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ABOUT THE CANONICAL MEANING

of “The Lifelong Office” of the Orthodox Bishops.

Is It Unconditional or Conditional?

Abstract: The canonical nature of the bishop's lifetime ministry in the local Orthodox Churches has been the subject of intense discussion for several years. Moreover, this issue is becoming increasingly relevant with real-world implications. However, in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), it has been overlooked for various reasons. In this context, the present report aims to initiate a scientific-theological discussion on this ecclesiastical-legal issue within our local Church as well.

Keywords: *Orthodox Church, Canon Law, Bishops, Lifelong Service*

Today, at the beginning of the third millennium, the discussions in the Orthodox Church on actual canonical issues more than ever require, presume and oblige researchers to demonstrate scientific seriousness and responsibility, paying special attention to unexplored scientific fields, which for one or another reason have been disregarded and concealed or misinterpreted.

Thus, the scientific problems come back to life and their background historical events evolve, survive, do not freeze in their historical essence and do not sink into oblivion and attain not only some ceremonial value but also acquire actual meanings, as they could also serve as a corrective for the present and the future. One of these questions is the meaning of the lifelong office of Bishops in the context of the canonical tradition and practice.

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In the last decade the nature of the lifelong office of the orthodox bishop once again was a theme for theological discussions in the Orthodox Church, even more – the problem was “materialized” into real events. For instance, the issue about the lifelong office of the first hierarch the Cyprus Orthodox Church Archbishop Chrysostom I, due to his incapability

after 2000 to perform his duties (the reason – Alzheimer’s disease) went through fiery debate not only within the diocese of this autocephalous church.

For solving this canonical problem, in Switzerland took place a meeting of the extended members of the Holy Synod of the Cyprus (2006), presided by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, at which the decision to resign with honor the position Archbishop of the Cyprus Orthodox Church and to proceed with the election of a new first hierarch, was made. On the 5th of November 2006 a new one was elected – Chrysostom II.

Similar debate was also unleashed in the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2008-2009 after the progressive worsening of the health of the then Serbian first hierarch – 95-year old Patriarch Pavle. The outcome of the situation was that the Archbishop Synod of the SOC, gathered in November 2008 in Belgrade, did not satisfied the pledge of the Patriarch to be exonerated from his responsibilities, ensuing from the Patriarch cathedra.

Let me explain in details the actuality of this issue in the context of the events, taking place in the Hellenic Orthodox Church. The question whether the Metropolitan cathedra is given for life or the Metropolitans must retire at certain age, is nowadays very actual in Greece. It is periodically commented in the Greek society but it has recently run high with the election of the new Greek Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens (7th of February 2008), who is also over 70 years old. Right after his election the specialist of canon law noticed that popular members of the high clergy and theologians for the first time posed in such an open and categorical way the question of the age limits for electing a Metropolitan in the Greek Church.

The biggest challenge was posed by the Metropolitan of Zakynthos Chrysostomos, one of the most influential and popular of the Greek high hierarchs, who has already said farewell to the clergymen of the island eparchy led by him after 35 years of archbishop office. He resigned when he completed 72 years. He himself for years has been a defender of the idea that metropolitans could not rule lifelong their eparchies literally but must retire at certain age not to hinder the development of the church life in the eparchy.

Metropolitan Chrysostomos had declared his decision to retire at that age some years ago. Not long ago he said: *“I want to emphasize that I am not going to leave the Island of Zakynthos in order to move to another metropolis but will give up my position to someone younger and more capa-*

ble. And I will be right next to him and will help him because my interest in Zakynthos will never stop. I hope the new metropolitan will fulfill entirely all the expectations of the people on the Island”.

Commenting the reasons of his retirement he pointed his age of 70 years and defined it *good* for his resignation from his office: „*The teachers and judges retire at 65 or 67 years, he said, that is why I think it would be better to resign at 70*”. In January this year he also reminded on the national TV of Greece that he was going to give his resignation at the beginning of the Church year since he did not consider dying „*stuck to the throne*”.

In the day of his resignation Metropolitan Crysosstomos stressed emphatically that his decision was based on his believe that no one can occupy lifelong an responsible position like the bishop’s one since time pass by and man’s strength diminish and appealed to all the clergymen to accept in October the new metropolitan, elected by the Holy Synod of the Greek Church. „*My resignation is a matter of principles, not an escape*” the Metropolitan replied to the attacks against him.

After the resignation of Metropolitan Crysosstomos his example followed some other Metropolitans. Thus the Metropolitan of Kifissia (a district of Athens) Cyril, who is still under 50, publically stated his intention to leave the throne when he gets old. As he says „*the holy canons expect the metropolitan to be capable. Lifelongness accompanies capability – not for administration but for liturgy. To give Holy Communion. To go round to see the eparchy. If I cannot stand and perform all these duties then what is the meaning to occupy the Metropolitan’s position?*”

These opinions also shares the 52-year old Metropolitan of Kastoria (Greek Macedonia) Seraphim, who also declared in public: „*As long as I can serve, I will occupy this position. Otherwise I will resign for other to take my place*”. 63-year old Metropolitan of Idra Ephrem also thinks that „*if the Bishop has no longer the physical and mental strength, he has to resign in dignity. So it is a matter of prudence and mental maturity when to resign. And the solution of problem about the age limit of the bishop’s office is in the power of the Archbishop Council of the Greek Church*”.

