

## **General Bishops in the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Tradition**

### *A member of the Coptic Orthodox Church*

At a time of transition in the Coptic Orthodox Church, while the process of electing a new Pope takes place, many people are asking how the rank of General Bishop fits into the Orthodox Tradition of the Church. It must be said that the many General Bishops who have been consecrated over the last 50 years are deserving of all respect and honour for their service in and to the community of the Coptic Orthodox Church. But this does not mean that it is inappropriate to ask whether the increasing numbers of General Bishops in the Church, now comprising almost one third of the Holy Synod, is a development in accordance with the Orthodox Tradition.

It must be remembered that the Church is not a human institution such as any large, or even international business. If we turn only for a few moments to the Holy Scriptures we can find many descriptions of the Church which are not institutional at all. It is the Body of Christ, of which all Christians are equally members. It is the Bride of Christ, waiting for the consummation of the mystical marriage in the world to come. It is a royal priesthood, a holy nation, gathered together from those who now belong to God. Within the Church each member has equal value, although not all have equal honour and dignity. When we speak of the Church we are never meaning only to refer to the clergy, but we mean to include all those who have been baptised and anointed. Indeed in the Orthodox Church each infant, or adult convert, is crowned when they have been baptised and anointed, as a sign that they are also children of a Heavenly King. Within the Church those who have the greatest honour are those who serve, as our Lord teaches us, 'whoever wishes to be first must be the servant of all'. And so it is that the Church is not an organisation of power and authority, but of love and service.

Of course this does not mean that the Church has no structure. A living, growing body has an order about it. As the Scriptures teach us, if everyone was a foot where would be the hands. There is a need for order in the Church. If it is also a living Temple, then there must be organisation in the way that it is constructed. But just as a foot is not more important than the hand in the Body of Christ, so the foundations and the windows are not more or less important than the roof in the Temple of God which we are becoming. We see that from the earliest times there has been an order in the Church, which is necessary for the Church to grow and prosper. St Ignatius of Antioch, one of the earliest bishops wrote to many of the other local Churches in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey, and in each case he describes this structure as being part of what it means to be the Church. Indeed we find it in all the Orthodox Churches, and in all times. He says, "Let the people be subject to the servants; the servants to the elders; the elders to the overseer/chief-servant; the chief-servant to Christ".

The Bishop has a particular role in the service of the Church. He is not a ruler, rather he is a shepherd. He is not a master, rather he is a spiritual father. His interest is not in the wealth or success of the Church in the world, but in the growth and fruitfulness of each soul that has been entrusted to him. St Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostles themselves, instructs us that 'where the bishop is there is the Church', and 'do nothing without the bishop'. The Bishop is not the manager of the organisation of one department of the Church, this is not what the Church is like at all. He is the one whose grace-filled ministry is to gather and unite the people of God in the life of Christ at the eucharist. He is the focus of the life of each Orthodox Church because he gives himself

always to the service of his flock, leading them to Christ, with the priests gathered around him, as the Apostles gathered around Christ, with the deacons engaged in the practical service of the people, and the community of the faithful following him as the spiritual flock follow the trusted shepherd.

The Bishop is inseparable from the faithful people in his care. St Ignatius cannot imagine the people acting separately from their bishop, but he also cannot imagine a bishop who is not at the centre of the Christian community. This was also the Traditional and Canonical position of the Church. It was understood that sometimes a Bishop might be expelled from his diocese by war or disaster, and in such a circumstance he would be allowed to enter into service when appropriate. But apart from this situation the canons, or rules of the Church, forbade a Bishop being consecrated without a diocese. One such canon says..

*Neither presbyter, deacon, nor any of the ecclesiastical order shall be ordained at large... And if any have been ordained without a charge, the holy Synod decrees, to the reproach of the ordainer, that such an ordination shall be inoperative, and that such shall nowhere be suffered to officiate.*

The Church understood, and provided canons to enforce this understanding, that all clergy should be ordained to a particular community, even deacons and priests. This is because the Church is not an institution with various ranks of authority and power, but is a living Body, an organism, and therefore all relations are those between faithful people, as representing a household or a family. Just as there could not be a shepherd without sheep, or a father without children, so the canons of the Church do not recognise a bishop without a diocese, a community for which he is responsible towards God.

