

Strictness and Economy with regard to Ordinations of those outside the Orthodox Church

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Translation of the Greek text: «Ακρίβεια καί οἰκονομία γιά τίς χειροτονίες τῶν ἐκτός τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας»

An important subject that recurs from time to time in our discussions is how the ‘clergy’ of schismatic and heretical groups should be received when they come into the Orthodox Church. This is, of course, connected with the Apostolic Tradition and the Apostolic Succession. However, since there are many detailed circumstances, on each occasion there is an investigation of the specific case and of the preconditions under which the clerical ‘ordinations’ took place.

In an article published under the title *Apostolic Tradition and Apostolic Succession in the Mystery of the Church*, I have already touched on this serious issue, from the perspective of Orthodox theology and ecclesiology.

However, in my search for more information on this subject, I found three texts that put in perspective how the Church throughout the ages has dealt with the ordinations of schismatics and heretics, and how the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church receives such ‘members of the clergy’ who come to her.

1. Analysis of the Subject by Professor Panagiotis Trembelas

Professor Panagiotis Trembelas, in the third volume of his *Dogmatics of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, includes a chapter headed ‘Invalid Ordinations and Reordinations’ (Panagiotis Trembelas, *Dogmatiki tis Orthodoxou Katholikes Ekklesias*, vol. 3, pub. Brotherhood of Theologians *O Sotir*, Athens 1961, pp. 314-319). In it he briefly sets out the basic principles of Orthodox ecclesiology, as they appear in the Canons of the Church and in her tradition on the subject of ordinations outside the Church.

I shall summarise his thoughts, because he was a conservative theologian and presumably his view is of interest.

At the beginning of his text he mentions that there are two principles in the Church with regard to the issue of ordinations.

The first principle is that, for an ordination to be valid, it is essential that the one being ordained should bend his neck of his own free will “under the hand of the one performing the ordination”, but the one performing the ordination must also pass on the charisma “far removed from any fraud or deceit, or any kind of coercion.”

The second principle is that the sacraments performed by schismatics or heretics outside the Church “are invalid according to the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, there is no salvation outside the Church.

With regard to the first principle, the ordination of Bishop Novatian was questioned because he tricked three bishops into coming to Rome “by deceit”, and in a drunken state “he forced them to give him the office of bishop by a fictitious and empty laying-on of hands.” In the same way, the Second Ecumenical Council decreed in its fourth Canon: “Concerning Maximus the Cynic and the disorder which has happened in Constantinople on his account, it is decreed that Maximus never was and is not now a bishop; that those who have been ordained by him are in no order whatever of the clergy; since all which has been done concerning him or by him, is declared to be invalid.”

A distinction must be made between the invalid ordinations of Novation and Maximus the Cynic, on the one hand, and, on the others, “ordinations that do not follow a canonical election, which are declared invalid by the Canons.” These are ordinations that take place outside the boundaries, intrusions into another metropolis, or arbitrary appointments by canonically ordained bishops from their own diocese within the boundaries of other dioceses, as well as appointments of bishops’ successors or relatives contrary to the sacred Canons by those who formerly held the post.

Sacramentally, these ordinations are valid, and, if the appropriate authority wished to use those members of the clergy ordained outside the boundaries and uncanonically, they are not reordained, because in these cases the sixty-eighth Apostolic Canon, which forbids reordination with the penalty of being deposed, applies completely. Although these ordinations are sacramentally valid, nevertheless their appointment and all the rights of the ordained that derive from these ordinations are annulled, so they are regarded as ordinations “at large” (without reference to a particular church).

With regard to the second principle, concerning the ordinations of schismatics and heretics, they are sacraments performed outside the Church, and “must be reckoned as completely invalid.” Therefore, clergy entering the One Holy Church from the heretics and schismatics “must be ordained.” This ordination is not counted as a second ordination, but as a valid first ordination.

Clergy who received ordination in the One Holy Church and subsequently strayed into heresy or schism, “when they repent and are accepted by the Church, even if they have been deposed in the meantime, are restored to the degree of the priesthood that they possessed, without reordination.” It is, however, clarified that, during the period when they were in a state of schism or heresy, as they had been deposed and repudiated by the One Church from which they received the charisma, this charisma of priesthood “was inactive and invalid.” Reference is made at this point to St Basil the Great’s teaching following the declaration by Cyprian and Firmilian that, when someone withdraws from communion with the Church, the transmission of grace is interrupted.

