



# UNITY AND SELF-RULE: CHALLENGES OF A NEW ERA

By **VERY REV. JOSEPH ANTYPAS**

*"An enterprise begun in prayer cannot be anything but successful — because it is begun with love, hope, and faith."*

A. Elchaninov

**T**HE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2003 will be inscribed in the history of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America as a great historic time. For it was on Thursday, October 9, 2003, that the Holy Synod of the Church of Antioch voted unanimously to grant self-rule to the Archdiocese. This historic decision began in prayer during the Los Angeles Archdiocesan Convention in July, 2001, and was followed by a declaration of a Synodal decision in June of 2002. In November of 2002, the Geneva document was formulated, later ratified, and unanimously accepted by the Miami General Assembly in July, 2003. This document generated much intense discussion and after two long days of deliberations, the Holy Synod unanimously authorized a Synodal Resolution and granted self-rule to the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America. This historic resolution came to express the hopes and expectations of our beloved Metropolitan, our auxiliary bishops, the clergy and the people of our God-protected Archdiocese.

This is how the historic trip began.

On Wednesday, October 1, 2003, His Eminence took off with the delegation to attend the Holy Synod meeting in Damascus, Syria. The Very Rev. Fr. Joseph Antypas, Dr. George Farha, and Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury accompanied him. After a short stay in London, England, His

Eminence and the delegation arrived in Beirut International Airport on Thursday, October 2, 2003 at 7:30 p.m. Metropolitan Spiridon of Zahle, representatives of Middle East Airlines, and some friends received him warmly at the VIP Lounge. From Beirut we traveled by car to Damascus. The Damascus Sheraton became our residence until Saturday, October 11, 2003. Metropolitans Elia of Hama and George of Homs welcomed His Eminence at the hotel.

Friday, October 3, His Eminence received Metropolitan Elias of Tyre and Sidon. Later that day, he met with His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV and all the auxiliary Bishops. His Eminence then had another meeting with the Patriarch in preparation for the forthcoming Holy Synod meeting.

On Friday evening, His Eminence paid a visit to the Monastery of Our Lady of Saydnaya. He had a warm meeting with the new Abbess, Sister Christina, and all the nuns. His Eminence presented the Monastery a check in the amount of \$5,000 in loving memory of Katherine Ajar. This will become an annual gift, given to help the monastery take care of the needs of the orphans and other charitable work. His Eminence visited the Shaghoura, and toured the museum, which contained some very valuable manuscripts, religious articles, and priceless icons. This monastery was built in the sixth century. It has become a national shrine for thousands of pilgrims, who visit to receive healing and blessings from the Mother of God.

On Sunday, October 5, His Eminence and the members of the

delegation attended the Divine Liturgy at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God. His Beatitude welcomed our Metropolitan and commented on the position that His Eminence holds in North American Orthodoxy. Following the service, a sumptuous banquet was given in his honor at the Patriarchate. His Eminence was surrounded by the love and care of many hierarchs and individuals, including a prominent dentist, Dr. Kamal Richet, who helped Sayedna with some dental needs. Sunday night, His Eminence met some very important officials in the Syrian government, who appreciated the Metropolitan's religious, spiritual, moral, and human impact on the North American continent.

Monday, October 6 was the day of preparation for the Holy Synod meeting. The Metropolitans of Tripoli, Baghdad, Australia, Hama, Homs, Zahle, Brazil, and many others came to welcome him. The highlight of the evening was the presentation of the holy relics of the New Saint Raphael of Brooklyn to a monk, David Al Hamatouri, a member of the Monastery of Our Lady of Hamatoura, under the direction of Archimandrite Pandeimon Farah.

The meeting of the Holy Synod took place Tuesday, October 7, presided over by His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius. All Metropolitans, auxiliary Bishops, and members of the Geneva Combined Committee were invited to participate. Two Metropolitans were absent — Metropolitan Gabriel Saliby of Western Europe and Metropolitan Serjius of Chile. After the prayer and the chanting of the Pentecost



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From the left: Father Joseph Antypas, Metropolitan Philip, President Bashar Al-Assad (Syria), Dr. George Farha, Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury

