

THE SYNOD RESTORED: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF CYPRUS

Marios Sarris

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Nicosia

The history of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus can be traced back to late antiquity. Two main layers of administration marked civic life in the eastern Mediterranean in Hellenistic times. The imperial structures of Alexander and his epigones ranked supreme to all other forms of authority. At a lower level of governance, the independent city-states of the classical era were allowed to confederate and maintain most of their civic functions. These regional associations came to be known as "Commons" (Κοινά) and could be found all over the Greek-speaking world. Their responsibilities extended to coinage, athletic games and religious festivals among other things. The creation of the "Common of Cypriots" (Κοινὸν Κυπρίων) marked the time when Cypriots entered world history as a unified polity.

This decentralized model of local government extended to the Roman period, when Christianity started spreading to the Greek world. As a result, the organization of the early Church was modeled on that of the existing civic structures and developed to resemble the con-federal arrangement of the Commons. This was bound to occur since early Christianity did not grow in a socio-cultural vacuum. Doctrine gradually emerged to legitimize the essentially "con-federal" and democratic character that Orthodox Church Synods acquired at both the local and ecumenical levels. In the Orthodox iconographic depiction of the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appears in the form of tongues of fire which are 'cloven', descending *separately* upon each of the apostles. In Orthodox symbolic terms, this is equal to a divine maxim granting equal voting rights to all members of a Synod, irrespective of the size of the flock that each hierarch shepherds. An extreme manifestation of this principle can be seen in the Ecumenical Synod where the voting power of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia(s) equals that of the Head of the autocephalous Church of Sinai – an abbot managing a handful of Greek monks in the desert. In this essentially "con-federal" arrangement, the sheer logic of the "one-man-one-vote" principle informs what the Greeks call "synodical democracy" and safeguards against the possibility of a big Church dominating the small ones.

In the Orthodox Tradition, a Church is granted autocephaly on the grounds of its apostolic foundation. On this premise, an autocephalous Church remains in communion and doctrinal agreement with other Orthodox Churches but it can run its own affairs independently. It can do so as long as it maintains a minimum of thirteen bishops in accordance with the apostolic precedent of Jesus and his twelve disciples. As for the Head of the Orthodox Church, local or ecumenical, he remains "first among equals". His privileges are generally reduced to the rights of convening and representing his Synod. In most other respects, he remains equal to the other bishops or patriarchs. The Head of the Church is subordinate to his Synod in the same spirit that the Synod is

subordinate to him. This means that the Head can not take decisions without the consent of the majority in the Synod, and the majority of Synod members can not take decisions without the consent of the Head. The Head's views on key issues express the views of his Church only to the extent that they have been approved by majority vote in the Synod. Once decisions are reached by majority rule in the Synod, the minority has to abide by them in both word and deed.

The authority of the Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus was much reduced during Latin rule. The Latin rulers of Cyprus reduced the Orthodox Synod to four bishops whom they forced to establish bishoprics in rural centers. The adversity of the measures taken against the Orthodox Church owed less to the religious hostility that the Latins felt towards the local Greeks and more to the politics of administration. The relatively democratic, con-federalist and decentralized nature of Orthodox Church organization was compatible with a system of small land-holding but not with the large estate feudalism that the Latins introduced to Cyprus after the twelfth century. The partial displacement and subordination of the Greek clergy to the Latin Church in Cyprus re-addressed the relationship between the island's economic infra-structure and its political supra-structure.

The Latin measures had immense repercussions on the Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus. Since then, the island's Orthodox Church remained autocephalous only *in name*. On major issues concerning the Church, the Synod could not take decisions as it had not been a "Full Synod" (Πλήρης Σύνοδος) of at least thirteen member bishops. On some occasions in the post-independence period, archbishops convened a "Greater Synod" (Μεϊζων Σύνοδος) in order to resolve matters that threatened stability in the Church. Hierarchs from other Greek Churches and Patriarchates were invited to participate in the Cypriot Synod in order to have a quorum of at least thirteen members. In a situation like this, the archbishop invites the Heads of the ancient Patriarchates to send three individuals of their choice each to man the Greater Synod. Combined with the archbishop's privilege of determining the timing of the Greater Synod, this gives him a relative advantage in influencing the outcome of the Synod's proceedings. This may well explain why successive archbishops since the end of Latin rule lacked the incentive of restoring the Synod to its former membership.

As late as modern times, the Church faced difficulties recovering from the blow that it suffered to its structures in the twelfth century. Whenever the Church faced a controversy, the archbishop called the shots by convening a Greater Synod and inviting outsiders to attend. This state of affairs was a far cry from the "synodical democracy" of the Greeks, and did little to enhance the independence of the local Church. Chrysostomos II will go into the history books as the archbishop-reformer who, upon his election to the throne in November 2006, re-instituted all the bishoprics that the Latins had abolished. By March 2008, when the last bishop was consecrated, the Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus could boast a full Synod of seventeen bishops. In doing so, Chrysostomos enjoyed the support of the rest of the Synod. If there is one

thing that all Cypriot bishops agree upon, it is their resentment of outsiders meddling in their own affairs. The enlarged Synod is a fully functioning body in need of no external assistance.