy in the especial sense of Orthodox Catholic people born in America and primarily English-speaking or any American residents or parishes of whatever national or linguistic character or derivation not satisfactorily provided with proper and canonical Orthodox Catholic care, ecclesiastical authority, teaching and ministration of the Church or who may wish to attach themselves by the properly and legally provided means to an autonomous, independent, American Orthodox Catholic Church.<sup>205</sup>

The synod goes on to say that they “do hereby permit, empower, authorize and direct” Aftimios to “found, organize, establish, head, conduct, control, and maintain a distinct, independent and autonomous branch” of the Orthodox Church to be known as “The Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America.”<sup>206</sup> The act of the synod explicitly establishes this new American church as a parallel but independent jurisdiction which “shall preserve at all times its brotherly and filial relationship to the Orthodox Church of Russia represented... in America by His Eminence, Metropolitan Platon, and his

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203 Morris (Part Two), 7.

204 *Constitution of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America with Related Documents of The North American Holy Synod* (Brooklyn, New York: The Orthodox Catholic Review, 1928), 34-37.

205 *Ibid.*, 36.

206 *Ibid.*

canonically established and recognized successors.”<sup>207</sup> The act finally provides for Archpriest Leonid Turkevich to be elected as an assistant bishop for Aftimios.<sup>208</sup>

In its statement, the synod asserts two warrants for its act of establishing the new church. The first is a September 12, 1926, letter from Metropolitan Sergius (Starogorodsky), the patriarchal *locum tenens* of the Russian Orthodox Church, in which Sergius addresses the question of such an independent church in broad terms:

In countries which are not Orthodox, Autonomous groups, even Churches, could be organized, whose members need not all be Russians. Such separate and individual life can sooner save you misunderstandings and friction than an effort on the part of all to stay together under the authority of an artificially created centre.<sup>209</sup>

That this letter applies to the situation in America is not clear, as it was not written to address the creation of a parallel church by the Metropolia synod. Rather, it was written in the context of the dispute between Metropolitan Evlogy of Paris and the Karlovci synod over the source of Evlogy’s authority in Western Europe (i.e., whether it was Moscow or Karlovci).<sup>210</sup>

The second basis for the synod’s claim of authority to establish the new church is that Moscow itself was “now unable to either discharge that responsibility [i.e., care of the Orthodox in America] or to exercise that authority in any regular or sure manner.” Therefore, “both this responsibility and immediate de facto authority in America rests on us as the canonical Russian Bishops in America.” Further, because the Metropolia synod could not foresee an end to the chaos in Russia, continued delay in establishing such a church could mean “the loss of the benefits of Holy Church to thousands of Her American Children.”<sup>211</sup>

Thus, the establishment of the American Orthodox Catholic Church is essentially an extension of the

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<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Metropolia's unilateral declaration of self-government in 1924.

Archbishop Aftimios soon began to muster the resources of his Syrian diocese to aid in the new project. From August 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>, 1927, a committee of clergy and lay representatives of the Brooklyn diocese met at their cathedral in Brooklyn to approve Aftimios' plan for the American Orthodox Catholic Church. The archbishop charged them with "Presenting a Plan for the Independent Organization and Constitution of the Orthodox Church in America," and the committee's report is addressed to the November 29, 1927, convention of the Brooklyn diocese.<sup>212</sup>

Besides its "endorsement of a constitution," the committee also devised a "feasible and canonical plan for the transfer of the Syrian parishes of the Archdiocese [*sic*] of Brooklyn to the newly established and organized independent American Orthodox Catholic Jurisdiction." With a curious turn of canonical legalism, Syrian parishes wishing to join the new church would petition their current hierarch, Archbishop Aftimios, to be released into the jurisdiction of their new hierarch, Archbishop Aftimios. Aftimios thus regarded himself as heading two jurisdictions at once and being a member of both the Metropolia synod as its First Vicar and diocesan bishop for the Syrian mission and of the new American synod as its president.<sup>213</sup> With his organizational documents in place, Aftimios returned his attention to the question of an assistant hierarch.

Although Fr. Leonid Turkevich had originally been approved by the synod to be consecrated as Aftimios' first assistant hierarch, he was prevented by "personal matters" from immediately accepting consecration.<sup>214</sup> On August 20, 1927, Platon instead approved a petition from Aftimios, who was "ready finally to perfect and to announce the organization and establishment with the duty of which your Holy

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212 *Ibid.*, 41.

213 *Ibid.*, 43-45.

214 *Ibid.*, 37.

Synod charged” him, to consecrate Archimandrite Emmanuel Abo-Hatab as the assistant bishop for the American church. While asking for the approval to consecrate Emmanuel and for two bishops to assist in the consecration, Aftimios also requested that those same two bishops would join him in consecrating Turkevich, “or, in the event of his continued inability to accept this Consecration, of any other candidate who may be elected by myself and those working with me.”<sup>215</sup>

After Platon’s approval on August 20<sup>th</sup>, which appointed Bishops Theophilus and Arseny to assist in the consecration, the Metropolia synod ratified the petition on September 14, 1927, during a session at St. Tikhon’s Monastery in South Canaan, Pennsylvania.<sup>216</sup> Between Platon’s approval on August 20<sup>th</sup> and the ratification of the synod on September 14<sup>th</sup>, Emmanuel was consecrated at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Brooklyn by Aftimios, Theophilus and Arseny on September 11<sup>th</sup> with the title of *Bishop of Montreal*.<sup>217</sup>

Even before the official act of the Metropolia synod in February 1927 commissioning Aftimios to found the American church, the resourceful archbishop already had set two of his primary assistants on the task of preparing the way. Two members of the defunct English-Speaking Department, Hieromonk Boris Burden and Fr. Michael Gelsing, provided “very able assistance in this venture to establish an American Orthodox Church.” Both men were American-born and “very concerned with the leakage of Orthodox young people to the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches (in particular, the Protestant Episcopal Church because it was a liturgical church with social status and in some ways similar to the Orthodox Church).”<sup>218</sup>

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215 *Ibid.*, 38.

216 *Ibid.*

217 *Ibid.*, 43.

218 Surrency, 33.

Burden in particular was tasked with editing a new monthly periodical, *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, which published not only official pronouncements from Aftimios but also historical articles, saints' lives, editorials and various theological pieces.<sup>219</sup> The periodical only ran for seven issues (in six printings; the April and May issues were printed as one magazine), but it is nonetheless historically significant as the first periodical of its kind in English. In the January 1927 issue, a history written by Burden contains one of the first documented instances of the claim that all Orthodox in America accepted the authority of the Russian archdiocese prior to the founding of the Greek archdiocese in 1921.<sup>220</sup> Additionally, there are multiple articles and editorials which document some of the early appearances pseudo-Orthodox groups, preying upon the ignorance (and bank accounts) of canonical Orthodox Christians.<sup>221</sup>

One of the more significant articles in the *Review* appears in its April-May 1927 issue, written by Aftimios and entitled "Present and Future of Orthodoxy in America in Relation to Other Bodies and to Orthodoxy Abroad." In this twelve page piece, Aftimios blamed democracy and nationalism for the rise of division in American Orthodoxy:

The World War and the triumph of the slogan of Democracy, "Self-determination," fanned into destructive flame that smoldering but ever superabundant nationalism in the Eastern Orthodox people which, with unconscious irony, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has condemned as the new heresy of philetism—love of one's race or nationality above the love and obedience due to Holy Church and Her interests and canons. Each little group or tribe now aspired to become a distinct nation, and each nationalistic party determined to have a

219 For a fuller analysis of the contents of *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, see LaBat, 39-52.

220 Hieromonk Boris (Burden), "The Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America: An Historical and Current Survey," *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, January 1927, 9-10; FitzGerald, 135, note 43. As FitzGerald notes, there is not enough evidence for this claim, and there is indeed counter-evidence, as in a 1906 official listing of the Russian archdiocese parishes, which acknowledges Greek clergy outside its jurisdiction: "there are several Greek priests who are under the Metropolitan of Athens" (FitzGerald, 34). In addition, official lists from 1911 and 1918 do not include any of the many Greek parishes which existed at the time (Tarasar, 340-350).

221 See "Warning Against Deceptive Clergy and Collectors" (April-May 1927, 165); "Encyclical of Greek Archdiocese Warning Against Pretensions of Unknown Clergy" (March 1927, 110-111); "Concerning the 'American Orthodox Church'" and "The Orthodox Catholic Archbishop of Brooklyn to H. Devlin Carr" (March 1927, 111-114); "Old Catholic and Related Groups in America: A Survey of Numerous Independent Bodies and Clergy Sometimes Improperly Termed Orthodox or Erroneously Connected with the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church" (March 1927, 115).

separate and distinct national Orthodox Church or, indeed, a Patriarchate. This brought confusion and disorder enough in the Church in Europe where new or revived states sprang into existence; but its reaction on the Orthodox population of America where there was no corresponding political development to justify or excuse new ecclesiastical organizations was chaotic and disastrous.<sup>222</sup>

He also complained of the encroachment of the Episcopal Church on Orthodox people in America and its invitation of various Orthodox prelates outside of America to visit, thus bringing their unwanted influence where it had no authority. The article records Aftimios' particular distaste for the clergy of the opposing Syrian factions, who "made every effort to subvert the faithful of the Syrian Mission and Archdiocese of Brooklyn from their canonical obedience and rightful communion."<sup>223</sup> He also chronicled the various schisms and incursions leading to the establishment of the various nationally oriented Orthodox jurisdictions in America.

Aftimios' article then goes on to analyze the Orthodox situation in America, noting that its uniqueness lies in that it is "made up of people of all languages and from all political, racial, and ecclesiastical allegiances within the Church.... Only two things are common to all Orthodox in America—the fact of their Orthodox Faith, and their residence in this country." Further, "no foreign national Church is in a position to undertake effective administration of the Church in America."<sup>224</sup> He then goes on to put forth three standard answers for the solution of Orthodox unity in America, "each supported by a respectable weight of Orthodox opinion and authority."<sup>225</sup>

The first solution, which to his mind, is "the strongest claim canonically and historically," is that of the Russians, who claimed jurisdiction over America by virtue of having sent an episcopacy there first. The

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222 Archbishop Aftimios of Brooklyn, "Present and Future of Orthodoxy in America in Relation to Other Bodies and to Orthodoxy Abroad," *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, April-May 1927, 146-147.

223 *Ibid.*, 151.

224 *Ibid.*, 154.