Troparion and Kontakion, the Patriarch welcomed everyone and the agenda was presented, with the topic of autonomy being placed at the top. His Eminence Metropolitan Philip was given the floor. He presented a detailed analysis on the issue of Autonomy, starting from the Los Angeles Convention to the June, 2002 Synodal decision, passing through the Geneva meeting, and, finally, the overwhelming support which the modified Geneva document had received at the Miami Convention. There was an intense discussion on the topic of Autonomy during the first two days of the meeting. Presentations were made in comprehensive depth about the details of the new Resolution. Our beloved Patriarch, Metropolitan George of Mount Lebanon, Metropolitan Elias of Beirut, Metropolitan Elia of Hama, and our own Metropolitan Philip, discussed the issue in much detail, canonical, ecclesiological, and sacramental. On Thursday, October 9, the Holy Synod with much joy issued a resolution regarding the status of our Archdiocese, and granted it "Self-Rule." This unanimous decision was followed by a spontaneous invitation to stand up and chant in unison: "Arise, O God,

and judge the earth." This is a resurrectional hymn, which is chanted on Holy and Great Saturday. One could not help but see the tears of joy coming out of many eyes.

It is to be noted that on Tuesday at 3:00 p.m. His Eminence and his delegation had a private audience with the President of Syria, His Excellency, Dr. Bashar Al-Assad. The President commented on the role our Metropolitan plays in North America and his support of just and civic causes that benefit our people in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine.

There was a widespread warmth and satisfaction expressed by the Patriarch, bishops, and people who commented on the unity of the Church of Antioch. This was expressed in a special testimonial banquet given by our Metropolitan Archbishop and his delegation, in honor of the Patriarch and all members of the Holy Synod, at the Sheraton Hotel. His Eminence thanked the Patriarch for his leadership in steering the granting of "Self-Rule," and the Patriarch emphasized the unity of the Church, which will continue to deepen and strengthen its unity. A farewell took place until the following Wednesday, October

15, when the Holy Synod would convene at the Balamand Theological Institute, North Lebanon.

On Saturday, October 11, 2003, Metropolitan Philip and his delegation went from Damascus to Lebanon. He made a short stop at the Archdiocese of Zahle, Lebanon, and visited the new complex under construction. In the presence of many hierarchs and guests, including his Excellency, Elias Forzley, Vice Speaker of the House of Parliament of Lebanon, Metropolitan Spiridon welcomed His Eminence at the Auberge Restaurant in Chtura. Metropolitan Spiridon thanked Metropolitan Philip for his hospitality during his recent visit to North America, and our Metropolitan spoke against "distorted and distorting rumors" concerning separation from the Mother Church. He emphasized that we are one in the same Cup and one in the same Body, and in humanity as well, recalling again the words of His Beatitude that conciliarity is from the Holy Spirit; it is the work and the effectual operation of the Spirit of God, which is in us. Following the luncheon, we continued towards Beirut, where we stayed at the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel.



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There, Mr. Philip N. Saliba, Sayedna's nephew, joined our delegation.

During the entire time of the historic trip, many friends, especially members of the delegation, accommodated Sayedna and made sure that he was taken care of in every aspect.

On Sunday, October 12, His Eminence paid a visit to his hometown, Shreen, and spent time with his brother Nassif, nieces, and nephews. The visit was concluded by a dinner at the home of his nephew, Kameel. Upon returning to Beirut, some friends, Drs. Ghassan Skaff and Kamal Zakka, paid him a visit.

On Monday, October 13, at 11:30 a.m. the Metropolitan Archbishop and his delegation visited the President of Lebanon, His Excellency General Emile Lahoud. The discussion focused on the role His Eminence plays in the North American continent in maintaining sound relations among the immigrants and the ties that should be strengthened with their homeland. The meeting and the private audience he had with the President were fruitful.

His Eminence held a meeting at the Beirut Archdiocesan headquarters on Tuesday, October 14 with the executive Committee of the

University of Balamand, headed by its President, His Excellency Elie Salem. Dr. Salem presented a full and comprehensive report about the performance of the University and its faculties. Currently the University has 8 programs, including engineering, computer science, arts & science, medicine, nursing, and medical research. The university has 645 faculty members, and some 2700 students. It has become a center for research in the fields of environment and Christian-Muslim relations, and there are plans to create new schools. The President discussed the challenges that this vibrant University is facing. Engineer Samir Khairallah presented a full report on the progress of the development of the University Campus, and commented on the role the University plays in the Arab world. His Eminence Metropolitan Elias of Beirut invited all attendees to a luncheon, given in honor of Metropolitan Philip, at his headquarters. Words were exchanged concerning the overwhelming joy over the spirit of harmony, good will, and cooperation which is becoming more visible and experienced. Tuesday night, at the Au Premier Restaurant, Dr. Ghassan and his wife Mayssam Skaff, held a dinner in honor of Metropolitan Philip. A group of notable friends, politicians,

and dignitaries were present.

