

by Alexei Krindatch

National Coordinator, U.S. Census of Orthodox Christian Churches

(orthodoxdata1@gmail.com, www.orthodoxreality.org)

A Unified American Orthodox Church: Do Parish Priests Want It?

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What This Report Is About

Do American Orthodox clergy believe in Orthodox Church unity for the United States? Do they want to be part of one unified American Orthodox Church? According to data from our recent (February 2023) study, the short answer to this question is: “Yes.” But the full reality is more nuanced. While overall, a majority of Orthodox priests support the creation of a *fully independent autocephalous Orthodox Church* on American soil, their positions on this matter vary considerably depending on their particular Orthodox jurisdiction and personal background (i.e., cradle Orthodox vs. converts to Orthodox faith). We will also compare current attitudes of parish priests toward Church unity in America with a similar 2015 study, when the same issue was examined.¹ Finally, numerous written comments offered by the participants in the 2023 study explain their varied motives and reasoning for either supporting or rejecting the creation of one unified American Orthodox Church.

Information presented in this report was gathered in February 2023 through an online survey of US Orthodox parish clergy. In total, 390 priests participated. The following four Orthodox jurisdictions had high enough participation to look at results by individual jurisdiction:

- Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese
- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
- Orthodox Church in America
- Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia

Three Principal Takeaways

- I. More than three-quarters (77%) of US Orthodox parish clergy envision the future of Orthodoxy in America as an administratively united Church. However, while overall a strong majority of the priests favor creation of a unified Orthodox Church on American soil, their opinions yet vary considerably depending on their particular Orthodox jurisdiction. A strong majority of OCA and Antiochian Orthodox clergy advocate a fully independent autocephalous Church. A considerable number of GOA priests support the idea of a self-ruling Church under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Most ROCOR priests would rather maintain the current status of separate jurisdictions.

¹ See the respective chapter in the report “Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America: a Parish Life Study.” Available at: <https://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/studies/2018-01-OrthodoxChurchesIn21CenturyAmericaFinal.pdf>

- II. There is no difference among various generations of clergy in their attitudes towards Orthodox Church unity. However, the religious upbringing of priests – being either cradle Orthodox or converts to Orthodox faith – is a significant factor influencing their opinions about creation of a unified Church. Converts to Orthodoxy are more in favor of having a fully independent autocephalous American Orthodox Church than are cradle Orthodox priests.
- III. Today (2023), the idea of creation a fully independent autocephalous Orthodox Church in the USA has stronger support among American parish priests than it had eight years ago. This trend – a growing desire of clergy to have a fully independent autocephalous American Orthodox Church – is especially evident among priests of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese.

I. How Parish Priests of Various Jurisdictions Envision the Future of Orthodox Church in the USA

The questionnaire asked priests: “Some Church leaders have argued for the administrative unity of the Orthodox Church in the United States, while others are not in favor of it. What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?” The following options to answer were given to respondents:

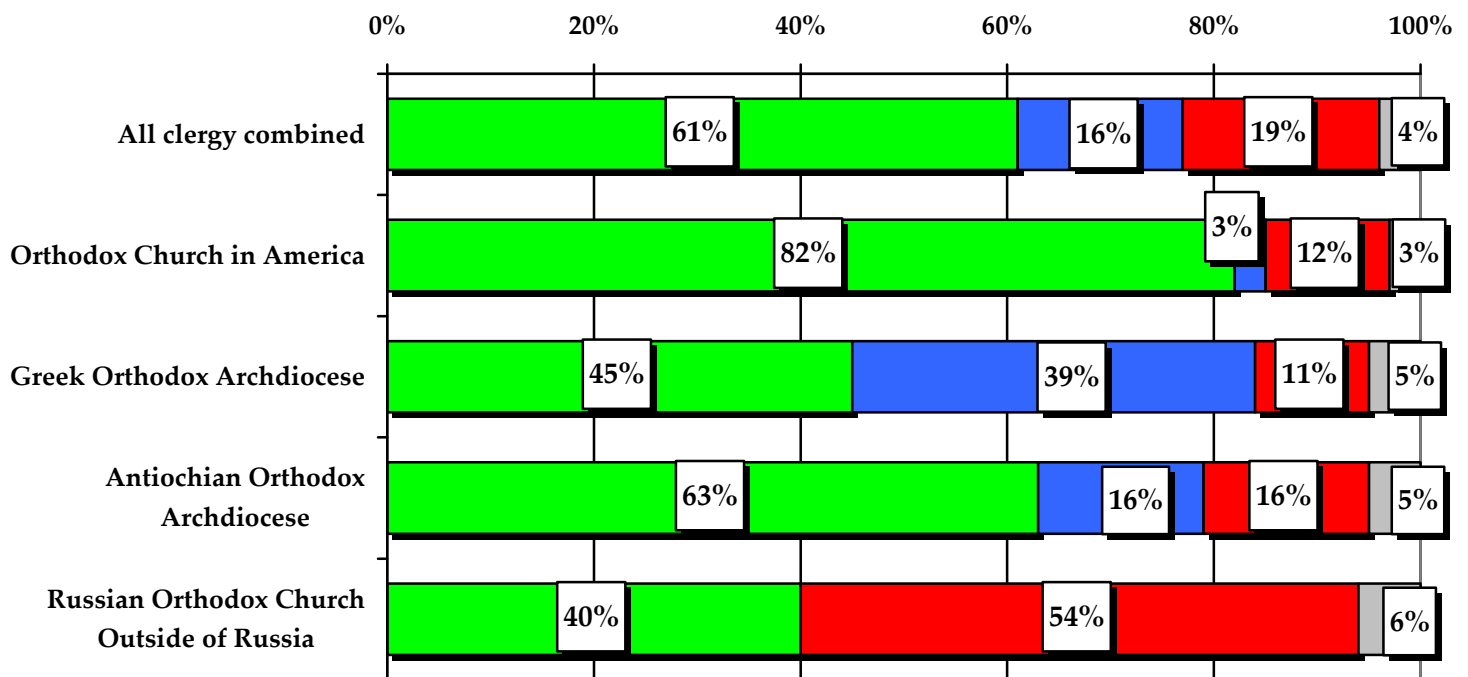
- ❖ It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- ❖ It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- ❖ I don’t personally believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- ❖ I do not think that this is an important question at all

Figure 1 on the next page shows clergy responses to this question: for all respondents together and individually for the priests of four jurisdictions.

Fig. 1 Parish Clergy of Various Jurisdictions Have Different Visions for Orthodox Church Unity
"What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?"

Percentage (%) of parish clergy responding:

- It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- I don't believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- I do not think that this is an important question at all



Three major observations can be made. First, only very few priests (4%) think that the question of Orthodox Church unity is an unimportant subject. Instead, nearly all of them have a clear position on this matter.

Second, more than three-quarters of parish clergy (77%) envision the future of Orthodoxy in America as an administratively united Church. Further, a strong majority of them (61%) are also in favor of such Church being fully independent and autocephalous, while 16% would prefer the status of self-ruling Church under Ecumenical Patriarchate. Merely one-fifth of the clergy (19%) would like to keep the current separate jurisdictions.

Third, while overall a strong majority of the priests favor creation of a unified Orthodox Church on American soil, their opinions yet vary considerably depending on the jurisdiction to which they belong. Among the clergy of four jurisdictions, one can distinguish three positions. In the first group are the priests in the Orthodox Church in America and in the Antiochian Archdiocese. The vast majority of them not only support creation of an administratively united American Orthodox Church, but also believe that this should be a full-fledged autocephalous Church: 82% of OCA and 63% of Antiochian clergy hold this position.

In the second group are the clergy of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. An overwhelming majority of them (84%) also favor administrative Church unity in America. Unlike Antiochian and OCA clergy, however, the Greek priests are divided between those supporting creation of a fully independent autocephalous Church (45%) and those preferring a self-ruling Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate (39%).

Lastly, among the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, the dominant opinion (54%) is that the current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presences.

II. How Personal Backgrounds of Parish Priests Affect Their Vision for the Future of Orthodox Church in the USA

Does the age of the priest matter for how he envisions the future of Orthodoxy in America? Does his religious upbringing (i.e., cradle Orthodox versus converting to Orthodoxy) play a role in his attitudes toward creation of a unified American Orthodox Church?