225 *Ibid.*, 155.

second is that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and its Greek supporters, which claims jurisdiction by virtue of America being outside universally agreed upon canonical boundaries. Aftimios did not think much of this view, but noted that with the basic incompatibility of the Russian and Greek views, “the matter remains deadlocked between the Russians and Greeks.”<sup>226</sup>

The third solution which Aftimios saw was based in the opinion that “no precedent or Conciliar Prescription applies to the facts of the American situation,” in which multiple Orthodox traditions established themselves “in the midst of an unchanged pagan or heretical environment. No such land as this was thought of or provided for in the formulation of the Canons and Practice of the Church.” Therefore, there was “no basis on which any National Church can claim exclusive jurisdiction and each Church is free to establish its own American Jurisdiction.” This last answer “seems to offer a solution,” but nonetheless goes against the universal canons of the Church, which require that there be no overlapping jurisdiction on the same territory.<sup>227</sup>

Aftimios’ conclusion was that, canonically, “there is no answer to the problem at once strictly correct and also practically applicable to the situation unless American Orthodoxy be independently organized and dispose of Her own affairs by Her own Synod’s application of Canonical practice to each separate problem.”<sup>228</sup> He went on to say that there was warrant for his idea because “more than half the Orthodox in America today are the American reared and educated children of the Orthodox immigrants,” the “Orthodox of America tomorrow” who “know little and care less about the racial and national prejudices and jurisdictional quarrels of Europe.” Such people deserved an Orthodox church that would “include all those nationalities on the common basis of their Orthodoxy and American residence.” Besides being of

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<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

benefit to the American-born children of Orthodoxy, a united American Orthodoxy would be able to found charitable institutions and theological schools. Overall, however, “the prime necessity for Orthodoxy in America and at large today is to bury the causes of Her division and set forth anew on a road of peaceful and united progress for the good of Holy Church and the Kingdom of Christ.” After all, “the very survival and future existence of Orthodoxy depends on the rapid and firm organization and development of the Orthodox Catholic Church as one unified body in America.”<sup>229</sup>

The *Review* soon got Aftimios into trouble with Platon, however, who in an April 30, 1927, letter told the archbishop to order Burden to “cease his ‘steppings out’ against the Protestant Episcopalians.”<sup>230</sup> Burden and Gelsingier had taken a “hard line” approach to the Episcopal Church in various articles, often mocking the financial support that it gave some Orthodox churches as being essentially in exchange for recognition of their clerical orders:

The Protestant Episcopal Convention was thrown into transports of joy by the ambiguous announcement of Patriarch Melitios of Constantinople on their Orders, but turned a politely deaf ear to the appeals for funds for the shrines of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Obviously the way to the Protestant heart and pocketbook lay through mazes of polite, even though meaningless verbiage about Orders and Sacraments.<sup>231</sup>

The *Review* also detested the Protestant Episcopal claim in one of their General Convention reports to be “the original Orthodox body in this country holding jurisdiction, and that all others who come are simply our welcome guests whom we are pleased to befriend and aid in ministering to people of their own church, race and language.”<sup>232</sup>

By contrast, Platon, who had been receiving funding from the Episcopal Church, wrote in his letter to

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229 *Ibid.*, 155-156.

230 Surrency, 38.

231 “The Jerusalem Patriarchate and the Russian Church Situation,” *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, February 1927, 89.

232 “Present and Future,” 149.

Aftimios, “I must attest before Your Eminence that without their (American Episcopalian) entirely disinterested assistance our Church in America could not exist.”<sup>233</sup> In the April-May issue, the *Review* published a brief note entitled “Truth and Apologies,” which expresses “regret that the tender feelings of many people appear to have been hurt,” though also stating that “there seem to be persons and bodies who take offense and feel injured if the truth be spoken plainly and dispassionately.”<sup>234</sup> The *Review* did not last long, and its seventh issue being its last is perhaps foreshadowed in the apology printed in what was only its second issue for “the continued lateness of the Review.”<sup>235</sup> Its publication was indefinitely suspended after its July-August 1927 issue due to lack of funds.<sup>236</sup>

Even before the new American church project had achieved any real momentum, 1927 also saw swift opposition from the Karlovci synod from whom Platon and Aftimios were now estranged:

In letters dated the 27<sup>th</sup> of April and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1927, the Synod made clear their unalterable opposition to the formation of the new Church both on the grounds that Metr. Platon and his Bishops had no power or authority to authorize the founding of the new Church (it must be kept in mind that for almost two years now there had been a break between Metr. Platon and the Exile Synod) as well as on the grounds that there was no justification or rationale for the establishment of an American Orthodox Church, at that time or any time in the foreseeable future.<sup>237</sup>

Aftimios’ reply was made in an equally contentious manner in an eleven page letter dated June 15, 1927, which referred to the Karlovci synod as “the uncanonical (pseudo-Synod of the Outlandish Russian Orthodox Church).” In the letter, Aftimios banned his clergy and laity from any contact or fellowship with “this pseudo-Synod which has no authority in America or anywhere else.”<sup>238</sup>

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233 Surrency, 38.

234 “Truth and Apologies,” *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, April-May 1927, 223.

235 “Space, Time and the Editors,” *The Orthodox Catholic Review*, February 1927, 52.

236 Ofiesh, 174.

237 Surrency, 37.

238 *Ibid.*

Undaunted by the outright opposition from Karlovci and the somewhat less than enthusiastic support of Platon, Aftimios moved ahead with the formation of the American Orthodox Catholic Church. In November 1927, the convention of the Brooklyn diocese ratified the report presented to them by the committee which met in August. By December 19, 1927, Aftimios had prepared a constitution for the jurisdiction, along with an accompanying cover letter to be sent to Orthodox bishops throughout the world, requesting recognition for his church.<sup>239</sup> Despite the December 1927 date of these documents, they were not officially promulgated until Spring of 1928.<sup>240</sup> It was also on February 1, 1928, that the new church gained a charter of incorporation in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, following on previous failures to incorporate in New York and Pennsylvania.<sup>241</sup>

The constitution gave extremely broad authority to Aftimios, perhaps much broader than had been intended by Platon and the Metropolia synod when they signed the February 2, 1927, document creating the American Orthodox Catholic Church. While the wording in the February document was ambiguous in certain ways, not explicitly defining the jurisdiction of the American church, the constitution was explicit: “This Church has original and primary jurisdiction in its own name and right over all Orthodox Catholic Christians of the Eastern Churches and Rites residing or visiting in the United States, and Alaska and the other territories of the United States, in Canada, Mexico, and all North America.”<sup>242</sup> Coupled with this claim to “primary” authority over North America is the claim of “Missionary jurisdiction” and being the “patron protector of Orthodox Catholic Faithful and missions in all countries of the New

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239 Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Archbishop President of The North American Holy Synod, Brooklyn, New York, to the Most Reverend Governing Prelates, Synods, Authorities, and Bishops of All Orthodox Catholic Churches and Jurisdictions, 19 December 1927, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

240 Surrency, 36.

241 *Ibid.*, 38, note 21.

242 *Constitution*, 9.

World” and its “colonial possessions” and protectorates of any New World nations.<sup>243</sup>

The constitution also uses the word *autocephalous* in reference to itself, while *autonomous* had been the strongest term of independence in the February 2 Act. *Autonomy* may well have been understood to be synonymous with *autocephaly*, however, given the language of “fully autonomous and independent” used in the prior document. *Autonomy* is also used in the constitution, so it seems that these terms were probably not being used in the distinct, technical senses which are now generally understood within Orthodoxy, that is, that an autocephalous church is completely independent in its governance, while an autonomous church is dependent on an autocephalous body for the confirmation of its primate.<sup>244</sup>

It is difficult to know what Platon may have initially thought about the status of the new church. In his account of the new American church,<sup>245</sup> Archimandrite Serafim Surrency writes that “one can safely say that Metr. Platon (perhaps with the exception of Archbishop Aftimios) and his Bishops never had any intention of granting any such broad and unlimited authority and jurisdiction,” especially since the jurisdictional claim made by the constitution essentially gave Aftimios authority over the Metropolia synod, as well.<sup>246</sup> It is also possible, however, that Platon and the Metropolia bishops may have hoped for the success of the American church in precisely these terms. If so, and the jurisdiction and its autocephaly gained recognition from Orthodoxy throughout the world, they could then insert their own parishes into the new jurisdiction, essentially ratifying with permanence the temporary autonomy they had granted themselves in 1924 and regularizing their own canonical status.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 36.

<sup>245</sup> Surrency, 32-42.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>247</sup> By 1924, the Metropolia was *de facto* out of communion with the Moscow patriarchate and thus unrecognized by most of the Orthodox world. In 1933, this division was made official with the establishment by Moscow of its own exarchate on American soil, led by a bishop with the title of *Archbishop of the Aleutian Islands and North America*. For an argument that the 1924 declaration was instead a canonically valid assumption of autocephaly, see: Alexander A. Bogolepov, *Toward an American*

Despite some relatively minor setbacks in 1927, the American Orthodox Catholic Church by 1928 appeared to be set for a solid future. On May 26, 1928, the church consecrated its third bishop, Sophronios (Beshara), who had served as a priest under both Raphael and Aftimios. Sophronios was consecrated with the title *Bishop of Los Angeles* and was considered to be a vicar of Aftimios in the Syrian Brooklyn diocese under the Metropolia but also as a missionary bishop in the new jurisdiction with territory west of the Mississippi River. A foreshadowing of the difficulties to come may be seen in the list of participants in the consecration, namely, Aftimios himself, Emmanuel, and the visiting Antiochian Metropolitan Elias (Deeb) of Tyre and Sidon. None of the Russian bishops joined them in the service.<sup>248</sup>

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*Orthodox Church (Revised Edition)* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).  
248 *Ibid.*, 38.

## Chapter VI:

### Leonid Turkevich

On March 10, 1928, Metropolitan Platon sent a telegram to Bishop Arseny in Canada in which he outlines his opinion regarding the American Orthodox Catholic Church:

Incorporation of American Orthodox Church in North America has not affected position of Russian Church in United States and Canada stop New Church was proclaimed autocephalous by Syroarabs who formerly formed branch of our Church in America and who found necessary proclaim with our permission American Orthodox Church stop<sup>249</sup>

Platon goes on to say in the telegram that he had no problem with young Russians in America and Canada who did not speak Russian attending services at Aftimios' churches, since the services there were conducted in English. Whatever Platon's initial intentions were in signing the jurisdiction into existence, he clearly no longer regarded the "Syroarabs" as being part of his jurisdiction. There must have been some confusion regarding whether Aftimios' church now took precedence over the Metropolia, however, not just because of Platon's beginning remark that the American church "has not affected position of Russian Church," but also in that he ends his telegram that "we declare once more that Russian Orthodox Church in America and Canada will preserve unchanged her present status which she has been enjoying for 127 years in United States and about 40 years in Canada."<sup>250</sup>

Platon's telegram addressed another, related question concerning the relationship between the American church and the Metropolia: "It was intended to appoint Russian Archpriest Leonid Turkevich as their Bishop stop Since no Russian has shown desire become member of American Orthodox Church

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249 Metropolitan Platon to Bishop Arseny, Edmonton, Alberta, 10 March 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.  
250 *Ibid.*

appointment of Russian Bishop has been postponed stop.”<sup>251</sup> The election of Turkevich to the episcopacy had never been officially rescinded, but Aftimios was clearly not willing to wait on Turkevich’s accession to consecration and went forward with consecrating first Emmanuel and then Sophronios.

Archpriest Leonid Turkevich was a widowed priest serving in the Metropolia. Born in 1876 to a priestly family in Volhynia (now part of western Ukraine), Leonid studied at the Kiev Theological Academy and pursued a teaching career for a few years after graduation. He was married in 1905 and then ordained to the priesthood at the monastery of Pochaev. He served as a parish priest in Kremenetz, the town where his father had served in the same position, and thought of becoming a missionary in Persia. Turkevich came to the United States in 1906 at the behest of Archbishop Tikhon, who appointed him as the rector of the seminary in Minneapolis and later in Tenafly, New Jersey. From 1914 to 1930, he was the editor of the *Russian-American Orthodox Messenger (Vestnik)*. He was widowed in 1925, left with three young children.<sup>252</sup>

The question of Turkevich’s consecration was revisited in the summer of 1928. Aftimios and his secretary, Fr. Boris Burden, had come into contact with Major A. M. Platoff, a parishioner at St. Nicholas Orthodox Church on 7<sup>th</sup> Street in Philadelphia, an independent Russian parish under no jurisdiction served by a Rev. Nicholas V. Senovsky. Aftimios, through Platoff, attempted to negotiate the reception of the parish into the American church to be used as a cathedral for a Russian branch. Turkevich was to become its bishop.<sup>253</sup>

Platoff was fascinated with the idea of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, and he wrote a nine page letter to Burden extensively detailing his ideas for the jurisdiction. The letter’s primary message is that

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251 *Ibid.*

252 Tarasar, 232-233.

253 Major A. M. Platoff to Rev. Boris R. Burden, 9 May 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

Aftimios needed parishes, not just plans:

I wish to call your attention to another, more pressing problem: you cannot do anything for the younger generation until you have local parishes to do the work; and in order to achieve anything you have at first to establish either new parishes or, still better, to have transferred existing parishes under new independent jurisdictions of the American Orthodox Church, in accordance with accepted Constitution. Only when you will have local parishes of the American Orthodox Church, the real work could be started. A Church consists not only of bishops and clergy, but mainly of Christians—laymen to whom the clergy have to serve and preach and administer sacraments.<sup>254</sup>

This comment by Platoff is an indication that the new jurisdiction probably consisted at this point mainly of ideas. If any of the Syrian parishes had consciously followed Aftimios into the American church (that is, more than merely on paper), they were clearly not enough for Platoff to have the impression that there were yet enough “local parishes to do the work.”

