

THE ORTHODOX IN NORTH AMERICA (By Metropolitan GEORGE Khodr)
ANNAHAR – Saturday, October 18, 2003

This is a discussion regarding the organization of the Antiochian Orthodox who live in the United States and Canada, most of whom are of Arab descent, whereas others are of non-Arab heritage who converted to the Orthodox faith. Through the leadership of Metropolitan PHILIP Saliba, they met during the summers of 2001 and 2002 asking that their Archdiocese become one of self-rule. That is how ‘we’ translated the word AUTONOMY due to its lack of presence in the Arabic language, but to preserve its Greek origin. This is to reveal the ecclesiastical organization that is still associated with the old Patriarchates, but enjoys a sort of internal independence. This rule is what differentiates it (the church) from self-ruling autocephalous churches and their relationship with other sister churches and other faiths.

This order came to be after certain battles led to the pardon of other churches, outside of the Soviet Union, and their relationship with Moscow, such as the church of Finland and Poland; or for other historical reasons such as the church of Crete which is under the rule of Constantinople.

Certainly, no one would dream of establishing an independent church in America, according to the canonical definition, since that would entail the spread of its (the church’s) power through the entire American land without regard to jurisdictional and linguistic basis. To this day, this has been a topic that has been studied among Orthodox churches, and which requires approval from all of the ancient Patriarchates. It is a topic for discussion by the Ecumenical Orthodox Council. All signs, though, lead to the fact that this is currently a disturbance, and that every jurisdiction is to follow its Mother Church similar to having various Archdioceses lead by one Episcopate, such as with the Greeks, or one Archdiocese such as with the Antiochians.

It became apparent that the “self-rule” is inevitable with the Americanization of the young members, as they have become more engaged with the American culture, with other (Orthodox) jurisdictions, and their expressiveness towards unity. This became evidenced throughout universities and social meeting places. Such a time of fusion is not without desire; in fact, there is no doubt that the original languages would persist, and that those of Arab-descent as well as new-comers will want the preservation of the Arabic language during church prayer.

Due to such happenings, the Antiochian Orthodox found themselves, on one hand, in a controversial restructuring, and the preservation of their Antiochian style, on the other. The one who carries such controversy is their spiritual leader, Metropolitan PHILIP Saliba, who is true to his Antiochian roots, his Eastern sense, and who exemplifies the depth of American culture and study; withal, he has preserved such treasures. This is not the time to rejoice over spreading his Church’s faith in that continent. How can you translate that which is sought after by parishioner in a canonical language?

It was necessary to translate such ‘double suspicion’ in a canonical way. That took place at the Holy Synod meeting that took place in Damascus, beginning on October 7, which ended with the resolution “the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America has been granted self-rule, and shall remain as such (the United States of America and Canada), and shall represent one united Antiochian body”. We have clarified the use of the bold word AUTONOMY and made

certain of its meaning to that Archdiocese. What stands to reason, of course, is the cohesive nature between the original order of the Patriarchate along with the constitution of the Archdiocese and its self-rule. It has become 'self-governing', as outlined by the decision of the Holy Synod.

Such restructuring is two-fold: the first deals with the Metropolitan and the second deals with the local Bishops. The Metropolitan will remain a member of the Holy Synod of Antioch, and through him is brought forth agreement of this decision. Such decision will be expressed to the entire Archdiocese through, what we will call, the Local Archdiocesan Synod, which will be composed of bishops who used to be auxiliary to the Metropolitan and are now to become bishops of the earth.

Per the new definition, the Bishop is to be situated to a particular geographical area and be given the name of an American or Canadian city. He will be both consecrated (enthroned) and situated there (in that particular city), as well be in charge of choosing priests within his diocese. Of old, the chief priest would have chosen the diocesan priests.

Newly formed is the Local Synod of Bishops, four of whom currently live in the United States; undoubtedly, such a synod will expand and incorporate more bishops.

What remains of the decisions of the Holy Synod of Antioch are issues dealing with the faith, the liturgy, the mysteries, as well as relations with other autocephalous churches and Ecumenical politics dealing with Christian and non-Christian existence.

What has happened is that we have buried in America the auxiliary bishop, who had no region to responsibly shepherd. The auxiliary or honorary bishop is a "novelty" that arose in both the East and the West; such arose due to the need of the Archbishop of a helper to perform various duties in his (the Archbishop's) name. However, as some of the clergy and canonical scholars may recall from a few years ago, Christianity does not believe in a bishop by common terms, but believes in a bishop over a geographic area whose people are led by him. Therefore, he is a shepherd to people, and not a delegate of his "master". To use philosophical words, there is no bishop who ought to consider himself as a jewel of his own self. The bishop should, then, shepherd the faithful who dwell within his region, as says Saint Cyprian, by holding on to the faith and counsel of this brotherly vocation.

If the bishop is one who elevates his head unto another, it is obvious that he is not a bishop who submits to another. Therefore, the bishops ought to be honorable and respectful brothers, with each one fully carrying his own responsibility. He will not even elevate his head unto God. Nothing will impel a bishop but his self-submission unto God, for not only is God his word, but also his word is that of the treasures and canons of the Church. This is all directed by the chief priest, for that brotherly course is one of organized counsel, similar to that of the Patriarch through whom nothing is finalized without his authority, while at the same time, who will not enforce anything which does not please his bishop brothers.

Should the vision of the See of Antioch consist of the placement of the various auxiliary bishops of the Patriarchate and of the other Archdioceses into particular regions? The Archdiocese of North America already opened the door with such progressive thought.

The old structure, which has been renewed today, is not bound by itself. It is not the canonical structure of the Church which pours forth everlasting life unto us. Rather, is it one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that appears to new laity. The important thing is to promote holiness and bring forth such holiness throughout life in our lands and homes. Even more important is to renew all things through a prayerful life, which is founded on principles and God-inspired holy fathers so that Christ's beautiful Church may descend on all mankind.

What occurred last week was a joyful movement towards our relationship in carrying Christ to the American continent with His eyes towards Antioch "where the Apostles were first called Christians". It is our duty to remain one with them in spirit and function. They have given us plenty merely by their faith to the Church of the East, and have helped us in establishing mutual trust. Our hearts are filled with love for them as well as their hospitality when we shall visit them carrying the shroud of Christ along with our historical steadfastness. Indeed, we need nothing but this mutual love which is truly a treasure on this earth. We, together with them, endeavor towards the Heavenly Kingdom which is enough to offer bliss to all mankind.