

## **The Autocephalous Churches and the Institution of the 'Pentarchy' - an article written by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and St Vlassios**



Much has been written recently as a result of the Ukrainian issue, both positively and negatively, from whichever side one looks at it. In particular, there has been very harsh criticism of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Prompted by this, it has been necessary for me to write articles so as to explain some aspects of the subject as a whole, without dealing with it exhaustively. In particular, I have clarified that the regime of the Church is not papal, neither is it a Protestant confederation, but it is synodical and hierarchical at the same time [[The Regime of the Orthodox Church](#)]. I insist on this subject, because I consider that it is the basis of the problem that has arisen.

There are certainly many sides to the Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue. The most fundamental aspect, however, is that many people have not understood what 'autocephaly' means in the Orthodox Church; what 'Autocephalous Churches' are; how the sacred institution of the Church functions; to what extent 'Autocephalous Churches' can function independently of the Ecumenical Throne, which is the first

throne and presides over all the Orthodox Churches, and has many powers and responsibilities; and also how the Ecumenical Throne operates in relation to the 'Autocephalous Churches'.

Unless someone has an adequate understanding of the way in which 'Autocephalous Churches' function, the way in which the Pentarchy worked in the first millennium, but also of the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch during the second millennium in relation to the more recent Patriarchates and the new Autocephalous Churches, he will not grasp the essence of this issue. He will become involved in other matters, which also have their importance, but he will be ignorant of the root of the issue.

It is, therefore, necessary to identify how the so-called Autocephalous Churches were created, and how the institution of the Pentarchy functioned in the first millennium. We see this very clearly when we read the Acts of the Ecumenical Councils carefully, as well as what applies to the more recent Patriarchates and the more recent Autocephalous Churches.

I boldly stated my views of mine in the past, at a very difficult period for the relations of the Church of Greece with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

To be specific, in 2002, seventeen years ago, I published a book in Greek entitled [\*The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece\*](#). This book includes a chapter called 'The Autocephalous Churches and the Institution of the Pentarchy', in which I set out my views on this serious issue, which continues to be of current concern.

I am therefore publishing this text again, to show that my views on this matter have been the same for many years.

I have absolute respect for the canonical institutions; I respect the synodical system of the Church and the position and role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, because all these things were established by Ecumenical Councils. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in particular, has been sanctified by great Fathers of the Church, and played a significant role in the history of the Church. Also, when the need arises, I express my views respectfully on theological issues as well, without undermining the sacred canonical institution of the Church.

I shall now publish again the text I mentioned above, which, I repeat, was written seventeen years ago, because it seems that nowadays the basic principles of canon law are overlooked or forgotten, all for the sake of geopolitical expediencies.

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## 1. The First Churches

Professor George Mantzaridis has described vividly, in a specific study of his, the way in which the original form of the Church was transferred to the worldwide Church, once Christianity had prevailed in the world. We shall now set out some of Professor Mantzaridis' interesting views, because they are important for the subject that we are analysing here.

The first Christian communities were formed on the basis of the synagogues of the Jews of the diaspora. For this reason, they had a certain independence, but "they retained some particular reference to the mother community in Jerusalem." The Christian communities were, of course, different from the Jewish ones, because Christianity appeared in history as the "new race" (*Epistle to Diognetus*) or the "third race" (*Aristides Apology*). The basis and sign of unity of the faithful, "as well as the centre, around which the life and the organisation of the Church developed", was Eucharistic worship. It should also be said that "this Eucharistic basis gives a charismatic and eschatological character to the ecclesiastical structure and fabric." This means that spiritual gifts were expressed in the course of liturgical and Eucharistic life, and also that the Christians lived in an intensely eschatological perspective, as they were waiting for the Last Things, the end of history. The Divine Eucharist, therefore, "was the centre, around which the organisation of the Church basically took shape."

The first Churches had been founded by the Apostles, who were their true charismatic leaders. Because they were continually on the move, however, they appointed permanent ministers. When the Apostles departed, that is to say, when they died, these permanent ministers took the place of the Apostles, and the institution of the prophets and those with spiritual gifts was restricted. The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles refers to this: "Ordain, therefore, for yourselves bishops and deacons... for they also perform for you the ministry of prophets and teachers. Do not despise them, therefore, for they are your honoured ones, together with the prophets and teachers."

Consequently, from a charismatic situation we were brought to the institutionalisation of ecclesiastical life, without this charismatic structure of the Church being lost.