In the letter, Platoff goes on to detail how to get parishes and people on board with the jurisdiction. The letter recommends luring and confirming clergy with various awards and titles (e.g., a “kamilavka” or “skuffia,” both clerical hats), while laymen could receive the bishops’ blessings with a form letter, perhaps accompanied by a lapel pin.<sup>255</sup> He also believed, however, that an “American National Orthodox Church” would serve to Americanize immigrants, which would make the jurisdiction more attractive so as to “enlist members from the old American stock regardless of denominational differences.” It is not clear whether he intended these recruits to convert to Orthodoxy, however, because he says that membership “should not be confined only to men and women belonging to the Orthodox faith.”<sup>256</sup> This comment may mean trying to create a multi-faith jurisdiction or simply that the American Orthodox Church should not hesitate to evangelize among the heterodox.

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

In July, Burden sent a letter dated July 10, 1928, to Turkevich, asking him to translate a letter in Russian from Bishop Arseny, supposedly a reply to an earlier request that he assist in consecrating Turkevich. In his letter, Burden also asked Turkevich whether the latter had been in contact with Platoff and the Russian parish in Philadelphia, where “if possible we hope to arrange your Consecration there before the end of this month.” He also noted without explanation that “so far we have heard nothing from Bishop Theophile. Have you?”<sup>257</sup> (Theophilus was also being sought out for the consecration.)

Turkevich translated Arseny’s letter and sent it the next day, July 11<sup>th</sup>. Instead of addressing the question of the consecration of Turkevich, Arseny instead asked Aftimios for help with legal costs arising from a lawsuit in Edmonton. Bishop Adam (Philipovsky), an independent Carpatho-Russian bishop rivaling Arseny in Canada, had gotten the courts to declare the Metropolia to be in schism and was trying to take property from Arseny. Somehow, this lawsuit is “connected with [Aftimios’] stepping out,” possibly meaning that the creation of the American church was an act of schism on the part of the Metropolia. Arseny hoped that Aftimios would see this as their common struggle, but that if he did not, “I, for the alleviation of the trial, will be forced to take out my signature from the document, which exist in your declaration.... If you not forgotten even then in Brooklyn I with the great unwillingness was going on the agreement of your plan [*sic*].”<sup>258</sup>

If the hesitation for support on Arseny’s part were not enough of a problem for Aftimios, in another letter from Platoff to Burden, dated July 12, 1928, the major, aside from stating that Senovsky was willing to try to convince his parishioners to come into the American church, also mentioned a rumor that he had

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257 Boris R. Burden, Altoona, Pennsylvania, to Father Leonid Turkevitch, Arrochar, Staten Island, New York, 10 July 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

258 Bishop Arseny, Winnipeg, to Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, 11 July 1928 (translation), OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

heard from the priest: “As a rumor he told me that the Metropolitan has an idea to create an Autocephalous American Patriarchate, himself becoming its first Patriarch.” Platoff wanted to know what Burden thought of this, noting elsewhere in his letter that, if Turkevich did become the bishop there in Philadelphia, he “will have a very difficult task before him, a task which will require a very strenuous work among the nearby parishes.”<sup>259</sup>

In Burden’s reply, he stated that he was happy to hear that the parish in Philadelphia might be willing to come into the American church and that he and the archbishop would like to meet with Senovsky. He also addressed the rumor regarding Platon:

With regard to the rumor about an American Patriarchate being in the mind of His Eminence, Metropolitan Platon, I do not see how it could be established by His Eminence under the present situation and I doubt if he will really attempt it. Should he do so, I am sure he will fail through getting no support outside a small faction of the Russians in America and no recognition from abroad. It would be disastrous to his position I should think.<sup>260</sup>

On the same day, Burden also sent a letter to Senovsky, indicating his and Aftimios’ pleasure at the priest’s willingness to cooperate. He went on to say that he believed that having Turkevich as the bishop of Philadelphia and working in the American church was the only way to “save the Orthodox Russians and others in America from the present disorder and helpless condition.” If Turkevich could be consecrated, it might “rescue... the Russian Church in America from its troubles and enemies. It will be the beginning of a new and united American Orthodox Church out of the scattered children of the Russian Orthodox in America.”<sup>261</sup>

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259 A. M. Platoff, Lansdown, Pennsylvania, to Rev. B. R. Burden, Brooklyn, New York, 12 July 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

260 Boris R. Burden, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to Major A. M. Platoff, Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, 17 July 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

261 Boris R. Burden, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to Reverend Nicholas V. Senofsky, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 July 1928, OCA Archives (Oyster Bay Cove, New York).

On the same day that Burden sent his letters to Platoff and Senovsky, Aftimios sent a letter to Turkevich. He thanked him for the translation of the letter from Arseny and also sent him a copy of the July 12 letter of Platoff, asking Turkevich to meet with the major and Senovsky as soon as possible. He also wrote that he finally heard from Theophilus regarding assisting in the consecration, and that neither he nor Arseny would be able to come soon enough for his liking, as he wanted Turkevich consecrated by the end of July or early in August. He thus proposed that he be assisted in the consecration by his own assistant bishops instead of waiting for Theophilus and Arseny. He then finished his letter by asking about the rumor of the American patriarchate, which he thought was “highly unlikely for I do not see how it could be done.”<sup>262</sup>

Nine days later, Burden sent a letter to Turkevich, asking why he had not yet met with Senovsky (Platoff sent another letter saying that Turkevich had delayed a planned meeting). Burden also wrote that he and Aftimios were “anxiously awaiting some reply and comment from you on our last letters and the several enclosures we sent you.”<sup>263</sup> Turkevich finally wrote a reply to the various queries sent him by Aftimios on July 26<sup>th</sup>, which most likely crossed in the mail with the last letter from Burden.

In his reply, the widowed archpriest noted three numbered items. His first was that he read Platoff’s letter essentially as meaning that the whole notion of having him consecrated as bishop of Philadelphia really belonged only to Platoff himself, having the support of neither Senovsky nor the parishioners. Second and perhaps most significant, “Metropolitan Platon, having obtained information of the plan from a letter written to him by Bishop Theophilus, told me on Sunday before this that my acceptance of the

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262 Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to Very Reverend Leonid Turkevich, Arrochar, Staten Island, New York, 17 July 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

263 Rev. Boris R. Burden, New Kensington, Pennsylvania, to The Very Reverend Father Leonid Turkevich, Arrochar, Staten Island, New York, 26 July 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

proposition would cause him to curse me publicly and withdraw all financial support.” His third item was that he needed to provide for his two young sons and his daughter, and therefore cannot accept Aftimios’ proposal, which includes no fixed income.<sup>264</sup>

Turkevich finished his letter thanking Aftimios for the great honor of being chosen as bishop, saying that he believes that great possibilities exist for the Orthodox Church by the fulfillment of Aftimios’ plan, but that he cannot accept the proposal due to its lack of steady salary. He therefore withdrew his name from candidacy. A final note mentioned that he had “no information concerning any plans of forming a Patriarchate in North America by Metropolitan Platon or any other prelate.”<sup>265</sup> On August 3, Turkevich sent a separate letter to Burden, reiterating his inability to accept consecration due to his financial needs and also saying that “Mitropolitan [*sic*] Platon is dead against such a step and threatens not only to withdraw financial support but also open antagonism.” Platon is also “not keep me informed as to his plans concerning the American Patriarchate nor what the law suits [appeals on the Kedrovsky court battles] are proving. I am as much in the dark on those matters as you are.”<sup>266</sup>

Metropolitan Platon’s support for the American Orthodox Catholic Church had moved from possibly enthusiastic (with at least official endorsement) to the edge of outright antagonism within about a year and a half. Three months after the affair with Turkevich fell apart, Aftimios sent a frantic telegram to Bishop Theophilus saying that he had been unable to contact Platon. There was to be a meeting of the Metropolia synod to which Aftimios had not been invited, and worse, it was going to cover matters pertaining to interferences in the Syrian Brooklyn diocese, which he believed he still headed.<sup>267</sup> Aftimios now found

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264 Fr. Leonid Turkevich, Arrochar, Staten Island, New York, to Aftimios, Bishop of Brooklyn, 26 July 1928 (draft), OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

265 *Ibid.*

266 Rev. Leonid I. Turkevich, Arrochar, Staten Island, New York, to Father Boris, 3 August 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

267 Archbishop Aftimios, Montreal, Canada, to His Grace Bishop Theophilus, Chicago, Illinois, 26 October 1928, OCA

himself on the fringe.

Three days after his telegram to Theophilus, Aftimios sent a letter to Platon himself. The letter uses strongly emotional language, written with “the deepest grief and pain” that Aftimios was “most deeply and sadly disappointed”:

Even in the face of the fact that Your Eminence forbid Bishop-elect Leonid Turkevich from accepting Consecration after Your Eminence had yourself proclaimed his election and given order for his Consecration I have wished to believe it impossible that Your Eminence should secretly attempt to destroy the work of your own hands in the creation of an American Orthodox Catholic Church founded by your order and committed by Your Eminence and the other Russian Bishops into my charge and authority. As a son to his father, I turn to Your Eminence now asking an explanation of your attitude and a final setting at rest of the ugly rumors which are a disgrace to our mutual work for our Holy Orthodox Church and Faith.... I had no thought that Your Eminence would find it possible to order me to proceed in this great and difficult work alone and then secretly condemn me and that work by permitting rumors of Your Eminence’s displeasure to be scattered where it was necessary that there be the fullest confidence if our work was to be successful.<sup>268</sup>

Aftimios declared that he had always loyally defended Platon as the primate of the Russian-American archdiocese, but that he heard that Platon was dissatisfied with him, yet he did not know why. Worse yet, Aftimios was greatly disturbed at the possibility for Platon stepping into the Brooklyn diocese:

Finally it comes to me that Your Eminence has received some unauthorized and rebellious letters and requests from a few with whom I have trouble in my Diocese of Brooklyn and Syrian Mission or in the new American Orthodox Church and that Your Eminence will answer favorably these irresponsible troublemakers and will take action interfering in the Diocese of Brooklyn and Syrian Mission. I can not believe that Your Eminence will do so or that it is your intention. But I am forced to ask that Your Eminence give me formal assurance in this matter and put a stop to the rumors and reports which interfere with the peace and unity of our work together for Holy Church.<sup>269</sup>

Aftimios ended the letter with a repetition of his request for assurance, expressing his “continued devoted

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Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

268 Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Montreal, Canada, to Most Reverend Metropolitan Platon, New York, New York, 29 October 1928, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

269 *Ibid.*

loyalty” and hope that their “filial fellowship” would continue. He tellingly signed the letter “Aftimios, Archbishop of Brooklyn, Head of the Syrian Mission, and President North Am. Holy Synod.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter VII:

### Mariam Namey

The question of the recognition of the American Orthodox Catholic Church received its first answer from the Old World on December 1, 1928. It came in the form of a letter from Ecumenical Patriarch Basil III of Constantinople to Archbishop Alexander (Demoglou), the head of the Greek archdiocese in America, who had alerted the Ecumenical Patriarchate in May of 1928 to the proclamation of the new church:

...we hasten to state in answer and by a decision of our Holy Synod, that the establishment of this Church is altogether anti-canonical and besides it is of national character under a concealed form. The Mother Church, therefore, repudiates the establishment of this new apparently Russian Church, and we urge your Eminence not to come into a Communion whatever with it. We further request you whether your Eminence or representatives of other Churches have taken part at the councils for the establishment of this Church [*sic*].<sup>271</sup>

Two months later, on February 11<sup>th</sup>, Alexander sent a letter to Aftimios, replying to a message from the latter dated January 15. Alexander's letter states that he and Aftimios

differ fundamentally in our view as to the canonical right of jurisdiction over the Orthodox Churches. For me and for the majority of the Orthodox world no such question exists. This question is solved. We recognize the canonical and ancient historical right of the Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, in accordance with Canon 28 of the IV Oecumenical Council.<sup>272</sup>

He comments that Aftimios says that the Ecumenical Patriarchate's interpretation of Canon 28 to give Constantinople jurisdiction in the lands of the "diaspora" is "recent," "uncanonical" and "unhistorical," and that instead the Russians have "the sole and exclusive canonical jurisdiction in America," which

Alexander rejected:

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<sup>271</sup> Shadid, 105, Appendix E.