In this connection, the example of a conduit connected with a reservoir of water is used. The conduit brings water from the reservoir to various places. So, someone who receives the charisma of priesthood “becomes a conduit passing on divine grace to others as well”, provided that he is in unbroken communion with the steward of grace, the One Holy Church, drawing from her, as from an inexhaustible reservoir, the saving stream of the grace of the Holy Spirit,

both for himself and others. When, however, he breaks away from the One Holy Church, although he remains a conduit “on account of the indelibility of the priesthood”, because he is cut off from the one steward and life-giving reservoir of grace “remains an empty conduit, incapable of passing on any grace at all.”

Instead of a water pipe, we can use the example of the electricity cable, which, when it is connected with the socket, conveys electric current, but otherwise is just a cable.

This principle is established by the sixty-eighth Apostolic Canon, which forbids reordination, unless someone has been ordained by heretics. However, even in this case of ordinations by heretics, use was made of “the measure of ecclesiastical ‘economy’, always within limits and with conditions.” Thus, for heresies whose baptism is not recognised as valid, “their priesthood was also unswervingly rejected.” For those whose baptism is accepted according to economy, “their priesthood was not unswervingly recognised”, but some of them “were accepted into the clergy and into the order they possessed in the heresy, while it was declared that others should be reordained.” Relevant examples are mentioned from the Canons and the practice of the Church.

Referring to examples of Arians who returned to the Church, Professor Panagiotis Trembelas writes that the Church on each occasion examined each particular case. I shall cite the whole of the relevant passage.

“With regard to the points mentioned by St Athanasius the Great in his canonical epistle to Ruffinian, according to which some members of the clergy returning from the Arian delusion ‘who were leaders of impiety’ were forgiven when they repented, but were not given ‘the place of clergy’, whereas those who ‘did not instigate the impiety but who were only drawn away by force, or complied for fear the people should be corrupted, should be given forgiveness and have the place of the clergy too’, we observe that these clergy had very likely, if not certainly, received ordination in the One Holy Church, and had then broken away from the Church and fallen into heresy. Something similar could be observed with regard to bishops who were ordained by heretics who were acting within the One Catholic Church, such as Meletius of Antioch, Cyril of Jerusalem, Anatolius of Constantinople, Germanus of Constantinople and John of Jerusalem. They were not ordained in order to be bishops of the heresy professed by those who ordained them, nor did they believe the teachings of that heresy, but they believed in an Orthodox manner and were appointed from the beginning as bishops of Orthodox flocks of the One Catholic Church. The acts and ordinations of Peter Mongus (482-490), who seized the throne of Alexandria by a coup, were recognised as having taken place in the One Holy Church.”

It is noted that the use of economy does not create a permanent state, but it is adjusted accordingly by the Church, which evaluates the various circumstances. Professor Trembelas writes:

“Clearly, economy was often used, but this does not create a permanent state, but it depends on the Church, which judges the circumstances on each occasion and adjusts them, to make use of the measure of economy, when a more general benefit is

going to result, but to keep to exact strictness, when this prevents laxity and indifference, which could lead to destruction.”

He mentions relevant examples from the more recent practice of the Church.

Referring to a decision by a commission, which was set up by the Council of Constantinople, in favour of the validity of the ordination of clergy by deposed and schismatic bishops, he writes:

“Given that, as we have said already, the use of economy is not a measure that can be imposed by a law or canon that applies permanently, but depends on the circumstances, it was wrong for the commission set up in 1879 by the Holy Council of Constantinople to declare ‘in favour of the validity of the ordinations of clergy ordained by deposed and schismatic bishops.’ Only by economy could these ordinations be recognised, because, if this economy applied as a canon, all discipline in the Church would break down, and the boundaries of economy and strictness would be disastrously confused. Finally, with regard to the validity of Anglican ordinations, we note, that they must be regarded as sacraments performed outside the Church.”

In a footnote he makes a distinction between the instigators of the schism and their descendants, writing:

“Without doubt, the first ones who broke away from the Church and were deposed by her, as instigators of the insurrection, and who performed ordinations after their deposition, bear a very heavy responsibility, much heavier than those who were born generations later and found themselves in the schism, and are ministers in the schismatic Church. Those instigators, particularly at the moment when the schism is erupting, will be judged differently from their descendants, who, returning after the volcanic eruption has abated, ought undeniably to be received, making full use of every measure of leniency and economy.”

From this brief summary and presentation of the analysis made by Professor Panagiotis Trembelas, it is clear that the Church is a steward of divine grace; the Clergy are conduits that bring grace from the reservoir, and if they are not connected with the reservoir, they remain empty conduits. Also, the Church through the Councils decides on strictness and economy, on when there will be reordinations, and when the ordinations of clergy who were in schisms and heresies are recognised, after examining how someone received the priestly or episcopal charisma, and how he is approaching the One Holy Catholic Church, and examining whether more general benefit is going to result.

