THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
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The topic of autocephaly is the only one worthy of a pan-Orthodox Council, believes the Serbian Orthodox bishop of Bačka Irinej.



In his presentation at the "World Orthodoxy: Primacy and Conciliarity in the Light of Orthodox Dogmatic Teaching" conference, the bishop of Bačka Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church touched upon one of the most sensitive topics of inter-Orthodox relations, that is to say, the issue of autocephaly.

Your Holiness,
Your Eminences and Your Graces,
My dear brother bishops,
All-honourable fathers the priests and monks,
Dear brothers and sisters,

I believe that the topic of the unity of the Church and conciliarity should most definitely include the topic of autocephaly since autocephaly as the structure of church order throughout the centuries should be the affirmation and strengthening of the conciliarity and unity of the Church, while in actual fact it has become a wall of temptation and a stumbling block. It not only does not serve the cause of strengthening the Orthodox faith and the growth of the body of the Universal Orthodox Church, but above all it does not serve the soteriological goal of the salvation of the souls of the faithful; on the contrary, unfortunately, it is used today as a weapon and means for the destruction of church unity by aiming to redefine Orthodox ecclesiology.

The canonical disorder, canonical anarchy, interference and intervention into the canonical territory of the other Local Orthodox Churches has already received a pitiful quasi-theological treatment and justification. The pastoral aspect and soteriological perspective of the Church's mission in the world lose their relevance and are even ignored. All of this is happening before our very eyes and is demonstrated in our time by the sad way in which the Patriarchate of Constantinople – our Mother Church - has behaved, unfortunately forgetting what maternal care and love actually mean.

If we examine ecclesiastical autocephaly in the historical perspective, in the context of all the events of church history, then we may find various definitions and theories regarding what autocephaly actually is, what it entails, the conditions for granting and receiving it and so on. One hundred years ago the renowned Sergei Alexandrovich Troitsky, whom I consider to be equally a Russian and Serbian theologian, wrote about the situation today in the land of Ukraine as though he were witness to these events. And, like St. Sophrony (Sakharov), he expressed his profound concerns regarding the actions and theories which arose a century ago in Constantinople and which, unfortunately, are today being used for justification for its actions by the more renowned theologians of the Church of Constantinople.

Fr om the various definitions and descriptions of the concept of autocephaly we can draw a very simple conclusion: autocephaly is the right of bishops of a single church territory to call their own independent episcopal council and choose their primate, the election of which is not subject to confirmation or consent fr om a higher ecclesiastical centre but which is accepted by all the Orthodox Churches. All the other elements and aspects of autocephaly are of secondary importance: it is not so important who commemorates who, whether the holy myrrh is prepared independently or whether it is received from Constantinople – these are merely details which do not define the essence of autocephaly. In this sense, autocephaly, especially that which has come about as a result of a serious crisis – a crisis that could be removed from church practice in general – should have been the topic of the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete. The Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches proposed and demanded that this topic be

discussed at the Council. I would even say that this topic should have been the only topic for a Pan-Orthodox Council. A Council has never been akin to a scholarly or theological conference. Councils have always examined problems, especially heresies or canonical violations, which threatened the unity of the Church. Unfortunately, already at the early stages of preparation for the Council in Crete back in the 1960s a catalogue was drawn up containing 105 different topics, which is far too many even for a conference. And only towards the end were several topics announced that more or less touched upon the challenges, trials and temptations which Universal Orthodoxy encounters.

The subject of autocephaly and the subject of ecclesiastical autonomy was worked upon for two or three decades at the pan-Orthodox pre-conciliar meetings and conferences, at the conclusion of which a pan-Orthodox text was adopted wh ere, unfortunately, there was only one issue upon which there was disagreement – the means of signing a commonly accepted document (i.e., a Tomos). And when in Chambésy at the preliminary sessions we started to touch upon the topic of autocephaly, the president coldly and sharply told us that as so much time had been lost on other topics (even though these were at times not so important), there was no time for the topic of autocephaly and that it would not be on the agenda. And, as His Holiness Patriarch Kirill correctly noted, it was for this reason (although I cannot assert this) that this topic was deliberately removed from the agenda, and therefore if the Council had adopted a common Orthodox position regarding autocephaly, as had been the case for decades, then this would have prevented the tragic events which came about as a result of the anti-canonical interference by Constantinople into the affairs of the inner life of the Russian Orthodox Church in the land of Ukraine.

The concept of autocephaly developed over centuries. As is well-know, in the time of the apostles each local Church was the fullness of the Catholic Church, which is to say, she was the presence of the entire Catholic Church in a certain locality and in a certain time as the fullness of the grace of the Holy Spirit in the communion of the bishop, priests and laity of the faithful people of God.