<sup>272</sup> Quoted in Gabriel, 52.

It is sufficient for me to state in connection, that as long as Alaska was a Russian territory, the Russians had jurisdiction in their own house, but it makes a great difference thence to jump to Canada, to the United States, etc. The jurisdiction over all Orthodox in the Diaspora, including the whole western Hemisphere, which includes Alaska as well, being no more a Russian territory belongs indisputably to the Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.<sup>273</sup>

Alexander concludes his letter by saying that so long as there is disagreement on this “basic point,” that “confusion” will persist. Therefore, in order to avoid making the situation worse, it would be best if the disagreeing parties simply left one another alone. It is also probable the the Greeks had been angered over Aftimios’ ordination of Fr. Demetrius Cassis, an American Greek.<sup>274</sup>

On October 4, 1929, Aftimios publicly repudiated Platon’s jurisdiction, published in a directive addressed to “All Bishops and clergy of the Patriarchate of Moscow resident in America and to all members of the Russian Diocesan Council.”<sup>275</sup> This directive, likely in response to a now public opposition from Platon, stated that:

His Eminence, the Most Reverend Platon (Rozhdestvensky), the Metropolitan of Kherson and Odessa, has no proper, valid, legal or effective appointment, credentials or authority to rule the North American Archdiocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in any capacity, Such being the case it follows that from the departure of His Eminence Archbishop Alexander (Nemolovsky) that the lawful and canonical ruling headship of the Archdiocese of the Aleutian Islands and North America in the Patriarchal Russian Church has naturally been vested in the First Vicar and Senior Bishop in this Jurisdiction.... the title and position of “Metropolitan of North America and Canada” has no canonical existence in the Russian Church.<sup>276</sup>

Aftimios signed the directive as “Aftimios, First Vicar and Senior Bishop in the Archdiocese of the Aleutian Islands and North America.” Almost certainly, “this announcement had little or no effect on the Russian Clergy—presumably they knew of the 1924 Ukaz of Patriarch Tikhon suspending Platon but specifying

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<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>274</sup> Surrency, 39.

<sup>275</sup> LaBat, 32.

<sup>276</sup> Quoted in Surrency, 39.

that he was to continue to rule the Archdiocese until such time as a Bishop was sent to relieve him.”<sup>277</sup>

Two weeks after Aftimios’ claim to jurisdiction over all Russian Orthodox in America, his first assistant bishop, Emmanuel (Abo-Hatab) of Montreal, wrote a letter dated October 21 requesting release from Aftimios to be allowed to come under Platon’s jurisdiction. Aftimios reluctantly agreed.<sup>278</sup> His canonical release of Emmanuel is worded more like a deposition, however:

Rt. Rev. Emmanuel Abo-Hatab is removed and totally cut off from all office, administration, authority, membership, and communion in any and all Dioceses, Districts, Missions, or Churches under our authority and at the same time is not permitted... to exercise office... in any other mission, Diocese, or Church.<sup>279</sup>

On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the Metropolia synod received Emmanuel as one of their synod, noting “the extremely hard position in which Archbishop Aftimios has placed him,” and appointing him as the head of the Brooklyn diocese to take care of “all our Orthodox Syrians who do not wish to go out of the circle of our Holy Patriarchal Church.”<sup>280</sup>

Faced with the betrayal of Platon and the loss of Emmanuel, Aftimios pressed forward, instructing Fr. Boris Burden to write an October 31 letter to Fr. Mark Kondili, who was an early leader in establishing Albanian Orthodox parishes in America. The letter was an attempt to negotiate bringing the Albanian parishes into the American Orthodox Catholic Church. The intended plan was to bring the former prime minister of Albania, Bishop Theophan (Noli) over to the United States from Germany to oversee the Albanian parishes under Aftimios’ jurisdiction.<sup>281</sup> This overture to the Albanians does not seem to have borne any fruit.

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<sup>277</sup> Surrency, 39.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> Quoted in LaBat, 33.

<sup>280</sup> Quoted in Emmanuel, Bishop of Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, to Platon Metropolitan of America and Canada, New York City, 19 November 1929, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

<sup>281</sup> Surrency, 40.

Aftimios' hold over even his core parishes, those of Syrian tradition, soon began to slip. In January of 1930, a committee claiming to represent the majority of the members of the Brooklyn Cathedral of St. Nicholas sent a letter to Platon complaining that the Brooklyn diocese was in a state of "chaos and trouble," that there was "a possibility that the people may lose orthodoxy [*sic*]." The letter regards Aftimios as having misled the people of the Brooklyn diocese into believing that the Metropolia synod had authorized the creation of the American Orthodox Catholic Church.<sup>282</sup>

Following the 1927 founding, Aftimios "has issued various proclamations and ordered various acts to be performed which... [are] inimical to the best interests of orthodoxy and our church," such as refusing to allow any clergy to serve at the cathedral who have not sworn allegiance to Aftimios. The letter also complains that Aftimios failed to call a convention in 1929, as was required by their diocesan constitution.<sup>283</sup>

The next month, Najeeb Diab, editor of *Mir'at al-Gharb*, one of the Arab-American periodicals which had supported Aftimios in his battles with Germanos, also wrote a letter to Platon. Diab demands that Platon step in to assist those attempting to gain control over the cathedral by means of a lawsuit against Aftimios. Diab says that his publication has "spent all efforts and energy combatting [*sic*] the malice and ruinous efforts of Archbishop Aftimios, but now is about to lose patience in fighting your battle while you stand aloof." He wants Platon to issue a judgment on Aftimios, "whether pro or anti, so that we can guide ourselves accordingly."<sup>284</sup> On April 10, the Metropolia synod ruled that Aftimios was no longer one of their number, since "it is not permitted to one person to be, at the same time, a head in one church and a

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282 St. Nicholas Cathedral Committee, Brooklyn, New York, to the Most Rev. Platon, Metropolitan of North America, New York City, 14 January 1930, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

283 *Ibid.*

284 N. M. Diab, New York City, to His Eminence the Most Reverend Platon, Metropolitan of North America, New York City, 19 February 1930, OCA Archives, Oyster Bay Cove, New York.

vicar in another.” The resolution also officially recognized Emmanuel as the head of the Brooklyn diocese.<sup>285</sup>

In September of 1930, Fr. Basil Kherbawy and many of the people of the Brooklyn cathedral put themselves under Platon. However, Kherbawy asked in his September 30<sup>th</sup> letter that, because of dissent among the Syrians, they not be placed under Bishop Emmanuel.<sup>286</sup> Twenty-seven days later, Kherbawy, who had meanwhile been suspended by Aftimios, placed himself under his former hierarch’s nemesis, Metropolitan Germanos (Shehadi). Aftimios published an edict again repudiating Germanos and demanding none of his clergy or people have anything to do with him.<sup>287</sup>

In October of 1930, Aftimios made an erratic move, appealing to the newly arrived Metropolitan Damaskinos (Papandreou) of Corinth, whom the Ecumenical Patriarchate had sent as an exarch to try to bring healing to divisions among the Greek parishes. Aftimios called upon Damaskinos as “the special Representative and Exarch of the Ecumenical Throne of Constantinople.” Because of the “present chaotic and helpless state of the Church of Russia,” Aftimios hoped that “the Holy Great Church which you represent” could “bring about a united and disciplined Orthodoxy in America for greater and more profit to Orthodoxy than any other settlement of the Hellenic divisions in this country.”<sup>288</sup>

In May of 1931, Aftimios wrote and published a piece of writing entitled “The Orthodox Situation in America: A Practical Survey and Program for Unity.”<sup>289</sup> The text was similar to items he had published in the past, detailing the history of Orthodox divisions in America from his point of view and seeking to prove his jurisdiction as the First Vicar of the Russian archdiocese. It also puts forward his ideas regarding what

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285 Quoted in Gabriel, 204, note 23.

286 LaBat, 34.

287 Surrency, 40.

288 *Ibid.*

289 Reproduced in Ofiesh, 138-159.

an American Orthodoxy should look like, that its services be conducted in English, that educational materials be produced, and so forth. The piece also covers the current state of jurisdictional division, noting “seventeen separate divisions, or factions, having a total of twenty-three bishops actually consecrated (besides several unconsecrated leaders or acting administrators of groups).”<sup>290</sup> At the end of the work, Aftimios invites the Ecumenical Patriarchate to assert jurisdiction over America and for Athenagoras (Spyrou), the new Greek archbishop in the United States, to assume the presidency of the American Orthodox Catholic Church. Aftimios believed that a union of Russian and Greek jurisdictions in America would, on the basis of the authority of Aftimios derived from Moscow and the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, draw other Orthodox groups into union with it.<sup>291</sup>

On August 2, 1932, the court battle over the cathedral in Brooklyn was finished, and Aftimios lost his bastion of support to the Metropolia, who turned the cathedral over to Emmanuel. During the trial, Emmanuel testified against Aftimios, as did lay members of the cathedral community, who charged the archbishop with misuse of funds. Aftimios rebuffed the accusation by an assertion of his rights as the bishop. In the end, however, the judge ruled that Aftimios had no right to the cathedral, since he had been removed by Platon and also because he had violated the canons of the Orthodox Church by setting up the American jurisdiction.<sup>292</sup> Additionally, according to the cathedral charter, only a hierarch recognizing Russian authority could use the church.<sup>293</sup>

Despite his jurisdiction sinking around him, Aftimios continued to throw out jurisdictional lifelines in an attempt to find sure footing. In 1932, Aftimios along with Bishop Sophronios (Beshara) consecrated

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<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159.

<sup>292</sup> Morris (Part Two), 9.

<sup>293</sup> Surrency, 40.

two new bishops for the American church: Bishop Joseph (Zuk) of New Jersey was consecrated to head a Ukrainian branch of some six parishes and William A. Nichols, who took the name Ignatius at his consecration, was appointed as bishop of Washington and given care of “Americans.” Ignatius had formerly been an Old Catholic *episcopus vagans*<sup>294</sup> and a priest of the Episcopal Church, and had been received recently into Orthodoxy.<sup>295</sup> Though of questionable canonical status by virtue of being under Aftimios, Ignatius was the first convert to Orthodox Christianity consecrated to the episcopacy in America.