The development of the idea of a bishop without a community has been very recent. In the Russian Orthodox Church it was only introduced in 1708 AD. In the Church of Antioch only as late as 1900 AD. While in the Coptic Orthodox Church the idea of a Bishop without a diocese, a community of the faithful in some particular place, is unknown before 1962 AD. Before this very recent date there was no Tradition at all of a person being consecrated as a Bishop without a community of the faithful to shepherd as the exclusive spiritual authority. The intent of this article is not to criticise the fruitful ministries of the many General Bishops which have now been consecrated, but it is reasonable to state what is a fact. Until 1962 AD the Coptic Orthodox Church did not consider that it was possible for a bishop to be consecrated without a diocese, a community of people, young and old, male and female, clergy and laity, gathered in a particular place. Many of the General Bishops of the present time do not have the authority to ordain their own clergy, as all other bishops do, but they have received a proper consecration as a Bishop. This has resulted in a large proportion of the Holy Synod being dependent on the Patriarch for their ministry, rather than having their own spiritual authority as a result of their episcopal consecration. This has resulted in a situation with much confusion. The Tradition of our Coptic Orthodox Church only knows Bishops with local authority as shepherds of their own flocks. It does not recognise any other type of Bishop.

There are a variety of types of General Bishops. But each of these different situations does not require the provision of a General Bishop, rather the Tradition of our Coptic Orthodox Church already provides the appropriate ministry over 2,000 years of practice. There are General Bishops who essentially have a Diocesan responsibility. Their time is occupied with local congregations where they provide an episcopal oversight in place of the Pope himself. The Tradition of the Coptic

Orthodox Church would describe these bishops as simply being Diocesan Bishops. They have the care of particular congregations in a particular area of the world. These congregations are composed of young and old, male and female, clergy and laity, and so are exactly what would be considered in the history of the Church as a diocese. The Tradition of the Church would reasonably conclude that such bishops should not be General Bishops at all, not least because this is a modern invention, but should be Diocesan Bishops. Indeed the history and experience of the Church requires that where there are settled communities of Orthodox Christians there should be a Diocesan Bishop living there among them, gathering them together in Christ, who has complete pastoral authority and care for them.

But there are also General Bishops who have a responsibility for certain ministries. Once again it must be insisted that no criticism of the service of any General Bishop is intended, on the contrary they deserve great praise. But the Tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church does not recognise a Bishop who does not have a Diocese, and a particular ministry cannot be used as a substitute for a community of faithful people of all ages and circumstances, which is what a Diocese really is. In the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church there have been many very important figures who have held very great ministries in the service of the Church but they have not been Bishops. The ministries of the Church have always been held by Deacons and Priests. St Athanasius, St Cyril, St Dioscorus and St Timothy were all Deacons in the service of their Patriarchs. And this is indeed what a Deacon is, since the word means nothing more than servant. This does not diminish the importance of these ministries. It would be possible, for instance, to imagine a Professor of Theology, a Deacon, being responsible for the day to day management of theological education. This is how these ministries have always been organised. When they become the sole responsibility of a General Bishop then he is not properly acting as a Bishop, since such service is part of the Diaconate. But such centralised responsibilities under the Pope also diminish the proper responsibility of each Bishop in his Diocese. The life and welfare of each faithful Christian in a diocese is ultimately the responsibility of the Bishop of that Diocese, and cannot be delegated to another Bishop, even one acting under the authority of the Pope.

