

THE SEAT OF MOSES

Its Powers and Perils

“What can we do? These are our bishops. We know that they have betrayed Orthodoxy and that they are breaking the Holy Canons that tell us that we must avoid all prayers with the heterodox. We know that they believe in the Anglican Branch Theory and practice ‘eucharistic hospitality,’ and that they preach ‘Marxist Christianity,’ and that their joys and sorrows are one with their theistic overlords. We know that they are wolves in sheep’s clothing, that they are traitors to Orthodoxy, and disdainers of the writings of the holy Apostles and the holy fathers of the Church. But what can we do? Willingly or unwillingly one is forced to remain with the hierarchy that has been given us, for without a bishop there is no Church. We have to obey our bishops, don’t we?”

Orthodox Christians are duty bound to have *Orthodox* bishops. They are obliged to obey their bishops only if their bishops obey Holy Tradition, as it is embodied in the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Canons and the teachings of the Church Fathers. If the bishops are not obedient to the Church, we are not obliged to be obedient to them. Indeed, how can one demand obedience to disobedience? Why should one show reverence to irreverence?

The Orthodox Church has criteria by which the Orthodoxy of all—bishops, clergy and lay people alike is evaluated. These criteria are the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition, as it is expressed in the Holy Canons and writings of the Saints of God and Church Fathers. As a result, there is no room here either for anarchy, or for despotism. There is no danger of slipping into dictatorial papism or into free-for-all protestantism. On many occasions, when discussing such matters with Roman Catholic priests or monks, we have made it abundantly clear to them that, “*All Orthodox bishops are infallible—until they make a mistake.*” Our Orthodox bishops know exactly where they stand and they know they must stand there correctly or they will have to answer to God and to the people of God. At their ordination to the episcopacy, they make three solemn declarations and vows before God and the Orthodox faithful. In the first declaration, the candidate recites the Creed wherein, among other things, he declares his belief not in the Anglican Branch Theory, but in the Undivided Church which is “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.” He professes that the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father”—not “from the Father and the Son” as the heretical denominations aver. In the second declaration he pronounces the Orthodox Catholic faith regarding the Person of the Son of God, and here he denounces the doctrines of Sables, Arius, Nestorius, Eutyches, Dioscurus and all the other Monophysites and Monothelites. In the third declaration, the candidate professes the Orthodox Faith concerning the Holy Trinity, adding also the words, “I believe also in the One, Catholic and Apostolic Church’s traditions and interpretations concerning God and things divine.” Furthermore, he denounces those who do not accept the holy icons as the Church has accepted them. And at the end of the declaration, he states, “I anathematize and openly proclaim with a great voice: To every heretic anathema. To all heretics, anathema” (*Great Euchologion* [Venice, 1862], pp. 166-76).

These are indeed very strong and frightful words. The candidate for the episcopacy is here proclaiming before God and the people of God that he will uphold and defend every aspect of the Orthodox Faith, and he calls the Church’s anathema and excommunication upon those who refuse to obey the voice of Christ Who has spoken in His holy Church (“Whatsoever ye bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven”).

Of course, like every other mortal, bishops too have failings—“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But, like all other mortals, they too struggle with their weaknesses and try as best as they can to overcome them. Like everyone else, they are not always successful. Nevertheless, despite the fact that they too have human flaws, as long as they uphold and defend and teach the Orthodox Faith, they are being faithful to the confession of faith and the vows that they made at their ordination. We do not revere our bishops because they too are mortal, and therefore have failings like the rest of us. We revere and love them

because, though mortals and, therefore, possessing human failings, they have taken upon themselves the heavy task of: (1) defending and propagating the Holy Orthodox and Catholic Faith. (2) striving to cultivate an increase the piety and fervor for God of the flock with which they have been entrusted. and (3) seeking by all means to increase that flock.