With the passage of time, particularly after the departure of the Apostles, and on account of the fact that various Gnostics appeared, who claimed that they had

received mystical knowledge from the Apostles, the order of bishop was further developed. Thus, “the bishop is put forward as a symbol of God’s presence. Subjection to the bishop is regarded as subjection to God.” It is in this light that we should look at all the relevant texts and the exhortations of St Ignatius the God-bearer.

The spread of Christianity to the whole inhabited world at that time, as well as the recognition of Christianity by the Roman authority, helped to bring about a change in the administrative structure of ecclesiastical life, without it losing its sacramental and charismatic character, as it adopted the administrative structure of the Roman Empire. In this way, “bishops who were located in the same civil provinces formed larger ecclesiastical units, the metropolises, in order to deal with problems of common concern. The bishops who were in the principal cities of the provinces were in charge of the metropolises, and they were called metropolitans. For the same reason, the metropolitans who were in the same geographical or administrative units, formed Patriarchates or Autocephalous Churches, led by the metropolitans of the biggest or most important cities, and they were called patriarchs or archbishops respectively.”

It is clear from this analysis that the Church in its original form was linked with the Divine Eucharist, which was its basis, and there was certainly a charismatic structure, according to the Apostle Paul’s words: “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:28).

This means that the Apostles come first, followed by the prophets and teachers, and then those with spiritual gifts, administrations and the charismata of speaking in tongues. After the departure of the holy Apostles, however, the bishops came before the prophets, and they remained in the type and place of Christ, as successors to the Holy Apostles, precisely because they celebrated the Divine Eucharist, which was the centre of ecclesiastical life. Subsequently the metropolitan system developed, which had as *Protos* (the one in first place) the bishop of the seat of the civil administration of a province, who was called the metropolitan. Later the patriarchal system developed, when the metropolitan of a large city was called the patriarch and was the *Protos* of the metropolitans of that province.

Professor George Mantzaridis notes: “Institutionalisation in the Christian life should not be regarded as a fall away from the original state, but as its organic development and evolution. In fact, the creation or even the increase of institutions does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the area that has not been

institutionalised, because it too can co-exist in an excellent way with the institutions.”

## **2. The Autocephaly of the Church**

The term *Autocephalous Church* was introduced as time passed, not in the sense that it constitutes an independent Church that has no connection with the universal Church, but in the sense that it constitutes a unified ecclesiastical administration that determines matters connected with the election, ordination and trial of bishops, and deals with all the ecclesiastical issues of the local Church. However, it certainly has a connection with the whole Church, especially with the Mother of the Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It is not an autonomous and independent head, which is separated from the one single head of the Church. Rather, it has administrative freedom within the one Body of Christ, according to the model of the division of the Eucharistic bread.

Metropolitan Maximus of Sardis, calling Alexander Schmemmann to witness, writes that the concept of “autocephaly” does not belong to the “ontology” of the Church, but rather to its historical “hypostasis”. This distinction between the ontological and the hierarchical order of the universal Church is necessary and indispensable if we are to avoid both the danger of Roman Catholicism and the temptation of Protestantism. Consequently, we not deny the ontological unity of the Church as the Body of Christ, but neither do we deny the hierarchy among the local Churches.

Metropolitan Maximus of Sardis observes: “The history and longstanding tradition of the Church have created and safeguarded the practice of the ‘hierarchy of honour’. Denial of this in the name of a badly conceived ‘equality of honour’ is a premeditated and biased replacement of genuine catholicity by some kind of ‘democratic’ equality.”

We know from various studies that the term *autocephaly* originally appeared in connection with the title of the archbishop. At that time, of course, ‘archbishop’ did not denote the leader of a Local Church, but rather the bishop who was dependent on, and answerable to, the patriarch, and not to the metropolitan of the province. Thus, the ‘autocephalous archbishop’ was dependent on the patriarch, from whom he received ordination, and whom, to be sure, he commemorated in church services.

From the ninth century onwards, as Professor John Tarnanidis points out, the significance of autocephaly was upgraded, when ecclesiastical independence was among the political and ethnic ambitions of the Slavs.

However, even in this case, when the definition and role of the *autocephalous archbishop* were upgraded, as happened with the independence of the Bulgarian Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate could at any moment intervene in the Church's internal affairs, extend his powers in the realm of its ecclesiastical administration, and ordain the archbishop. All this is connected, of course, with the obligation on the part of the archbishop to commemorate the Patriarch of Constantinople. For this reason, throughout the centuries the term autocephalous archbishop never meant ecclesiastical independence, just as it did not mean absolute independence.