In October of 1932, Aftimios received a message from St. Mary’s Church in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, asking for him to come to the church to resolve a dispute regarding the local priest, Constantine Abou-Adal.<sup>296</sup> The parish had divided into two factions. One faction wanted Abou-Adal replaced by Fr. George Mitchell, who was a “fellow countryman” then serving in Niagara Falls, New York, while the other group wished to keep Abou-Adal at the parish. Aftimios traveled to Wilkes-Barre to intervene.<sup>297</sup>

Aftimios was able to negotiate apparent reconciliation between the two factions, denying the request of the dissenters who wished to remove their priest, whom none could show had done anything but served faithfully. While Aftimios met with various committees and organizations of the parish, he also undertook to organize Bible studies, train a choir, and work with the youth. It was during one of his meetings with the youth that he was delivering an impassioned plea to “lay aside narrow provincialism still clung to by their elders and to unite as liberated Americans, allowing no ‘Ob-Stack-L’ to stop them from accomplishing and developing their full potential.”<sup>298</sup>

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294 Latin for “wandering bishop,” from the Roman Catholic teaching that apostolic succession is preserved in bishops even without remaining true to the faith or in communion with the Church.

295 Surrency, 40.

296 Ofiesh, 178. Abou-Adal had originally come to America in 1895 with Raphael as his chanter (Gabriel, 32).

297 *Ibid.*

298 *Ibid.*, 178-179.

After the speech, the youth stood in a line waiting to shake hands with Aftimios. What happened next became the catalyst for the event by which he would later be best known:

Near the end of the line was Mariam Namey who had hung breathlessly on every word Aftimios had spoken. When he took her hand, she asked if she might say a word for his ear only. When he inclined his head, she whispered, “It is ‘obstacle,’ not ‘Ob-Stack-L’” and hastened out the door.<sup>299</sup>

The archbishop was struck by the boldness of this twenty-one year old young lady who dared to correct his English pronunciation. He also noticed her absorption during his lessons on the Scripture with the youth and her humble bearing in dealing with other members of the group. Before he left Wilkes-Barre at the end of October, Aftimios asked her to oversee the Sunday school program, but she excused herself as “unqualified and in need of instruction.”<sup>300</sup>

Mariam Namey was a Wilkes-Barre native, born on December 2, 1910, to a Syrian immigrant family. Mariam’s mother Sophia died in April 1922, and within two years, Mariam left school to take a job as a clerk at the furniture store where her father Elias worked. She later was hired by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and worked to support her family as its sole wage earner. Although she never returned to school, she continued private study of both English and Arabic.<sup>301</sup>

The next month after Aftimios’ visit, November, Abou-Adal resigned from the parish, “saying his delicate health could not tolerate the thinly veiled hostility of the dissenters who pretended reconciliation.” With the cessation of services at the departure of the priest, Aftimios himself returned to Wilkes-Barre in December to serve the parish, especially so that it would not have to be without the services of Christmas. While he was there, the archbishop resumed teaching Bible studies and working with the choir, but he also

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299 *Ibid.*, 179.

300 *Ibid.*, 180.

301 *Ibid.*, vii.

began giving Mariam private lessons in the New Testament, apparently to prepare her for taking the leadership of the Sunday school. Aftimios left Wilkes-Barre in February of 1933, assigning Mitchell as the pastor and filling the new vacancy in Niagara Falls with Fr. Michael Gelsing, who was serving as a Greek professor at the University of Buffalo.<sup>302</sup>

Pascha (Easter) fell on April 16 in 1933, and Paschaltide found Aftimios serving at the church in Niagara Falls. While he was there, he received a telegram and several telephone calls reporting that Fr. Boris Burden “had been caught corrupting and molesting the parish youth” in Brooklyn. The incensed parish urgently asked the archbishop to come to Brooklyn and take action against Burden, who was being threatened with physical violence in retaliation for his actions. Upon hearing of this news from Brooklyn, Aftimios said, “They are not content except that they wallow in vice. I shall not come to Brooklyn to wash the hands of the clergy; however, soon you will hear history-making news that will shake the nerve and sinew of clergy and laity alike!”<sup>303</sup>

Aftimios soon telephoned Mariam in Wilkes-Barre, asking her to meet him in Niagara Falls. Mariam boarded the 11:20pm Lehigh Valley train on Friday, April 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>304</sup> She arrived in Niagara Falls on April 29<sup>th</sup>, and she and the fifty-two year old Aftimios were legally married by a local judge in his chambers. The one witness to the event soon notified the English and Arabic press.<sup>305</sup>

On Saturday, April 29, 1933, when Mariam Namey did not report for work at the insurance office where she held a job, her father Elias Namey was contacted, asking where she was. At the time, he believed that she had left to do “something for the church,” but he did not know where she was. The following

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302 *Ibid.*, 180.

303 *Ibid.*, 180-182.

304 “Dad Frowns on Girl’s Marriage to Bishop,” *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 3 May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

305 Ofiesh, 182.

Monday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, Namey received a letter from his daughter and her new husband informing him of their Saturday wedding. Upon hearing the news, Namey said that he neither wished to go to Niagara Falls to congratulate the couple nor even to see either of them again.<sup>306</sup>

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306 “Dad Frowns on Girl’s Marriage to Bishop.”

## Chapter VIII:

### Aftermath

The marriage of Mariam to Aftimios drew immediate criticism from numerous members of the Syrian Orthodox community. Opinions ranged from wanting nothing to do with the bishop who had so disgraced himself with the young Wilkes-Barre girl to assertions that Aftimios had excommunicated himself from the church by his act.<sup>307</sup> But Aftimios maintained otherwise:

...Bishop Ofiesh is said to say that his marriage does not violate any rules of the church. He says that the rule by which the clergymen do not marry is merely an agreement that may be broken any time. His friends say that he has often threatened to get married to prove his contention.<sup>308</sup>

Contrary to Aftimios' assertion, however, Canon VI of the Quinisext Council (also called the "Council in Trullo"), which met in 692 and is regarded by the Orthodox Church as having binding, ecumenical authority over the whole Church, states: "it is in no wise lawful for any [clergyman] after his ordination to contract matrimony but if he shall have dared to do so, let him be deposed." Other canons explicitly state that only those in the rank of lector or cantor may marry after ordination. By the time of the Quinisext Council, all bishops were expected not only not to marry after ordination, but to be celibate, separating from their wives upon consecration to the episcopacy (Canon XLVIII).<sup>309</sup>

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bishops Ignatius (Nichols) and Joseph (Zuk) held a "synod" meeting in Carteret, New Jersey, believing that Aftimios had resigned as President Archbishop of the American Orthodox Catholic Church. At the meeting, the two elected Joseph as the new head of the church, with Ignatius having the

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307 "Local Girl's Bridal Splits Syrian Church," *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 2 May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

308 *Ibid.*

309 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II, Vol. 14* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 364, 388.

right of succession after him. They also expressed regret at Aftimios' resignation but also rejected the ancient Orthodox standard of episcopal celibacy, saying that

inasmuch as it is merely a Canon of the European and Asiatic branches of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Church, that a Bishop should not be married, such has no valid weight on the American Church where conditions are dramatically opposite... therefore the Holy North American Synod congratulates His Eminence on the moral courage in the step he has taken.<sup>310</sup>

After the statement from the meeting of Ignatius and Joseph, the former later sent a message to Aftimios published in the press: "Wind will winnow chaff out of your brave act. Orthodoxy will begin new life in America. God bless you both." Though not present at the meeting, Bishop Sophronios (Beshara) was also said by friends to be "in sympathy" with Aftimios.<sup>311</sup>

While the hierarchs of the American Orthodox Catholic Church were coming out in favor of the marriage (yet also distancing themselves from Aftimios), Fr. Boris Burden was fleeing to Niagara Falls from the angry mob in Brooklyn, looking for protection from Aftimios. Upon hearing of the wedding, however, Burden met with Aftimios and began making demands. His demands were that Aftimios should publicly deny the marriage (saying that Mariam was only his secretary), refute the accusations of perversion against Burden, consecrate him as a bishop, and then give him free rein in establishing missions for the independent church. When Aftimios refused, Burden called for a meeting of the clergy of the jurisdiction in Niagara Falls, to convene May 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>312</sup>

At the meeting (which was attended by Fr. George Mitchell from the Wilkes-Barre parish, among others), Burden called upon the clergy to recognize the *de facto* deposition of Aftimios by virtue of his

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310 Quoted in Surrency, 41. Surrency also notes that Joseph, who was quite ill at the time, later denied making this statement.

311 "Marriage Wins Bishop's O.K.," *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 10 May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

312 Ofiesh, 183-184.

violation of the canons.<sup>313</sup> Aftimios, whose whereabouts were apparently difficult to ascertain, had been quoted as saying that “he declines to resign and that his withdrawal is a matter that only the bishops of the synod could decide.”<sup>314</sup> He believed that God had commanded him to marry Mariam.

Aftimios shortly thereafter suspended Burden, saying that “Boris no longer is connected with the Syrian Orthodox Church.”<sup>315</sup> Burden would later be expelled by Metropolitan Platon from the Metropolia as well.<sup>316</sup> He was finally received by Bishop Benjamin (Fedchenko), the newly arrived hierarch from Russia who in 1933 established the exarchate of the Moscow patriarchate in America.<sup>317</sup>

On July 2, Aftimios sent a letter to the Brooklyn diocese defending his choice to marry, basing his argument mainly on the testimony in Scripture about the goodness of marriage. In the letter, blamed the development of episcopal celibacy on “the Papal Church,” whose “heretical attempts” succeeded in the Quinisext Council under the leadership of “these faithless hierarchs of the Trullen Synod.”<sup>318</sup> He claimed that the married episcopacy (which historically had existed in the early Church) had been restored “throughout Russia, Siberia, and also in America.” Finally, no doubt stinging from the accusations against Burden, Aftimios also wrote that the “ghastly revelation of faithlessness in a junior hierarch and some of my celibate clergy, all of whom formerly had my full trust, compelled me to the considered and serious act for which I have been denounced and reviled by my many unprincipled opponents.”<sup>319</sup>

The letter likely fell on deaf ears, however, because by the summer of 1933, there were no more than

313 “Archbishop Has Lost Balance, Synodical Secretary Thinks,” *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

314 “Archbishop and Bride Vanish: Syrian Church Dignitaries Continue to Debate Law Violation Question,” *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 4 May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

315 “Archbishop Strips Chief Accuser of Church Offices,” *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, 10 May 1933, Archives of St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

316 Schneirla interview.

317 Surrency, 42.

318 Ironically, Rome was not really represented at Trullo and only recognized its canons under Pope Hadrian I in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. They were never followed in the West. See *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II, Vol. 14*, 356-357.

319 Ofiesh, 188-193.

six parishes still holding allegiance to the American Orthodox Catholic Church.<sup>320</sup> Those that were left were by no means united in support of Aftimios.

The next month, on August 18<sup>th</sup>, Aftimios burned another bridge in a letter denouncing the Moscow patriarchate itself, declaring that Metropolitan Sergius, the “pretended, illegitimate and self constituted so-called Locum Tenens,” held absolutely no authority over him whatsoever. Further, Sergius and his synod in Moscow, having allegedly commanded “the rebaptism and reordination and reconsecration, again and again, of... Orthodox persons in Russia,” were all to be regarded as deposed and excommunicated.<sup>321</sup> Again, this thundering from Aftimios probably went entirely unheard.