Wednesday, October 15, the Holy Synod continued its meeting at the Balamand Institute of Theology. Following the morning session, an interview was given to a major TV network and newspapers about the New Resolution of Self-Rule. Following the interview, a luncheon was held at the School of Tourism and Hotel Management, hosted by President Elie Salem. It was decided then, after a discussion between the Patriarch and our Metropolitan, that a liaison office would be established to coordinate and exchange news between the Self-Ruled Archdiocese and the Patriarchate. Wednesday night, Mike & Yolla Mufarrij invited a group of friends and hosted an elegant dinner, including the Minister of Environment and his wife, and the famous movie producer, Mr. Mustafa Al-Akkad, a longtime friend of His Eminence.

On Thursday morning, October 16, Metropolitan Philip paid a special visit to Mrs. Violette Khalife, the mother of our Trustee, Mr. Walid Khalife of Troy, Michigan, at her home. Later that day, His Eminence Metropolitan Elias Aude of Beirut gathered the Governor of Beirut, Mr. Yacoub Sarraf, the St. George Hospital medical staff, nurses, and the administrative body, under the leadership of director Salam Rayess,





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From the left: Father Joseph Antypas, Metropolitan Philip, President Emile Lahoud (Lebanon), Dr. George Farha, Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury, Mr. Philip N. Saliba, Mr. Joe Hanna

to a luncheon, given at the hospital, in honor of Metropolitan Philip. Metropolitan Aude welcomed His Eminence and his delegation, commenting on what transpired at the Holy Synod meeting. "We feel the presence of God in this meeting," he said. "We are sincerely anxious that we do not want any part to be separated or severed from the body. Love was present during the meeting, and it was even confirmed as a sign of victory with chanting, adding a genuine dimension to our being." Metropolitan Elias thanked Sayedna Philip, reminding everyone that the Metropolitan Philip Heart Center is a constant reminder of the love that he has for the hospital, and that the devil cannot overpower it. He extended a personal invitation to Sayedna Philip to be at the dedication ceremony, planned in April, 2004. In response, His Eminence Metropolitan Philip affirmed that whatever takes place at St. George Hospital is from the heart and content of the gospel of the ministry of healing. "Christian fellowship," Metropolitan Philip said, "is founded on love. Love is limitless and knows no boundaries. St. George Hospital,

under the leadership of Metropolitan Elias, is a source of pride for the Orthodox Church. We constitute a Church not a denomination, and we always seek that which pleases God." He thanked all those who continue to manifest the spirit of love and sacrifice, which is the real credit that the hospital owes to all those that seek healing.

Thursday evening, His Eminence received two priests from the Archdiocese of Beirut, who had received their education at St. Vladimir's Seminary, Fr. Gaby Karam and Fr. Philip Saed. The discussion focused on some pastoral issues the Church is facing. On Thursday night a private dinner was held at the table of His Excellency, former Minister of Environment, Samir Mukkbel and his wife Joyce.

Friday, October 17 was a quiet day. His Eminence had a meeting with Mr. Mohammad Al-Safadi, a member of the Lebanese Parliament. He also met with family members. On Saturday, October 18, we took off at 8:00 a.m. from Beirut International Airport to London, England. At the VIP Lounge, Metropolitan Elias of Beirut, the Director

of the St. George Hospital, Mr. Emile Rahbany of St. George Hospital, and some friends and family members bid us farewell. We arrived at the Archdiocese Headquarters around 6:30 p.m. This enterprise, which started in prayer, ended in prayer at the St. John Chrysostom Chapel at our Archdiocese Headquarters, thanking God for our safety and for a successful mission, which started with love, hope and faith, and which will prepare our Antiochian Archdiocese, under the spiritual leadership of Metropolitan Philip, to move from glory to glory, in His name.

We, the members of the delegation, are indeed fortunate to have accompanied our Primate on this historic journey, and to have witnessed his work done with excellence for the unity of the Self-Ruled Archdiocese. For us, it was our pleasure to support His Eminence to achieve this result. We witnessed the birth of a child, which will soon grow up and leave its impact and legacy on the Church of the 21st century in the North American continent.