

# **The Practice of Authority and Jurisdiction in the Coptic Orthodox Tradition**

**By Metropolitan Bishop**

According to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church:

“The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria is an Apostolic Church which is intimately bound with other Oriental Orthodox Churches through the unity of faith and the ecclesiastical Tradition and Sacraments.” (Article No. 1).

According to this, the Church of Alexandria considers that she is not going to claim any type of authority and jurisdiction over other Oriental Orthodox Churches, while they are in full communion with her.

The Constitution and By-laws continues to state:

“The priestly presidency of the Apostolic Alexandrine Seat extends to the whole See of St Mark inside and outside Egypt.” (Article No. 2).

“The Holy Synod is the highest priestly authority in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Both the clergy and all the people are subjected to this authority.” (Article No. 4).

“The clergymen are the bishops, the priests, and the deacons. The bishopric status includes His Holiness the Pope and Patriarch, the Catholicos, the Metropolitans, the Bishops whether diocesan or general or auxiliary bishops. The auxiliary bishop is a full-fledged bishop from the point of view of his bishopric status; but from the pastoral viewpoint, he assists another bishop.” (Article No. 5).

“The Holy Synod is composed of the Pope and Patriarch who is its head, and all those who carry the rank of episcopacy, abbots, chori-episcopis, the Patriarchal vicars who are its members.” (Article No. 6).

“Membership of the Holy Synod is lifelong for all the bishops according to their occupation for other members. This membership is dropped without exception in case of those who go against the landmarks of the right Christian faith, or those who are heretical or insane, or those who ought to be deposed or excommunicated according to church Canon laws. This is only possible through a judgment issued by the Holy Synod after an official trial according to the Tradition of the church. In this case, the person is given the chance to defend himself, unless he is obstinate and refuses to be present. An official

sentence is then pronounced and signed by the members of the Holy Synod.” (Article No. 7).

The Constitution and By-laws of the Holy Synod determined the Jurisdictions and Responsibilities of the Holy Synod as follows:

“The Holy Synod is the highest legislative authority in the Church. It has the power to issue rules and regulations for the church as deemed fit. It can also issue internal by-laws related to the ordination and the versatile church services as needed. It is authorized to lessen punishments and issue by-laws for trials and punishments.” (Article No. 8).

“The Holy Synod is the highest judging authority in the church. It has the power to try any person who holds a priestly rank or any layman who is accused of going against the church or its teaching. The Synod may also re-open any church judgments issued against a priest or a layman.” (Article No. 9).

“The Holy Synod is the highest responsible body for faith and doctrine. It can explain the corner-stones of the faith without going against what has been handed down and fixed. In this wise it has the authority to revise books which deal with church education and give judgments therein.” (Article No. 10).

“The Holy Synod is the first reference to church rites.” (Article No. 11).

“Statements issued by the Holy Synod are final. Only the Holy Synod can review what has been done before, should conditions change. It may forgive, for instance, a guilty person, or a person who gave up his heresy, and may give its judgment as deemed fit.” (Article No. 12).

“The Holy Synod is concerned with the process of papal election and with those who let their names stand and then with the consecration or enthronement ceremony. It also participates with the Pope in the ordination of bishops.” (Article No. 13).

“The Holy Synod is also concerned with legislation of the relation with other churches in the light of the faith of the church and the teaching of its fathers.” (Article No. 14).

The Primacy over the Holy Synod:

“The Holy Synod meets under the Primacy of the Pope. It can never meet without him throughout his life.” (Article No. 15).

“There are two exceptions to this rule:

A. If the Pope is not feeling well severely, and is unable to talk or think according to the prescriptions of recommended physicians and this is witnessed true by more than half of the members.

B. If more than half of the members ask the Pope for the Holy Synod to convene, and he refuses to comply with their request, while this is possible for him.

In these two cases the Holy Synod may convene without the primacy of the Pope; in this case the oldest of the attending Metropolitans and Bishops presides over the meeting.”

(Article No. 16).

“In case the Patriarchal Throne is vacant because the Pope is deceased or his priestly status is dropped according to the 7th article of this constitution, the Locum tenens of the Pope of Alexandria and the Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark shall preside over the meeting of the Holy Synod.” (Article No. 17).

“The primate marshals the affairs of the general meetings of the Holy Synod. He may attend and preside over any of its committees.” (Article No. 18).