On October 4, 1933, an official decree (*ukaz*) from the Russian Orthodox holy synod in Moscow, promulgated in the United States by Bishop Benjamin, declared Aftimios to be deposed from the episcopacy. The grounds for the deposition were his marriage after ordination in defiance of the canons of the Orthodox Church, and the authority by which the synod made the decree was that Aftimios claimed to derive his episcopacy from the Russian church (which had never recognized the independence of either the Metropolia or Aftimios’ American jurisdiction). The decree also declares the suspension of Burden annulled and calls upon Benjamin to contact Aftimios to ask for his cooperation and to discuss what ministries he might perform as a layman.<sup>322</sup> Three days later, Bishop Sophronios (Beshara), acting as senior hierarch of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, also declared Aftimios to be removed from office.<sup>323</sup>

Aftimios and Mariam stayed for a while in Niagara Falls, where she soon became pregnant. On February 17, 1934, Mariam gave birth to their son Paul. The family eventually moved to an apartment in

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320 Surrency, 41.

321 Ofiesh, 194-195.

322 LaBat, 36-37. Considering the chaotic and strained state of church affairs at the time, especially between Moscow and the Metropolia, summoning Aftimios to Moscow for an ecclesiastical trial would have been almost impossible. Platon had already disavowed authority over Aftimios and would likely not have held a trial, either.

323 Surrency, 42.

Wilkes-Barre, then later to New Castle, Pennsylvania, which was not far from New Kensington, where Aftimios' brother Nicholas served as priest. They returned to the Wilkes-Barre area in 1938, where Mariam found a job in Kingston to support them.<sup>324</sup> During this time, life was not easy for the Ofiesh family, as Paul needed surgery at one point and at another Mariam had to be admitted to a sanitarium to be treated for tuberculosis. They were generally quite poor, though they received occasional contributions from the few supporters who remained loyal to Aftimios.<sup>325</sup>

Two brief attempts were made to return Aftimios to church service. In 1935, several of the families at the Niagara Falls parish met and decided they wanted Aftimios as their pastor. They offered an apartment which could serve as Aftimios' headquarters, so that he might reestablish contact with supporters throughout the country. However, the plans fell apart when it was revealed that the group instead wanted to put the family on state assistance.<sup>326</sup> In 1937, a similar offer was made to bring Aftimios to Allentown, but it also came to naught.<sup>327</sup> Aftimios made visits to the Allentown group, as well as trips to Brooklyn and Montreal, which yielded some offers of financial assistance, but nothing significant. At one point, Aftimios even tried getting a job with the Wilkes-Barre Street Department, but was refused by the mayor, who felt it would be insulting to the "retired" bishop.<sup>328</sup>

Over the following years, a number of *episcopi vagantes* and other irregular clergy sought out Aftimios looking for "validation of their questionable orders." There is no evidence that he ever did anything for them along those lines.<sup>329</sup> In addition, a Greek bishop once came to Aftimios seeking his help in testifying

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324 Ofiesh, 235.

325 Morris (Part Two), 9.

326 *Ibid.*, 215-216.

327 *Ibid.*, 217; Morris (Part Two), 9.

328 Ofiesh, 216-221.

329 *Ibid.*, 222. Ofiesh lists a number of names: Bishops James Toombs, Joseph Klimowicz, Peter Zurewetski, and Alexander Turner, along with priests named Gregory Adair, John Chrysostom, Vasilious Markopoulos, and "others whose names Mariam cannot recall and does not have access to."

as part of litigation. Aftimios naturally refused, owing to his intense dislike of lawsuits.<sup>330</sup>

Tensions within the Ofiesh and Namey families regarding the scandalous marriage were often present, but there was some contact between the couple and their families, especially with Fr. Nicholas Ofiesh from New Kensington. Additionally, members of the Namey family would visit, and the children who came in his twilight years referred to Aftimios as “Uncle Sayidna,”<sup>331</sup> remembering years later that he still dressed and acted as a bishop, despite being almost entirely cut off from the life of the Orthodox Church.<sup>332</sup>

Shortly before his death, Aftimios was paid a visit by the local Syrian Orthodox priest in Wilkes-Barre, Fr. Herbert Nahas. Nahas had not wished to see Aftimios, mainly because of the disgrace in which Aftimios and Mariam lived and also because doing so would possibly mean stirring up dissension in the parish. However, Nahas had received a letter from Metropolitan Antony (Bashir), the head of the Syrian archdiocese, instructing him to visit Aftimios to see what kind of biographical information could be had regarding the period between his marriage and the current time. There was also a personal connection between Nahas and Aftimios, as the latter had ordained Nahas’ father George.<sup>333</sup>

When Nahas entered the house in Kingston, Aftimios looked up and saw him coming. When the old bishop recognized that the son of one of his priests was entering, he looked at him and bitterly said, “Now you come to see me?” Nahas showed him the letter from Antony, but Mariam, “always a tough woman,” refused to allow Aftimios to speak with him. “You just leave him alone,” she said. The priest left their home without anything to send the metropolitan.<sup>334</sup> This encounter was probably Aftimios’ last contact

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330 *Ibid.* This Greek bishop may have been Christopher (Contogeorge), who led a group of dissidents against the Greek archdiocese for some years in the 1930s and 1940s, initiating multiple lawsuits. There are some reports that the consecration of Christopher was assisted by Bishop Sophronios (Beshara).

331 *Sayidna* is Arabic for “our Master” and is the standard manner of addressing bishops of Arabic tradition.

332 Norman Namey, interview by author, 2005, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

333 Archpriest Herbert Nahas, interview by author, 5 April 2007, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

334 *Ibid.*

with the Orthodox Church.

Peace does seem to have come to Aftimios, however:

One evening, shortly before his demise, Mariam asked him if she had spoiled his life. His answer was that he had been saved from a pit of corruption; then slowly looking up with a mirthful smile and laugh as at a secret joke, he quietly said the word “Ob-stack-L” at which Mariam laughed, and he fell silent, reassured.<sup>335</sup>

Aftimios Ofiesh died on July 24, 1966, at the age of eight-five. His will stipulated that his funeral was to have no flowers, no viewing, no gathering and no religious services of any kind. “No clergy of any denomination” were to have anything to do with his body. He was buried according to his wishes the next day at Maple Hill Cemetery in Hanover Township (near Wilkes-Barre), across the street from the Orthodox cemetery.<sup>336</sup>

After Aftimios died in 1966, Mariam moved a few times, living in Florida and Massachusetts.<sup>337</sup> In 1995, an independent group of *episcopi vagantes* based in Arkansas (later moving to Texas) and calling themselves “Orthodox” contacted Mariam and convinced her to be on their board of directors, at least nominally. With her on the board, they obtained ownership of the corporate name of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church in North America (the American Orthodox Catholic Church).<sup>338</sup> In 1999, Mariam published Aftimios’ official biography, but it made no mention of the Arkansas/Texas group or of its claim to be the continuation of Aftimios’ church. After Mariam died in 2000, the group continued on under this name, still claiming to be the same jurisdiction that Aftimios began and regarding Mariam as having been the “locum tenens” for the thirty-nine years between Aftimios’ death and the founding of their new church in 1995. In 2003, the group declared itself to be a patriarchate. As of April

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<sup>335</sup> Ofiesh, 223.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-229.

<sup>337</sup> Archpriest David Hester, interview by author, 2007, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

<sup>338</sup> It is unclear how this was accomplished. It may be that Mariam inherited the corporate name from Aftimios or that its registration expired and was renewed by the Arkansas/Texas group.

2007, the group's website listed no parishes or service schedules, and most of its notable activity seems to be spent in lawsuits defending its corporate name.<sup>339</sup>

Shortly before Aftimios had married Mariam, Bishop Emmanuel (Abo-Hatab) received a letter from Fr. Leonid Turkevich, dated March 10, 1933. In the letter, Turkevich quotes to Emmanuel part of a letter from Patriarch Alexander III (Tahan) of Antioch, written to Metropolitan Platon:

...Since every Orthodox National Community which is immigration including this part of the Syrian one, is naturally attracted by the general and irresistible wave to its own Mother, this bishop (Emmanuel) and his flock themselves begin to dream and yearn... for more close reunion with their own Mother—Holy Church of Antioch... meanwhile saving in their hearts the feeling of unlimited gratitude toward Second Mother—the Holy Russian Church...[sic]<sup>340</sup>

Platon added to the letter this resolution: “The wish of His Holyness [sic] Patriarch Alexander can be gratified after Bishop Emmanuel, his clergy and laity have pronounced their opinion upon the question brought up by the Patriarch.”<sup>341</sup> The release to Antioch of the last remaining Syrian parishes under the Metropolia was finally granted, but not until after Emmanuel died of lymphosarcoma on May 29, 1933, aged forty-three years. Germanos (Shehadi) finally returned to the Middle East in 1933, dying the next year in Lebanon.<sup>342</sup> With his return and the release of the Metropolia parishes to Metropolitan Victor (Abo-Assaley), three separate strands of Antiochian Orthodoxy in America merged into one.

On July 30, 1933, Ignatius (Nichols) followed in the footsteps of Aftimios and was married to a

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339 Fr. Paul (of the “American Orthodox Patriarchate”), email interview by author, 16 April 2007. See also *The American Orthodox Patriarchate*, <http://www.theocacna.org/>; *Concerning the Succession of St +Aftimios*, [http://www.apostle1.com/08-17-2004-concerning\\_the\\_succession\\_of\\_st\\_aftimios.htm](http://www.apostle1.com/08-17-2004-concerning_the_succession_of_st_aftimios.htm); *The Lawsuit*, <http://www.ind-movement.org/lawsuit/index.html>; (all accessed April 16 2007, available via the Internet). Verifiable documentation of the activities of such independent groups is extremely difficult.

340 Quoted in Gabriel, 205, note 25.

341 *Ibid.*

342 *Ibid.*, 55.

woman Emily Cashman by one of his priests. On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bishop Sophronios declared Ignatius deposed from the episcopacy.<sup>343</sup> Ignatius then entered into communion with John Kedrovsky for a short time in 1933 and then with his son Nicholas the following year. He soon resumed his career as an *episcopus vagans*, consecrating various men to the episcopacy and beginning several independent bodies. Ignatius died in 1947 as the pastor of a small Community Church in Middle Springs, Vermont.<sup>344345</sup>

Among the various groups that Ignatius created, the most notable is probably the Society of Clerks Secular of St. Basil, a brotherhood of clergy who used the Western Rite, a form of worship based in the ancient Orthodoxy of the West. In 1939, Ignatius consecrated Alexander Turner to the episcopacy, who took over the headship of the Society when Ignatius died in 1947. Within a few years, Turner began discussions with his friend Fr. Paul W. S. Schneirla, a priest of the Syrian Antiochian Archdiocese of New York under Metropolitan Antony. As a result of these discussions, Turner brought many of his flock into the archdiocese between 1958 and 1961, was accepted as a priest and became the first Vicar General of the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate.<sup>346</sup>

Sophronios spent the better part of 1933 and 1934 as an independent hierarch, the last bishop of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, trying to regularize his relationship with two of the Russian factions

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343 LaBat, 37.

344 Surrency, 41, including note 33.

345 If one were to follow the various lines of claimed “apostolic succession” derived from Ignatius, the list could probably number in the hundreds, especially by means of the Internet. Despite the claim of being “canonical” by such groups, they are outside the context of the Orthodox canonical tradition, which presumes being within the ongoing communion of the Church. Many of these groups regard themselves as being descended from Aftimios, but despite his often fiery nature and eventual rejection of most church authorities, he would never have taken to such a reckless approach to church life. Nevertheless, some look on him as a saint. For “icons” of “Saint” Aftimios, see Appendix II.