Professor Panagiotis Trembelas, in his article in Greek entitled 'Terms and Factors in the Declaration of Autocephaly', and subtitled 'Autocephaly and the Sacred Canons', analyses in detail, on the basis of the sacred Canons and Church history, how the Autocephalous Churches functioned, as well as examining thoroughly the terms and factors that made a Church autocephalous.

It is not possible to refer to all the arguments used by the writer of the article, but some of his conclusions will be recorded.

Speaking about the terms on which autocephaly is declared, Panagiotis Trembelas asserts that neither the apostolic character of the see nor the political significance of a city contributed to this. In any case, St Photius the Great's statement, "It is customary for jurisdictions with regard to districts to change together with the civil provinces and dioceses", "does not constitute an inviolable principle that has been strictly observed, as the words 'it is customary' also imply." As the basic principle and the essential condition for the emancipation of a Church, "emphasis must be placed on elements that facilitate and guarantee the smooth and effective functioning of the synodical authority, through the canonical and regular convocation of synods, according to the fundamental provisions, which were preserved very early on in the thirty-fourth and thirty-seventh Apostolic Canons, and in general through maintaining contact, and the mutual surveillance, supervision and guardianship of the Churches united under one *Protos*."

Consequently, the autocephaly of Churches is connected with the synodical structure of the Church as a whole, and the preservation of the unity of the Churches under the supervision and guardianship of the *Protos*, who is the

Ecumenical Patriarch, at the top of the ecclesiastical pyramid. On no account can autocephaly serve schismatic efforts and tendencies. On this point, Trembelas observes:

“Finally, it must on no account be forgotten that such mutual contact between the bishops under the one Protos aimed at strengthening unity in Christ. Quite clearly, therefore, it cannot on any account be allowed to lead to the creation of ‘fiefdoms’ or ecclesiastical provinces that are strangers to each other, but rather it must aim at easier communication among all the bishops everywhere, through their centres, the archbishops. Hence, even early on, as we have seen, a tendency is expressed to extend the boundaries of ecclesiastical regions by the subordination of various metropolitans or protoi to the exarchs or patriarchs, whose number is ultimately limited to just five.”

Analysing the factors that contributed to the autocephaly of Churches – an autocephaly that functioned as self-administration without, however, the relationship of the Local Church to the Ecumenical Patriarch being interrupted – Professor Trembelas observes that the principle of “self-determination of the peoples” played an important role in autocephaly, and “the opinion expressed by the members of the Church”, in other words, by the peoples, “is taken seriously into consideration.” The same also applies to the withdrawal of autocephaly, as took place in the case of the Archbishop of Ochrid. Certainly, even in this case, “the desires of the members of the Church were indisputably accepted only insofar as they did not contravene well-thought-out ecclesiastical interests. Hence, the synodical factor appears to be equal, or even superior, to the popular factor. Without the consent of this synodical factor, the movement of the popular factor, or of the governing factor representing it, can only produce insurrections, which approach, or even cross, the very boundaries of schism. The synodical factor, for this reason, has always been presented as determining, regulating and approving the movements of the popular factor.”

The process for granting autocephaly is also upheld.

The first synod that is competent to pronounce on the request for the emancipation of a Church is the synod around the Protos upon which the provinces to be emancipated depend, and afterwards “the body that finally and categorically pronounces on autocephaly or autonomy is the more general synod, in which all the Churches are represented, especially the Ecumenical Council.” Between these two bodies, the maturity of the Churches is examined, so it is possible that autocephaly may be withdrawn.

In fact, Trembelas asserts that temporary emancipation means that the maturity of the Church must be investigated. He writes:

“In order to give the Church that is to be emancipated time to prove its maturity in practice, and to give the other Autocephalous Churches time to decide, with full information and appraisal of the circumstances, on whether it is advisable for a certain Church to be proclaimed autocephalous, the Churches asking for emancipation must initially only be autonomous under the ecclesiastical centre on which they are dependent, which reserves the right to proclaim autocephaly in all the Autocephalous Churches alike. The ruling Church can only regulate the position of the new Church in relation to itself, but not its position among the other Churches. This is determined for the new Church by all the other Churches at a synod, as is clear from Canon 17 of the Council of Carthage.”