They are the living icons of Christ our Savior. It is by their authority that all the Holy Mysteries are performed in the Church. Furthermore, since they are the true icons of Christ our Lord and Teacher, it is their duty to rightly divide the word of truth and to observe and uphold the Holy Canons, to maintain and extend that Truth of which they are icons, and to see to it that their flock does the same. The English word “bishop” comes from the Greek word *episcopos*, which means “overseer,” and this term describes their duties and obligations well; if they fulfill these obligations, we revere and honor them as our fathers and tutors in Christ. Such holy bishops came together in the Ecumenical and Local Councils in defense of the Orthodox Catholic Faith. As Chrysostom Stratman expressed it:

These authentic shepherds of the Lord’s flock had but one concern the welfare and safety of those entrusted to them. Guiding, nourishing, and protecting their sheep was their one earthly occupation and preoccupation. They lived for Christ’s flock and many died for it, as did the great and holy St. John Chrysostomos...[*The Ecumenists* (Oak Park, III.), p.7]

Granted that not all bishops are saints, and perhaps a few are totally unworthy of their calling, what does Our Saviour teach us in regard to this point? Our Lord and God taught us that those religious leaders who do not observe the laws of God stand convicted of hypocrisy, like the scribes and pharisees of old. Nevertheless, as long as they continue to teach us the law of God—even though they themselves do not observe it—we are to obey them. Our Saviour said:

The scribes and pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye according to their works: for they say, and do not. [Matthew 23:2]

Here too, in our Saviour’s words, we find the key to understanding the difference between human sin and blasphemous heresy: Sin is a transgression of the Gospel’s precepts. Heresy, on the other hand, is an *alteration* of those precepts.

So, as long as our hierarchs sit in the seat of Moses, the Prophets, the Apostles, the Church Fathers, and Saints—that is to say, as long as they continue to teach the Orthodox faith correctly and without alteration—we are to obey them, even though they themselves, perhaps, are not in order personally.

On the other hand, if they openly and without shame teach heresy—that is change the teachings that have been delivered unto us by the Saints of God—then we are not under any obligation whatsoever to listen to them or to obey them. They no longer sit in the seat of Moses.

What, then, should one do if one is faced with the possibility that one’s bishop has gone astray in matters of the faith? “We are just simply, Orthodox Christians. What do we know about theological matters anyway?” This is a typical statement, heard too often. The answer, of course, is that we are the *rational* flock of Christ. As conscientious Orthodox Christians, we are expected to know our Orthodox Faith well and to live it. This means that we have been attending and listening carefully to the divine services. We have been reading the Holy Scriptures together with the commentaries of the Holy Fathers. We have been studying the Lives of the Saints, the Holy canons and Church History. We have been keeping the holy fasts and cultivating the life of prayer. We have been trying to keep the commandments, struggling with our passions, and striving to grow in true love for God and man. If we have not been doing these things, we are not conscientious, practicing Orthodox Christians. We are not a rational flock.

This is what the *Apostolic Constitutions* say about what kind of flock we are supposed to be:

The sheep and rams are rational, and not irrational, so that no layman may ever say that. “I am a sheep, and not a shepherd, and I give no account of myself, but the shepherd shall see to it, and he alone shall pay the penalty for me.” For even as the sheep which follows not the good shepherd shall fall to the wolves unto its own destruction, so too it is evident that that which follows the evil shepherd shall acquire death, for he shall utterly devour it. [*Apostolic Constitutions*, 2:19 (PG 1.633)]

Nor should we forget what the Orthodox Patriarchs of the East wrote in their *Answer to Pope Pius the IX* in 1848, “...the guardians and defenders of the faith is, the very body of the Church, that is, the people” (J.Karmiris, ed., *Ta Dogmatica kai Symbolica Mnemeia* [Athens, 1953], vol.2, p. 920).

Let us return now to the question we mentioned above. What does an Orthodox Christian do when he ascertains beyond a shadow of a doubt that his bishop is openly and stubbornly preaching heresy? Fortunately, we have an abundance of examples that tell exactly how we must proceed should such a dire and grievous situation ever arise. Church History, the Lives of the Saints, the writings of the Church Fathers and the Holy canons all provide guideline for us.

To begin with, the first thing an Orthodox Christian must do—once he is sure his bishop no longer preaches Orthodoxy—is to find the nearest bishop who does preach Orthodoxy.

