

THE PLACE OF THE BISHOP IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH*

by Archimandrite Cyprian

The text of this article, translated from the Greek, is taken from an address delivered by Father Cyprian, a brother of the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili, Greece, on October 6, 1997 (Old Style), at the annual convocation (held that year at the Novotel Convention Center in Athens) in honor of the Name Day of Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili.

*Our Most Reverend Metropolitan and Much-Revered Spiritual
Father; Holy Hierarchs; Reverend Fathers and Brothers;
Honored Company of Monastics; Beloved Brothers
and Sisters in Christ:*

A

I call upon your blessings and prayers, that I may fulfill this task of obedience—a service which was assigned to me, in my unworthiness, by our monastic Brotherhood.

1. The meagre thoughts that will be expressed this evening have as their basis the well-known Patristic teaching that Angels are the light of monastics, and monastics are the light of the laity: “Angels are a light for monks; the monastic way of life is a light for all people.”¹ Monastics are a light, first and foremost, because they struggle to become a “good example” for all, an example and a model of virtue.

They are also a light when, with prayer, love, and humility, they encourage and guide the Faithful in acquiring a genuine ecclesiastical ethos.

This service of brotherly love that characterizes monastics is especially valuable in our days, because our brothers and sisters in the world are exposed to a variety of influences, with the result that—usually out of ignorance—they think and act in a manner at odds with the Church.

Permit me this evening, therefore, to contribute—with the help, to be sure, of our *Panagia* and our Saints Cyprian and Justina, whom we are honoring—to this service of love, by dealing with a fundamental characteristic of the true ecclesiastical ethos, which is: a profound recognition of the central place of the Bishop in the Church and a deep reverence for his person.

At this year’s convocation we would like to approach this subject,

which for every pious Christian literally constitutes an essential determining factor in his Church life, with brevity and simplicity.

2. But this subject, specifically, incites fear in us. What do I mean?

The Thirty-Sixth Canon of the Holy Apostles prescribes that the clergy of a diocese be punished very severely for one very serious sin, an ecclesiastical transgression.

What is this transgression?

If the people of a diocese, “on account of their own insubordination and malice,”² are not obedient to their Bishop and do not accept him as their Shepherd, then the clergy of this diocese are to be excommunicated, “because they have not corrected such an insubordinate people”;³ “inasmuch as,” according to the interpretation of St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, “they did not instruct such an insubordinate people by their teaching and good example” (see note 2).

• We clergy, therefore, are obliged to provide our people with “teaching” and a “good example,” if we are to avoid the very heavy penalty of excommunication.

B

We are constantly impressed by the great reverence shown by Russians, Romanians, and other Orthodox peoples towards their Hierarchy.

In the lands of these folk, even after subjugation under atheism and the severe blows that the Orthodox Church thereby sustained, there has been preserved a popular dedication to, and honor for, the person of the Bishop which is probably without parallel.

1. This is how a clergyman who took part in a tour made by a Hierarchy to Russia describes some of its highlights:

In the cities through which we passed, the Faithful spread out their garments in the Bishop’s path and then kissed the place where the Bishop had stepped....

In one small city..., the street along which the Bishop was going to pass was completely covered with flowers. ...The Archbishop was welcomed by the light of hundreds of candles held by the Faithful.

In one parish of the diocese..., almost all of the residents of the street leading to the Church cleaned the doorsteps of their houses and took tables spread with white tablecloths out of their dwellings. After a short while, a zig-zag of white and multi-colored cloth—on which icons, bread, and salt (traditional symbols of hospitality) had been placed—and flowers showed the Bishop which course he was to follow. The Bishop...approached one of the tables, blessed it, and greeted the inhabitants.⁴

2. But the people’s dedication to the person of their Bishop reaches a climax at his repose.

In one Russian city, two or three hours after the announcement of

the repose of the elderly Metropolitan, it was already difficult to make one's way through to his residence.... For many nights, the people filed past the remains of their Shepherd. During the funeral, the large Cathedral was able to contain only a small portion of the Faithful, the majority of whom were forced to remain in the courtyard of the Church and in the neighboring streets. Many thousands of believers came to bow before the venerable remains of the deceased (see note 4).

And in another instance “tens of thousands of Faithful escorted in procession the remains” of their Metropolitan “from the Cathedral to the cemetery, which is seven kilometers away” (see note 4).

C

Someone may ask: Is this behavior on the part of the people not a bit hyperbolic? Is not the focus of devotion, here, shifted from Christ to the Bishop?

