

## Fr. Nikolas Palassis: “Canonical Churches”: What Does It Mean?



*St. Photios the Great of Constantinople* (AD 820 - 891), a great defender of the Orthodox Faith, who called the very important First-Second Council in 879.

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## **CANONICAL CHURCHES: What Does It Mean ?**

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A new definition has crept into World Orthodoxy in recent years. World Orthodoxy has begun to recognize Orthodox Churches on the basis of their being 'canonical'. By this newly accepted definition, to be 'canonical' a church must be in full communion with Constantinople. Constantinople has become World Orthodoxy's touchstone. In fact, occasionally there are press releases that describe the Patriarchate of Constantinople as an Eastern Papacy or "the leader of World Orthodoxy." The late Patriarch [1972-1991] Demetrius [of Constantinople] described the Ecumenical Patriarch as the foremost bishop of Orthodoxy. If a church falls away from communion with him, it is no longer 'canonical'.

Let's ask a simple question: How did the understanding of the term 'canonical' change?

According to the Holy Fathers, the venerable term, 'Canonical' always referred to the pious observance of the Holy Canons of the Church, and, most certainly, to those Canons relating to the beliefs and pious practices of the holy Orthodox Church.

However, because of wars and political turmoil in the 20th century, the administrative structure of the Church became disorganized, most especially in the Diaspora. 'Mother,' in other words, ethnic, Churches sought to preserve Orthodoxy by preserving its canonical organization, i.e., the organization described by the holy canons for dioceses and synods. Sadly, in the course of this organizational struggle for external order, any canons relating to the Apostolic Faith and the doctrines of the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils, that is, to her inner, mystical life, were deliberately overlooked by the hierarchs who considered themselves to be the architects of this quest for order. These men were prompted by the syncretistic and anti-dogmatic spirit then prevalent, a spirit which continues today, a spirit which controls all current thought and practice in World Orthodoxy.

Satisfied that they had jettisoned the mystical life of the Church of Christ, these revisionist hierarchs in the Diaspora, and elsewhere, hastily sacrificed the Church's unity in Apostolic truth for the modern idea, foreign

to guidance of the Holy Fathers, of the unity of mankind. This modernizing group imposed an external administrative union in order to preserve the unity of an outward ecclesiastical apparatus, now stripped of the inner life of the "faith once for all delivered to the Saints" (Jude 3) with all parishes welded together under one headquarters.

As an example of how this new restructuring of Orthodoxy in the Diaspora functioned, Parish Council members taking their pledge in Greek Archdiocese of America churches were asked to promise to be obedient to the canons and traditions of the Orthodox Church. Generally, these canons and traditions are viewed as abstract principles, which were not defined or clarified by the priest administering the pledge. This pledge is usually interpreted as complete obedience to the ruling hierarch.

The renovating hierarchy, as the chief plank in its modernizing platform advanced the novel theory, unknown to the Holy Fathers, that the canons are Laws which are to be interpreted by the ruling hierarch who decides what is and what is not 'canonical' in this new way of thinking. This is the way that the Patristic, truly Orthodox, understanding of the canons was set aside.

A former bishop of the Greek Archdiocese who taught at Holy Cross in Boston shared his thoughts with his students about the Holy Canons. He remarked that over the years he had carefully studied the canons and had come to one conclusion: there was only one canon which needed to be obeyed in the church. He cynically declared that only those canons which spoke of hierarchal authority and obedience to the bishop needed to be obeyed. All other canons could be ignored.

Such a militaristic or, better, papal interpretation of the canons allowed individual patriarchs, metropolitans, archbishops and bishops the freedom to act entirely apart from the wisdom and guidance of Holy Tradition. Such renovationism, so they thought, gave them unrestricted license to ignore any and all of the Holy Canons. They thus played the role of the sole authentic interpreters of the canons. This attitude reduces all the canons to one straightforward operating principle: "Obey your Bishop." With this axe in hand, the modernizing hierarchy quickly proceeded to align the Church

with the spirit of the age and not with the Spirit of Christ.