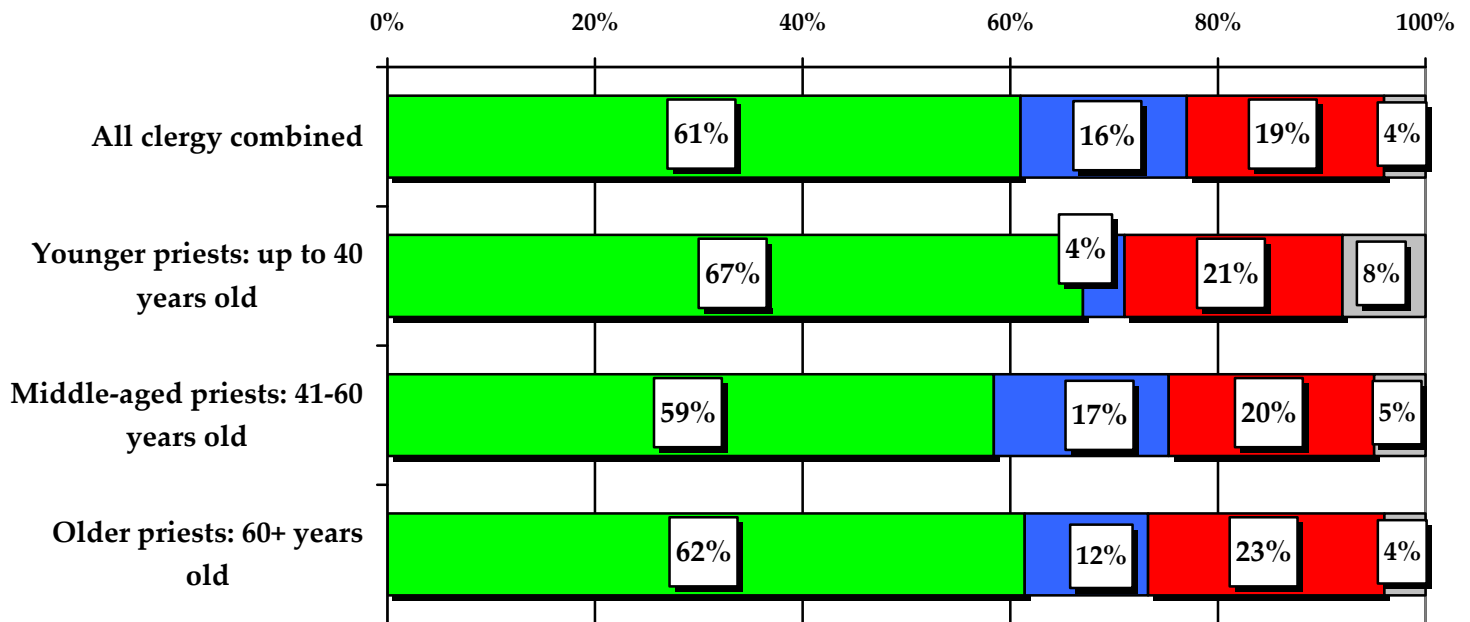
The short answer to the first question is: "Age does not seem to be a significant factor." Survey data indicated that younger (up to 40), middle-aged (41-60), and older s (over 60), priests have fairly similar opinions on creation of a united American Orthodox Church. See Fig. 2 on the next page.

Fig. 2 Various Generations of Clergy Have a Similar Vision for the Future of Orthodoxy in the USA

"What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?"

Percentage (%) of parish clergy responding:

- It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- I don't believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- I do not think that this is an important question at all



While age does not seem to have influence on clergy attitudes toward Orthodox Church unity, their religious upbringing – being either cradle Orthodox or converts to Orthodoxy – makes a difference in their opinions about creation of a unified Church.