In this analysis one sees the strictness and the philanthropic spirit of the Church, but also the conservatism and breadth of mind of Professor Panagiotis Trembelas.

2. ‘Patriarch Photius: Questions...’

From the answers of St Photius the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople, to ten questions that were put to him, I shall cite the answer of this great Father to the fourth question. This

answer is significant for the manner in which the Church acts synodically with regard to ordinations by schismatics and heretics.

“Question 4: Which of those ordained by condemned heretics have not suffered any harm?”

Answer: Although Paul of Samosata was condemned, none of his own people was deposed, although they did the same things for which he was deposed. Although Nestorius was deposed, none of those ordained by him were deposed. Peter Mongus was deposed by St Proterius while he was still a priest; he assisted the assassin Timothy in the murder of Proterius, and after Timothy’s death he seized the throne of Alexandria and pronounced anathema every day on the Council of Chalcedon. Those who were ordained by him, although he was deposed, an assassin and a heretic, and although they were themselves heretics, nevertheless repented and were received. And Felix of Rome wrote to Emperor Zeno and described his decree, by which he expelled Peter from the Church, but accepted those who repented, as a divine edict, and with what he wrote he accuses him because he brought Peter, who was outside the Church, back into the Church, and expelled John. Meletius of Antioch, who was ordained by heretics in the place of Eustathius of Sebaste, was moved from there to Verroia, and was then made bishop of Antioch by them again; but although they were accused as heretics, he was received by the Church. Although Sergius, Pyrrhus and Macarius were expelled from the Church as heretics, those who were ordained by them were accepted when they repented. The same happened with those who were ordained by Macedonius the Pneumatomachian. The Romans deposed Acacius and pronounced anathema on him while he was still alive. After his death, however, when Justin became emperor after Anastasius, they sent a delegation to him and deleted him [Acacius] from the diptychs, when John was on the throne of Constantinople. However, they concelebrated with those whom he had ordained and were in communion with them. Those who were ordained by the heretics Anastasius and Nicetas were accepted by the Seventh Council. Also, Meletius was guilty of innumerable evils: he intruded into other bishops’ thrones, he grieved martyrs, he rebelled against his own patriarch and took his throne, he sided with Arius, and, according to Socrates, he offered sacrifice during the persecution. On account of all this he was deposed by Peter. However, although he was deposed many times, subsequently he received the name, if not the priesthood, of bishop.” [Patriarch Photius, *Ten Questions and Answers*, PG 104, 1224]

St Photius the Great’s answer is important with regard to the way in which the Church acts synodically in ordinations that were performed by schismatics and heretics. The Church makes a distinction between the instigators of the schisms and heresies and those who were ordained by them.

All the cases to which St Photius the Great refers are significant, but the case of Peter Mongus should be noted in particular. He was a heretic; he rejected the Fourth Ecumenical Council and fought against it; he was ordained by deposed bishops; and he was a murderer. However, the ordinations that he performed were accepted by the Church, when those who had been ordained repented.

Father George Metallinos has written about the life of Peter Mongus:

“Patriarch Peter III of Alexandria, surnamed ‘Mongus’ (477/82-490). A Monophysite ordained deacon by Dioscorus. He took part in the outrages against Flavian at the Robbers’ Council. He sided with Timothy Aelurus, the Monophysite patriarch, against the Orthodox Patriarch Proterius, and was exiled (454). After the death of the Emperor Marcian (457), Timothy Aelurus took the throne uncanonically, and Peter became his archdeacon. In 460 they were both exiled. The Orthodox Patriarch Timothy Salofaciolus stayed on the throne until 476, when, with the support of Emperor Basiliscus, Timothy Aelurus returned. He died the following year (31.7.477).

In the absence of Salofaciolus, the Monophysites elected Peter as his successor, who was said to have been ordained by only one bishop, Theodore of Antinoë. Salofaciolus, after many efforts, succeeded in having Peter exiled to Euchaita. According to information from Monophysite historians, the priest and steward of the Church of St John the Forerunner in Alexandria, John Talaia or Tabennisite, despite the prohibition of Emperor Zenon, managed to take the episcopal throne. Zenon, however, was in favour of Mongus, as an opponent of the Fourth Ecumenical Council. The *Henoticon* of Zeno (482), which Peter, wishing to return to Alexandria, was obliged to sign, turned against this Council, and Acacius collaborated in producing it. Talaia was expelled, and Peter convened a synod (482) against the Fourth Ecumenical Council. (Mansi VII, 1024, 1177. Evagrius *Eccl. Hist.* 3,15. Niceph. Kallistos, *Eccl. Hist.* 16,13, Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 130).