346 Benjamin A. Andersen, “The Western Rite Vicariate of the Antiochian Archdiocese: Historical Foundations, Development and Future Prospects” (unpublished essay, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 2003); Thomas E. Bird, “The Orthodox Church in America: A Sketch,” *The Word*, January 1965, 10; Metropolitan Antony, “Edict on the Western Rite,” *The Word*, September 1958, 23.

in America, the Metropolia under Platon and the newly established patriarchal exarchate under Benjamin. Despite having only perhaps a small handful of parishes claiming him as their bishop, he always sought in negotiations to be treated as the equal head of a church. He had also tried to contact Emmanuel, who died before he could do so.<sup>347</sup>

Sophronios himself died in 1934, and Fr. Michael Gelsinger, who had remained with him until that point, returned to the Metropolia under Platon. Joseph (Zuk) had died early in 1934, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, and his Ukrainian branch was led by his successor, Bishop Bohdan (Spilka), into the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1937. With the last of the episcopacy of the new jurisdiction gone, the remaining parishes wandered between authorities or eventually became independent.<sup>348</sup> Most of those identifying themselves as Syrian came to be part of the Antiochian jurisdiction of Metropolitan Victor.

With the death of Sophronios in 1934, the various Syrian factions united into one jurisdiction for the first time in nearly twenty years, becoming part of the Antiochian patriarchate. The peace was not to last, however, as Victor died on April 19, 1934. Within the space of a little more than a year, all of the Syrian hierarchs in America—Aftimios, Germanos, Emmanuel, Sophronios and Victor—had either died or left office.<sup>349</sup> The weary Syrian flock was ready for a leader to unite them.

Archimandrite Antony Bashir was eventually selected by the Antiochian archdiocese to be the next metropolitan. For a while, there seemed to be some contention for the title from Archimandrite Samuel David (who had originally come under the Syrian diocese of the Metropolia but left for Germanos'

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<sup>347</sup> Surrency, 42.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Two of these bishops, Emmanuel and Sophronios, are buried in the same grave with Bishop Raphael at the Antiochian Village in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Victor is buried in another grave next to them. The date of death on the gravestone given for Sophronios is incorrectly listed as 1940. See the photographs in Appendix I.

jurisdiction), but he eventually agreed to step aside for Antony's election. On April 19, 1936, exactly two years after the death of Victor, Antony was consecrated by Metropolitan Theodosius (Abourjaily) and Bishop Vitaly (Maximenko)<sup>350</sup> at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Brooklyn.<sup>351</sup>

Hopes of unity were destroyed, however, as Samuel was consecrated on the same day at St. George Cathedral in Toledo by three bishops of the Metropolia, Adam (Philipovsky) of Philadelphia (who had reconciled with the Metropolia), Arseny (Chagovtsov) of Detroit, and Leonty (Turkevich) of Chicago (who had finally been consecrated by Platon in 1933). The three Metropolia bishops were acting without the blessing of the rest of their synod, and when brought before them to answer for their action, they claimed it was done to prevent the loss to the Maronites<sup>352</sup> of the Syrian Orthodox who favored Samuel. Samuel himself essentially claimed that he was taking up where Emmanuel had left off, as a Syrian bishop under the Metropolia.<sup>353</sup>

Samuel did not function as a Metropolia bishop, however, and his small group of parishes eventually came to form a parallel Antiochian archdiocese based in Toledo. Samuel and Antony cooperated at various times to an uneven degree, but the division was not to be healed by them, being perpetuated not only by division in America itself, but also by division within the Antiochian synod in Damascus. Samuel died in 1958 and was replaced four years later by Michael (Shaheen), who was originally consecrated as an assistant to Antony but soon became Samuel's successor in division, propelled into that position at least partly against his own desire. In 1966, Antony died and was succeeded by Metropolitan Philip (Saliba).<sup>354</sup>

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350 Theodosius would eventually become patriarch of Antioch in 1958, while Vitaly was a major leader in the ROCOR.

351 Gabriel, 56-62.

352 The Maronite Catholic Church is an Eastern Catholic communion under Rome with a strong presence in Lebanon.

353 Gabriel, 64.

354 For a detailed examination of the relationship between the New York and Toledo archdioceses, see Fred Mark G. Shaheen, "A Tale of Two Churches: The Toledo and New York Archdioceses of the Antiochian Church in North America" (M.Div. thesis, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 2002).

Michael and Philip came to be much closer to one another than Samuel and Antony had succeeded in doing. During the few years between Michael's consecration and Antony's death, the two had published statements of unity in *The Word*, but no real administrative union had taken place. In 1975, however, on June 24<sup>th</sup>, after nearly forty years of the New York/Toledo division, which had been preceded by twenty years of the "Russy/Antacky" factioning, accompanied with the divisions created by the fracturing of the American Orthodox Catholic Church, Metropolitan Philip and Metropolitan Michael signed an agreement uniting the two archdioceses into one.

Despite canonical claims and counter-claims, backed up with various documents from the synod in Damascus, the two hierarchs chose to pursue unity over jurisdictional rights. Michael agreed to step aside as a ruling bishop, becoming an auxiliary archbishop, while Philip became the canonical hierarch for all Antiochian parishes in North America.<sup>355</sup> The various threads which had their origins in the work of Bishop Raphael had finally been woven together into one cloth.<sup>356</sup>

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355 "Our Negotiations with Toledo," *The Word*, November 1975, 7-8.

356 For a graphic representation of the various divisions and unions pertaining to the American Orthodox Catholic Church and the Antiochian archdiocese, see Appendix III.

## Conclusion

An ancient metaphor for the episcopacy is that a bishop is married to his church. In one sense, the episcopacy of Aftimios Ofiesh could be said to be the story of a man always in pursuit of his ecclesiastical wife. From the day he took office as the bishop of Brooklyn, Aftimios was faced with an often fickle and various flock, and this chaotic relationship continued until the total disintegration of his office that occurred with his marriage to Mariam Namey in 1933. Just as in a stormy romantic relationship, Aftimios courted his flock with both kindness and often conflict, especially with other “husbands” who worked to court the same flock, especially his itinerant nemesis Metropolitan Germanos (Shehadi).

Unlike the marriage of Hosea, though, Aftimios did not live the life of the patient husband, always quietly seeking out the wandering wife. He instead entered into open conflict with nearly everyone who opposed him. While his charisma and charity had some success in reconciling warring parties with each other, he proved almost incapable of reconciliation when he was one of the combatants. Aftimios was a brilliant, talented man, but he did not have the kind of love that characterized his holy predecessor Raphael.

Photographs of Aftimios prior to his marriage almost always show him with an intense, almost angry look on his face, while images from his life with Mariam and their son Paul are generally of a peaceful, contented man. The peace for which Aftimios strove during his sixteen tempestuous years as a bishop was found only when he met and married his “second” wife. From his early days as a seminarian to the end of his ecclesiastical career, he was almost perpetually in conflict. Toward the end of his life, however, Aftimios no longer fought to claim jurisdiction against the counter-claims of other bishops. This fact and his quiet

life of seclusion are evidence that he finally found the peace for which he had looked, though certainly not in the form in which he had initially sought it. Mariam Namey became the consort Aftimios desired.

Apart from the irony one may draw from the above psychological analysis of Aftimios and his relationship to his flock, the metaphor of the church as the bishop's wife holds true in a number of ways in Aftimios' case. The intensity of the sacramental bond between the bishop and his church is such that separation, as in a marriage, becomes a truly ugly thing. Perhaps one of the most painful episodes Aftimios experienced was in 1930, facing Bishop Emmanuel (Abo-Hatab), his former archdeacon and assistant hierarch, testifying against him in court. In the end, perhaps the most pastoral possibility that existed for Aftimios was a "divorce" from his episcopacy followed by his marriage to Mariam.

The significance of Aftimios Ofiesh is far larger than questions of his personality, however. The beginning of his episcopacy was precisely at such a moment in history that almost no man in his position, apart from divine intervention, could have succeeded in bringing together the scattered and divided flock. There is an odd mirroring between Aftimios and his predecessors Raphael and Tikhon. Aftimios, like both of them, had a vision for the unity of the Church in North America, and he also worked tirelessly to minister to his flock, traveling great distances to meet them and see to their needs. Without the holy and self-sacrificial love that were the hallmarks of the ministries of the two sainted bishops, however, Aftimios proved incapable of bringing back together what they had worked to build.

In her biography of her late husband, published in 1999, only a year before her own death, Mariam draws an image of Aftimios meant to depict him as a saint. Throughout the book, Aftimios is always the unjustly wronged party, the prescient pastor, the righteous prophet. Yet unlike those among the canonized saints whose lives were also filled with conflict, Aftimios' labor ultimately proved almost entirely fruitless.

One also does not see such saints railing against their persecutors for their supposed canonical “rights” and “jurisdiction.” Wherever Aftimios went, division and conflict followed. To be sure, he usually stepped into an already divisive situation, but he rarely made it better.

The failure of the American Orthodox Catholic Church should not be attributed to a single cause. It would be easy to place the blame on Platon’s withdrawal of support based on his reliance on funds from the Episcopalians whom *The Orthodox Catholic Review* offended. This factor no doubt played a role in Platon’s lack of support, but other influences probably also led him to back away from Aftimios almost as soon as he signed the new jurisdiction into existence. The prevailing attitude of the Russian hierarchs in America was not that of Tikhon before them. Tikhon drew together people of disparate backgrounds and customs, uniting them in seeking their salvation in the one Orthodox Church. The Russian hierarchy after Tikhon tended rather to become entangled in its own, Russian difficulties and either alienated or ignored the non-Russian members of their flock. This tendency was of course significantly influenced by the chaos in Russia itself and throughout the Russian diaspora brought on by the Bolshevik Revolution. By 1933 there were three separate Russian Orthodox factions in America.

As seen in the Metropolia’s final release of its last Syrian parishes to Antioch in 1933, all of American Orthodoxy in that period began to look almost entirely to its own problems and to let various ethnic enclaves form without reference to the catholicity which marked Tikhon’s vision. The whole affair over the consecration of Fr. Leonid Turkevich must have rankled Aftimios especially in 1933 when he was finally consecrated, not by Aftimios but by Platon. That episode illustrates particularly sharply that Platon was not truly interested in supporting the new jurisdiction he had created. Perhaps Platon had initially been

enthusiastic about the idea of an American Orthodox Church, as possibly evidenced by the rumor in 1928 of his creating an “American Patriarchate,” but his attitude soon was clearly one which isolated Aftimios.

Aftimios and his group were the only major players of the time who sought to look beyond the tribal approach being taken nearly everywhere, not only in America but also in the rise of nationalism in eastern Europe and elsewhere in the aftermath of World War I. That his international call for ecumenical Orthodox recognition of the American Orthodox Church went almost entirely unanswered, except for indirect condemnation from Constantinople, is symptomatic of an impairment of catholicity in the general consciousness of the Orthodox Church of the twentieth century. Most of the churches were clearly not even interested in discussing the question, which is the status quo that prevails even eighty years later.

Aside from these external forces which worked against the new jurisdiction, a number of internal elements also engendered its defeat. Aside from the handful of feisty writers who had formerly made up the English-Speaking Department, Aftimios had a difficult time in attracting clergy who could minister to the needs of the flock. Even when he finally did ordain two non-Syrian bishops, Joseph (Zuk) and Ignatius (Nichols), their contribution was quickly aborted, first by Joseph’s illness and death, and second by Ignatius’ obvious lack of commitment to Orthodoxy, demonstrated by his swift apostasy after Aftimios’ marriage.