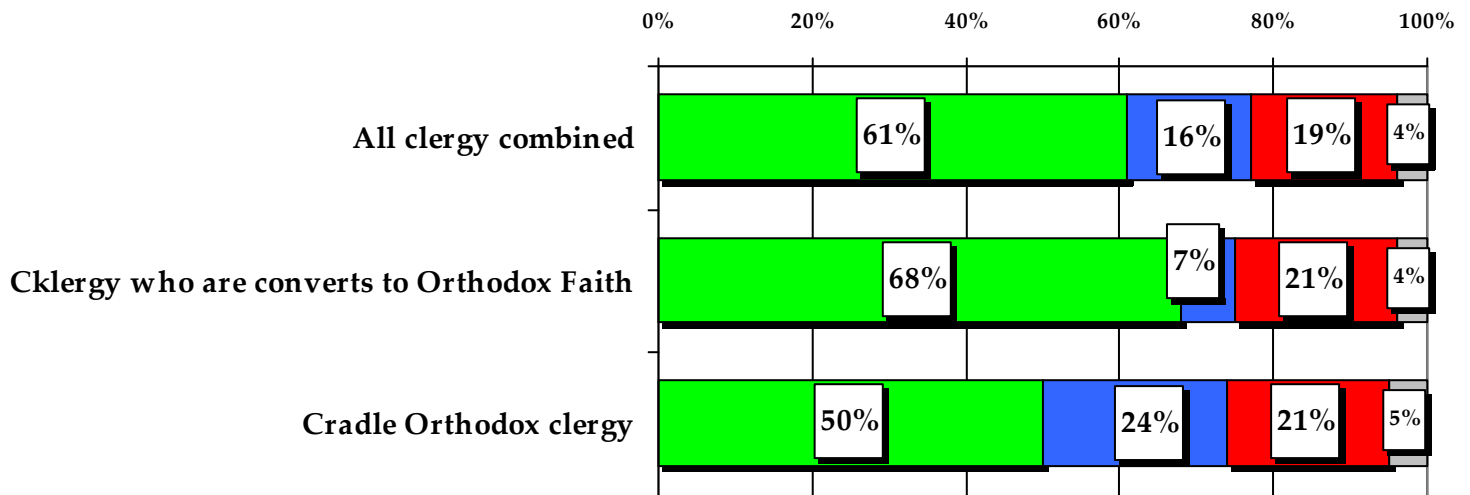
Figure 3 shows that converts are more in favor of having a fully independent autocephalous American Orthodox Church than cradle Orthodox priests: 68% vs. 50%. Importantly, this finding also holds true when looking separately at the clergy of various jurisdictions. The only exception is the Orthodox Church in America, where there is no difference in opinions between converts and cradle Orthodox priests.

Fig. 3 Convert Clergy Have Stronger Preference for Creation of a Fully Independent Autocephalous American Orthodox Church than Cradle Orthodox Priests

"What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?"

Percentage (%) of parish clergy responding:

- It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- I don't believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- I do not think that this is an important question at all



III. How Clergy Opinions about Orthodox Church Unity in America Have Changed Since 2015

The attitudes of parish clergy regarding creation of a unified American Orthodox Church were also examined eight years ago, in the 2015 national study, "Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America."² Both the 2015 and 2023 surveys asked the same question. However, one of the four response options was different between the 2015 and 2023 studies: the final choice. In 2015, the option was, "Difficult to tell. At this point, I do not have any opinion on this matter," while in 2023 the choice was, "I do not think that this is an important question at all."

Keeping in mind this limitation, we still can compare the 2015-2023 changes in clergy preferences. For either having a fully independent autocephalous American Orthodox Church, or self-ruling autonomous Church in the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, or simply keeping presently existing independent jurisdictions.

² The full report is available at: <https://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/studies/2018-01-OrthodoxChurchesIn21CenturyAmericaFinal.pdf>