Although this is the first, and easiest, solution to the problem, things do not always work out so simply. There have been occasions when the entire hierarchy of an area fell into heresy, as occurred in all North Africa during the Arian controversy in the fourth century, and in the Polish occupied territories with the so-called Union of Brest during the seventeenth century. There have been other occasions in the Church’s history when the Orthodox Christians did not know who the nearest Orthodox bishop was. Such was the plight of the Orthodox Christians during the iconoclast period. What did they do when all the bishops known to them were iconoclast? There simply were no Orthodox bishops at the head of the dioceses in the Byzantine Empire at that time. The Orthodox bishops who had not died at the hands of their tormentors were languishing in prisons and exile, and the Orthodox Christians hardly knew where they were or if they were alive or dead. What did the Christians do then? They simply commemorated “our Archbishop” or “Metropolitan” or “Bishop” without mentioning any name, and by this they meant the nearest Orthodox bishop whose name, at the moment, was unknown to them. This practice is used to this day by the zealot fathers of the Holy Mountain who refuse to commemorate the apostate Patriarch Demetrius of Constantinople, and who instead use the formula “for every episcopate of the Orthodox which rightly divideth the word of truth.”

The life of Saint Maximus is also instructive for us. Saint Maximus, though only a simple monk, resisted and cut off communion with every patriarch, metropolitan, archbishop and bishop in the East because of their having been infected with the heresy of Monothelism. During the first imprisonment of the Saint, the messengers from the Ecumenical Patriarch asked him:

“To which church do you belong? To that of Byzantium, of Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, or Jerusalem? For all these churches, together with the provinces in subjection to them, are in unity. Therefore, if you also belong to the Catholic Church, enter into communion with us at once, lest fashioning for yourself some new and strange pathway, you fall into that which you do not even expect!”

To this the righteous man wisely replied, “Christ the Lord called that Church the Catholic Church which maintains the true and saving confession of the Faith. It was for this confession that He called Peter blessed, and He declared that He would found His Church upon this confession. However, I wish to know the contents of your confession, on the basis of which all churches, as you say, have entered into communion. If it is not opposed to the truth, then neither will I be separated from it.”

The confession which they were proposing to the Saint was not Orthodox, of course, and so he

refused to comply with their coercions. Furthermore, they were lying about the See of Rome which, in fact, had remained Orthodox. Some time later, at his last interrogation by the Byzantine authorities, the following dialogue took place:

The Saint said, “They [the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Alexandria and all the other heretical bishops of the East] have been deposed and deprived of the priesthood at the local council which took place recently in Rome. What Mysteries, then, can they perform? Or what spirit will descend upon those who are ordained by them?”

“Then you alone will be saved, and all others will perish?” they objected.

To this the Saint replied, “When all the people in Babylon were worshipping the golden idol, the Three Holy Children did not condemn anyone to perdition. They did not concern themselves with the doings of others, but took care only for themselves, lest they should fall away from true piety. In precisely the same way, when Daniel was cast into the lion’s den, he did not condemn any of those who, fulfilling the law of Darius, did not wish to pray to God, but he kept in mind his own duty, and desired rather to die than to sin against his conscience by transgressing the Law of God. God forbid that I should condemn anyone or say that I alone am being saved! However, I shall sooner agree to die than to apostatize in any way from the true faith and thereby suffer torments of conscience.”

“But what will you do,” inquired the envoys, “when the Romans are united to the Byzantines? Yesterday, indeed, two delegates arrived from Rome and tomorrow, the Lord’s day, they will communicate the Holy Mysteries with the Patriarch.”

The Saint replied, “Even if the whole universe holds communion with the Patriarch, I will not communicate with him. For I know from the writings of the holy Apostle Paul: the Holy Spirit declares that even the angels would be anathema if they should begin to preach another Gospel, introducing some new teaching.”

As history had demonstrated, Saint Maximus—who was only a simple monk and not even ordained—and his two disciples were the ones who were Orthodox, and all those illustrious, famous and influential Patriarchs and Metropolitans whom the Saint had written against were the ones who were in heresy. When the Sixth Ecumenical Council was finally convened, among those condemned for heresy were four patriarchs of Constantinople, one Pope of Rome, one Patriarch of Alexandria, two Patriarchs of Antioch and a multitude of other Metropolitans, Archbishops and Bishops. During *all* those years, that one simple monk was right, and all those notable bishops were wrong.