Monophysitism prevailed in Alexandria, but the *Henotikon* was equally displeasing to the Orthodox and many Monophysites, who broke away from Peter and were named *Acephaloi* [headless], as they no longer had a bishop. At the suggestion of the Orthodox of Egypt and Constantinople, Pope Felix III of Rome, by means of two synods (484 and 485), deposed and excommunicated Acacius, Peter Mongus and Peter the Fuller of Antioch as Monophysites (Acacian Schism, 484-519). The policy of Peter was two-faced, and for that reason he caused a great number of abnormalities in the Church of Alexandria. He died on 29.10.490, in the midst of this irregular situation. Together with Dioscorus, Timothy Aelurus, Peter the Fuller and Acacius, anathema was pronounced upon him by the *Formula Hormisdæ* (519)” (*Thriskeftiki kai Ithiki Enkyklopaideia* [*Religious and Ethic Encyclopaedia*] vol. 10, pp. 366-7).

Interpretation by St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain of the Sixty-Eighth Apostolic Canon

St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain is a great teacher of the Church of recent centuries and a canonist, because in the *Rudder* he managed to interpret correctly the Canons of the Local and Ecumenical Councils and to include the entire tradition of the Church. It should be noted that the Rudder that St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain composed was published with the approval of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

I shall now cite the sixty-eighth Apostolic Canon, which states that Clergy should not be reordained, as well as the ‘Interpretation’ and the ‘Concord’ of this Canon with other sacred Canons. This ‘Concord’ is the work of St Nicodemus.

Sixty-Eighth Apostolic Canon

“If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, shall receive from anyone a second ordination, let both the ordained and the ordainer be deposed; unless indeed it be proved that he had his ordination from heretics; for those who have been baptised or ordained by such people cannot be either of the faithful or of the clergy.”

Interpretation

For one to be ordained twice may be understood in different ways. Either because the one ordained has come to hold in contempt the one who ordained him, or because he thinks that he may receive more grace from the one who has ordained him the second time, on the ground that he has greater faith in him; or for some other such reason. Hence the present Canon ordains that if any bishop or presbyter or deacon accepts a second ordination from anyone, he shall be deposed from office as well as the one who performed the ordination. The sole exception is if it be proved that his ordination was performed by heretics. For all those who have been baptised or ordained by heretics cannot in any way whatsoever be Christians by virtue of this heretical baptism, or rather to say, pollution, nor priests and clergy by virtue of this heretical ordination. On this account there is no danger whatever in such people being baptised by Orthodox priests, and ordained by Orthodox bishops. In accordance with this, St Basil the Great writes to the Christians of Nicopolis saying: ‘I will never count as a true priest of Christ someone who has been ordained and has received the protection of the laity from the profane hands of heretics to the subversion of the Orthodox faith.’

Concord

Notwithstanding that the First Ecumenical Council in its Canon 8 accepted the ordinations performed by the Novatians, and the Council held at Carthage in its Canon 77 those performed by the Donatists, the fact remains that the Novatians, on the one hand, were not heretics, but schismatics, according to Canon 1 of Basil, whereas, on the other hand, the ordinations of the Donatists were accepted only by the Council held at Carthage on account of the great need and want which Africa had of clergy, according to its Canon 66. This is the same as saying that they accepted them by economy and as a matter of necessity. That is why the Council held in Italy refused to accept them, since it was in no such straits, according to Canon 77 of the same Council. Moreover, the Council held in Carthage, according to its Canon 101, required that all who ordained heretics, or who were ordained by heretics, or who accepted them to hold services should be fined ten litres of gold. Actually, too, the Seventh Ecumenical Council, though it did accept the ordinations performed by the heretics called Iconoclasts, (but

