

The Organization & Government of the Orthodox Church

Journal Syndesmos: A journal of Orthodox Unity, Witness and Renewal, Issue N°1,
Spring 1995 - Syndesmos Publication

Adapted from: Rev. Dr. Milton EFTHIMIOU,
Canonical Orthodox Juridictions in the Americas,
in The Word, USA, January 1995

The structure and organization of the Orthodox Church can only be understood by looking at its history. From the Church's historical beginning, it was organized around the Bishop (in Greek "Episkopos") of a local city or region. The word used to describe this unified ecclesiastical region is "Episkope" in Greek and "Diocese" in English.

Over the years, for administrative purposes, groups of dioceses were organized into "Metropolitan Provinces", usually defined by political borders. Eventually, by the 5th century, these were organized in to a system called the "Pentarchy" (Greek for "Five Leaders"). One exception to this was the Church of Cyprus, granted autocephaly in 432 by the Third Ecumenical Council. Pentarchy meant that all of organized Christianity within the Roman (and later Byzantine) Empire was under the jurisdiction of five Patriarchates. In the order of precedence these were Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. After the Great Schism (1054-1204), which split the Church into Eastern and Western parts, there remained four Patriarchates in the Eastern part, which came to be called "The Orthodox Church".

Mission Churches

In the 9th century, missions among the Slav peoples and local Churches (understood as the Churches structured so as to serve the people of a single ethnic group) were organized. This system expressed the basic missionary tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which called for the Gospel to be preached, and the worship to be conducted, in the language of the people. Some of these self-governing Orthodox Churches were also identified as Patriarchates, and others were not.

After 1453, when the Byzantine Empire fell to the Moslem Turks, many Orthodox Christian populations, with the notable exception of the Orthodox in Russia, found themselves in the Ottoman Empire. In this situation, the Orthodox were considered by the Ottoman rulers as one Christian nation, or "Rum Millet." But the local Churches maintained and cultivated the ethnic identities of the Orthodox people in their care. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in the early 20th century, the basic lines of the organization of the Orthodox Church today came into existence. In addition to the four original Patriarchates, there are now a number of independent (technically called " autocephalous") Orthodox Churches, some of which are

Patriarchates, some of which are headed by Metropolitans or Archbishops, and a few semi-independent (technically called "autonomous") Orthodox Churches.

Thus the system of Church government which exists in the Orthodox Church today is in the form of a family of churches. They mutually recognise each other as Orthodox and as having properly ordained episcopal leadership (that is "canonical"). Most of these Churches are closely related to the cultural traditions, languages and ethnic identities of the people who make them up.

In this sense, there are differences among the Orthodox Churches, which represent the unique and concrete embodiment of the Orthodox Christian faith in the particular and special cultural characteristics of their people.

As a result, the whole Orthodox Church is made up of a dozen or so self-governing churches which share the same faith (doctrine), worship, govern their actions according to the same rules, and share in the same spiritual tradition.

Church Government

The local Orthodox Churches are self-governing. Whether they are called Patriarchates or whether they are identified as autocephalous (i.e. self-governing) Churches, the leader of each Church, together with the Holy Synod of that Church (a ruling council of some or all of the bishops of that Church) make their own decisions about internal affairs of their own Church. No other Patriarch, Metropolitan or Archbishop may interfere in the internal affairs of another Church.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople serves the Orthodox Church as the "First Among Equals" among the hierarchs. The position is one of honour and respect, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate exercises moral, ecclesial and spiritual influence among the Orthodox, serving Orthodox unity, and acting as an arbitrator.

In nearly all the autocephalous Churches, the presupposition of organization was territorial. History has meant that there is often one, local autocephalous Church in a nation (i.e. "The Church of Greece"), or in one region (i.e. the Patriarchate of Alexandria's jurisdiction includes all Africa).

The Orthodox Diaspora

There is, however, a major and important exception to this pattern of Church governance today: the so-called "Orthodox Diaspora". From the turn of the 20th century huge numbers of Orthodox peoples left their traditional homelands and emigrated to countries which were not traditionally Orthodox. In Europe, for example, ethnic Greek Orthodox went to work in Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Many Cypriots emigrated to Great Britain. Following the Russian Revolution, many refugees fled to Western Europe. In some countries where Orthodox Christianity has spread as a "diaspora" in significant numbers. Some examples are the United States, Canada and Australia. In most of these cases, people from several ethnic backgrounds and various autocephalous Orthodox Churches emigrated to the same countries. This

cultural and ethnic diversity among the Orthodox led to the formation of organized communities which retain ties with their “Mother Churches”, but which do not form a unified Orthodox Church in these countries. Unlike the basic principle of one Orthodox Church in each nation, the Diaspora Orthodox communities have many different ecclesiastical jurisdictions, and in some cases, several jurisdictions of the same ethnic group. Without question, this is a new situation, which does not fit the general principles of Orthodox Church government.

The world-wide Orthodox Church, through recent gatherings of the leaders of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches has sought to begin a process leading eventually to a solution to this situation.