The Holy Fathers clearly answer, “No!”

“The Bishop in his diocese is,” says St. John of Kronstadt, “after God and the *Theotokos*, the source of sanctification for all the Christians of his flock, and this is why they should all have great esteem and love for him as the most perfect celebrant of the Holy Mysteries.”⁵

This teaching, which is correct in every way, is not recent in Orthodoxy, but is a fundamental idea of the Apostolic Church.

1. St. Ignatios the God-Bearer, Bishop of Antioch, links the Bishop and Jesus Christ together to such a degree that everything which happens to a visible Bishop of the Church is attributed and ascribed to the invisible Bishop, Christ our Savior.

The following is precisely what the Saint says:

For the honor, therefore, of Him Who desired us, it is right that we obey (the Bishop) without any hypocrisy; for a man does not merely mislead this Bishop who is seen, but seeks to deceive Him Who is invisible.⁶

2. In another instance, St. Ignatios urges us to see the Bishop as the Lord Himself: “Therefore, it is obvious that we must look upon the Bishop as we would the Lord Himself.”⁷

3. The Saint goes on to exalt the place of the Bishop in the Church so highly as to teach that all who wish to be with God must be with the Bishop: “For as many as belong to God and Jesus Christ—these are with the Bishop.”⁸

4. And so significant is the issue of our unity with the Bishop, and through him with God, according to St. Ignatios, that this unity demarcates two completely different worlds: the world of God and the world of the Devil: “See to it that you all follow the Bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father...”; “It is good to know God and the Bishop”;

“he who does anything without the knowledge of the Bishop is serving the Devil.”⁹

D

St. John Chrysostomos was a true exponent of this Apostolic Tradition.

From the many instances which testify to the profound reverence and obedience of Chrysostomos towards the Episcopacy, we will cite only three, which pertain to the period of his activity in Antioch.

1. Once, while the Saint was still a Presbyter, at a gathering of the Faithful he did not see Flavian, the Bishop of Antioch, present, as he usually was; this grieved the Saint, and he said tearfully: “When I look upon that Throne, deserted and bereft of our teacher, ...I weep; I weep, because I do not see our Father with us!”¹⁰

2. At another time, the holy Bishop Flavian was absent again, since he was ill at home; so, Chrysostomos began his sermon with an expression of fervent love for his Bishop:

Just as a choir misses its leader and a crew of sailors its helmsman, so also this company of Priests is missing its Hierarch and common Father, today.... But even if he is not present in the flesh, he is, nonetheless, here in spirit, and he is with us now as he sits at home, just as we are with him as we stand here; for such is the power of love that it habitually gathers together and unites those who are separated by a great distance.¹¹

3. In another instance, the most holy Flavian was present, and Chrysostomos shortened his sermon, offering the following justification:

So I must bring my discourse to an end, since I want to hear the voice of my Father (and Bishop). For we—like shepherd boys under the shade of some oak tree or poplar—play reed pipes as we sit under the shade of these sacred foundations; whereas he (our Father and Bishop), in the way that an accomplished musician who plays a golden lyre and with the harmony of its notes elevates the entire audience to a higher realm—so he, not with a harmony of notes, but with the harmony of his words and actions, greatly benefits us.¹²

• It is clear, then, in what way the Holy Chrysostomos guided the People of God and helped them to acquire a true ecclesiastical ethos: The absence of his Hierarch would be a matter of indifference to a Presbyter who did not recognize the importance of the Bishop in the Church; whereas Chrysostomos suffers and weeps. The presence of the Bishop, on the other hand, would not act as a brake for a garrulous preacher, whereas Chrysostomos cuts his sermon short, so as to allow his Bishop to speak, while he praises him appropriately, humbling himself and exalting the nobility of the Hierarch.

E

On the basis of this comparison that St. John Chrysostomos makes between a Presbyter (a shepherd boy with his pipe) and a Bishop (an excellent musician with his lyre), permit me to encapsulate in just a few sentences—in order not to tire you—the purely theological and ecclesiological outlook of our Most Holy Orthodoxy concerning the place of the Bishop in the Church.

What is the Church?

1. The Church is the Assembly of the People of God for the celebration of the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist, wherein the local Church actually becomes and is revealed as the Body of Christ, as a Theandric organism, in which the Holy Trinity dwells.¹³

2. The visible center and head of the Eucharistic Assembly is the Bishop: It is he who leads the Assembly and preaches the word of God; it is he who offers the Eucharist, as an “Icon of Christ,” the Great High Priest, and as the one who presides “in the place of God,”¹⁴ according to St. Ignatios of Antioch.