Finally, there are also those General Bishops who act as assistants to another Bishop, either because of his infirmity, or the magnitude of his responsibilities. Our Coptic Orthodox Tradition has no experience of there being two bishops in one Diocese, just as the canons also forbid a bishop being responsible for two Dioceses. Each community has only one father, and only one shepherd. If the responsibilities in one place have become too great, due to the growth in the numbers of Christians, then the response has always been to divide the Diocese into two, and elect a new bishop, with his own Diocese, so that each community receives the necessary pastoral care. Our Tradition and history has not shown us that a second bishop should be consecrated with care of the same Diocese. Where will the General Bishop be Bishop of? It is necessary for a Bishop to have responsibility for a particular community of the faithful. He cannot be responsible for the Diocese where he is assisting, because it already has a shepherd and spiritual father, and if he is named for some other place then that is where he should be acting as a Bishop.

Of course the Church has always had to support infirm bishops, and has provided some assistance to those Bishops with the greatest responsibilities. But in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and other Orthodox Churches, this has been through the rank of the khor-episcopi, and never through General Bishops. The khor-episcopi is a responsibility given to some senior priests where

there is need. Therefore we can read of men who were priest AND khor-episcopi. This role allowed the senior priest to act on behalf of the Diocesan Bishop when required and under the authority of the Bishop. He could, for instance, ordain the minor ranks of the Diaconate. He would also help the bishop in the pastoral care of the congregations in the Diocese. As a priest there were limits to what he could do, and everything was always to be under the direct control of his bishop. He was not a bishop, because he received a blessing from his Diocesan Bishop, and not a consecration from three Diocesan Bishops. But this role developed to help bishops in just the sort of circumstances that a General Bishop is now being used. But the khorepiscopi is part of the Coptic Orthodox Tradition and does not introduce two bishops into the same Diocese.

Nor is it necessary that a General Bishop be responsible for any centralised ministries. There is of course a great benefit in the Bishops of various Dioceses, especially those in the same part of the world such as North America, or Australasia, working together to provide for certain pastoral needs. But just as the organisation of these ministries in each Diocese should be undertaken by Deacons rather than Bishops, so the organisation of these ministries in co-operation should also be the work of those Deacons set apart for this service by their own Diocesan Bishops. The Holy Synod would be expected to organise Synodal Committees, as it has done in many cases, but these would provide an episcopal oversight of the work of those Deacons whose ministry it was, rather than taking day to day control. Each Diocesan bishop must always have the ultimate responsibility of pastoral care in his Diocese, but Bishops express their ministry of unity through the Synod, and therefore it is natural and according to our Tradition that Diocesan ministries are brought under some Synodal oversight, without losing the distinction between Bishops and Deacons.

In regard to the current Papal Election, there will be those who ask if General Bishops should be eligible to stand as candidates. It must be said that General Bishops receive the same consecration as Diocesan Bishops, and our Orthodox Tradition knows no distinction. The General Bishop is no less a Bishop than the Diocesan Bishop, except for the fact that he has not been properly united with a particular community. This produces an anomaly. It is to be hoped that under the new Pope the issue of General Bishops will be considered, and a return will be made to the Tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, providing only Diocesan Bishop where there are congregations, Deacons where there are ministries, and khorepiscopus where there is a need for a bishop to have additional support. But in the present election it must be also noted that some of the General Bishops have certainly exercised a Diocesan ministry, while others have not been engaged in such localised pastoral work. It does not seem easy to say whether all or some of the General Bishops are actually Diocesan Bishops. They have certainly received the same consecration, but have not been able to exercise the same authority.

Perhaps it is possible to say that in the present circumstances, while a Diocesan Bishop is clearly excluded by the canons, as our bishops in North America, and the people of the Diocese of Alexandria have noted, it might be said that the position of General Bishop remains anomalous, it remains ambiguous, and therefore it is not clear at all whether on this occasion they should also be excluded. It would be best if they were, to save confusion and argument. What does seem clear is that as soon as possible it is proper and according to our Coptic Orthodox Tradition that the rank of General Bishop be allowed to become extinct so that there is no controversy in the future, and each Bishop is equally and properly the shepherd and spiritual father of his own flock, gathered together in congregations in a particular place.