

Pan-Orthodox Episcopal Assemblies: recent developments

a talk by Bishop Basil of Amphipolis

to the Community of St. Nicholas

on Saturday August 22nd 2009,

In June 2009 there was a meeting of fourteen Orthodox bishops from all local Orthodox churches, held in Chambésy-Geneva in Switzerland, and convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch. This was the fourth such gathering (the “Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference”), the previous one having been held in 1993. This fourth conference reiterated the conclusions of the previous one, and went further, in that it now called for the formation of pan-Orthodox Episcopal Assemblies in the lands of the Orthodox diaspora.

1. Chambésy: New developments

There have been many changes in the intervening period, such as the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, leading to significant immigration from Eastern to Western Europe. This represents a dramatic sociological change for Orthodoxy in Western Europe. As a result, the structures inherited from the past have become stretched, and new structures have appeared.

The previous conferences at Chambésy were mainly concerned with bringing order to the chaos of the Orthodox diaspora. This time, the bishops discussed setting up “Episcopal Assemblies” in the diaspora regions (Western Europe, North America, Australia, etc.) in order to bring together all Orthodox bishops in the region. Britain is one of these areas, and Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira (the most senior hierarch in the UK) would chair Britain’s Episcopal Assembly. The Assemblies will enable co-operation between existing but overlapping jurisdictions (a problem that does not occur in the traditionally Orthodox lands of Greece, Russia, etc). The difference between the outcomes of the third and fourth conferences at Chambésy is that each Assembly now has the task of developing a programme to move towards the situation where there is only one Orthodox bishop in each city. This is the canonical Orthodox situation of territorial dioceses, with no overlapping jurisdictions. However, moving towards this situation will be a very difficult task.

2. Historical background

One could ask: how did this situation arise in Western Europe? It is of recent origin, being less than a hundred years old. Until the start of the twentieth century, there was no resident Orthodox Bishop in Western Europe, only individual churches and chapels, such as those at embassies, run from abroad (eg. Russia). This means that the priest’s authority in each case derived from an overseas hierarch. In addition, there was a very small number of parish churches in centres of shipping, under the Ecumenical Patriarch.

In 1920, the Russian bishops who found their way to the Balkans gained permission from the Ecumenical Patriarch to set up churches in Western Europe. However, in 1921 they placed themselves directly under the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate. This meant that, for the first time, there were resident Orthodox bishops in Western Europe. Hence the situation of the diaspora is due to economic and political factors, and is less than a hundred years old.

All Orthodox churches accept that the current situation is untenable. Hence, the Episcopal Assemblies (that is, the people on the ground) have been asked to resolve it, rather than imposing a solution from above. To date, the only place where this has been done is France, which has an inter-Episcopal Assembly, meeting once a month: the AEOF (Assemblée des Evêques Orthodoxes de France). A similar but less structured group meets in Germany. The USA has SCOBA (Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America). However, SCOBA has no canonical status or authority, and is very loosely structured. The outcome of the Chambésy decision is that this topic will be discussed at a high level for several years.

The idea of a “national church” dates only from the nineteenth century, and is linked with the idea of the “nation-state”, which dates from the Napoleonic Wars. In Orthodox terms, this is very recent. Napoleon mobilised the whole population for his wars, for the first time. Previously, wars had been fought between small armies only, and had not involved the population as a whole. With the development of the idea of the nation-state, the nineteenth century saw the creation of the Church of Greece, of Bulgaria, of Romania, etc. Previously, these areas had simply been considered part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

3. Answers given during the “question and answer” session afterwards

- a) There are seven Orthodox bishops actually resident in the UK, across all jurisdictions
- b) The recent conference at Chambésy included the Moscow Patriarchate.
- c) The UK needs to have an Orthodox seminary, in order to develop a common culture among the Orthodox priests in the UK. This is because, in future, there might be a situation where, for example, a Serbian priest might have a Greek bishop.
- d) The Episcopal Assemblies will work towards becoming bodies with decision-making powers. This development requires a certain amount of local autonomy.
- e) Up to the time of the Crusades, there was a system of five Patriarchates, as follows:
Jerusalem (this was the only one which was not a missionary Patriarchate);
Constantinople for the lands north of Jerusalem;
Antioch for the lands east of Jerusalem;
Alexandria for the lands south of Jerusalem;
Rome for the lands west of Jerusalem
This pattern was broken when Rome began to appoint bishops in the territory of other Patriarchates. However, the Orthodox Church has never appointed a bishop for Rome.
- f) The canonical jurisdiction of (for example) the Patriarch of Romania is Romania. He has no authority outside Romania. However, the Romanian bishop in Paris exercises that jurisdiction (eg. by moving a priest from one parish to another), which is against the canons of the Orthodox Church. There is no such thing as an ethnic church.
- g) The Patriarch of Alexandria has never created an autocephalous church: only the Ecumenical Patriarch has done this. Internal autonomy is another matter, and it is the thing to aim at, as no more than this is needed. Autocephaly has been a problem, and the long-term effect of granting autocephaly has led to unintended consequences.
- h) The four Chambésy conferences spring from meetings in the nineteen-sixties in Rhodes, where the bishops decided to set up a body that would initiate action in the case of the diaspora. It is accepted that it is the task of the Ecumenical Patriarch to convene these meetings on behalf of the other Patriarchates.
- i) The important thing for us to remember in the UK, is that we are living in the Patriarchate of Rome.

Report by Ninian (Briony Williams) and approved for publication by Bishop Basil.