The position of these *archierey* about the lifelong metropolitan office was not supported by all the *archiereys*. In the conditions of the debate 81-year old Metropolitan of Ioannina Theoklitos categorically rejected this idea: „*I am not a clerk to retire*”, he said.

The same opinion also expressed the 92-year old Metropolitan of Maronia Damassinos (with headquarters in Komotini or Giumurjina)

„The Bishop remains Bishop for life. He figuratively contracts a marriage with the Church, with the eparchy, with his parishioners.” According to him the Metropolitan could really resign on their own judgment but only if they have strong reasons for that.

Not long ago his opinion about the lifelongness of the archierey on active duty expressed also the famous theologian Ierotei Vlahos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, who said that the canon law of the Orthodox Church does not adopt the practice and the idea a Bishop to „retire” and still remain a Bishop.

According to him, in these rare cases in the church history, the one, who resigns, has also been deprived of his Bishop status because „a Bishop could not exist without a congregation”. But nowadays according to Ierotei Vlahos it is considered a punishment someone to be deprived of episcopacy and thus there is a danger of creating a theological and pastoral paradox – a Bishop without a parish, which Holy liturgy to preside.¹

The presented examples from the actual debate and the modern practice in the Ellada and some other local Orthodox churches only illustrate the severity of the problem with the lifelong Bishop’s office in the Orthodox Church. They come to show that this question has not yet been solved in canonic way and that it probably would be manifested in other local Orthodox churches in which for different reasons the debate on this subject still has limited publicity or is controlled by different means, part of the imposed in the last centuries conservative believes of the absolute, literal and not in conformity with the real object of the archierey’s office interpretation of the canonical meaning of the lifelong office of the diocese Metropolitan, respectively of the Patriarch.

The problem will be subject of further development with the perspective of a great ecumenical and panorthodox council at which series of actual issues are expected to be brought up. Undoubtedly one of the most important and significant is the question of the nature of the Bishop’s office and in particular its lifelongness.

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Posed in this way, the question about the lifelong office of the Or-

¹ The information and the quotations about the question of the lifelongness of the episcopacy in the Orthodox churches of Cyprus, Serbia and Greece is obtained in different specialized ecclesiastical and affiliated sites.

thodox Bishops, assumes strict canonical interpretation, based on the theological principles and the church tradition but at the same time is a question of rational evaluation and canon law analysis. It would be hard enough to give at least satisfying answer in these few pages but it would surely contribute to bring the debate out of the field of ex-cathedra opinion expression and to focus in scientific-theological discussion, partially deprived of traumatic ecclesiastic prejudices or scholastic perceptions.

So, as it is well known that the church hierarchy can be two types – sacred and administrative. On its side the sacred hierarchy has three ranks, the highest of which is the Bishop's one. The sacred hierarchy receives by the act of ordination the gift of priesthood. This gift in fact is given to the person /Bishops, Priests and deacons/ for life – the ordination and baptism cannot be revoked. „*Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands*” – writes Saint Paul to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6). In this meaning the Bishop's office is literally lifelong because the Bishop in the Church must be guided by and follow all his life the vow he has taken at time of his *chierotonia*.

Even more, if we can use a hyperbole, the office of Bishop is “over-lifelong”, it is “post-lifelong”. Even after his death he remains a Bishop, he keeps on being referred as such with the corresponding honor and dignity and the only indication that he is no longer with us is the explanation that he is already *ex-archierei* of his Episcopal cathedra – functional – real or not („long existing”). Thus the explanatory definition “ex” in fact only differentiates between the presently ruling *archierei* and the cathedra he occupies – with those *archierei* whose government has already become part of the church history but who bear lifelong or even post-mortem this God's gift.

The office of the Patriarch, of the Metropolitan, of the Archbishop (in some local churches) or of the Bishop on active duty (i.e. the first hierarch of an eparchy) is an office of Bishop in a higher (administrative) state. Their Bishop cathedras are occupied not by the sacrament of *chierotonia* but by a vote, in which, in most of the local churches, representatives of the clergy and of the laics take part, which is the case of BOC. Chosen for Patriarch, Metropolitan, Archbishop or Bishop on active duty, they become bearers of the sacred, as well as of the administrative office.

But the nature of the administrative office of these Bishops assumes lifelongness, which from the canon law point of view, could not be defined as unconditional, imperative lifelongness. In this meaning it could not be

determined and defended by sacred means but it is determined by certain conditions, which the Bishop must satisfy administratively throughout his office. In this sense it is already conditional. Thus the Bishop, bearing the patriarchal, metropolitan and etc. power, must satisfy all these conditions and maintain all these qualities, which he has satisfied or has had at the time of his election.

