

Article Three – The Transfer of Bishops in Practice

Father Peter Farrington

The second article in this series ended with a note that this third article would consider the history of the transfer of bishops over a much larger period of history to allow us to understand when and why some Orthodox Churches did begin to allow the transfer of bishops, and to show that the Church in Egypt always resisted such changes until very recent times.

It is a matter of fact that many of the local Orthodox Churches now allow the transfer of bishops from diocese to diocese, and from the service of a diocese to the various patriarchal thrones. But this does not of course mean that it is wise to do so. It has already been said that the canons are not a new set of laws, rather they are the structure within and around which the Church, as the Holy Temple of the Lord, is being built. This means that in extreme cases it might be decided that it was necessary to do something else for the sake of the Church. What matters is always the life of the Church, not following any rule. But the rules, the canons, are not something extra which can be ignored. They are part of the life and order which the Holy Spirit has revealed to the Church and manifested in the Church. So it is never enough to look at others and say that because they have changed or broken the canon then it is fine for our own local Orthodox Church to do so as well.

Indeed we will see that if we consider history for a while, it was not until relatively late in time that this current breaking of the canons took place in the other Orthodox Churches.

We will begin our short survey by considering the Catholic Church of Rome. There are advantages in doing so since the Church of Rome has preserved very detailed documentation of its history. Until the middle of the 9th century the Church of Rome can still be considered to be Orthodox. It was only in the second half of that century that Rome broke with the Eastern Orthodox, made changes to the Creed, and seemed to have set off on a direction of its own. If we consider what the Church of Rome, while it was still Orthodox, said about the transfer of bishops we will perhaps be surprised.

In the first place there were no transfers of bishops from one diocese to another in the Church of Rome until 882 AD. There were no such transfers throughout the history of the Church of Rome until after it had begun to cease to be Orthodox. This is surely quite important. The Church of Rome was conservative in many respects, and often preferred to keep to the canonical practices which had been established in the past, and this was one of those issues in which it showed itself unwilling to adopt any novelties. In 867 AD there was a mission to the Bulgarian people, and their King was very keen that the Bishop of Porto, who had introduced the Christian Faith to Bulgaria, should become their bishop. But the Pope of Rome, Nicholas I, was insistent that it was completely forbidden for a bishop to be transferred from one diocese to another. Indeed when the Pope then died he was succeeded by a celibate priest who became Pope Hadrian II. He also communicated with the King of Bulgaria and insisted again that it was forbidden for a bishop to be transferred from one diocese to another, whatever the reason. He wrote to the King saying that Formosus could not become Archbishop of Bulgaria because he was already Bishop of Porto.

In fact Formosus was eventually excommunicated because not satisfied with trying to become Archbishop of Bulgaria, he had even tried to become the Pope of Rome. It was not until 882 AD, that the very first bishop in the Church of Rome was transferred to another diocese when Marinus,

Bishop of Caeri became the Pope of Rome. He restored Formosus to Porto and removed his excommunication. Indeed in 891 AD, when Marinus died, it was Formosus who finally became Pope of Rome, after two attempts at becoming Archbishop of Bulgaria, and a previous attempt at obtaining the papal throne. He could not be consecrated bishop of Rome, since he was already a bishop, and so he was simply enthroned. Perhaps it seems that by this period the Church of Rome had accepted that bishops could be transferred from diocese to diocese, and even to the papacy itself. But this was not quite the end of the story. After Formosus died in 897 AD, his successor, Stephen VI, had his body dug up and stripped him of all the papal garments, and condemned him for passing from one see to another. Finally, in this account of the Church of Rome, his successor John XII, holding a council to discuss this matter, allowed that it was possible in exceptional circumstances to permit the transfer of a bishop from one diocese to another, but that the case of Formosus could not be allowed to set a precedent.

This brief consideration of the Church of Rome shows us that not only did the practice of transferring bishops develop very late, and only as the Church was slipping away from Orthodoxy, but that it continued to be resisted and even condemned into the 10th century. It was not until the Church of Rome came under the military and political control of the Germans in the 11th century that the transfer of German bishops to the Papacy became common. But by that time Rome was no longer considered Orthodox and is no longer an example. Indeed all the time that it remained Orthodox in doctrine it also preserved the canon of Nicaea which forbids the transfer of bishops from one diocese to another. The Coptic Orthodox practice of observing this canon is no different to the traditional practice of Rome, observed there until the 10th century.