The view that the temporary recognition of autocephaly ought to be given by the Church from which it is detaching itself is a personal opinion of the writer of the article. However, the practice that has prevailed is that the first declaration of a Church as Autocephalous is made by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the final recognition is given by the Ecumenical Council. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has this honour and rank, that it not only presides at Pan-Orthodox Synods, but it also takes substantial initiatives for the unity of the Church.

It becomes clear that autocephaly is not granted for the independence of a Local Church, but for the preservation of the unity of all the Local Churches under the supervision of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Moreover, despite the self-administration of certain Churches, such a Church is not separated from the Ecumenical Patriarch. In particular, the Acts of the Fourth Ecumenical Council mention that the bishops from the diocese of Asia and Pontus declared their dependency on the Ecumenical Patriarch. For example, Bishop Romanos of Myra, said: “I have not been forced; I am glad to be under the throne of Constantinople, since it was he who honoured me and ordained me.” This means that there was interdependence between the self-governed dioceses and the Ecumenical Patriarch.



The conclusion of these analyses is that self-administration or autocephaly is given, first and foremost, for the unity of the Churches and not so that 'fiefdoms' can operate; and that the bodies that grant autocephaly are, in the first place, the Synod around the Protos, particularly the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and subsequently the Ecumenical Council, while in the meantime it judges the maturity of the Autocephalous Church. It is possible that autocephaly may be withdrawn before its recognition by an Ecumenical Council. Panayiotis Trembelas notes:

"Through such a declaration by the Ecumenical Councils, the autocephaly, on which they pronounced, was securely confirmed, as is shown the fact that Autocephalous Churches not possessing such ratification and confirmation were abolished over time and dissolved (Carthage, Lugdunum [Lyons], Mediolanum [Milan], Justiniana Prima, Ochrid, Trnovo, Ipekios, and so on), while conversely, Autocephalous Churches possessing this recognition, although they fell into dire circumstances or passed their prime, continued to exist and gradually revived (the Cypriot emigration, and the submission, according to Canon 39 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council, of Cyzicus and the province of Hellespont to the bishop of the island of Cyprus; the Patriarchates of Antioch, of Alexandria, and of Jerusalem)."

### **3. The Institution of the 'Pentarchy'**

It is in the context of this development that the Local and Ecumenical Councils and the sacred Canons, which they formulated to preserve the unity of Church life, should be interpreted. The complexities of ecclesiastical life and all the different kinds of organisation demanded a specially structured ecclesiastical hierarchy, which would comply with and obey particular Canons. In reality, it was the Holy Spirit Who preserved the unity of the Church through the Canons.

This is how the institution of the Ancient Patriarchates, the 'Pentarchy', together with the Autocephalous Church of Cyprus developed. We shall look briefly at this development, in order to interpret a subtle aspect that is connected with the autocephaly of the Church of Greece.

Professor John Karmiris and Nicodemus Milas, both of blessed memory, refer in detail to the subject of the creation of Autocephalous Churches in earlier times, and the subject of the Pentarchy.

Canon 6 of the First Ecumenical Council appoints the Bishop of Alexandria as Protos of the bishops in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis. And this would be exactly as is customary in the case of the Bishop of Rome. It appoints the Bishop of Antioch to preside over all the provinces that are subject to him, namely, Syria, Coele-Syria,

Cilicia and Mesopotamia, and to have the prerogatives (*presbeia* 'seniority') among the Churches. Canon 7 of the First Ecumenical Council also named the Bishop of the city of Aelia, as Jerusalem was called at that time, as a Patriarch, according to the commentary of Aristenus.

Canons 2 and 3 of the Second Ecumenical Council set up the division of the Churches of the East, based on the division of the state by St Constantine the Great. Canon 3 of the Second Ecumenical Council determines the prerogatives of honour of the throne of Constantinople. "The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogatives of honour after the Bishop of Rome, because it [Constantinople] is New Rome."

Canon 8 of the Third Ecumenical Council ratifies, together with the previous ecclesiastical districts, the autocephaly of the Church of Cyprus: "The rulers of the holy Churches in Cyprus shall enjoy, without dispute or injury, according to the Canons of the blessed Fathers and ancient custom, the right of performing for themselves the ordination of their most pious bishops. The same rule shall be observed in the other dioceses and provinces everywhere."

By Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the holy Fathers laid down equal prerogatives of honour for the throne of New Rome, with the following reasoning: "And the 150 bishops most dear to God, motivated by the same consideration, gave equal prerogatives to the most holy throne of New Rome, justly judging that the city which is honoured with the Sovereignty and the Senate, and enjoys equal prerogatives with the old imperial Rome, should in ecclesiastical matters also be magnified as Rome is, and be second after it."

Finally, the Quinisext Ecumenical Council confirmed the division of ecclesiastical districts, and also determined the hierarchical order and prerogatives of the thrones by its Canon 36. "Renewing the enactments by the 150 Fathers assembled in this God-protected and imperial city, and those of the 630 Fathers who met at Chalcedon, we decree that the throne of Constantinople shall have equal prerogatives with the throne of Old Rome, and shall be highly regarded in ecclesiastical matters as that is, and shall be second after it. After Constantinople shall be ranked the throne of the great city of Alexandria, then that of Antioch, and after this the throne of Jerusalem."

The Canons of the Ecumenical Councils to which we have referred, particularly the Canon of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council in Trullo, regulated finally and irrevocably what are called the Ancient Patriarchates and the autocephaly of the Church of Cyprus.

There are abundant references in Church tradition to the existence of the Pentarchy, which welds together the unity of the Church. St Theodore the Studite considered that all the Patriarchs constituted “the five-headed dominion of the Church”, “the five-headed body of the Church”, or the “five-headed ecclesiastical body”. Theodore Balsamon draws a parallel between the existence of the Pentarchy and the five senses in the body of Christ. That is to say, the five Patriarchs “are like the senses of one head, five in number and indivisible, and are regarded by the Christian faithful as having equal honour in all things. They are rightly called the heads of the holy Churches of God throughout the world, and they can be subject to no human difference.”

This whole ecclesiastical structure imposed order on the Church, in accordance with her synodical regime. Every ecclesiastical diocese had autonomy. It was restricted within its own boundaries, and it could administer the Churches in accordance with the same faith and revelatory truth. In fact, Canon 8 of the Third Ecumenical Council lays down that “that every province shall retain the rights which have always belonged to it from the beginning, according to the old prevailing custom, unchanged and uninjured: every metropolitan having permission to take, for his own security, a copy of these Acts.” And Canon 2 of the Second Ecumenical Synod, which lays down the prerogatives of the thrones, states: “The aforesaid Canon concerning dioceses being observed, it is evident that the synod of every province will administer the affairs of that particular province, as was decreed at Nice.”

Professor Vlassios Pheidas, in his two excellent studies in Greek entitled *The Institution of the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs* (volumes 1 and 2), refers in detail to how the local Churches, the metropolitan system, and subsequently the supra-metropolitan administrative system and the supra-exarchal authority took shape, culminating eventually in the patriarchal system and, of course, to the development of the institution of the Pentarchy.

According to his analysis, “prerogatives of honour” was granted in the first centuries of ecclesiastical life to one Church, and these prerogatives were directly related to the unity of the Church “in apostolic Orthodoxy, the Divine Eucharist and love”, and were free from any sense of administrative procedure. The “prerogatives of honour” were connected with the Mother Church’s witness to the faith, the

apostolicity of the thrones, the political significance of the cities, missionary activity, and ecclesiastical prestige.

Through its decisions, the First Ecumenical Council turned “prerogatives of honour” into “metropolitan status”, and so the metropolitan system developed, centred on the capital city of the civil provinces. Dealing with the Arian heresy also played an important role with regard to the Church of Egypt, and gave powers to the throne of Alexandria, which became a centre of unity for the Church of Egypt in the Orthodox faith. Thus, the First Ecumenical Council introduced the metropolitan system into ecclesiastical administration, and this system made a province “like an autonomous administrative unit.”

The introduction of the metropolitan system certainly had negative repercussions as well, because “Arian-minded bishops, taking advantage of the administrative autonomy of each province, which had been adopted on account of the metropolitan system, quickly succeeded in becoming dominant in the East, and in displacing the Orthodox even from the most eminent thrones.”

It was precisely this problem, the tendency for Arian-minded bishops to take possession of the most eminent thrones in the East, that created another problem of who would judge “the bishops of the most eminent thrones.” As time passed, the tendencies “towards polyarchy, mass-rule, and sole supremacy among the bishops led to anarchy, which found expression particularly in the synods.”

This fact led the Fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council to adopt “supra-metropolitan prerogatives” and “they appointed as the highest administrative power the Great Synod of the diocese”, as a body. Thus, “the decisions of the Second Ecumenical Council prepared the ground for the formation of the patriarchal organisation of ecclesiastical administration.