For practical reasons, with the growth of the Church and her mission to the world it was necessary to organize a system of so-called metropolitanates. During the period of the Ecumenical Councils, especially up until the Fourth Ecumenical Council, there were more than one hundred autocephalous metropolitanates within the Roman empire. But there also existed metropolitanates outside of its confines, and its is vital to bear in mind that some Churches located beyond the borders of the Byzantine or Roman empire were even older that the Church of Constantinople. As a result, a system developed that proposed that several dioceses could be become part of a single metropolitanate, while several metropolitanates could form a broader unit known as an exarchate. The Fourth Ecumenical Council mentions the so-called exarch of the diocese. According to some interpretations, this is the Patriarch of Constantinople, but I think this to be unlikely. I adhere to the opinion of those who believe that the exarch of these dioceses was the Primate of a very broad ecclesiastical structure.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council and after it definitively asserted the patriarchal system of autocephalous Churches, by which was meant the pentarchy (the five apostolic ancient Churches) and other Churches, for example, the Churches of Armenia and Georgia, which were located beyond or were only partly within the confines of the empire, and which lived and developed without the pentarchy.

The fate of this system of ecclesiastical structure and organization changed radically after the fall of Constantinople when the Ottoman empire became the heir of fallen Byzantium. Even the Sultan in his many titles was also called the 'emperor of the Romans', believing himself to be their legitimate heir. And it was in this capacity that on the basis of his Muslim beliefs he granted to the Patriarch of Constantinople rights and powers which he did not enjoy even under the Roman Christian empire. The Patriarch of Constantinople became a so-called ethnarch (millet-bashi) who had not only had pastoral care for Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman empire, but also exercised political power over them, he could even gather taxes for the Sultan without the direct participation of the Turkish authorities and bureaucrats.

So, in those times we can see the birth of some of the ideas which have gathered traction in the twentieth century, as we have already mentioned. We have come this conclusion on the basis of the history of the Tomes which Constantinople granted to autocephalous Churches or the recognition of the autocephalous status of the Georgian Church; indeed, nobody can say that she never had autocephaly, even though formulas were found in order not to mention the actual granting of autocephalous status but merely the confirmation of autocephaly by the Church of Antioch to the Georgian Church.

In the period from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Russian Orthodox Church received autocephaly, we can trace the bolstering of the notion that Constantinople owns the topic of autocephaly and unilaterally and autocratically decides the extent of each autocephalous status and in what manner it is to be granted. In this sense, the Patriarchate of Constantinople later would ever more restrict autocephaly. We may say that the autocephaly which the Russian Church received was complete, genuine and authentic. Similar to it were the autocephaly of the Serbian and Bulgarian Churches and a number of others, for example, the Romanian Church. Other subsequent autocephalous were limited, and in time we end up with the so-called "autocephaly" of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (it would be better to say the "pseudo-Church"), wh ere there is no autocephaly as such at all.

There are some distinguished theologians in the Greek world (some of whom are friends from my youth) who adhere to the very strange idea that it is only by the good will of the Patriarchs of Constantinople (or, by contrast, the lack of good will) that there depends whether to grant autocephaly to a particular Church. One of these theologians, to my regret and sorrow, has stated that it was a great error on the part of Constantinople to grant autocephaly, as he expressed it, to the "Russian Horde" and

“amassed savages”. However, he completely ignores the fact that this autocephaly (at first unofficial, but then real and vital) was a stance taken compelled by the fact that at that time Constantinople had become a Uniate Church: metropolitan Isidore [who then supported the Unia] had simply been expelled from Moscow and the Uniate programme had been rejected.

Something similar happened with Serbian autocephaly in the thirteenth century. There was then the Latin kingdom in Constantinople, while the remains of Byzantium and the Patriarch of Constantinople found themselves in exile and emigration in Nicaea and other places. Serbia at that time was located (and remains located) on the border between the Western Roman and Eastern Roman world. The Catholic presence and proselytism were keenly felt – even St. Sabba’s own brother in Montenegro was a Catholic. St. Sabba had to strengthen Orthodoxy in his own land. This was not an uprising against the existing order, of which he was accused and remains to be accused by some, but simply a struggle for Orthodoxy, which is one of the fundamental aspects of the life and mission of an autocephalous Church