In the Life of Saint Hypatius of Rufinianus (commemorated on June 17), we find the following account:

When Nestorius came from Antioch in order to become Patriarch of the illustrious Imperial City of Constantinople (he was brought there by Dionysius, who had become *magister militum per orientem*), Saint Hypatius saw in a vision, at the moment the holy Church of the Capital some laymen installed him (Nestorius) upon the throne. And immediately a voice announced, “In three and a half years this tare will be uprooted.” Thus Saint Hypatius began to say to certain persons and particularly to the brethren of his monastery, “I have great anxiety over this man who has come, my children, for I have seen that he will turn aside from the faith; but he will reign only three and a half years.” Thus when he passed by the Saint’s monastery, Nestorius did not wish to go to meet him—he had accidentally learned what the Saint had said—although he had hitherto visited everywhere, including all the monasteries and Church dignitaries and abbots, as he made his way to the Capital. When he had entered the Capital and had become Patriarch, he immediately sent clergymen to Saint Hypatius with the message, “Go say to that dreamer: ‘I shall reign for twenty years in the City and where are your dreams?’” Saint Hypatius replied to them, “Say to the Patriarch that if it comes to pass as I discerned

it, it was a revelation; if not, it was a dream and I, as a man, imagined it.” Thus embarrassed by the answer which they brought back to him, Nestorius some time after sent other people in order to ensnare him in certain of his words. But after having tempted him with troublesome and useless questions, they were not only unable to trap him in his words, but they left his presence filled with admiration for him, having understood that the Saint possessed great intelligence. It was for this reason that Nestorius left him in peace and did not send anyone else to him. The three years having passed, little by little the evil treasure of his heart began to show itself. For in his sermons he said abominable things about the Lord which were to fall again upon his own head, and which are not permitted for us to repeat. This evil man did not know the Holy Scriptures, which say, “Who shall declare his generation?”, and, “Search not into things too deep for thee.” When he understood that Nestorius held opinions contrary to those which should be acknowledged, Saint Hypatius immediately, in the church of the Apostles, erased his name from the diptychs, so that it should no longer be at the Oblation.

When the most pious Bishop Eulalis learned of this, he was anxious about the outcome of the affair. And seeing that it had been noised abroad, Nestorius also ordered him to reprimand Hypatius. For Nestorius was still powerful in the city. Bishop Eulalius spoke this to Hypatius: “Why have you erased his name without understanding what the consequence of it would be?” Saint Hypatius replied, “From the time that I learned that he said unrighteous things about the Lord, I have no longer been in communion with him and I do not commemorate his name; for he is not a bishop.” Then the bishop, in anger, said, “Be off with you! Make amends for what you have done, for I shall take measures against you.” Saint Hypatius replied: “Do as you wish. As for me, I have decided to suffer anything, and it is with this in mind that I have done this.” Now when Nestorius had left for Ephesus, and the Council had assembled, on the day when he should be deposed, Saint Hypatius saw in a vision that an angel of the Lord took hold of Saint John the Apostle, and led him to the most pious Emperor and said to him, “Say to the Emperor: ‘Pronounce your sentence against Nestorius.’” And he, having heard this, pronounced it. Saint Hypatius made note of the day, and it was verified that Nestorius was deposed on that very day, the three and a half years having passed, as the Lord had foretold to the Saint. And some days later the decree of the deposition was brought. It was read in the presence of all the clergy and people, Bishop Eulalius and Saint Hypatius being present together in Church.

The significant point in this account is that the Saint ceased commemorating Nestorius even *before* any synodal decision had been made against the latter. Furthermore, the Saint declared, “I am no longer in communion with him and I do not commemorate his name; *for he is not a bishop.*” All this was said and done *before* any Church council had condemned Nestorius’ heresy. And indeed, heresy is heresy whether or not a council condemns it. It is not, after all, the decision of the council that makes the heresy a heresy. Rather, following in the path of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, the Church councils openly proclaimed the true Orthodox doctrine, while at the same time demonstrating in what points heresy had deviated from that doctrine.

