



Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk: "We have embarked on a significant and new endeavor in Africa."



In December and January, the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa sent clergy from Russia to conduct festive services in 15 countries across the hottest continent. This included both the northern regions, where parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church have long been active (in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt), and sub-Saharan Africa—countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, and others, which are exotic to Russians. There, services are sometimes held under stretched tarpaulins or in the shade of trees.

In Kenya, the Patriarchal Exarch of Africa, Metropolitan Konstantin of Zarskoye, performed the Great Blessing of the waters of Lake Victoria while sitting in a dugout canoe. In Bangui, the palm-lined capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), students at the St. Sergius of Radonezh School were amazed by a foreign wonder—a spiky Christmas tree. Almost all of Africa was covered: French-, English-, Spanish-, Arabic-, and Portuguese-speaking regions.

Africa used to be under the Alexandrian Patriarchate

Why has the Russian Orthodox Church turned its attention to Africa now, and what are we doing there? The TASS Analytical Center posed this question to Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

– Historically, the Russian Church had several parishes on the African continent: in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and South Africa. While carrying out our activities on the continent, we respected the canonical rights of the Alexandrian Patriarchate. According to ancient decrees, which we call the Sacred Canons, North Africa is recognized as the canonical territory of the Alexandrian Patriarchate, which during the 20th century expanded its activities to the entire African continent.

In all those parishes, clergy sent from the Russian Orthodox Church coordinated their activities with the leadership of the Alexandrian Patriarchate and conducted them only with the blessing of local bishops. Our parishes primarily served Russian-speaking parishioners.

But things change.

The archives of the Department for External Church Relations contain many appeals from Russian-speaking compatriots living in other African countries, asking the Russian Orthodox Church to establish parishes and send priests.

– We respected the rights of the Alexandrian Patriarchate and therefore could not positively respond to these requests.

Everything changed in 2019 when Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria... suddenly and unexpectedly, unilaterally recognized the Ukrainian schismatics. Prior to this, Patriarch Theodoros had visited both Russia and Ukraine multiple times. In numerous public speeches, he swore his allegiance to the Sacred Canons, stating that the Ukrainian schismatics were graceless and could not be considered legitimate, canonical clergy.

On the internet, one can find many videos of Patriarch Theodoros speaking about this, including while in Ukraine.

Just a year before recognizing the Ukrainian schismatics, he visited the Odessa diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, where he was warmly received, and he urged believers to remain loyal to the canonical Church.

Then, in November 2019, Patriarch Theodoros, on his own decision and without consulting the Synod of the Alexandrian Patriarchate, announced the recognition of the Ukrainian schismatics and began commemorating their leader.

– This action by Patriarch Theodoros made him appear as a man who does not stand by his words. This impression was formed not only by us but also by a vast number of clergy within the jurisdiction of the Alexandrian Patriarchate. They understood that their Patriarch had committed betrayal and that it was difficult to call him an honest man. Shortly after, dozens of appeals began to arrive at the Department for External Church Relations from African clergy, mostly locals, stating that after all that had happened, they no longer wished to be under the omophorion of a Patriarch who had acted so dishonorably. They asked the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' to take them under his protection and jurisdiction.

And he became a schismatic

– We did not rush to resolve the issue, although we understood that these priests could not be left in such a difficult situation. However, there was still hope for possible repentance by the Alexandrian Primate or that the Holy Synod of this ancient Church would revoke the decision made unilaterally by the Patriarch. But after Patriarch Theodoros had conducted a joint 'service' with the leader of the Ukrainian schism in August 2021, there was no choice left. According to the canons, anyone who concelebrates with a schismatic becomes a schismatic himself. We could not leave hundreds of clergy and even more parishioners, who attend the parishes served by these clergy, without help, care, and canonical protection. People did not want to participate in the schism, so their choice had to be answered.

A decision was made to establish the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, a Patriarchal Exarch was appointed, and the Russian Orthodox Church began actively working on the incoming appeals. The Exarch and the clergy assisting him visited those parishes, met with local clergy, and made decisions on the possibility of accepting these priests into the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. In December 2024, the Exarchate will mark its third anniversary. The two dioceses—the South African (covering 24 countries) and the North African (covering 31 countries)—include about 350 parishes in 32 African countries, served by more than 250 priests today. In addition to spiritual work, many humanitarian and educational projects have been initiated.

