

The Bishop in the Tradition of the Eastern Church

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Abstract

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Archbishop Joseph provides a synthetic overview of the office of bishop as understood in Eastern Christian theology, weaving together biblical, canonical, patristic, historical, and liturgical threads to show how richly multifaceted the office is. The bishop may be understood as an image of each of the Persons of the Trinity, with the Holy Spirit in particular showing all bishops to be equally yoked in the Lord. This equality is manifested, Raya says, through their collegiality, which is expressed concretely in local synods, ecumenical councils, and the profession of faith made upon the election of a new hierarch – and, in the case of patriarchs, sent to their brother patriarchs. The author then considers the role of the bishop in the search for Christian unity and, quoting *Ut Unum Sint*, goes on to provide a unique perspective on how to achieve Orthodox-Catholic unity through what some have called the “Zoghby formula.”



Introduction

Tradition, an important and even sacred word in the Christian mind (in Latin, *traditio*; in Greek, *paradosis*), represents the whole body of teachings and practices that keep the truths of the gospel alive. Christ’s instructions were implanted in the hearts and minds of His apostles who, in turn, passed them on to the bishops who succeeded them. From generation to generation, Tradition has been an intimate part of the life of

the Church. Tradition, according to the mind of the Fathers, is something sacred, immutable in its essence, alive and dynamic, coming down to us from the Lord Himself.

When Christ revealed His divinity in the course of the Transfiguration, every detail of His life and work was proven to be true. He warned the apostles not to tell of these until the day of His resurrection. He also told them that “there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, and nothing hidden that shall not be known. What I tell in the darkness, you shall proclaim over the housetops” (Matthew 10:27). This command is the very source and origin of Tradition: that which was given in obscurity to the first apostles of the Lord has been handed down by them to their successors, the bishops, and, perforce, to the whole Church.

The bishop is the main witness to the Lord in His Church. He is the servant of the community, protecting the people of God and upholding their dignity by reminding them of all that the gospel teaches. The bishop recognizes the face of his flock, shares in their suffering, rejoices in their blessings, and acts as index and measure of their union with God and with each other. According to the Acts of the Apostles, “the Holy Spirit has established you as bishops [*episcopoi*] in order to feed the Church of God” (20:28). The bishop feeds his people with the Eucharist and so binds them together in unity and harmony. Just as all the apostles together supported the Church, so too do all the bishops act not as overlords but as supporters for the whole Body of Christ, building it up in unity. As Saint Cyprian would write:

this is what constitutes a Church: the people united to their own high priest, the sheep following the shepherd. You must understand that a bishop is constituted by his Church and a Church by her bishop. Whoever is not with his bishop is not in his Church (*Ep.* 66,8).

The Bishop: Image of the Trinity*i) Bishop: Image-Type of the Father*

The bishop is an expression of God the Father. In addition to being an image of the Father, the bishop is also an image of the Son, whom the Father sent to redeem humanity and all creation, and of the Holy Spirit, who was sent to keep the Church in the power of the truth until the end of time. The bishop is an “event,” a “happening,” and not the mere guardian of an institution. He is the consecrated successor of the apostles not only by the imposition of hands by other bishops at his ordination but by the Holy Spirit Himself, who, in the words of the prayer at the imposition of hands, “supplies what is lacking.”

The bishop is the father of his particular Church and as such is an image or type of God the Father who gives life, heals, sustains, and nourishes. As a father, the bishop is to give life and restore life, which he does chiefly through the sacraments. As Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “apart from the bishop, it is not lawful either to baptize or to hold the sacred meal.” In addition to baptism and the Eucharist, the bishop also heals sinners through his steady gentleness in upholding the law of Moses and every law received from Christ. Patterning himself after Christ, who freely disregarded certain laws in favour of a higher good – as in, for example, the case of the woman taken in adultery whose stoning was demanded by the law – the bishop also is able to take note of situations where the strict observance of the law may be opposed to Christ’s spirit of mercy and, making use of the principle of *oikonomia*, relax or bypass certain laws for the good of his flock.¹ Such an action is an extension of the divine

¹ The word *oikonomos* is based on two Greek roots, *oikos*, which means “house,” and *nomos*, which means rule. The compound therefore referred originally to the sound administration of a home or business. The *oikonomos* is the person of order and harmony, good judgment and managing skill. In Greek literature, the pre-eminent exemplar of this is God, creator of the order and beauty of the universe. In both the Old and New Testaments, the word *oikonomia* is often used to mean the good administration of the house of God. In the Church, the bishop is the *oikonomos*.