

To our Antiochian Orthodox faithful living in United States and in the world over.

Many members of our Holy Antiochian Church have been following the issue of Autonomy of our Archdioceses in North America and thousand of people have been asking us about this burning issue to know the reality of the recent negotiations related to this matter. Therefore, we felt that our duty to put all our members on the picture of all realities. The attached letter explains the outcome of the meeting of the special committee that had been taken place in Geneva recently. We are open to receive any comment related to this issue.

Finally, we need to pray more so that our God inspire the members of the Antiochian Holy Synod to take the right decisions of the unity for our Holy See that dates back to the time of Apostles.

Praying for the Forthcoming Antiochian and Holy Synod

Many Antiochian faithful wrote to us asking about various issues raised by the successive statements and recommendations of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America (Spring meeting of the Metropolitan and his auxiliaries designated as "The Eparchial Synod" (April 30, 2003), meeting of the Board of Trustees (May 30-31, 2003) and the Forty-Sixth Convention of the Archdiocese (July 21-27, 2003).

There have also been fraternal exchanges between prelates and a number of laypersons. Unfortunately, some of those exchanges did not dissipate every misunderstanding nor redress every misperception. Regrettably, there were also a few rumors spread. Most preoccupying was a semi-veiled threat asking the Holy Synod to approve the North American recommendations and not "bring schism".

It is likely that such threats are, in the minds of those who made them, impatient attempts aiming at forcing the pace of the Antiochian Synod. We hope and pray that they will be short-lived and will not create a deep rift in the Church of Antioch.

Since the issue of autonomy for the archdiocese of North America was first mentioned there has been an ambiguous use of certain words. These ambiguities are not yet fully dissipated. The North American speeches, articles and resolutions, since 2001, did not get close enough to fully clarifying the "raison d'être" of autonomy. They fell short of addressing the range of motivations and issues about which all those concerned Antiochians need to be aware before they are able to make a responsible and ecclesiologically informed judgment. They did not disclose a matured dialogue on this issue even from within the North American context.

The Synodal decision of June 12, 2002, receiving the request of the North American archdiocese was drafted in Arabic following a discussion in Arabic. A number of words used such as "blessing the wish of the faithful" and "self-administration" had diverging translations. Even the task of the Committee established was interpreted in two different ways. Members delegated by His Beatitude Ignatius IV came to Geneva (November 22-24, 2002) expecting a first meeting, as indicated by the said decision, initiating a process of dialogue and discernment. The representatives of the North American Archdiocese seemed to have little patience for a comprehensive dialogue to take its course. They understood their role to be focused on reaching an agreement in the form of a tomos granting autonomy. Their insistence that the Committee works on the assumption that autonomy was granted, and there were a few details only to be worked on, limited the ability of the Committee to engage in a constructive exchange. The patriarchal delegates were displeased by this rush and found themselves, in spite of their insistence on seeing the Committee as one group involved in a collective reflection, moving into a bi-partite negotiations mode. Negotiations were neither their preference

nor their mandate.

The Geneva document produced did not account for the whole subject examined. There were many questions that were considered. To be sure, it was as an attempt at establishing the status questionis and searching for convergence on a number of issues. However, it was neither a final nor authoritative word. In North America, the document was given a higher status than intended and not taken for what it was. Disagreements, stated or not, were considered "minor", justifying amendments which, in turn, were labelled "minor". Members of the Committee heard with dismay how the dynamics of the Geneva meeting were described and the status of the drafted document misrepresented to the faithful of the North American Archdiocese. Much of the North American discourse on autonomy became increasingly assertive and combative. It did not speak to/with fellow Antiochians in the "old country" but at them. Regrettably, it did not engage.

Letters received by the Patriarchate, and by members of the patriarchal delegation to Geneva, indicated that reports of the apparent quasi-unanimous enthusiasm in North America blurred a more complex reality. Discussions were less patient, participatory and inclusive than they should have been. The over-stated inter-cultural misunderstanding was explained in terms of simplistic categories. Many thought that the discretion of the Patriarchate and its delegates, instead of being an expression of good faith, was too cautious. It was presented as a sign of confusion or weakness and as a tactical move to gain time. Views of the Patriarch, a number of Metropolitans and other people concerned, were not given the chance to be heard in North America.

To present the report from the Geneva meeting to the Board of Trustees, and to the Convention of the Archdiocese, as if it was the ultimate resolution of the dialogue implies a status for that report that is not consistent with the understanding of those who participated in that meeting. Thus the meaningful continuation of the dialogue process was interrupted by the precipitous move to a juridical process of public acclamation. Such acclamation of a revised text, not yet examined by the Holy Synod, seemed to exert an undue pressure and could not be persuasive.

Seeking a common mind through dialogue, for the common good of the Church, is not less meaningful than reaching an agreement. A genuine and respectful dialogue is, more than ever before, necessary. The negative hue in which the Church of Antioch in the "old country" is sometimes portrayed in the North American Archdiocese does not help this dialogue. Caricatures cripple efforts at mutual understanding.

This situation invites a creative and sustained effort. Those who strive for the

unity and renewal of the Church of Antioch will never emphasize enough how much we need each other, across dioceses and continents. Faithfulness to the vocation of Antioch motivates all us to seek mutual empowerment, spiritual and otherwise. This is a challenge and a call.

This is the time to pray for the Holy Synod of Antioch, for all of its members, and for the Patriarch who will lead it, trusting that God is in the midst of his Church, notwithstanding our weaknesses, shortcomings and disagreements



Upon the invitation that had been initiated by **the Community of St. Egidio and the diocese of Aachen** to His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV to attend a conference entitled:

“War & peace: Faiths and cultures in Dialogue”