Such a procedure may well bring to mind the current method by which decisions are made in the Supreme Court of the United States of America. The Supreme Court now feels free to change prior decisions of the Court as well as laws passed by legislative bodies on the basis of the contemporary understanding and interpretation of moral values. For example, abortion may have been wrong at one time and condemned by the Supreme Court, but the Roe vs. Wade decision defined that there were other value systems which needed to be acknowledged. For the modern way of thinking, morality becomes a relative value and is never absolute. The modern mind desires to live in a world where there are no absolutes (aside for its demand that there are no absolutes), aside from its nihilism. Further, there is no Divine Authority on which to base any decisions. God has been dethroned and in His place stands the Supreme Court.

The interpretation of the Holy Canons has thus become a selective response controlled by the contemporary moral and irreligious scene. Ecumenism, a form of relativism, is in. The many canons forbidding joint prayer with non-Orthodox are out. These canons, so the story goes, are "old fashioned." There is no hesitation in having non-Orthodox Christian persons participate alongside the clergy of World Orthodoxy at funerals, in wedding services, vesper services, Theophany services, and even in Divine Liturgies. And this has happened often enough over the past 40 years that it has become a standard practice. Many, but not all, Orthodox Christians are not surprised or disturbed when such concelebrations take place. Very many Orthodox Christians in the so-called "Canonical" Churches are confident that the union of the churches has already occurred. The rites of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches are now acknowledged as "grace filled" by all the so-called "Canonical" jurisdictions, while the Mysteries of the traditional Orthodox Christians are deemed as invalid. What is ignored is that the Church has steadfastly taught that outside the Church there is no salvation; no mysteries (St. Cyprian of Carthage? 268).

Indeed, some clergy of the Greek Archdiocese are known to have declared that the union of the churches has already occurred. The Antiochian

jurisdiction's blasé attitude has allowed Moslems to be godparents, and priests to concelebrate in religious processions with Roman Catholic clergy. The O.C.A. has allowed a monastery that openly recognizes Roman Catholic saints as Orthodox Saints, and whose abbot has said that there is no theological difference between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, to remain uncorrected by the O.C.A. hierarchy. Greek Archdiocese clergy have been scandalized by the fact that the monastery does not keep the fast of Great Lent, and allows the eating of meat during Great Lent. The hierarchs of SCOBA (Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America) have forbidden their clergy to baptize Roman Catholics and Protestants because, according to these hierarchs, those in heresy have baptismal grace!

The canons are clear in that heretical baptism is not a baptism, but is a curse and defilement. The Holy Fathers teach with one voice that the "One baptism" referred to in the Nicene Creed is the mystery performed under the guidance of a right-teaching, right-believing, Orthodox bishop. If one recognizes the non-Orthodox baptisms then why shouldn't one recognize the other non-Orthodox rites: chrismation, Holy Communion, etc? Actually, many of the clergy of the "canonical" jurisdictions have already done so.

**What makes a church truly canonical? Is it not the adherence to what has been taught everywhere, at all times, and by all the Orthodox Fathers of the Church (St. Vincent of Lerins 445)?** If we cannot confess our faith and identify it with the faith of the Church's confessors and saints, then indeed we are not confessing the Orthodox Christian faith, but we are in reality mocking our ancient Orthodox Faith. But first of all, pray that we may not be lead astray by the "sirens of ecumenism." We need to be bonded to the spiritual ark of the church and not give in to the compromised faith of those who have rejected the Orthodox Faith and accepted a new adulterated faith, which no longer represents the faith confessed by the Holy Fathers, that is, **"the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).**

And one final point: **Not one canon of the Orthodox Church teaches that one has to be in communion with Constantinople (or any other "ancient see") in order to be canonical or Orthodox!**



***"And I tell you, ...on this rock [faith] I will build My Church."***  
(St. Matthew 16:18)

***"He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son."*** (2 St. John 9)

When the Great Mother Church of Jerusalem, still governed by the Holy Apostles, heard that unknown "men from Cyprus and Cye'ne, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus ... and a great number that believed turned to the Lord," the Apostles sent Barnabas (Acts 11:20-24). "When he (Barnabas) **came and saw the grace of God**, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." Did the Holy Apostles "bestow" the Church of

Jerusalem's "recognition" to Antioch? Absolutely NOT! Once Antioch's **faith** was verified, any so-called "recognition" was automatic based on the Faith.

