

April 10, 2009

An open letter to Orthodox Christians throughout North America

Last month, our Antiochian Metropolitan PHILIP embraced what he is framing as an attempt by the Holy Synod of Antioch **to effectively negate self-rule and deliver into Metropolitan PHILIP's hands dictatorial powers with respect to the Archdiocese.** This decision, taken by the Holy Synod **without the presence of a quorum of bishops in violation of its own Bylaws and without appropriate scrutiny or detailed discussion, violates our legally adopted Constitution and governing civil laws.** Further, this decision purports to strip our enthroned Diocesan Bishops of their proper authority and force them to become mere instrumentalities of the Metropolitan's will. The Holy Canons of our Church permit bishops to divest another bishop of his authority *only with the consent of such bishop or for cause*—for instance, if a bishop falls prey to the soul-wolf of addictions or immoral behavior, teaches heresy, or otherwise acts contrary to the Holy Canons. Our Metropolitan tells us and our clergy in a soothing voice that things will run no differently—that the Local Synod will still make decisions—but he conveniently omits the fact that the decisions will all be his, because, according to this decision, “no bishop shall do anything contrary to the will of the Metropolitan.” **In complete disregard for the Holy Canons and the original vision of the Holy Synod and the General Assembly of this Archdiocese, the Metropolitan's announcement attempts to emasculate our Diocesan Bishops and transform them into an impotent Puppet Synod—making “self-rule” a sham and a laughing stock throughout other jurisdictions in North America.**

Compare our Metropolitan's embrace of this recent decision to his strong protest in 2005 regarding some amendments offered by the Holy Synod to the Archdiocesan Constitution (taken from a letter drafted by the *now-silent* Legal Department of our Archdiocese under Metropolitan PHILIP's own letterhead):

“The proposed October 15, 2004 constitution violates the spirit and letter of the **irrevocable Synodal self-rule resolution** of October 9, 2003, which was itself immediately effective. Moreover **it is not appropriate** for any person to attempt to rewrite the Constitution of this self-ruling Archdiocese and **to attempt to negate self-rule and give less authority to the Archdiocese than it had prior to the Synodal Resolution of October 9, 2003.**”

“The proposed October 15, 2004 constitution did **not receive enough scrutiny by the Holy Synod, nor was it discussed in detail in the Holy Synod meeting.**”

“We will, at all times in this Archdiocese, be bound by our legally adopted constitution and the civil laws of this land in which we reside.”

Somehow, our Metropolitan expects us to believe that effective negation of self-rule and enslavement of our Diocesan Bishops to his personal will is only a “narrow administrative decision,” while the Synod's minor revisions to our Constitution in 2004 were worthy of the hearty protest noted above. **Where is the irrevocability in which our Metropolitan and Archdiocesan Legal Department once were such adamant believers?**

Unfortunately, **many of our clergy are hamstrung by fear.** The reprisals launched against those few who stood against the Metropolitan in the case of Joseph Allen (a priest who remarried a parishioner whom he counseled through a divorce from another parishioner and who the Metropolitan scandalously and uncanonically permitted to retain his priesthood and continue serving the Holy Table) lead our clergy—with good reason—to believe that they will be subject to retaliation if they speak out against this giant step backward from what so many have labored so long to build.

Some of the more courageous faithful throughout our Archdiocese have already begun to express their deep concerns directly to Metropolitan PHILIP, and you may view some of their correspondence by linking to www.ocanews.org and to the less informative Archdiocesan web page www.antiochian.org. (The Timeline that was recently posted under the Resources tab at www.orthodoxattorneys.org also provides a very clear and well-documented walk-through of how the Archdiocese got into this mess.)

Our diocesan bishops were consecrated and enthroned by – and with the approval of – both our Metropolitan and our Patriarch. **As an Orthodox Christian, you are obliged to be concerned** about this noncanonical attempt of our Holy Synod and Metropolitan to functionally dismiss our Diocesan Bishops in complete disregard of both the Holy Canons and the Archdiocesan Constitution so fiercely championed just years ago by our Metropolitan and our Archdiocesan Legal Department.

As Orthodox, we naturally expect that our Church *not* be a democracy, but we likewise insist that it not be a Papal tyranny. Thus, although our Church has a history rich in hierarchs overstepping their boundaries, making ill-advised decisions, or acting as tyrants, the theology of our Church is just as rich in advising us that **the Orthodox faithful – including priests, monastics and especially the laity – have a sacred obligation to set such hierarchs straight. IT IS TIME FOR THE FAITHFUL TO ACT.**

Please consider prayerfully what action you, as a member of the faithful, will take in carrying out your sacred obligation. If you are laity, your options are endless and could include (a) writing simple protests to Metropolitan PHILIP and the Holy Synod, (b) calling the Archdiocese office, (c) encouraging your priests and bishops in this time of chaos, (d) expressing your concern to the editor of *The Word* magazine (or even to the popular press), or (e) withholding contributions to Antiochian projects or concerns until canonical order is restored in North America. If you are clergy, please consider the potential impact of your actions on your families and parishes before doing anything. Obviously, any action you take in large groups, as brother priests and bishops, will be much harder for the Metropolitan to attack than isolated action by a single clergyman. Finally, **compliance lends credence and a veneer of respectability to these patently inappropriate acts.** We urge you all to give careful consideration to simply ignoring the Holy Synod's purported decision and the Metropolitan's Archpastoral Directive, given their clear incompatibility with Holy Tradition, the Holy Canons, and the rules by which these authorities have bound themselves.

For those few non-Antiochians on this distribution, these recent actions should concern you deeply, too. If +PHILIP's directive is permitted to stand, what prevents the Moscow Patriarchate from simply deciding that it has had enough of the OCA and is taking back its grant of autocephaly? Of even greater concern are the implications such a perspective holds for Orthodox unity in North America. What would prevent the proper authorities from concluding an agreement implementing unity and then, one of those authorities, for one disgruntled reason or another, deciding to revoke its share of the agreement. **Metropolitan PHILIP's directive, rather than furthering the cause for unity, is sowing the seeds of distrust and discord.**

Although we disagree with these recent actions, we nonetheless (or perhaps moreso, as a result) implore God to pour out His blessings upon our Patriarch, Metropolitan, Bishops, Priests and our entire Archdiocese during this difficult time. As we struggle to complete the Great Fast, may we all pray, in the words of St. Ephraim, that God will not grant us a spirit of "lust for power," but, rather, a spirit "of meekness, of patience and of love."

Signed,
Concerned Laypeople of the Antiochian Archdiocese