

Article One – The Translation of Bishops

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It is impossible to avoid the present controversy within the Coptic Orthodox Church concerning the election of a new patriarch. The conversation has spread onto the internet, and has provoked important contributions from priests and bishops. Many ordinary Church members might think that this is a matter which is outside of their interest and influence. But a selection of ordinary Church members have the privilege of helping to elect the new patriarch, and each member of the Church is responsible for the health and well-being of the whole Church, since we are one Body of Christ. Therefore it is important that each of us understands why there is a discussion taking place about how the new patriarch should be chosen. The way in which the Church is organised and acts matters.

From the beginning, the Church has been organised as communities of faithful Christians gathered around their bishops, with the wider unity of the Church expressed through the brotherly fellowship of bishops in each area meeting together in synods or councils. Although each bishop was allowed a great degree of pastoral independence to care for the welfare of his diocese, it was at local synods, and at the great ecumenical councils which allowed large numbers of bishops to consider various matters, that the rules for handling different situations were established. This allowed the Church to develop in many places with a consistent structure. Where there was no need for a universal rule, or where rules were applicable only to the Churches and bishops in one area, then local councils would make decisions, or matters would be left to the discretion of each bishop. But where the bishops understood that there should be one rule for all then these were also established, and were considered as being authoritative in all places and at all times.

These rules are known as canons. This is a Greek word which means a measuring rod, or a standard. The local and universal canons are the standard by which each local Church and each bishop governs and organises his community, and the standard by which bishops work together in unity. They prevent the Church being affected by every changing fashion of the world around us and prevent any one bishop or group of bishops from damaging the life of the Church by their own opinions. To follow these canons is to be canonical. Being canonical matters because it means that a Church is living and growing in the right way. To act against these rules introduces a distortion into the life of the Church.

The first instance of such a council producing rules or canons to be observed in all places is in fact described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 15, in the New Testament. The Apostles and Elders gathered together in Jerusalem to discuss the issue of converts to the Christian faith coming from outside the Jewish community. It was decided that these converts did not need to become observers of the Jewish law at all, but should abstain from meat offered to idols and from sexual immorality. These were the first canons or standards to guide Church practice. When the council had made these decisions it was not possible for another group of Christians to decide that actually converts from outside the Jewish community also needed to be circumcised. The council of Jerusalem had set the standard.

Of course this was a unique circumstance since it drew together many of the Apostles themselves, and those who had been followers of Jesus Christ. But the Apostles appointed bishops to continue

their work of establishing the Church, and the bishops also met together in councils to deal with issues of varying importance which affected the Church. These councils did not create a new set of laws, just as strict as the Jewish Law, but they set standards. There is a difference. Within the Judaism described in the New Testament there was nothing more important than keeping the Law. This was how it was possible to try and please God. The Law had something to say about every aspect of Jewish life, far beyond regulating only the religious aspect of Judaism. Sharia Law is similarly a comprehensive collection of laws and judgements which must be kept to gain God's favour and which covers almost all aspects of society. In both cases to break a law is to sin against God. Things are forbidden or permitted, and to do something forbidden is to incur God's wrath. The Orthodox Church does not take such a view of the canons. Indeed if all the canons were added together in a book there would be very many important topics which were not considered at all. The canons are not laws, they are a standard for particular aspects of Church life and are normally created only to deal with a real problem. For much of our Christian life we simply follow the Tradition which is passed on through the prayer and worship of the Church. It is only where the life of the Church itself may be harmed that canons have been composed.

The canons are guidelines for the bishops to take into account as they respond to the Holy Spirit leading the Church of their own times. Some of these guidelines are to be strictly observed outside the gravest situations, others have a local or even a temporal application, and though the spirit of the canon might be preserved it might also be necessary for the letter to no longer be observed. The Orthodox Church considers the canons as boundaries which should not be exceeded and as the scaffolding surrounding the Holy Temple which is being built. They are not the Temple, but the bishops, as master builders, seek to be faithful to the canons so that the Temple they are constructing is built straight and true.

There are certainly canons which are less applicable today than when they were composed. But those which have been issued by one of the three ecumenical or general Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus have an authority which cannot be ignored. This is what the present controversy is all about. Within Jewish or Sharia Law it might be much easier. We would just ask what the Law says and we would be obliged to do it. But the canons of the Church are not laws. They are to be responded to by the Church with continuing faith and hope in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will help us to understand how we should apply the canons in our own time because the Church is alive and we are not under a new Law but under the authority of Christ Himself who has not abandoned the Church.