The Holy Tradition of the Church from Apostolic Act and times was to verify, and therefore accept one as Orthodox and valid based on **one's faith** – nothing more! "Being in Communion" and all the organizational, structural, administrative stuff, etc., were NOT determining factors, but came afterward as result of determining the one, SINGLE determining factor – possession of and adherence to the Orthodox **Faith** or not, nothing more, nothing less.

“...those churches, who, although they derive not their founder from apostles or apostolic men (as being of much later date, for they are in fact being founded daily), yet, **since they agree in the same faith, they are accounted as not less apostolic because they are akin in doctrine.**” [Saint Irenaeus (130-202 AD.), Prescription Against Heretics, Vol. III, p.258, Chapter 32]

**“We believe to be members of the Catholic [Orthodox] Church all the Faithful, and only the Faithful; who, forsooth, having received the blameless Faith of the Savior Christ, from Christ Himself, and the Apostles, and the Holy Ecumenical Synods, adhere to the same without wavering; although some of them may be guilty of all manner of sins.”** [Decree 11 of the Synod of Jerusalem: 1672, The Acts and Decrees of The Synod of Jerusalem, 1899, J.N.W.B. Robertson, Thomas Baker Publisher, London.]

“...**The Spirit of God blows where it will**, and, as Irenaeus said, ‘where the Spirit is, there is the Church.’ We know where the Church is *but* we cannot be sure where it is not; and so we must refrain from passing judgment.... In the eloquent words of Khomiakov:

“Inasmuch as the earthly and visible Church is not the fullness and completeness of the whole Church which the Lord has appointed to appear

at the final judgment of all creation, she acts and knows only within her own limits; and ... does not judge the rest of mankind, and **only looks upon those as excluded, that is to say, not belonging to her, who exclude themselves**. The rest of mankind, whether alien from the Church, or united to her by ties which God has not willed to reveal to her, she leaves to the judgment of the great day.'

"...Orthodoxy desires ... reconciliation, not ... absorption.

"There *is* only one Church, but there are many different ways of being related to this one Church, and many different ways of being separated from it.

"...for there is room in Orthodoxy for many different cultural patterns, for many different ways of worship, and even for many different systems of outward organization. Yet there is one field in which diversity cannot be permitted. Orthodoxy insists upon unity in matters of the faith. ...for **Orthodoxy looks on the faith as a united and organic whole.**" [*The Orthodox Church*, 1963/67, Timothy Ware (Greek Bishop Kallistos), Penguin Books, Baltimore, MD.]

"...a catholic and general axiom that all who have been ordained **contrary to the Canons and unworthily, are nevertheless true priests until they are deposed by a council or synod**. Because, as divine Chrysostom says, 'God does not ordain all men, but **He does act through all men, even** though they themselves are unworthy, in order that the people may be saved' (Homily 2 on II Tim., p. 337 of Vol. IV). And again: 'Because grace operates through the unworthy not on their account, but for the sake of those who are destined to be benefited' (Discourse 11 on 1 Thess., p. 216 of Vol. IV). And again: 'But now, it must be said, God is wont to operate also through unworthy persons, and the grace of baptism is in no respect injuriously affected by the life of the priest' (Discourse 8 on 1 Cor., p. 200 of vol. iii). Moreover, in Discourse 3 on the Ep. To the Col., p. 107 of vol. iii, he proves this by means of numerous arguments, among which he says these things too: 'God's grace is also operative in an unworthy person, not for our sake, but for your sake.'" [Interpretation, Canon 9 of the First Ecumenical Council, *The Rudder*, 1793, by Ss. Nicodemus and Agapius]