3. In the early Church, only the Bishop offered the Divine Eucharist in each local Church; that is, there was only one Eucharist, and this was centered on the Bishop.^{14a}

4. The Bishop, when he offers the Divine Eucharist, offers Christ in His wholeness, imparting the Holy Mysteries to the Faithful with his own hands; in ancient times, the People of God partook of Christ only from the living Icon of Christ, the Bishop.¹⁵

5. Therefore, the Bishop not only embodies the local Church, but also expresses in time and space the Catholic Church, that is, the whole Church; for that which embodies Christ in His wholeness, and wherein one receives Christ in His wholeness, is that which embodies the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. “Wherever Jesus Christ is,” says St. Ignatios, “there is the Catholic Church.”¹⁶

6. For precisely this reason, when one is united with the Bishop in the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist, then he is also united with the Catholic Church.

St. Cyprian of Carthage emphasizes this ecclesiological truth in the following striking terms: “The Bishop is in the Church and the Church in the Bishop; and if one is not in communion with the Bishop, he is not in the Church.”¹⁷

F

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I hope that all to which we have thus far referred will suffice to help us understand why the People of God, whenever a Bishop Liturgizes, yearn to receive communion from his hands; why there is a veritable festival in villages, whenever the Bishop visits; why the Faith-

ful welcome him with the pealing of bells, “with palms and branches”; why they spread carpets for him to step upon; and why girls present their dowries to him to be blessed—why, in short, the Faithful have such love for, and dedication to, their Bishop.

Elder Silouan of Athos, in his endeavor to present to us the Orthodox teaching about the Episcopacy, relates the following amazing incident:

A humble and meek man was walking with his wife and their three children. On the road, they met a Hierarchy, who was passing by in his carriage; and when the peasant had bowed piously to him, he saw that the Hierarchy who was blessing him was enveloped by the fire of Grace.¹⁸

I think that this instructive miracle, together with the aforementioned Patristic testimonies, suffice to make us, clergy and laity alike, aware of our obligation before a Bishop.

Orthodox Tradition has always assigned the Bishop to such a central place in the Church, that it proclaims through the Holy Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem († 1707) the following great truth: “What God is in the heavenly Church of the firstborn, and the sun in the world, such is each Bishop in the local Church.”¹⁹

1. *Is it possible*, then, given these assumptions, for us to treat a Bishop with disrespect, when, indeed, we take into account that the Thirty-Fifth Apostolic Canon appoints that a clergyman who insults a Bishop be deposed,²⁰ while the Third Canon of the Synod at Hagia Sophia anathematizes a layman who dares to strike a Bishop?²¹

2. *Is it possible* for us to do anything connected with the Church clandestinely, without the Bishop’s knowledge and blessing, seeing that the Saints instruct us: “Do nothing without the Bishop”?²²

3. *Is it possible* for anyone—especially, to be sure, the clergy—to be independent and to follow their own pastoral agendas, when the Thirty-Ninth Apostolic Canon enjoins: “Let Presbyters and Deacons not carry out anything without the knowledge of the Bishop”?²³

4. *Is it possible* for us who have the rank of *disciples* to be impertinent, daring to teach *the Bishop*, the Teacher of the Church, when the “Apostolic Constitutions” admonish us in the following way:

The Bishop, he is the minister of the word, the guardian of knowledge, the mediator between God and you in your worship of Him. He is the teacher of piety; and, next after God, he is your Father...; he is your ruler and governor; he is your king and potentate; he is, next after God, your earthly god, who ought to enjoy honor from you...; for let the Bishop preside over you as one honored with the dignity of God, which he is to exercise over the clergy, and by which he is to govern all the people.²⁴

5. *Is it possible* for us to assemble illicitly “without the knowledge of the Bishop” and to act schismatically, when the Saints teach us: “Just as the Lord did nothing without the Father..., so must you do nothing without the Bishop...”?²⁵

6. *Is it possible*, finally, for us to judge and to condemn a Bishop, when the Holy Chrysostomos forbids this in the strictest terms, “...even if his (the spiritual Father’s) life is extremely corrupt”?²⁶

...And when the same Saint, in posing questions to those who accuse Priests, forbids them even to enter a church?

When you accuse your spiritual Father, how do you consider yourself worthy to step over the sacred threshold [of the Church]? ...And does not such a one (an accuser of Priests) fear, lest the earth open up and cause him to disappear completely, or a thunderbolt fall from on high and burn up his accusing tongue?²⁷

G

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I hope that you will forgive me for keeping you. I was carried away by the seriousness of the subject and by my desire for your edification in Christ.