A completely new reality

– This is a completely new and unexpectedly emerged reality. The establishment of the Exarchate of Africa has stirred up church life on the continent. The leadership of the Alexandrian Patriarchate had long focused primarily on the Greek part of its flock. In the parishes in African villages, which are difficult

to reach, where sanitary conditions are poor, and poverty-related issues exist, not only had no Greek bishop set foot, but often no priests had visited. People were left to their own devices.

When our clergy began visiting these parishes, we were horrified by the terrible conditions in which local priests were serving. At best, in buildings that bore no resemblance to an Orthodox church.

We began seeking resources to provide these parishes with everything necessary for worship and to address the urgent problems of local residents: assisting in drilling wells for drinking water, delivering medicines, and providing essential items.

Through these initial steps, people realized that the Russian Church cares for them, that they are not abandoned and are needed. We are working to improve the educational level of clergy who have been ordained but mostly lacked the opportunity to receive systematic theological education. Currently, a large number of African students are studying in theological schools in Russia, with the Church providing them with everything they need, from clothing to scholarships and tickets for trips home during holidays.

We have taken on a significant and new task and see that it is bearing fruit. Every day, more and more priests are joining us, seeing our genuine care for the clergy and flock on the African continent.

Views align with the Antiochian Orthodox Church

At the end of January, Metropolitan Anthony made a working visit to Lebanon, where he was received by Patriarch John X of the Great Antioch and All the East.

– What is the situation with another autocephalous Orthodox Church—the Antiochian?

– The Russian Church has historically had the warmest relations with the Antiochian Church. Unfortunately, the Orthodox world is now divided due to the actions of Constantinople and the aforementioned Alexandrian Patriarchate, which has aligned with it in the context of the Ukrainian schism and attempts to legitimize it. With the Antiochian Patriarchate, our views on the problems in inter-Orthodox relations tend to align.

– How have the events in Syria affected the Antiochian Church?

– Of course, during our conversation, we discussed the situation of Christians in the Middle East. On behalf of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus', I conveyed to Patriarch John X, the clergy, and the flock of the Antiochian Church assurances of full support for their efforts to preserve the Christian

presence in the Middle East. Patriarch John spoke about the situation in Syria and Lebanon, sharing his assessments of the prospects for the region's development. We all pray for peace to reign in the Middle East, so that Christians living on this sacred land can enjoy the opportunity to freely practice their faith.

It's not often that we get to speak with His Eminence, so we must seize the moment.

– In the US, there is a new President from whom a 'conservative turn in values' is expected. Does the Russian Orthodox Church consider this [turn] possible?

– I noticed (after watching President Trump's inauguration and listening to his speech) that in the very first hours of his leadership, he made several statements which indicate that he attaches great importance to the topic of traditional moral values.

In particular, he mentioned that there are only two genders—male and female—which later caused great dissatisfaction among the liberal part of American society and beyond.

It also seems important that some members of Trump's team, in their statements before the elections, spoke extensively about the issue of religious freedom in Ukraine. Specifically, they spoke about the unacceptability of the current Kievan regime's policy towards the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which, I emphasize, represents the majority of Christians living in Ukraine.

Therefore, we hope that the Trump administration, now in office and having leverage over the current regime in Kiev, will give this issue the necessary attention, as today, before the eyes of the civilized world, brutal persecution of the Orthodox Church is taking place.

What about the Catholics?

– On January 9, the Italian Episcopal Conference published new guidelines allowing openly homosexual individuals to become priests. Will this complicate the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican?

– Certainly, we have also taken note of the news from Italy. I must admit, the shift towards a liberal agenda, far removed from the teachings of the Gospel, which we are now observing in the Catholic Church in the context of traditional family values, cannot but cause bewilderment and concern.

Recently, the document *Fiducia Supplicans* was published, which essentially introduces a new practice for Catholics of blessing same-sex couples. The Synodal Theological Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church analyzed this document and **published its review**, which contains numerous

criticisms. Departures from the traditional Christian family ethics have already become a sad reality in many Protestant denominations.

The topic of family ethics and traditional moral values is one of the few on which we and the Roman Catholic Church could speak, as it were, the same language. As is known, there are serious theological differences between us, and there is no Eucharistic communion. Nevertheless, for many years, we have built relations with the Roman Catholic Church precisely on the basis of common themes and issues where our positions coincide.

The danger lies in the fact that the topic of traditional Christian family ethics is essentially falling out of our agenda. And if this does happen—I can hardly imagine what else we could discuss together with the Catholics.

DECR Chairman was interviewed by Oleg Osipov

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