Professor Vlassios Pheidas's studies show, therefore, that in the post-Apostolic Church, ecclesiastical administration was based on the synodical system of the relationship between the prerogatives of honour of the Mother Churches and the right to ordain. The First Ecumenical Council laid down the metropolitan system of administration. Immediately afterwards, however, the lack of a supra-metropolitan authority was ascertained, with regard to both the trial and the ordination of bishops. For this precise reason, from the Second Ecumenical Council until the Fourth there was a struggle to subject the metropolitan polyarchy to the supra-metropolitan authority of the thrones of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. In this way the thrones of these Churches acquired power to judge bishops in law and to ordain, within the boundaries of their jurisdictions.

Before the Fourth Ecumenical Council the institution of the Pentarchy had taken shape "through the canonical order, in order to link the ecumenical canonical prerogatives of honour (preference being given a throne's witness in the matter of faith) with the right to ordain and try bishops", and it functioned as a supra-exarchal authority. After the decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, however, the institution of the Pentarchy functioned as a supra-metropolitan system based on the connection between the special prerogatives of honour and the supra-metropolitan right to ordain.

This means that, just as in the metropolitan system the authority of the metropolitan was associated with the provincial synod, so in the supra-metropolitan system the authority of the most eminent thrones of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem was associated with the patriarchal synods under them, which were made up of metropolitans and bishops from each ecclesiastical district. Thus, the metropolitan provincial synod elected the bishops and its own metropolitan, but the elected metropolitan was ordained by the appropriate archbishop or patriarch, or his representative.

From then on, the institution of the Pentarchy remained as it was until the departure of Old Rome from the Catholic Church. Every attempt to increase or decrease the number of the five patriarchal thrones was condemned to failure. Even the Church of Cyprus, although it possessed administrative autonomy, was not able to claim patriarchal rights, and its autonomy was regarded "as simply an administrative prerogative in the right of ordinations and judging bishops, which was exercised under the immediate supervision of the patriarchal thrones of the East, especially by the throne of Constantinople."

It is not possible here to undertake wider-ranging analyses of the institution of the

Pentarchy, but readers can, if they are looking for something more, refer to the two academic studies by Vlassios Phidas that have been mentioned, in order to become more fully informed about these issues.

It should only be emphasised that the Church, led by the Holy Spirit, Who illumined the deified Fathers, was organised, as time passed, into a system of interdependence, not of independence, to serve her unity as the Body of Christ and the salvation of Christians. This structure originally consisted of the arrangement of Churches into mothers and daughters, and according to how significantly the thrones had preserved the Orthodox faith and tradition. However, the administrative structure of the Roman state also contributed.

The Roman (Byzantine) Empire was actually divided into prefectures, dioceses and provinces. The prefectures were large administrative areas, which were further divided into individual parts called dioceses, and, of course, each diocese was made up of provinces. From time to time various changes were made to the demarcation of these areas. We therefore have the division of the Roman state in the early fourth century, after the administrative reforms of Diocletian; the division of the Roman state after the death of Constantine the Great; and the administrative division of the Roman state after the date of Theodosius the Great.

According to the administrative division of the Roman state after the death of Constantine the Great, there were three prefectures: the prefecture of Gaul, the prefecture of Italy, Africa and Illyricum, and the prefecture of the East.

The Church adopted the administrative structure of the Roman state, so the bishop of the principal city of the diocese was called the exarch of the diocese, and the bishop of the principal city of the province was called the metropolitan. Every province, of course, was divided into individual districts (*enories* 'parishes'). In the light of this analysis, we can understand the provincial synods, with the metropolitan as *protos*, and the dioceses, with the exarch of the diocese as *protos*.

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that the ancient Orthodox Patriarchates of Old Rome, New Rome – Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, as well as the Autocephalous Church of Cyprus, were a development of the metropolitan systems, and were recognised by the Ecumenical Councils, on condition that they were administered on the basis of the sacred Canons of the Local and Ecumenical Councils. Consequently, in their case the thirty-fourth Apostolic Canon, and everything that refers to the *Protos*, is implemented. The *Protos* is the head of the metropolitans, and the metropolitans make up the synod around the *Protos*. The administrative system, therefore, is episcopal and synodical.

