

To Our Readers

A series of widely publicized reports on religious affiliation have unmistakably indicated an ongoing decline in formal religious commitment in North America. The questions that arise from these observations in the context of Orthodox Church experience motivated the current issue of *The Wheel*. It should grieve the Church when any member of the Body of Christ feels compelled to disaffiliate from the community. A constructive response to institutional attrition must include listening respectfully to the stories of those whose paths have led them in this direction. It is impossible, of course, for a mere handful of first-person accounts to represent current tendencies in all their complexity. However, each of the personal essays included alongside this issue's feature articles addresses considerations relevant to the larger context.

Just as the editing process for this issue began, Russia invaded Ukraine. As we write this, the Russian invasion forces have stepped up attacks on civilian populations, and members of the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy—at the highest levels—have indicated support for the Russian state's aggression. What was merely the background noise of unjustified church-state collusion has become an acute crisis for the contemporary Orthodox Church in the world. We have not felt it necessary to alter the original conception of the issue. On the contrary, several of the articles gain a new relevance in light of current affairs. What concerns us here is neither the realignment of church jurisdictions nor the future of ethno-national churches more generally. Rather, it is the fundamental orientation of the Church toward the gospel of Christ and not toward moral coercion or cultural hegemony. The current war only renders acute what had been a slow-moving trend.

It would be easy to find nothing but discouragement in the content of this issue. We encourage readers to consider the hopeful directions brought forward in several articles. Embracing an attitude of wonder at the beauty of creation, rediscovering the communal narrative dimension of liturgy, and participating in the living tradition of the Church as articulated by Orthodox thinkers of the last hundred years can all help us recover Christian catholicity and find a way forward.