

Article Four – The Resistance to the Transfer of Bishops in Egypt

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In the first of these four short articles we have seen that it was an ecumenical council, the most authoritative and important decision making body in the Church, which decided that it would not be allowed for bishops to move from one diocese to another. We have also seen that the bishops gathered at this council of Nicaea were well aware that in some places bishops were being transferred, but they completely rejected this practice believing that it caused harm to the life of the Church. In the second article we looked at several examples from the period after Nicaea, and we saw that in each case the canon or rule against the transfer of bishops was carefully preserved. Then, in the third article, we considered the history of the transfer of bishops in the Church of Rome, and in the Syrian Orthodox Church. We discovered that all the time that Rome remained Orthodox it rejected the transfer of bishops, even digging up the body of a bishop who had worked over many years to become the Pope of Rome, so that the body could be stripped of the papal vestments. While in the case of Syria we saw that after the council of Nicaea there were no transfers of bishops certainly until the end of the 10th century. Far from the canon of Nicaea being ignored, we find that everywhere it is being applied until relatively recently.

In this fourth article we will consider the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the practice which was adopted in Egypt from even before the time of the council of Nicaea. If we return to the example of Gregory of Nazianzus, which we considered in the second article, we will remember that when he was proposed as the patriarch of Constantinople there were bishops who objected because he had been consecrated as the Bishop of Sasima, and had then served as the acting Bishop of Nazianzus when his father, the consecrated Bishop of Nazianzus had reposed. Gregory had been more or less recognised as the Patriarch of Constantinople by some of the bishops who had arrived for the second Ecumenical Council, but as soon as the Egyptian bishops reached Constantinople they objected to Gregory becoming Patriarch because he was already a bishop. They insisted that the fifteenth canon of Nicaea, the subject of these articles, forbade the transfer of a bishop from one diocese to another, even a patriarchal diocese. This incident allows us to determine the views of the bishops of the Church of Alexandria in 381 AD.

But we can also read the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria to see what happened each time a patriarch reposed and a new one was chosen and consecrated. The History is a collection and compilation of documents over many centuries which allows us to discover the sort of people that were selected to be the patriarch. Of course it takes some time to study these large volumes, and so only a few extracts will be provided here, while a summary of the History will provide an explanation of what can be found by anyone with some time. If we begin even before the ecumenical council of Nicaea, by considering St Peter the Seal of Martyrs, who became patriarch in 300 AD, and those who followed him in the 4th and 5th centuries.

The History says of St Peter,

When Abba Theonas, the patriarch, went to his rest, the clergy of Alexandria assembled with the people and laid their hands upon Peter the priest, his son and disciple, and seated him upon the episcopal throne of Alexandria, as Theonas, the holy father, bade them.

It was during the patriarchate of St Peter that the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian assaulted the Church and caused so many faithful Christians to be martyred. He was himself a priest when he was chosen to lead the Church. He was Bishop of Alexandria for 11 years and was finally beheaded. Now at such a time we could imagine that it might be possible that a bishop would be selected as the next patriarch? After all, the worst persecution the Church in Egypt had ever faced had taken away the Bishop of Alexandria. But in fact we read in the History,

When the Father Peter went to his rest, and the people of Alexandria were thus deprived of his presence, they sent and assembled the bishops together. And they made Achillas, the priest, patriarch instead of Peter.

We see that rather than choosing a bishop in such a time of uncertainty the bishops consecrated another priest as the patriarch. There is no need to investigate each of these examples in detail, but to illustrate the practice of the Church of Alexandria at this time it is enough to simply quote the references in the History to each of the succeeding patriarchs. They say,

When Achillas, the patriarch, went to his rest, the people assembled and laid their hands upon the Father Alexander, the priest... So when the blessed Father Alexander went to his rest, the Church was widowed for a few days. Then the people assembled and took counsel, and appointed the Father Athanasius, and seated him on the evangelical throne... When the patriarch Athanasius, the Apostolic, went to his rest, the bishops and clergy with the orthodox people assembled, and laid their hands upon a priest, named Peter, and appointed him patriarch... And the people assembled, with the bishops, after the death of the Father Peter, and laid their hands upon a priest named Timothy, and made him patriarch.

The History of the Patriarchs continues in the same manner for Patriarch after Patriarch, for year after year, century after century. Through the most difficult of circumstances the Church always chose a monk, deacon or priest and never a bishop. The greatest of our saints such as St Athanasius, St Cyril, St Dioscorus and St Timothy were all deacons and priests before they became Bishop of Alexandria. Indeed until the 19th century there is no record of any bishop ever becoming the Patriarch of Alexandria.

Now it could be said by some that perhaps the Church only elected monks, deacons and priests out of habit, and not because of any particular concern with the canons. But the History provides us with an example in 830 AD that shows us that the Bishops always acted with a constant observance of the canons. At this time the Patriarch Simon II passed away and a group within the Church in Alexandria hatched a plan to have a very wealthy, married layman made the new Patriarch. Here is what the History says,

They devised an evil plan in those days, contrary to the canons of the Church. For there was at Fustât Misr at that time a man of family and wealth; and he and his kinsmen possessed gold and silver and furniture.... So, when they saw his position and his wealth, together with the consideration in which he was held, they wrote him a letter, saying : "We will not elect any man, to appoint him patriarch, except you". But he was a layman and married to a wife. So some of the bishops held apart from this transaction of the hypocrites who followed this man for the sake of human glory.

