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Metropolitan Calls for Orthodoxy Unity

Metropolitan calls for unity of Orthodoxy Also says Toledo bishop may be assigned to N.J.

By DAVID YONKE
BLADE RELIGION EDITOR

Having just achieved self-rule for the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, Metropolitan Philip already is looking toward the next goal: unity among U.S. Orthodox churches.

"As long as we are fragmented and known by Antiochians and Greeks and Serbians and Bulgarians and Russians, we will have no impact as a church on this country," Metropolitan Philip said this week.

The leader of the 450,000-member archdiocese was in Toledo to celebrate the 90th anniversary of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral.

In a wide-ranging interview in the Presidential Suite of the Wyndham Hotel, Metropolitan Philip discussed U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the church's efforts to preserve the family unit, and the ordination of a homosexual Episcopal bishop.

Regarding Toledo-based cleric Bishop Demetri, arrested in July for allegedly fondling a woman and being highly intoxicated in a casino, the metropolitan said he is likely to be reassigned to the archdiocese's Englewood, N.J., headquarters once he completes a rehabilitation program.

Metropolitan Philip said barring Bishop Demetri, the 55-year-old leader of the Midwest Diocese, from performing liturgies "was an act of love and act of compassion because he has this problem with alcohol. He must be rehabilitated."

He said it "broke my heart" when he learned of the bishop's alcohol problem after his arrest July 9 at the Turtle Creek Casino near Traverse City, Mich. Prosecutors said the bishop appeared highly intoxicated when he allegedly grabbed the breast of a woman who was passing by.

Bishop Demetri was charged with criminal sexual conduct, but no trial date has been set yet, Traverse County Prosecutor [sic] Dennis LaBelle said this week.

The bishop is undergoing treatment in a rehabilitation clinic in Minnesota, Metropolitan Philip said.

"When he comes back, we will put him someplace to continue his rehabilitation," Metropolitan Philip said. "It could be our headquarters of the archdiocese, where we have a community. Some people cannot be alone. He was living alone. And I think he was a lonely man."

He indicated it is unlikely that Bishop Demetri will return as leader of the Midwest diocese, calling it "questionable at this time."

"Basically he's a good man, a good worker, a good bishop," Metropolitan Philip said.

"I believe that people can be transformed, people can be changed. ..."

Metropolitan Philip, 72, a native of Lebanon who immigrated to the United States in 1956, said he presented his case for autonomy to Patriarch Ignatius IV during a synod in Damascus last month.

Since the North American archdiocese was founded in the late 19th century, the U.S. church has been governed by the Damascus headquarters of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, which traces its origin to the days of Saints Peter and Paul in Antioch.

A charismatic and politically savvy leader who has led the church since 1966, Metropolitan Philip said he told Patriarch Ignatius that members of the American church voted 97.7 percent in favor of autonomy in 2001 and 99.6 percent this year.

"When I faced the patriarch with these facts, I said, 'What do you want me to go and tell these people in America?' And we Americans are very, very fond of democracy. ... Even our Constitution starts 'We the people ...'

"So I said, 'We the people in America desire this self-rule, this autonomy. And here you are. What are you going to do?'"

"Finally, after some tense moments - and there were tense moments - I stood my ground and I said, 'This is it. We have other choices. The choice is yours now, to grant us self-rule or not to. If you don't, then I will return to the United States of America and tell my people that you refused to grant us self-rule and we will take it from there.'"

Autonomy gives the North American church more control over such matters as the selection of bishops and self-governance, although it still reports to the patriarch in Damascus on matters of theology.

Metropolitan Philip said he does not believe Orthodox unity in the United States will be achieved soon.

"We have been preaching Orthodox unity for more than half a century. The problem which we are facing is that we are ready for it, for example, but others are not."

The U.S. Greek Orthodox in particular, he said, are too "connected" with their mother church to achieve autonomy and without self-rule, churches cannot discuss unity.

Metropolitan Philip said he created a department of marriage and parish family ministries in order to help preserve the family unit.

"I came to this country in 1956 and things were not as bad as they are today," he said. "The basic unit of our society is the family. If the family is disintegrated, the whole society is disintegrated."

He said members of the Orthodox Church are as affected as any segment of society by divorce and other cultural problems.

"We are no longer an ethnic island," Metropolitan Philip said.

In the 19th century, church members who immigrated from the Middle East used to live near the church so they could speak Arabic and hear the liturgy in their native tongue, he said.

"Those days are gone. Our people are totally integrated into American society. What affects society affects us."

As for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Metropolitan Philip called it "a total failure."

"I believe that all the oil of Arabia is not worth one drop of blood of an American soldier," he said. "It pains me to see these young people dying in Iraq. For what? Iraq does not threaten our nation's security."

He called Iraq "a broken society" that has suffered through an embargo and years of war with Iran.

"We have these young American boys dying every day, every day, every day, every day," he said. "How long can the American people tolerate that? ... This is not a regular war. This is a guerrilla war, the worst kind of war."

He also called for the establishment of a Palestinian state adjacent to Israel.

"Let us not take sides in this conflict. Let us bring these people together and bring peace to the Palestinians and Israelis," he said.

Regarding the consecration of an openly gay Episcopal bishop this week, Metropolitan Philip said "I feel very sorry. The church is being torn asunder." He said Bishop V. Gene Robinson's ordination "goes against the teachings of our church. It's against the Scripture."

According to the Book of Genesis, he said, "'God created them male and female.' That's how we build our families, through procreation, a man and a woman coming together. Not a man and man, or a woman and woman."

Leaders of other Christian churches must "take a firm stand" against homosexuality, Metropolitan Philip said.

"I will never approve such things in the Orthodox church - never! Never! And what do you do with all these teachings? What do you do with the theology of 2,000 years? Throw it in the garbage?"

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