In the eleventh century (1099 AD), after various events, Old Rome was cut off from the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs of the East, and the throne of New Rome – Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarch, was left as *Protos*, without Old Rome.

From the sixteenth century onwards, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, on its own, gave patriarchal dignity and honour to various local Churches, which were to be ratified by a future Ecumenical Council. The Patriarchate of Moscow was an exception, because the patriarchal dignity and honour that was initially given by the Ecumenical Patriarch was recognised by the Patriarchs of the East. Also, the Ecumenical Patriarchate on its own granted other autocephalies.

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The above words were written seventeen years ago! I want to point out here that these are my ecclesiological convictions, which do not alter or change with the passage of time, because they are basic ecclesiological principles.

What conclusions can be drawn from the text cited above?

**Firstly.** The Fathers of the Church at the Ecumenical Councils, through the sacred Canons, organised the visible unity of the Church, so that she would be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

In this way, starting from the first Apostolic Churches, there was an organic development and evolution of the organisation of the ecclesiastical system, such that the Fathers advanced from the metropolitan system to “supra-metropolitan prerogatives”, then to the patriarchal system, and finally to the institution of the Pentarchy of thrones.

**Secondly.** The sacred institution of the Pentarchy did not function in the first millennium as five independent heads, like “fiefdoms or ecclesiastical states

foreign to one another” (Panagiotis Trembelas), nor as “individual authorities [kephalarchies]”, but “like the senses of one head, five in number and indivisible” (Balsamon), because there is one head of the Church, Christ. The term Autocephalous Churches should be understood as self-administering Churches, and not as Churches that are independent of the Church as a whole. The first throne was that of Old Rome, and the throne of New Rome – Constantinople had equal prerogatives of honour with it.

**Thirdly.** Since the eleventh century (1009), when the Church of Old Rome departed from the Pentarchy, the Church has functioned as a Tetrarchy. The Church of New Rome – Constantinople, therefore, became the first-throne Church and had all the powers of the Church of Old Rome.

The Bishop of New Rome, the Ecumenical Patriarch, acquired special dignity and honour in the time of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, but also under Turkish domination, through the system of ethnarchy instituted by Mehmed the Conqueror. This also influenced the manner in which the Tetrarchy of the thrones of the East functioned, together with the Autocephalous Church of Cyprus.

**Fourthly.** In the sixteenth century (1589) the Ecumenical Patriarch gave patriarchal dignity and honour to the Metropolitan of Moscow, and this was recognised by the other Patriarchs of the East (in 1590 and 1593). Later, the Ecumenical Patriarch, on his own, also granted autocephalies and patriarchal dignities and honours to various local Churches, and these, of course, have been recognised in practice by all the Churches, because all the Primate take part in Divine Liturgies and synods, with some exceptions.

**Fifthly.** The Church of Moscow, with the theory of the ‘Third Rome’, which it has cultivated and since the fifteenth century until today, not only undermines the position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as *Protos* in the canonical system of organisation in the Orthodox Church, but in practice promotes itself as the first Church with power and strength, as is clear on the issue of Ukraine.

If one adds that, from the nineteenth century onwards, a particular theology has developed, according to which Russian theology is superior both to patristic theology up until the eighth century, and to the scholastic theology of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, one sees clearly that the ‘Third Rome’ issue not only has a geopolitical foundation, but also a post-patristic theological basis.

To take an objective view of things, it must, of course, be pointed out that the theories of some contemporary theologians are also invalid, when they find an



analogy for the Protos of the Church within the mystery of the Holy Trinity, into Which, contrary to Orthodox belief, they introduce a hierarchy!! The canonical institution of the Church, which has a *Protos* within the synodical and hierarchical regime of the Church, is not the same as the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is utterly inaccessible to human beings.

We ought, therefore, to respect the canonical institution of the Church, as it was laid down by the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils, and we should not undermine it. What is more, we should respect the first-throne Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Even when it makes some mistakes, we ought to express our thoughts with respect, discretion and honour, without demolishing and undermining the sacred institution of the Church, which was established by the Holy Spirit, Who enlightened the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils to define it.

It is impossible in ecclesiastical issues, as in other matters, to apply the principle of drastic over-reaction – “cutting of your head because you have a headache”, as the Greeks say. In that case, we would become matricides and patricides, and undermine the work of the holy Fathers.

In a future article I shall refer particularly to the term *Autocephalous Church*, because I believe that it is misinterpreted by many people.

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– Source: [parembasis.gr](http://parembasis.gr)