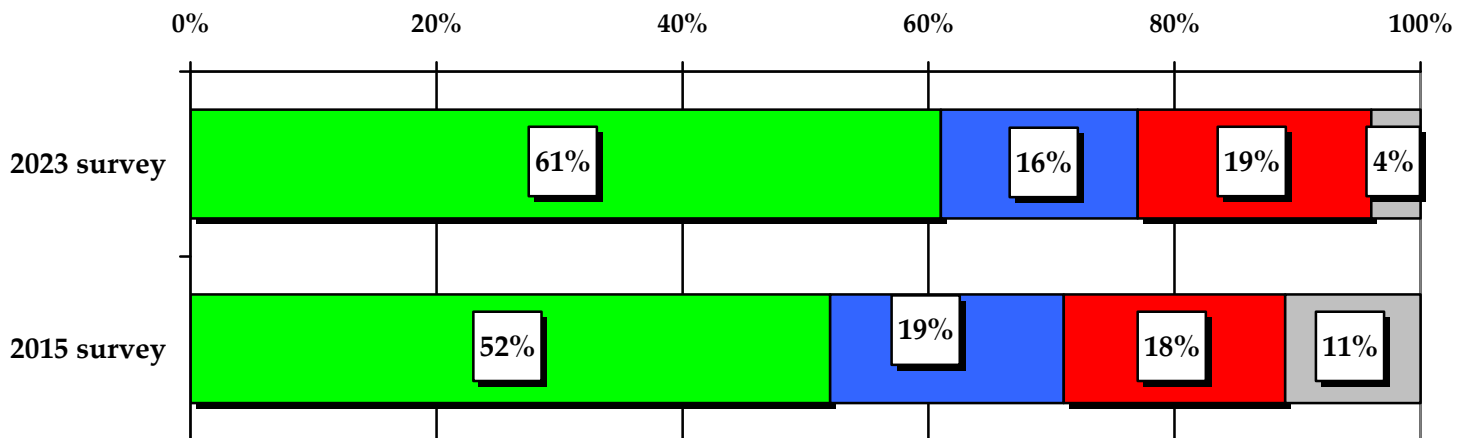
Fig. 4 shows that today (2023), the idea of creating a fully independent autocephalous Orthodox Church in the USA has stronger support among American parish priests than it had eight years ago: 61% vs. 52%.

Fig. 4 Creation of an Independent Autocephalous American Orthodox Church Has Stronger Support among Parish Clergy Today than in 2015

"What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?"

Percentage (%) of parish clergy responding:

- It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- I don't believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- Other answers



Remarkably, this trend – a growing desire of clergy to have a fully independent autocephalous American Orthodox Church – has been especially pronounced among priests of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The overall percentage of GOA priests favoring some form of independence of American Orthodox Church has grown from 65% (2015) to 84% (2023). Most importantly, however, *their vision for specific form* of independence has also changed.

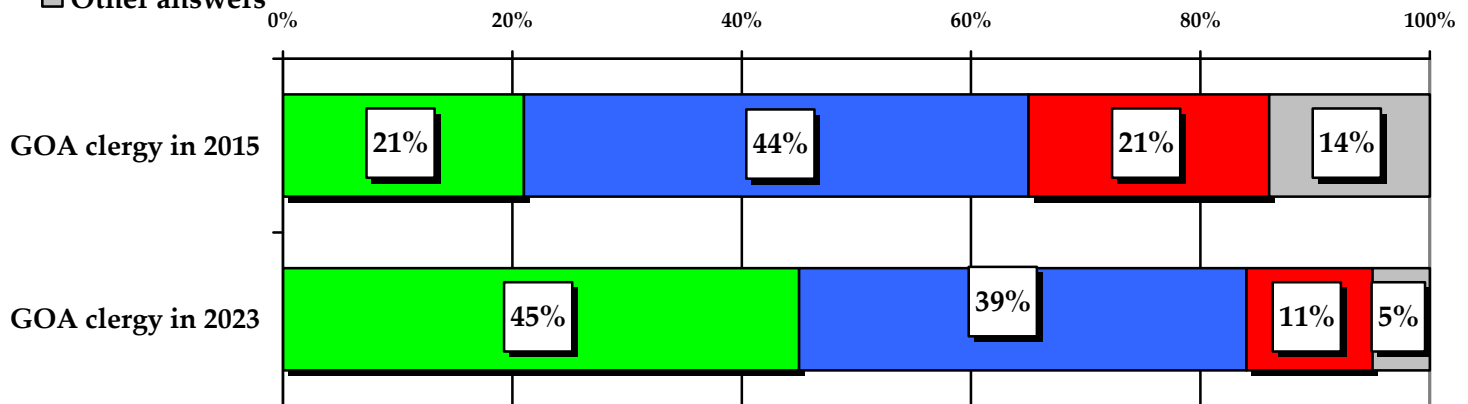
Fig. 5 shows that in 2015, twice as many GOA clergy favored a self-ruling united American Church in the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate over a fully independent autocephalous Church: 44% vs. 21%. As of 2023, the situation reversed. Today, more GOA priests support full independence – autocephaly - of the American Orthodox Church (45%) than the status of an autonomous Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate (39%).