#### Convening of the Holy Synod:

“Invitations signed by His Holiness the Pope are sent to the members indicating that the Holy Synod would convene.” (Article No. 36).

“The Holy Synod convenes regularly twice a year.” (Article No. 38).

“The Holy Synod may convene on any sudden occasion for an important reason.”

(Article No. 39).

“The Holy Synod may convene if more than half the members submit a request.” (Article No. 40).

“The regular meeting is legal if two thirds of all of the members are present.” (Article No. 41).

“A decision of the Synod is legal if three quarters of the members voted for it.” (Article No. 43)

#### The Primate and the members of the Holy Synod:

“The primate of the Holy Synod is the Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch, the successor to the Evangelist St Mark the Apostle. He is the Bishop of Alexandria and Cairo. As the Bishop of the Great City of Alexandria he is also the Archbishop of the See of Saint Mark according to the Canons of the Ecumenical Council of Nicea.” (Article No. 49).

The 6th Canon of the Holy Ecumenical Council of Nicea (325) states as follows:

“The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places, since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome. Similarly in Antioch and the other provinces the prerogatives of the churches are to be preserved.

In general the following principle is evident: If anyone is made bishop without the consent of the metropolitan<sup>1</sup>, this great synod determines that such a one shall not be a bishop. If however two or three by reason of personal rivalry dissent from the common vote of all, provided it is reasonable and in accordance with the church’s canon, the vote of the majority shall prevail.” (Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Norman P. Tanner, Vol. I, Sheed & Ward Georgetown Univ. Press, 1990, p.8, \*9)

The constitution and By-laws of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church continues defining the functions of the primate and members of the Holy Synod as follows:

“The Pope in association with the Bishops who are the members of the holy Synod ordains the new Bishops and promotes the Bishops to the status of Metropolitans and Catholicoi.” (Article No. 53).

“The Pope is responsible for the general affairs of the Church. He represents it nationally and in front of other churches and all official religious organizations.” (Article No. 54).

“The Pope is the Supervisor General over all the Coptic monasteries. He appoints the Abbots.” (Article No. 55).

#### The Metropolitans and the Bishops of the Dioceses:

“The Metropolitans and the Bishops of the dioceses are their pastors and the primates of their clergy; each of them is responsible for all the churches of his diocese, all its parishes and its monasteries (except the monasteries that are affiliated to the Patriarchate), in addition to their pastoral, financial and administrative affairs.” (Article No. 58).

“The Bishop ordains the priests and deacons in his diocese. He consecrates churches, altars, baptisteries, icons, altar and service vessels. He pastoralizes his people

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<sup>1</sup> See Apostolic Canons 34-35 (CSP24; trans. Percival 596).

as he is handed the pastoral staff by the hand of His Holiness the Pope. He joins the Pope in Apostolic service in the membership of the Holy Synod, the ordination of new Bishops and the Episcopal work.” (Article No. 59).

“A new bishop is chosen after the consent of the people and after they recommend and acclaim him, and also with the approval of His Holiness the Pope of this acclamation, on condition that he should fulfill the spiritual and personal conditions according to the teaching of the scriptures and church rules. If the majority of the members of the Holy Synod object to this ordination, then it must be stopped.” (Article No. 60).

The ministry of the bishop is well described in the epistles of Ignatius the Theophorus early in the second century as follows:

“See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administrated] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid.” (Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, chap. VIII: 1, ANF, vol.1, pp.89, 90).

“Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show faith] the unity of His blood; one altar; as there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow servants: that so whatsoever ye do, ye may do it according to [the will of] God.” (Epistle to the Philadelphians, chap. IV: 1, ANF, vol.1, pp.81).

In the Coptic Orthodox Church the presbyters and the deacons are playing a big role in the life of the church according to the Apostolic Tradition. In every diocese the bishop is the head of the clerical council, with the presbyters as members.

Each parish church has a board, with the priest presiding and the deacons as members. Everything is done under the supervision of the bishop.

Any ordination in the church is carried out according to the acclamation of the people and consent of the bishop.

All the priestly ranks in the church are affected after the acclamation of the people so that the people are always sharing in the life of the church according to the Eucharistic model, where the Eucharist should be celebrated together with the people, as explained in the Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans (chap. VIII: 1).

An illustrative diagram is attached to explain the frame of performing Authority & Jurisdiction in the Coptic Orthodox Tradition.