Now this shows us that the canons of the Church were always important. This rich and married layman was opposed because it was contrary to the canons that he be consecrated as patriarch. The History continues and describes what happened,

There were at that time holy bishops, such as speak the truth, and are filled with grace... Having verified the intentions of the Alexandrians, they said to them : "Why have you left the fear of the Lord, since you have broken the canons so far as to choose layman married to a wife... in opposition to custom and to the canons?" Thereupon the people were silent, knowing their fault, and uttered not a syllable in answer to the bishops.

Clearly the people of Alexandria were not about to choose a bishop as their patriarch, this idea had never occurred to anyone for the first 1900 years of the life of the Church. But they were intending to break the canons, and it required holy bishops, speaking the truth, and filled with grace, to remind the Alexandrians how they should have acted. In fact a holy man, Joseph, who was a priest, was mentioned and it was agreed that he should become the patriarch, in accordance with the canons.

These examples are enough to indicate the constant practice of the Church of Alexandria. As a patriarch reposes in the Lord, so he has always been succeeded by a monk, deacon or priest for hundreds and thousands of years. So it might be asked why it has become a subject of argument and controversy. The reason is that over the last century there have been three instances of a bishop or metropolitan becoming the patriarch contrary to the canons and the constant Tradition of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria.

In 1928 AD the revered Metropolitan Youannis of El-Biharah was enthroned as the Patriarch of Alexandria. This was the first occasion in the history of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria that any bishop had ever become the Patriarch of Alexandria. Almost immediately he lost his influence and became subject to the ambitions of those around him. It is said that many priests and laity often heard him expressing regret and asking for forgiveness for ignoring the canon established by the fathers in accepting the Patriarchate. Some even heard him cursing the day in which he coveted the Patriarchal throne. There were many problems throughout his short patriarchate and he reposed in 1942 AD.

He was succeeded by the great scholar and priest, Macarius, who had been Metropolitan of Assiut and became patriarch in 1944 AD. He only served as patriarch for a short period of time, but his patriarchate was also subject to many problems. Eventually he was forced to retire to the monastery of Anba Paula, unable to properly shepherd the Church. Pope Macarius III reposed in 1945 AD and was succeeded by another bishop, Yusab, Metropolitan of Girga. The period of the papacy of Pope Yusab II was not a fruitful one, and eventually he also was forced to retire to a monastery and the Church was governed by a committee of three senior bishops. It was only after the failure of these three patriarchs, who had all been bishops before their selection, that the saintly monk, Father Mina, became Pope Kyrillos VI following the canons of the Church.

Now it could be said that in these recent times the Church has now accepted that diocesan bishops can become the patriarch. But we should also read what the bishops in these recent times have also determined. In 1873 AD the Holy Synod gathered together and issued the following condemnation of any bishop who might become or seek to become the patriarch.

We do not ordain or permit at all the priests or the laity in all the See of Saint Mark to revoke or break these fatherly limits. All who desire this rank (the Patriarchate) from among the bishops or the metropolitans who have sees (literally thrones) or who campaign for it, or accept it, and all those who campaign for him whether he be a priest or an archpriest or lay person shall be excommunicated. We have taken the initiative to write this epistle and its conclusion based on the canon laws and the instructions of the Fathers to be in effect in the holy Church of God (in the see of) Saint Mark, to be observed from now and forever. It is the duty of whoever is chosen by God to the Patriarchate to preserve this rule, him and his successors until the end of time, in obedience to the canonical saying addressing the bishops:

“These canons we have decreed for you, O bishops, if you are confirmed in them you shall be saved and shall have peace until the end of time. But if you do not accept or obey what is in them, then you will be scorned and will encounter war amongst yourselves, and after that you shall receive a punishment that you will deserve because of your rebellion.”

This is an important statement, and it is worth reading carefully several times. The Holy Synod is establishing an instruction which it intends to be applied *from now and forever*, and it intends to forbid any bishop or metropolitan becoming the patriarch. The Holy Synod speak to bishops, priests and laity, forbidding any person in any of these ranks to break these instructions, which are a restatement of the canons of the Church. The Holy Synod states that anyone, in any rank, who supports a diocesan bishop or metropolitan bishop in becoming patriarch is to be subject to penalties.

What shall we do in these times then? The Orthodox Church of Alexandria has never allowed a bishop to become patriarch until the last century. For 1900 years it carefully preserved the canons. Even in 1873 AD, before the first bishop had become patriarch, the Holy Synod deliberately and seriously provided instructions which were to be in place for all time. These instructions repeat the canonical rule forbidding a bishop becoming patriarch. The Synod calls on the laity, as much as the clergy, not to support a diocesan bishop in becoming patriarch.

It is not the purpose of these articles to insist on any particular outcome. But if the material presented has convinced the reader that a diocesan bishop or metropolitan should not become the Pope and Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria then those who are blessed to be participants in the electoral process should humbly make their objections to diocesan and metropolitan candidates known to the proper authorities in accordance with the process being followed, and should choose not to vote for such a candidate during the election. Those diocesan bishops and metropolitans who are candidates should remain the object of prayer and respect, asking that their existing episcopal ministries might continue to be blessed. But the Holy Synod of our own Church, writing in 1873 AD, has already described the seriousness of the issue.

These canons we have decreed for you, O bishops, if you are confirmed in them you shall be saved and shall have peace until the end of time. But if you do not accept or obey what is in them, then you will be scorned and will encounter war amongst yourselves, and after that you shall receive a punishment that you will deserve because of your rebellion.