And then the period of the Ottoman rule came to an end. Byzantium no longer existed, the Ottoman empire was no more, Constantinople was no longer the “city of Caesar and the Senate”, no longer the city of the Sultan, and no longer the city of the Pentarch the Patriarch of Constantinople. It is no longer even the capital of Turkey; it is a large but by no means capital city. New autocephalous Churches have appeared over the past centuries – not always voluntarily, and at times even compelled by circumstance. And in the modern epoch the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has become considerably diminished. It has lost its authority not only over all the countries and Churches which were under it at the time of Turkish rule (as is well-known, at that time the Patriarchate of Constantinople simply used its force to swallow up Trnovo in Bulgaria and Pečka in Serbia, as well as other jurisdictions; there remained only those jurisdictions which were outside the borders of the Ottoman empire – for example, the metropolitanate of Karlovci, known to Russians as Sremski Karlovci, which was a centre of Russian emigré life and so on). Constantinople has been left without the majority of its flock on its ancient territory of Asia Minor, while at the same we witness the emergence of the neo-papist theories, familiar since the time of Meletius (Metaxasis) and then Athenagoras, and especially, alas, in our day.

In this sense, when examining the practice of granting all forms and types of autocephaly, we must distinguish between full, genuine autocephaly and incomplete, damaged, partial and conditional autocephaly. An example of this is the Church of Greece. She never received full autocephaly and does not enjoy full autocephaly to this day in that, although she elects her own Council, the Council does not elect the Primate of the Church. There is no Primate in Athens – there is only the Holy Synod, which has a president, but there is no Primate of the Church as such. This is reminiscent of the situation in Russia during the Petrine period when there was no patriarch, but only the Synod and ober-procurator. Further steps in this direction would mean a visible, fictitious and in essence non-existing autocephaly, like [as

set in the Tome granted by Constantinople] the limitations of the autocephaly of the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia and other such autocephalies.

But the “autocephaly” granted to the Ukrainian schismatics is not autocephaly or even autonomy. The rights and freedoms enjoyed, for example, by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as an autonomous and self-governing Church within the Russian Orthodox Church, or the rights and freedoms once granted by our Serbian Church to the schismatics of northern Macedonia (they accepted our proposals, but then rejected them) are far deeper, broader and more serious than the supposed autocephaly that was granted to the Ukrainian schismatics. The Tomos granted to them more than proposes numerous restrictions as it clearly states that their authority, hierarchy and primate is to be the Patriarch of Constantinople. It is especially sorrowful that this ‘Tomos’ does not even mention the Lord Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church as in in earlier Tomes of autocephaly, but does state that the Patriarch of Constantinople is on earth the head of the Church. This is, of course, completely unacceptable and impermissible for the Orthodox conscience and signifies a revision of the Gospels and a revision of the New Testament in general.

I ask myself and you, Your Holiness, dear fathers and brothers: what can be done today to find a way out of this profound crisis which has been shaped by geopolitical factors, external pressure and even completely open, direct interference by the Western powers, especially the most powerful of the Western powers, and which also has its own internal soil, its own internal roots? These are not only the actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople, which are merely the embodiment of a tendency which, unfortunately, is developing within the parameters of a new theory of neo-papism.

I can see a way out, on the one hand, in liberating ourselves, wherever possible completely, from all external influence and pressure. We all know that it was not only the Ukrainian authorities which exerted pressure when the schismatics were recognized automatically, with a single stroke of the pen, not only as genuine bishops (something that has never happened before until the present day) but also granted autocephaly, something quite unprecedented in the history of the Church. All influence on the part of the authorities – both internal and external, as well as pressure – is to be firmly avoided, it must be resisted, as shown by the example of the Russian Orthodox Church throughout the seventy-year period of her history: she never bowed down to any king other than the heavenly king and no lord other than the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is an example for us all. I believe that this happened in other Churches, but not in such a grave manner. What else can be done I consider to be the aim and meaning of the present conference – to develop a healthy, truly Orthodox, patristic understanding and concept of autocephaly, conciliarity and primacy (this triptych is organically inwardly connected), unlike the internal ideologization and absolutization, which has been created by Constantinople, of an inner secularized conception of autocephaly and in general the loss of a genuine ecclesiastical self-awareness, without which we cannot go forward.

I consider this to be a very tragic situation, and a dangerous one, but I believe that as on the day of Pentecost, as throughout the entire history of the Church, the Holy Spirit guides the Church. The Saviour assures us that the gates of hell will not prevail over her, they cannot vanquish her, and I am sure a solution of some sort will be found. For if this schism lasts for too long, then, alas, a new schism of the sort we saw in the eleventh century will be inevitable, and guilt will rest upon those who caused this schism.

God forbid that this should ever happen and may God grant that in time the situation will be healed and that those who are already in advanced in years will live to see this day.

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