At the first Ecumenical Council held at Nicaea, now in modern Turkey, in 325 AD, more than 300 bishops gathered together to discuss various issues which were affecting the Church, and especially the question of how the relationship of God the Father and God the Son should be described. But the bishops also took the opportunity to deal with some of the practical aspects of Church life which needed regulating. Canon 15 of this Council says..

On account of the great disturbance and discords that occur, it is decreed that the custom prevailing in certain places contrary to the canon, must wholly be done away; so that neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacon shall pass from city to city. And if any one, after this decree of the holy and great Synod, shall attempt any such thing, or continue in any such course, his proceedings shall be utterly void, and he shall be restored to the Church for which he was ordained bishop or presbyter.

When the bishops published this canon they expected it to be accepted around the Church as a standard which was to be universally adopted. Indeed it had the authority of the 318 bishops who agreed to it from all the various places that the Christian Church had been established. Among those who gave their agreement was St Athanasius, who attended as a deacon, supporting his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, who also agreed with this measure.

The bishops were careful to explain why they were making this rule. It is to prevent the transfer of bishops, priests and deacons from one place to another which had caused 'great disturbance' in the past. We can imagine what some of these disturbances might be. A bishop might not like his present responsibilities and could envy the position of a bishop in a larger diocese. He might seek to undermine the bishop in another place and induce the local congregation there to demand that he be transferred. Meanwhile his own congregation would surely be upset and angry that he had chosen to abandon them. If it was possible for a bishop to be transferred then groups could form in the church of a particular place and each group could try to have their bishop replaced by someone else. The bishops at Nicaea realised that the Church needed continuity and stability in the ministry of the clergy. Just as with a marriage, once a commitment had been made the commitment had to be observed to the end. When a bishop could not be replaced, and could not try to move to a bigger and better diocese then it was hoped and expected that the bishop and congregation would abandon all sorts of political manouvering and would work out their life in Christ together.

We see from this canon that in some places these sorts of movements were more common than in others, it speaks of 'certain places', not 'all places'. And we can see that at the council the majority there considered that this local practice of transferring bishops was an error and harmful to the life of the Church. Indeed this canon speaks of these transfers as being 'contrary to the canon'. The bishops cannot mean THIS canon, as they were only just writing it. They must have in mind an even earlier canon or rule which forbade such transfers. The transfer of bishops was not only causing many disturbances, but they was already contrary to the standard which had been set, the guidelines which should have been followed. These transfers did not help the Church grow properly. They generally caused more harm than good, and so the Church emphasised the rules which already existed, and being gathered together in the largest meeting of bishops that had taken place, they insisted clearly and for all Churches in all times and places that bishops, and we will concentrate on the transfer of bishops in this series of short articles, should not take place.

The canon makes this clear. It is not time limited. Anyone who is transferred after this canon has been published should be sent back to where he came from, and everything he has done, acting as a bishop in some other place, should be completely null and void.

Why does this matter to us? Well, in the present elections for a new patriarch the names of several bishops and metropolitans have been put forward. This would seem to be contrary to the Nicene canon which has been considered here. The issue will be examined in more detail in the following articles. But it is the responsibility of all faithful Christians to be aware of the ancient traditions of our Church, and the canons or standards which the bishops of the past have established. We are members of the same Church which gathered at Nicaea in 325 AD and published this canon therefore we are subject to this same canon.

Those who will be sharing in the election of the new patriarch should be aware of this rule, and what it means. Those who will prayerfully discuss the election over the next weeks and months in

Churches around the world should also have a clear understanding of the requirements of the canons and the restrictions which they impose. This article, and those which will follow, are intended to provide just such a general introduction to the tradition of our Orthodox Church in this matter, and will consider in what circumstances transfers of bishops have taken place, and whether these allow such a transfer to take place on this occasion.

To be a canonical Church matters because it means that the Church is growing according to the standards which the bishops of the past, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have determined. We are all of us responsible for ensuring that we remain a canonical Church. This is a time when it is important that every faithful Christian becomes aware of the issues which have been raised concerning the election of a new patriarch and with understanding of the canons and traditions of the Church is able to offer prayers seeking the guidance of God for the election of a true shepherd of the Church after his own heart.