Even with regard to Canon 34 of the 85 Canons of the Holy Apostles, **“The notion that the interruption of jurisdictional dependence of a local church from a patriarchate cuts this church off from the Orthodox Church is not Orthodox but Papal.** ...the existence of jurisdictional dependence of churches upon one patriarch is of Papal inspiration. An Orthodox patriarch is a president, a coordinator of efforts, an adviser of great importance, but he is not a despot, not a sovereign.” [Dr. Alexander Kalomiros, *Against False Union*, chapters 28-30: *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, 1963, English edition]

**Regarding “Valid Apostolic Succession,” according to *The Complete Book of Orthodoxy* (2001, by George W. Grube, MA, ThM): “Apostolic Succession – the line of order and faith from the original Apostles to the present-day hierarchy of the Church. The ministry of the Church is maintained because of this link with the teaching and discipline of the earliest believers. Orthodox theology differs from Roman Catholic and Anglican belief, i.e. Orthodox teaching states that valid succession is not imparted through the simple [but necessary] ‘laying-on-of-hands.’ This ‘laying-on-of-hands’ *must* be accompanied by the maintenance of the faith. In other words, succession is valid only when at least two authentic bishops impart the consecration [‘laying-on-of-hands], and the candidate promises to believe and teach what the Church believes. Bishops, as successors to the Apostles, have a duty to protect and transmit the faith in all its integrity and import.”**

“...the presbyters who are in the church – **those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles. For they are those who, together with the bishops, have received the certain gift of truth** [the Orthodox Faith], according to the good pleasure of the Father.” [Saint Irenaeus (c.180 AD)]

**“There is no such thing, of course, as ‘canonical’ Orthodox jurisdiction,** despite the fact that this kind of terminology has crept into our

ecclesiastical vocabulary from the West. Nor are there 'official' Orthodox Churches, a category produced by the contemporary ecumenical movement. Were this so ... **we would have to concede that the Cappadocian Fathers, the Studite monks, and the Palestine Hesychasts were in some way 'quasi-canonical' and 'un-official.'**" - (Archbishop Chrysostomos of Enta, Review of *The Price of Prophecy* by Fr. Alexander Webster, *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. 14]

**"If then any come to you, and, as blessed John says [2 John 9-10], brings with him right doctrine, say to him, All hail, and receive such an one as a brother."**

(St. Athanasius [296-373 AD] Second Letter to Monks)



### **Canon XV of the 4th Council of Constantinople (879-880AD)**

"The rules laid down with reference to Presbyters and Bishops and Metropolitans are still more applicable to Patriarchs. So that in case any Presbyter or Bishop or Metropolitan dares to secede or apostatize from the communion of his own

Patriarch, and fails to mention the latter's name in accordance with custom duly fixed and ordained, in the divine Mystagogy, but, before a conciliar verdict has been pronounced and has passed judgment against him, creates a schism, the holy Synod has decreed that this person shall be held an alien to every priestly function if only he be convicted of having committed this transgression of the law. Accordingly, these rules have been sealed and ordained as respecting persons who under the pretext of charges against their own presidents stand aloof, and create a schism, and disrupt the union of the Church. **But as for those persons, on the other hand, who, on account of some heresy condemned by holy Synods, or Fathers, withdrawing themselves from communion with their president, who, that is to say, is preaching the heresy publicly, and teaching it bareheaded in church, such persons not only are not subject to any canonical penalty on account of their having walled themselves off from any and all communion with the one called a Bishop before any conciliar or synodical verdict has been rendered, but, on the contrary, they shall be deemed worthy to enjoy the honor which befits them among Orthodox Christians.** For they have defied, not Bishops, but pseudo-bishops and pseudo-teachers; and they have not sundered the union of the Church with any schism, but, on the contrary, have been sedulous to rescue the Church from schisms and divisions."