not, however, those performed by the chief leaders of the heresy, nor those performed by such of these heretics as cherished any rancour and who were not genuinely and truly repentant, as St Tarasius said; but only ordinations performed by those who followed the chief leaders of the heresy and of those who were truly and genuinely repentant: concerning which see the interpretation of the letter of Athanasius the Great to Ruffinian), and those who had been ordained by them and who held the Orthodox faith they did not reordain, as appears from its first act, but it did this by economy because of the great multitudes of Iconoclasts that was then in evidence; just as the Second Ecumenical Council accepted the baptism performed by some heretics by economy, as we have already said. In view of the fact that it did not make this temporal and circumstantial economy a dogmatic definition, it cannot be said to conflict with the present Apostolic Canon. Even the Patriarch Anatolius was ordained by the heretic Dioscorus and his heretical synod; and St Meletius of Antioch was ordained by Arians, according to Sozomenus (Book 4, ch. 28); and many others were ordained by heretics and were thereafter accepted by the Orthodox. But such cases are rare and due to the circumstances of the case, and they lack canonical strictness. Anything that is done according to circumstances and that is a rarity is not a law of the Church, both according to Canon 17 of the First-Second Council and according to Gregory the Theologian, and also according to the second act of the Council held in St Sophia, and according to that legal dictum which says: ‘Whatever is contrary to the Canons cannot be drawn upon as a model.’ Second ordinations of the Orthodox are also prohibited by Canon 57 of Carthage. Read also the interpretations and footnotes to Canons 46 and 47 of the Apostles.” (Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, *Pedalion*, Astir, Athens 1970, pp. 89-91; English translation based, with modifications and corrections, on *The Rudder*, translated by D. Cummings, Orthodox Christian Educational Society, Chicago 1957, pp. 119-122).

The faithfulness to the tradition and the magnanimity of St Nicodemus are absolutely clear.

4. Conclusion

The three texts that I quoted above (by Professor Panagiotis Trembelas, St Photius the Great and St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain) set out the perspective in which the Bishops in the Councils act, who have the responsibility for resolving serious theological and ecclesiological issues.

It is characteristic that Canon 6 of the Second Ecumenical Council describes Orthodox bishops as “administrators [*oikonomountas*] of the Churches”. The phrase “administrators of the Churches” is significant because the Greek word *oikonomountas* is linked with the English word ‘economy’ and refers us to the mystery of the incarnation of the Son and Word of God, which is a mystery of the divine economy. That is to say, it shows how God governed and managed, in His infinite charity and love for humankind, the consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve.

The root of the matter is that, according to strictness, there are no sacraments outside the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, but the Church receives the schismatics and heretics that come to her sometimes with strictness and sometimes with economy, depending on each case, with clear conditions and presuppositions. The ever-memorable Metropolitan Chrysostom Constantinides of Ephesus made a distinction on this subject between strictness and economy (Chrysostom Constantinides, Metropolitan of Ephesus, Professor of Dogmatic Theology, *I anagnorisi ton Mystirion ton Eterodoxon stis diachronikes scheseis Orthodoxias kai Romaiokatholikismou* [*The Recognition of the Sacraments of the Heterodox in Ongoing Relations between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism*], Epektasi 1995.

The Church is not a Public Prosecutor to pronounce verdicts of guilt or innocence, but a spiritual hospital that heals.

Consequently, exactness and economy are the “two kinds of government and correction” which are “observed in the Church of Christ”, according to the apt comment by St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain in his interpretation of another Apostolic Canon (Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, *Pedalion*, pp. 53-54, footnote; cf. *The Rudder*, p. 70, footnote). And it should be emphasised that both for strictness and for economy or making concessions in resolving various problems, a prerequisite is the synodical resolution of deified bishops, who act and make decisions by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And when one Council makes a mistake, this is corrected by another Orthodox Council. In general, when such issues arise as those in Ukraine today, the Church ought to deal with them through strictness and economy, on a case-by-case basis. I was impressed by St Paisios of the Holy Mountain’s reply to a monk who asked him about something, according to the authentic witness of one of his closest disciples, Hieromonk Paisios.

Hieromonk Paisios writes:

“A monk whom I know asked the Elder about the topic of transplants and the Elder replied that the Church would speak on that subject. Even on more serious subjects on which the Elder had expressed an opinion, he would say that, if the Church were to take a different view, we should follow the Church. Only on subjects that were not serious, on which the Church had not taken a view, could someone express himself.” (Hieromonk Paisios, *Myron ekkenothen, elkuomenoi apo to aroma tou agiou Paisiou* [*Myrrh poured out: Drawn by the aroma of St Paisios*], pub. Holy Monastery of St Hilarion, Promachoi, Aridaia, 1st edn 2019, pp. 41-42).

This is a genuinely ecclesiastical way of thinking.

In my next article I shall take courage to submit a proposal for a possible solution to the serious issue that has arisen in Ukraine, to prevent this state from becoming permanent and from developing into a serious schism between the Orthodox Churches.

I think that today, over and above the historical, canonical and theological analyses, serious proposals need to be made for solving the issue. These proposals will be further developed by responsible ecclesiastical leaders.