

What's next for the Greek Orthodox Church of Australia?



The death of Archbishop Stylianos after 44 years at the helm of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia has marked the end of an era.

A larger-than-life energetic figure, Archbishop Stylianos has left behind a legacy. He welcomed people to the church regardless of their religious beliefs, and was a man of great open-mindedness that sometimes contradicted traditional beliefs and caused controversy. Over the years, the charismatic leader that lead with an iron fist ensured the growth of the church and helped in its expansion to hundreds of thousands of members of many nationalities, and not just Greek.

The crowds that gathered to pay their last respects at his funeral provided further proof that Archbishop Stylianos was a religious leader to be reckoned with. Leaving behind such large shoes to fill, speculation is sky high as to who the new religious leader to replace him will be and what this will mean for the church.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is currently examining the situation and

contemplating the strategy that the church will follow with a new leader in place. Sources have told Neos Kosmos that the Patriarchate in Constantinople would like to “break up” the Australian Archdiocese into smaller jurisdictions. This would come as no surprise bearing in mind telling statements already made by Patriarch Bartholomew.

“I publicly confess that we are concerned as to whether the Archdiocese of Australia should in future continue being a unified ecclesiastic body, (with) one Archdiocese, one Archbishop and assistant bishops,” he said.

“The mother church, the Holy and Sacred Synod will try to make the best decision.”

Church sources have told Neos Kosmos that the reason for the separation of the Archdiocese from a single body is to prevent the rise of another “Stylianós”. In this way, the Patriarchate will have greater control of the operation of the church body in Australia just as it has tried to ensure in America where the church body has been split into four Metropolitan regions: America, Canada, Central America, South America. However critics point to a weakening of the role of the church in America following the division.

At the moment, the Archdiocese of Australia is one of three large church bodies outside of Constantinople. Greek Orthodox sources have told Neos Kosmos that the church in Australia needs a united Archdiocese with a powerful and active leader who can continue to ensure its growth and build on the substantial work already carried out by his predecessor. The Australian church has already suffered from a split with the separation of the New Zealand branch from its fold, and now it needs to look ahead, united and strong.

Should the Archdiocese be divided, this would have repercussions on its Property Trust, and the cost of the splitting up of its assets would be huge.

Metropolitan Panteleimon of Vryoula, who had been sent by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as its official representative, visited Melbourne following the funeral in Sydney. He will also visit Adelaide and Perth to discuss church matters before reporting to the Patriarchate regarding his findings on the situation in Australia.

Contenders for the top job

Speculation is high. Below are some of the scenarios:

- Bishop Nikandros could be a Metropolitan Bishop with the areas of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory under his jurisdiction.

- Bishop Ezekiel may become the Metropolitan Bishop of Victoria and Tasmania, however this would not be a long-term solution as he is rumoured to be retiring soon.
- Metropolitan Iakovos would be a candidate for NSW.
- Bishop Seraphim who hopes to be Archbishop of Australia may be offered Queensland, a smaller portion of the pie than he might have hoped for. Should this be the case, it is uncertain that he would accept the role and may even leave Australia.

If the Archdiocese continues to be in its current form, then Bishop Joseph is among the names being considered for the role as he has served in South Australia, Victoria and has also been a Metropolitan Bishop in New Zealand.

For the moment, Bishop Ezekiel has temporarily stepped in an interim leadership role until the future becomes clear. Behind-the-scenes machinations are many. Neos Kosmos sources from within the church speak of disharmony and discord brought on by uncertainty.

A decision will not be made until after June.

(Source: neoskosmos.com)