Fig. 5 In 2023, Greek Orthodox Priests Voice Much Stronger Support for Creating a Fully Independent Autocephalous American Orthodox Church Than in 2015

"What is your personal vision and preference for the future of the Orthodox Church in the USA?"

Percentage (%) of GOA parish clergy responding:

- It should be a fully independent autocephalous Church
- It should be a self-ruling autonomous Church within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
- I don't believe that there is a need for creating an administratively united Church in America. The current jurisdictions should continue to maintain their separate presence
- Other answers



IV. Major Fears and Concerns of US Clergy Regarding Orthodox Church Unity in America

Answering question about their vision for the future of the Orthodox Church in the U.S., the study participants could also select an option “other answers” and freely write comments explaining their position and thoughts. Notably, most of those who choose this option wrote about potential obstacles to achieving Church unity, or reasons why it would be preferable – at this point - to maintain separate jurisdictions. From the variety of comments, four consistent trends emerged.

One response trend suggested that the creation of a unified Church would be unlikely, primarily because current jurisdictions continue to be ethnically-centered, and the spirit of rivalry rather than cooperation permeates Orthodox Church life in America. Here are some examples of such statements:

- ❖ From a GOA clergyman: Orthodox Christians in America have a lot to do in order to overcome the "zero-sum" game of parish life – “my gain comes at your loss” - before any form of unity could be created. While parishes continue to focus on their ethnic identity and their "political" identity as a key point, achieving unity will be difficult.
- ❖ From an OCA priest: I do not believe that Serbians, Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks can be under one united church in America at this time. People tend to stay together ethnically. In fact, often staying

ethnically together in church is more important than staying together in Christ in the church, unfortunately.

Somewhat similar but less pessimistic, the second trend in responses dealt with the need to start by building a much greater level of cooperation and mutual understanding, before any unification would become possible.

Here are examples:

- ❖ From a GOA priest: The Church in the US should work first toward a level of cooperation among jurisdictions which removes administrative redundancies and pastoral contradictions. Anything more than this is conjectural at present.
- ❖ From a ROCOR clergyman: There could [not] and should not be jurisdictional unity, until some pressing issues and disagreements are dealt with first.

The third trend reflected the fear that the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese would “monopolize” and absorb a potentially unified American Orthodox Church. Here are examples:

- ❖ From a Serbian priest: Better keep it status quo. The Patriarch of Constantinople doesn't have the authority to de facto be bishop of US/Canada.
- ❖ From an OCA priest: It should be a fully independent autocephalous Orthodox [Church] where there is absolutely NO Greek Archdiocesan leadership. GOARCH has been leading the pan-Orthodox organizations and nothing has come from it.
- ❖ From a ROCOR clergyman: Unified – maybe, but definitely not under Constantinople.

Finally, the last trend suggested that the current situation of separate jurisdictions is actually preferable, because it allows for a much greater diversity of expressions in American Orthodox Church life than would be possible in a single unified Church. Here are examples of this line of thoughts:

- ❖ From an OCA priest: There is no need for an administratively united Orthodox Church in America. The strength of Orthodoxy is in its diversity, and its unity is in the faith itself, not in its territorial boundaries and administrative units.
- ❖ From a priest in the Antiochian Archdiocese: While I personally hope for unity for the Church in America, I think that the current disunity has safeguarded many from the current GOA Archbishop and modernist tendencies. I would not want any association with the Ecumenical Patriarch at the moment.
- ❖ From a GOA clergyman: Our Orthodox jurisdictions help us maintain our unique characteristics. It shows that Orthodoxy is not one color or thread but it yet brings all faithful together.