1. The damage done to the Orthodox ethos by extra-ecclesiastical factors has touched on one of the most fundamental characteristics of this ethos: a profound awareness of the central place of the Bishop in the Church.

May this meagre attempt of ours be regarded as a small contribution to the amelioration of this evil, of this damage.

I am profoundly convinced that, only when our relationship with the Bishop in the Church is brought to life in an Orthodox, Patristic manner, will the Lord have mercy on us and grant us to behold good Shepherds and, as a result, better days.

2. Likewise, in conclusion, we would also like you to receive our treatment, this evening, of the correct attitude that one should have towards the Bishop as a necessary response to those unfortunate brethren of ours who distorted the spiritual meaning of a gift that we presented to our Most Reverend Metropolitan in 1987.

In that gift—a painting from the Icon studio of the Holy Convent of the Holy Angels in Aphidnai, Attika, done with my own guidance and with my advice—our local Church was symbolically portrayed as the Body of Christ, with Her Bishop and the Divine Eucharist at the center.

This, for us, is the Patristic understanding of the Church; it was natural that all those who do not know this aspect of the Church or experience it in their own lives, should malign that symbolic gift, in order to damage the reputation of our honored Chief Shepherd.

May our Lord forgive them and lead them to repentance!

H

Our Most Reverend Spiritual Father, Divinely-Chosen Shepherd of

Our Little Flock:

On the occasion of your Name Day, accept our humble but heartfelt wishes that you might be preserved, by the Grace of the Lord, for many long years in safety, honor, and health, teaching aright the word of Evangelical Truth.

May the Most Blessed Mother of our Savior strengthen you and grant you forbearance, and especially when we, your spiritual children, relax our vigilance and behave improperly towards you.

As our Bishop, as a living Icon of Christ, the Great High Priest, continue—we beseech you—to pray all the more fervently before the dread Altar for your reason-endowed Flock, that no sheep thereof might stray and be caught by wild beasts, cut off from unity with you, unity with the Church, and unity with Christ.**

Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XVI, Nos. 3-4 (1999), pp. 8-17.

Notes

* We should make it clear at the outset that the Faithful are obligated to revere and obey Hierarchs as long as they are *truly Orthodox* and *teach aright* the word of Truth.

• St. John Chrysostomos, in dealing with the exhortation of the Apostle Paul says, “Obey them that have the rule over you (Bishops, Teachers, and Spiritual Leaders), and submit yourselves” (Hebrews 13:17), faces a legitimate question: “But what if...he is wicked; should we obey?” His reply is as follows: “Wicked? In what sense? If indeed with regard to the Faith, flee and avoid him; not only if he be a man, but even if he be an Angel come down from Heaven; but if in regard to his life, be not overly curious” (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXIII, col. 231 [Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews, XXXIV, § 1]).

1. St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder*, Step 26.1, § 23.

2. St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite, “Interpretation” of the Thirty-Sixth Apostolic Canon (*Pedalion [Rudder]*, p. 40).

3. Apostolic Canon XXXVI.

4. Solon G. Ninikas, *The Spiritual Resiliency of the Russian People* [in Greek] (Athens: 1991), pp. 21-22.

5. Bishop Alexander (Semenoff-Tian-Sansky), *Father John of Kronstadt* [in Greek] (Oropos, Attika: Parakletos Monastery Publications, 1976), p. 113.

6. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 665A (“Epistle to the Magnesians,” III.2).

7. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 649AB (“Epistle to the Ephesians,” VI.1).

8. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 700A (“Epistle to the Philadelphians,” III.2).

9. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, cols. 713A, 713C, 716A (“Epistle to the Smyrnæans,” VIII.1-IX.1).

10. St. John Chrysostomos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIX, col. 47

(“Homilies on the Statues,” III.1).

11. St. John Chrysostomos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLVIII, col. 953 (“Homily on the Kalends, When Bishop Flavian of Antioch Did Not Arrive,” § 1).

12. St. John Chrysostomos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIX, col. 314 (“Homilies on Fasting,” V.5).

13. Cf. Ephesians 4:5-6 and I Corinthians 10:15-16, concerning the ecclesiastical and sacramental Assembly and the meaning of the “Body of Christ.”

14. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 668A (“Epistle to the Magnesians,” VI.1).

• In the extended form of the Epistle to the Smyrnæans, he writes the following: “Honor...the Bishop as the Hierarch, who bears the image of God...[,] of Christ, in his capacity as a Priest” (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 853A [“Epistle to the Smyrnæans,” IX]).