The Holy Canons are not silent in this regard either. Here is what the 15th Canon of the First and Second Council sets forth:

If any presbyter or bishop or metropolitan dares to secede from communion with his own patriarch and does not mention his name as is ordered and appointed in the divine mystagogy, but before a synodical arraignment and his [the patriarch’s] full condemnation, he creates a schism, the Holy Synod has decreed that this person be alienated from every priestly function, if only he be proved to have transgressed in this. These rules, therefore, have been sealed and ordered concerning those who on the pretext of some accusations against their own presidents [i.e., prelates] stand apart, creating a

schism and severing the unity of the Church. **But as for those who on account of some heresy condemned by Holy Synods or Fathers sever themselves from communion with their president, that is, because he publicly preaches heresy and with bared head teaches it in the Church, such persons as these not only are not subject to canonical penalty for walling themselves off from communion with the so-called bishop before synodical clarification, but they shall be deemed worthy of due honor among the Orthodox.** For not bishops, but false bishops and false teachers have they condemned, and they have not fragmented the Church's unity with schism, but from schisms and divisions have they earnestly sought to deliver the Church.

Regarding this matter, the following is noted in the book *Against False Union*:

The communion with and respect of one church on the part of the other churches remains and continues only as long as that church remains in the Church, that is as long as it lives and proceeds in spirit and truth. When a patriarchate ceases to be a church, admitting communion with heretics, then its recognition on the part of the other churches ceases also.

The Orthodox people must become conscious of the fact that they owe no obedience to a bishop, no matter how high a title he holds, when that bishop ceases being Orthodox and openly follows heretics with pretenses of union "on equal terms." On the contrary, they are obliged to depart from him and confess their Faith, because a bishop, even if he be patriarch or pope, ceases from being a bishop the moment he ceases being Orthodox. The bishop is a consecrated person, and even if he is openly sinful, respect and honor is due him until synodically censured. But if he becomes openly heretical or is in communion with heretics, then the Christians should not await any synodical decision, but should draw away from him immediately.

As we saw from the few examples cited above—and there are countless others—the Orthodox faithful did not mince words, nor were they afraid to take immediate action when they ascertained that their bishop had strayed from Orthodoxy. Inevitably, there were those who found fault with this "extreme" course of action. The latter were not so much disturbed by the heresy of their bishop as they were by the words and actions of the "zealots," as they usually labeled the conscientious flock. These "super-correct" extremists were disturbing the peace of the Church and fomenting schism, said they. How did those "unhealthy elements" dare to rebuke the bishop and cut off communion with him *before* any synodal clarification? As we have seen, Saint Hypatius and Saint Maximus the Confessor gave us two concrete examples of how they dared. Saint Theodore the Studite and Saint Mark of Ephesus also dared, and today the church honors and reveres them for doing so.

The Church—which had just weathered the century long onslaught of iconoclasm—saw that there were often occasions when, for one reason or another, there was no possibility of calling an Orthodox council. Precisely for this very reason, therefore, the First and Second Council which convened in Constantinople in 861 formulated the Fifteenth Canon, which merely articulated and gave canonical expression to the ancient practice of the Church, to wit, that the Orthodox Christians should "wall themselves off from communion with the so-called bishop before synodical clarification." Thus, should the Orthodox faithful ever find themselves in an extreme situation—doctrinally speaking—they were encouraged and protected by this canon—no matter what they were called by others, and no matter what sanctions and actions the erring bishop threatened to take against them. Actually, church History has demonstrated repeatedly that the believers who were the first to react against heresy were wholly justified in their course of action on every occasion.

This, then, is the Orthodox understanding and the ancient practice of the Church in this matter. As we mentioned in the beginning, there is room here neither for anarchy, nor for despotism. We have criteria, and these criteria are the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Church Fathers, the Lives of the Saints, Church

History, and the Holy Canons.

This witness, this Faith is sealed with the blood of the martyrs and confessors of the Church. And truly, since the Church is built upon this rock, how is it possible for the gates of Hades to prevail against Her?

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