Additionally, Aftimios sought to build multi-ethnic unity upon an already divided flock consisting primarily of one ethnicity. Attempting to create an American Orthodoxy when Syrian-American Orthodoxy was so badly fragmented proved impossible. Aftimios’ own followers were not united in their support of his endeavor. Part of what made that difficult was the at first uncanonical and renegade influence of Germanos and then the official activities of Victor, the two Antiochian bishops against whom

Aftimios struggled. Except from a purely nationalistic perspective, it is difficult to have any sympathy at all for Germanos, but both Victor and Aftimios were attempting to create unity out of disunity, though on opposite sides. By the time the official Antiochian presence in North American began in 1924, there was almost no hope of reuniting under the Russian archdiocese. Even the previous unity with the Russian archdiocese still involved isolation for the Syrians, governed as they were by a separate bishop without geographic limits. Tikhon's plan certainly had its genius, but if absolutized and perpetuated, it still created overlapping jurisdictions defined by ethnicity.

Perhaps the most powerful factor in the downfall of the short-lived American jurisdiction was Aftimios himself. Brilliant and tireless, Aftimios nonetheless lacked the gentle conciliatory approach of his predecessors. The "poor, wretched Syria" in which he had been raised was brought within him to America, and conflict followed him. He had the sort of personality that built fortresses rather than bridges.

The purpose of this thesis is not to condemn Aftimios, however, but rather to show his significance and his lasting legacy. What Aftimios sought to accomplish for himself in his life never found its fulfillment except perhaps in the "Plan B" that was his thirty-three year marriage to Mariam. American Orthodoxy, the child that Aftimios wished to bring into the world through his consort, the Brooklyn diocese, proved to be stillborn. Nevertheless, a number of the threads which Aftimios gathered together and later frayed were to affect American Orthodoxy in a lasting way.

The English-Speaking Department that Aftimios supervised briefly during his time in the Metropolia and then later included on his staff in the American Orthodox Catholic Church came to be a major force in the development of an American Orthodoxy. Men such as Fr. Boris Burden and Fr. Michael Gelsinger

exercised a profound influence on the course of the Orthodox churches in America. Gelsinger in particular, because of his erudition and prolific work in writing and translating, did a great deal to promote an identity of Orthodox Christians in America not as sojourning foreigners but as truly Orthodox Christian Americans. The Antiochian archdiocese especially owes him a great debt for his work with Metropolitan Antony (Bashir) in publishing catechetical and musical works in English. As seen above in chapter four, Gelsinger spoke prophetically in his 1942 letter to Antony when he said that “the only chance our little Syrian church in America has is to go down in American Orthodox History as the one which established the work in English.” In many ways, his prediction has come true, but Gelsinger’s work is used even beyond the Antiochian archdiocese and can be found in other jurisdictions, as well.

The pursuit of publishing Orthodox materials in English is probably the longest lasting and most effective, practical legacy which Aftimios left the Church in America, but his greatest contribution to our history is his vision for American Orthodox unity. He quite lucidly and correctly analyzed the canonical situation of American Orthodoxy during his episcopacy, even if his solutions were not always the most strictly and canonically legal. As Aftimios wrote in his article “Present and Future of Orthodoxy in America in Relation to Other Bodies and Orthodoxy Abroad,” the essential deadlock between the respective viewpoints of the Russians and Greeks is insoluble by strictly canonical means. As a result, Orthodoxy in America remains uncanonically fragmented into more than a dozen separate jurisdictions.

The Russian claim of exclusive jurisdiction in all of North America by virtue of sending missionaries to what was then a portion of the Russian empire (Alaska) is the subject of debate. There is no agreement among the Orthodox churches that a jurisdiction may annex new lands simply by sending clergy into them, especially not a whole continent. Additionally, the claim which Fr. Boris Burden made in his history of

Orthodoxy in America, that all Orthodox Christians in North America recognized Russian authority before the founding of the Greek archdiocese in 1921, is ostensibly false. It is noted above how Germanos founded his “Antacky” diocese in 1916, and there is also no real evidence that the Greek parishes ever regarded the Russian hierarchy as their own. Indeed, there is counter-evidence that the Russian hierarchy in America recognized the existence of Greek parishes in the same land which were under the Church of Greece.

The counter-claim of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople also has major problems. Constantinople’s claim is that all lands outside canonically defined territories belong to her missionary jurisdiction by virtue of Canon XXVIII of the Council of Chalcedon, which gave it jurisdiction over certain “barbarian lands.” The canon does not explicitly state this position, however, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s interpretation of the canon is thus not agreed upon by the various Orthodox churches.

The third viewpoint which Aftimios notes is that canonically undefined areas may be missionized by any Orthodox church, which creates overlapping jurisdictions. This viewpoint essentially defines the current situation of the Orthodox churches in America, in which the various Orthodox groups remain in communion with one another, sharing the same faith and sacraments, but having different sets of bishops and often conflicting approaches to particular pastoral issues. The ancient canons of the Church forbid overlapping jurisdictions, and the pastoral problems are but one indication of why.

The canons, formulated in the ancient Church and presuming the existence of a secular empire as a skeleton for the Church’s administration, do not directly address the central questions of the canonical problem American Orthodoxy faces: Who has missionary jurisdiction in canonically undefined lands? What happens when there is mass immigration of Orthodox Christians into new lands? What is the proper

means by which an administratively independent Orthodox church may be founded? At this point in history, there is no agreed upon answer for any of these questions.

From Aftimios and Tikhon before him, one can therefore see another vision. In this vision, the particular traditions and customs which are characteristic of the various Orthodox groups are recognized and sanctioned. At the same time, however, groups as diverse as Syrians, Serbians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Russians, Carpatho-Russians, Albanians and Greeks, together with those who identify with none of these groups and are simply American, can be brought together as one Orthodox church, whose common body and blood are the Body and Blood of Christ.

This vision was incarnated in part by what occurred between the last two remaining Antiochian factions in 1975. In that instance, two bishops with competing canonical claims came together and set these claims aside for the sake of unity and love. The 1961 reception of the Western Rite parishes by Metropolitan Antony is also an expression of this catholicity, that union in the fullness of the Orthodox Christian faith may be enjoyed without total uniformity in ethnicity or liturgical tradition.

The vision of unity of men like Ss. Tikhon and Raphael, as well as Aftimios Ofiesh, has yet to be realized in America. Aftimios dreamed of an American Orthodox Church whose identity was explicitly catholic. His dream failed, and he was embittered by the opposition he faced. Though the canonical clock cannot be turned back, whatever that might entail, the catholic freedom of truth, that Orthodoxy is united around and in Christ rather than any tribal designation or liturgical custom, may still come to be. The true nature of the disunity in American Orthodoxy is not found in diversity of language or custom, but rather it is between those who are in the Church for their salvation and those who are there for some other agenda. Love always unites.

Appendix I:  
Photographs



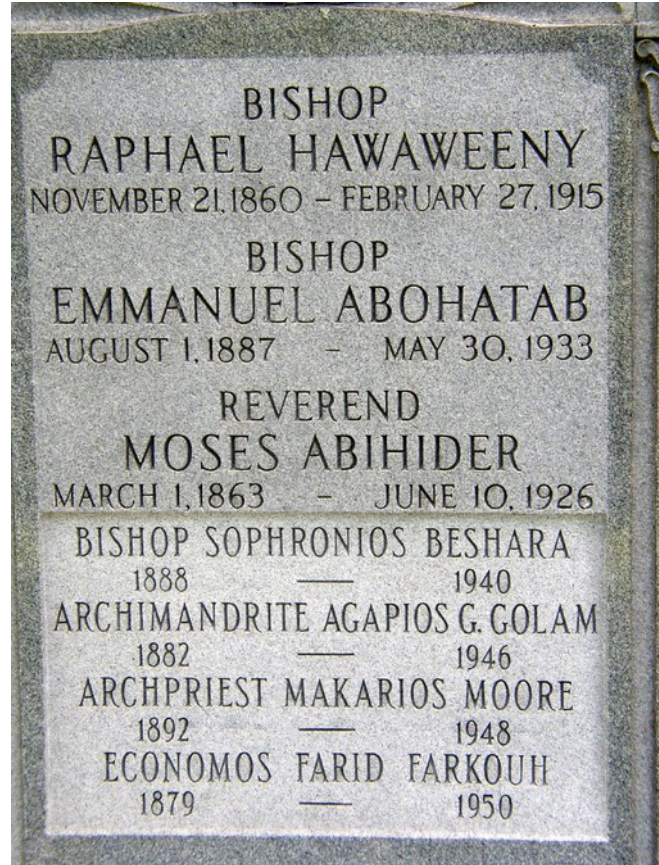
**Funeral of St. Raphael of Brooklyn, 1915**

Left to right (front row behind coffin): Aftimios Ofiesh, Emmanuel Abo-Hatab, Bishop Alexander (Nemolovsky)



**Consecration of St. Nicholas Cathedral on State Street, Brooklyn, 1920**

(Photo courtesy of St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, Brooklyn, New York)



Gravesite of St. Raphael of Brooklyn, Bishop Emmanuel (Abo-Hatab), Bishop Sophronios

(Beshara) and Fr. Agapius Gholam, Antiochian Village, Ligonier, Pennsylvania

(Photos by Rev. Andrew Stephen Damick)



Aftimios Ofiesh, Archbishop of Brooklyn



During the visit of Meletios (Metaxakis) to America, 1921

Left to right: G. Polis, Bishop Alexander (Demoglou), Metropolitan Platon (Rozhdestvensky), Archbishop Meletios (Metaxakis), Archbishop Alexander (Nemolovsky), Bishop Aftimios (Ofiesh), Deacon Vsevelod

(From the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.)



During the visit of Gerasimos (Messara) to America, 1923

Left to right: Archdeacon Antony Bashir, Metropolitan Gerasimos (Messara), Archimandrite Victor (Abo-Assaley)

(From the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.)

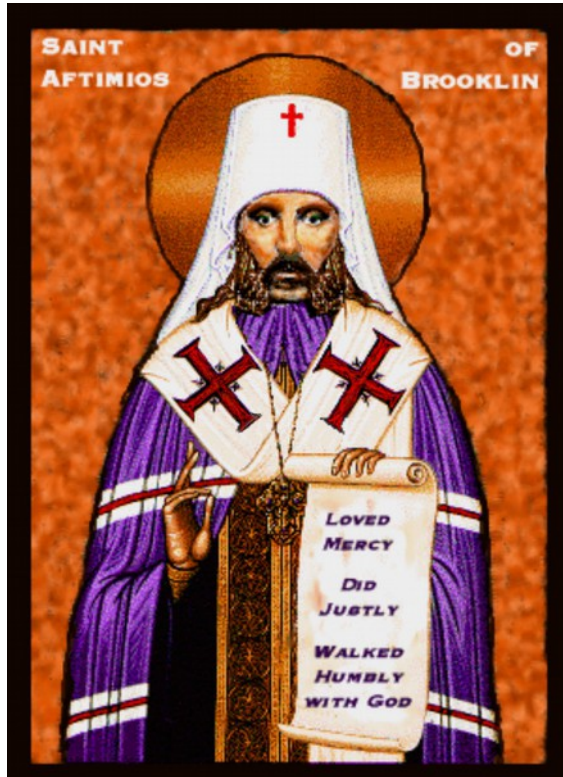


Graves of Aftimios and Mariam Namey Ofiesh, Hanover Township, Pennsylvania

(Photos by Rev. Andrew Stephen Damick)

## Appendix II:

## “Icons”



## “Icons” of “Saint Aftimios”

(From the “Russian Orthodox Church in America”

and the “Roman Orthodox Church,” respectively)

The inscription on the scroll on the image on the left is from Aftimios’ gravestone. The inscription on the right is a quote from a letter Aftimios sent to a newspaper editor: “There are two churches, one that is man-made with man-made laws. It is corrupt, false and misleading. It denies the will of the Living God, that reveals itself to the heart of man. It makes slaves and bond-servants of those who choose to obey it. There is another church, the only one for me, for it is the Church of Jesus Christ, imbued with His Spirit, attentive to the Word and Will of God. That is the Church I recognize.”



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