When he is no longer capable of satisfying even one of these conditions – for example to be in a good physical and mental health, to possess enough administrative capabilities and skills to manage and rule his local church, to enjoy good image and trust of the people and of the government and so on – he stops his administrative office, withdraws in peace or in case he has committed a canonical crime – suffers ecclesiastical punishment. This is supported by many canons, which foresee procedures for depriving the right of administrative office. Even more, the canons foresee imposing the most severe sanctions for a Bishop who while occupying his cathedras, for one reason or another „takes no care of the clergy or people and does not instruct them in piety” – he „is separated” and even deprived (cf. 58th canon of Holy Apostles and Interpretations) (1, 161 – 164).

For the constant office of Bishops, first church hierarchs, speaks the 19th Rule of the Fifth-Sixth Ecumenical Council: they must constantly teach, especially in the Sundays (2, 120 – 125). These ecclesiastical canons expect constant activity in the office of Bishop, performing the duties of a ruling hierarchy.

In case of losing his physical or mental capabilities the Bishop has no way to fulfill the conditions, defined by the canon – he just stops ruling and preaching and transforms into an ordinary subject of ecclesiastical ruling, which is already in inconsistency with the meaning and the spirit of the canons. In this sense, the lifelong office of Bishop is conditional, and when it is a conscious and responsible resignation from the Episcopal cathedra, it is not an escape but a matter of canonical principles and tradition, forgotten and abandoned nowadays (Look also: 3).

Today it is hard to say where and when this “phenomenon” of misinterpreting the issue of the lifelongness has gradually originated – in the Early and High Middle Ages (i.e. from the end of the 5th till the end of the 15th century) in Byzantine empire, the „sore point” of the Church and the state, as successfully defines D. Obolensky this demonstration of antinomy of the divine diarchy “State-Church” (Cf. 4, 229, 233).

The historical examples for the first in the history illustrations of

misinterpretation of the question of the lifelong office of the episcopacy demonstrate the strong influence of an external factor, namely the secular authority. Here I will remind on purpose that the chronological administrative titles of the Bishops emerge in the time, when the Church has already been secularly influenced.

Thus, the title *Metropolitan* coincides with the Nicene epoch – in the canonic monuments it is seen for the first time in the 4th, 6th and 7th rules of the First Council of Nicaea. In regard to the Patriarchal title, it is not used till the end of the 5th century. It is symptomatic that the title of the *Patriarch* is mentioned for the first time in the Constitution of Emperor Flavius Zenon in 477 A.C. and in the canons not till the Fathers at the Fifth-Sixth Ecumenical Council (691-692 A. C.) (5).

The time and place limitations, posed here, do not allow a detailed historical review, that's why I will present just some other examples. The first of them indirectly concerns the benefits of the *first-illumination* cathedras as they are represented in the canons. Undoubtedly the history of the formation of the local churches does not leave a possibility for dogmatic advantages of their first hierarchs.

The canons themselves (3rd canon of the Second Ecumenical Council, the 28th canon of the Second Ecumenical Council, the 28th Fourth Ecumenical Council) speak of political, not dogmatic reasons, for occupying the cathedras, mentioned in the rules. In fact, the civic position of the cities defined, according to the same rules, their place, position and dignity of the diptych.

The second example generally presents the vision of the political and social Byzantine elite about the Patriarch image and the nature of his service. Such is the attitude of the Byzantine emperor Basil II, who called the Constantinople Patriarch *spiritual leader of whole the East* or the „presented” image of the Patriarch, offered to us by the Epanagoge (civil legislative act of 9th century, that has never even been officially published), in which the Constantinople Patriarch is depicted as „*living and animated image of the Christ*”.

Unfortunately this early allusions of elitism which contradict and even set the “real” Church of the spiritual experience and piety against the institutional Church, reflect one side of the reality in the church history and its canonic and unfortunately, diverted tradition. Symptomatically, the connection „language – ecclesiology” has been being broken continually, which has been noticed even by the Byzantine writers.

For these nominally involved in the Church life Bishops, Nikita Stamat (one of the late Byzantine theologians) says: „ *A Bishop in the God's eyes and in the view of the Christian Church is rather those who has revealed himself in the Church by the Holy Spirit as a theologian (theologos), than the one who has been ordained as a Bishop by men but who still needs a consecration (mystagogian) in the secrets of the Kingdom of God*” (6, 158).

In the context of the theme this means that the episcopacy stands strong and authentic in the Church only if he has discovered the spiritual freedom and piety himself and does not search for the nominated public recognition of his office, that could set his manifestations free but at the same time would stand enslaved in the belief of redemption and salvation of mankind (7, 209). With other words, nowadays we have adopted definitions, coming from the ritual church practice, which are of no value for the real ecclesiology of the New Testament.

In conclusion, with a view to the theme for the lifelong office of the Bishops in the Orthodox Church – is it unconditional or conditional, with broader meaning, the choice of the local churches in the future will be whether to return to the early church ecclesiology of Saint Paul of the New Testament or to obey the ritual tendencies evolved in the post-New Testament and civil age and developed in ecclesiology, that is not criticized and not even questioned nowadays (8; 9, 73 – 88). But for sure the traumatic nature of the problem, that I presented here, is not a subject only to strict Episcopal analysis but needs broader theological scientific discussion in the future.

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