Comments on the First-Second Synod found in the Life of St. Photios the Great by the eminent Serbian scholar and Saint, Hieromonk Justin (Popovich) of Chelije (From Saint Photios, On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit, trans. by Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Studion Publishers, 1983): Maintaining his meekness, his love for order, and the canons of the Church, St. Photios called a second Council to convene in the Church of the Holy Apostles in the spring of 879 with the approval of Emperor Michael. This assembly later came to be known as the First-Second Council. Many bishops, including the representatives of Pope Nicholas, were in attendance. All confirmed the determinations of the holy Seventh Ecumenical Council, once more condemning the iconoclast heresy, and accepted Photios as the lawful and canonical patriarch. At this Council, seventeen holy canons were promulgated with the purpose of bringing disobedient monks and bishops into harmony with ecclesiastical order and tradition. The disobedient monks were expressly forbidden to desert their lawful bishop under the excuse of the bishop's supposed sinfulness, for such brings disorder and schism to the Church. The holy Council added that only by a conciliar decision could the clergy reject a bishop whom they thought to be sinful. This rule was adopted in direct response to those unreasonably strict monks who had separated themselves from their new Patriarch and his bishops. The holy

Council, however, did distinguish between unreasonable rebellion and laudable resistance for the defense of the faith, which it encouraged. In regard to this matter it decreed that should a bishop publicly confess some heresy already condemned by the Holy Fathers and previous councils, one who ceases to commemorate such a bishop even before conciliar condemnation not only is not to be censured, but should be praised as condemning a false bishop. In so doing, moreover, he is not dividing the Church, but struggling for the unity of the Faith (Canon Fifteen).

### ***about schisms...***

**"ORTHODOXY.** ...The Eastern focus on "rightness" of belief is characteristic and deeply engrained, somewhat in contradiction to the West's stress on unity and its horror of schism (q.v.). The Orthodox can live more happily with schisms, a virtue somewhat dictated by necessity, so long as the substance of the faith is not seen as compromised. In the West, the reverse has seemed to be in force: Heresy (q.v.) is almost tolerable so long as it does not rend the fabric of visible unity."

-Michael Prokurat, et.al, *Historical Dictionary of the Orthodox Church*, 1996, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Md & London.

"Schismatics were those who were at variance with the catholic Church, not on the subject of dogmas of the Faith, but on account of certain ecclesiastical easily adjustable questions."

-St. Basil the Great, Ss. Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder: The Holy Canons*, 1793, Interpretation of the Canons.

"There is a "distinguish[ment] between 'heresy' – theological departure from the Faith – and 'schism' – an administrative departure. Although heretics are not members of the Church, schismatics retain their membership (Const., Canon 7). Thus, violation of canon law which may, in some instances, lead to schism does not necessarily involve apostasy. To break a canon law may be impious, but in itself it is not heretical."

-Fr. Michael Azkoul, *The Orthodox Word*, May-June 1970, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North and South America.

"Even with regard to Canon 34 of the 85 Canons of the Holy Apostles, "The notion that the interruption of jurisdictional dependence of a local church from a patriarchate cuts this church off from the Orthodox Church is not Orthodox but Papal. ...the existence of jurisdictional dependence of churches upon one patriarch is of Papal inspiration. An Orthodox patriarch is a president, a coordinator of efforts, an adviser of great importance, but he is not a despot, not a sovereign."

-Dr. Alexander Kalomiros, *Against False Union*, chapters 28-30: Orthodox Ecclesiology, 1963, English edition.

"In the early Christian Church, as defined by the Fathers, and later, the offense of " schism " is distinguished from that of " heresy "; it refers not to differences of belief or doctrine."

-Johann Wilhelm Schirmer, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911.

"...canonical disorder does not as such constitute a heresy that deprives all members of the given Church of the grace of God."

-Blessed Hieromonk Seraphim Rose of Platina, 1980, In Defense of Fr. Dimitry Dudko

"Unity is to be understood not in juridical ... terms. Unity is not imposed from above by some hierarch or administrative center endowed with supreme power of jurisdiction"

-Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Greek Orthodox Church-Constantinople, *Communion and Intercommunion*, 1980, Light & Life Publishing, Minneapolis, MN).

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