If we consider the Patriarchate of Antioch things are a little more complicated. It does appear that in the period just before the Council of Nicaea there were some transfers with an existing bishop becoming patriarch of Antioch. But this should not be a surprise. The whole point of the 15th Canon of Nicaea was to put an end to the practice which had been disturbing the Church. Indeed the patriarch of Antioch at the Council of Nicaea, Eustathius, had already been Bishop of Beroea. When the bishops at Nicaea issued Canon 15 they must not have been afraid of offending him, since they made no exceptions to their rule, and forbade any transfer of bishops from diocese to diocese in the future.

Unfortunately this did not prevent such transfers happening again, but the history of Eudoxius, the next patriarch of Antioch to be transferred, is hardly a precedent for any wishing to encourage the practice. He had approached Eustathius hoping to be consecrated a bishop while Eustathius was patriarch of Antioch. But Eustathius rejected him. Nevertheless when Eustathius was deposed in 331 AD, just a few years after the Council of Nicaea, Eudoxius was made Bishop of Germanica, where he served as bishop for 17 years. At this time he was staying with the Imperial court when he heard that the patriarch of Antioch had reposed. He excused himself by saying that he was required in his diocese of Germanica, but instead he made his way directly to Antioch where he told the clergy that he had been appointed the new patriarch, and so he was enthroned by the unwitting synod.

This hardly stands as a positive example of the transfer of bishops from one place to another. Indeed the Emperor Constantius II wrote to the people of Antioch saying,

Eudoxius went to seek you without my sending him. . . . To what restraint will men be amenable, who impudently pass from city to city, seeking with a most unlawful appetite every occasion to enrich themselves?

We can see from this response that the Emperor considered that Eudoxius had acted *impudently* and with an *unlawful appetite*, and had only desired to *enrich himself*. Indeed this shows us that the Nicene Canon was understood to describe the proper manner in which bishops should act, serving in the diocese to which they had been united at their consecration and not desiring another. But Eudoxius is also not a precedent because he was not Orthodox in his teaching. Hilary of Poitiers reports that when he heard him speak he wished his ears had been deaf, so horribly blasphemous was the language. If he was not Orthodox in his faith then we should not be surprised that he was not Orthodox in his behaviour. In fact when he was expelled from Antioch because of his false teachings, he made his way to Constantinople and became the bishop of that city. We can certainly say that a heretic is no example and sets no precedent in regard to proper acceptance of the rules of the Church.

After this period of confusion, when the heresy of Arianism often had the support even of the Emperors, there were no transfers of bishops to the patriarchal throne in Antioch for many centuries. By the time of the great Saint Severus, who was consecrated patriarch in 512 AD, there had been no such transfers since that of the heretic Eudoxius. Indeed a study of the Syrian Orthodox Church until the end of the 10th century shows that there were no such transfers in all of that time. The great historian of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Michael the Syrian, Patriarch from 1166 AD to 1199 AD was himself only a monk when he was consecrated as Patriarch.

The examples of these two ancient Churches should be enough to show that the transfer of bishops was not something which immediately became common. When it did begin to become more common, and not until after the 10th century and even later, it was either because there were external pressures and such transfers were forced upon the Church by political and military circumstances, or it was because ambitious bishops were now willing to seek high office by any means, or it was because invasion and persecution had led to a breakdown of normal practice. None of these are a suitable reason for allowing the breaking of the Nicene Canon to become routine.

History shows that the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate is not some strange obsession that is best forgotten. On the contrary it represents the traditional Orthodox practice which should be preserved as a necessary aspect of the order of the Church. Throughout the first millenium the Orthodox Churches followed this canon with a degree of strictness. The practice of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate was normal, not unusual. It is others who have ceased to apply the Canon, but that is no reason for our community to change.

In the fourth article in this series the history of the Alexandrian application of the Canon will be considered, and those recent occasions when it has been broken for the first time.