14a. Cf. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 668C (“Epistle to the Magnesians,” VII.2) and col. 700B (“Epistle to the Philadelphians,” IV): “One Father,” “one Jesus Christ,” “one Church,” “one Altar,” “one Eucharist,” “one Flesh of the Lord,” “one Cup,” and “one Bishop.”

15. St. Hippolytos of Rome, *The Apostolic Tradition*, § 22 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, No. 11 bis [Paris: Cerf, 1968]), pp. 96-97.

16. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 713B (“Epistle to the Smyrnæans,” VIII.2).

17. St. Cyprian, “Epistle 66.”

18. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Elder Silouan of Athos (1866-1938)* [in Greek] (Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypsele Publications, n.d.), p. 392.

19. Dositheos of Jerusalem, “Confession of Faith (1672),” Definition 10, in J. N. Karmiris, *Dogmatic and Credal Monuments of the Orthodox Catholic Church* [in Greek], Vol. II (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1968), p. 753 [833].

20. “If any clergyman should insult the Bishop, let him be deposed; for ‘thou shalt not speak ill of the ruler of thy people’ [Exodus 22:28].”

• See also the “Interpretation” of St. Nicodemos, as well as the notes, which conclude as follows:

The laws of the Emperors, which promote piety, stipulate that anyone who enters a church when the Mysteries or other holy services are being celebrated and insults the Bishop, or prevents the services from being celebrated, should be subjected to capital punishment. This same principle should be maintained also when litanies and services of supplication are being celebrated and Bishops and clergy are present; that is, whoever insults the clergy should be exiled and whoever disturbs a litany or a service of supplication should be put to death.

From this Canon one may infer that whoever insults his father in the flesh or his spiritual Elder ought to be given an *epitimia*; for Scripture says, ‘He that curseth father or mother,’ whoever he may be, whether a clergyman, a layman, or a monk, ‘let him die the death’ [St. Matthew 15:4; cf. Leviticus 20:9]. Death in these cases is the deprivation of Divine Communion, which among those endowed with understanding is reckoned truly to be death, as we see in the Fifty-Fifth Canon of St. Basil the Great (*Pedalion*, p. 72, n. 1).

21. “If any layman in authority, despising the Divine and Imperial ordinances and mocking the dread statutes and laws of the Church, should dare to harm or imprison any Bishop without cause, or having fabricated a cause,

let him be anathema.”

- See the “Interpretation” of St. Nicodemus, as well as his notes (*Pedalion*, p. 366). [The Synod in Hagia Sophia was the Eighth Œcumenical Synod, under St. Photios the Great, convened in 879].

- St. Ignatios of Antioch says the following: “He who honors a Bishop will be honored by God; just as he who dishonors him will be punished by God” (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 853A [“Epistle to the Smyrnæans,” Longer Version, VII.2]).

22. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 668A (“Epistle to the Philadelphians,” VII.2).

- St. Ignatios emphatically insists on this point: “Let no one do any of the things pertaining to the Church without the Bishop” (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 713B [“Epistle to the Smyrnæans,” VIII.1]).

- See footnotes 9 and 25.

23. See the “Interpretation” of St. Nicodemus, as well as the “Concord” (*Pedalion*, pp. 43-45).

- According to the “Apostolic Constitutions,” the Deacon “does nothing” “without the Bishop,” and it is enjoined that “all things that he is to do with anyone be made known to the Bishop, and be ultimately ordered by him” (Book II, ch. 30); “...Let him not do anything at all without his Bishop, nor give anything to anyone without his consent” (Book II, ch. 31); “...Do nothing in a clandestine way, so as may tend to his reproach” (Book II, ch. 32) (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. I, col. 677BCD).

24. “Apostolic Constitutions,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. I, cols. 665B-668A (Book II, ch. 26).

25. St. Ignatios, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 668B (“Epistle to the Magnesians,” VII.1).

- Especially applicable is the following related view of the Saint:

“It is right, then, that we should not merely be called Christians, but also be such; even as there are some who recognize the Bishop in their words, but in everything act apart from him. Such people seem to me not to act in good conscience, since they are not validly acting in consort” (*ibid.*, IV).

26. St. John Chrysostomos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LIX, col. 472 (“Homilies on the Gospel of St. John,” LXXXVI, § 4).

27. St. John Chrysostomos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LI, col. 201 (“On Aquila and Priscilla, Discourse II,” § 5).

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