

The Bishop's Liturgical and Sacramental Responsibility

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According to the oldest historical testimonies, the bishop has naturally been, since the beginning, the center of all religious life of Christian communities in every local Church. As primate of the Christian Church, the bishop had the fullness of the priesthood ministering power. In exercising his liturgical function, the bishop is the Savior Himself, as High Priest and Hierarch¹.

1. The Importance of Episcopal Dignity

The Confession of Faith of Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem, published in Bucharest three centuries ago², is a true synthesis of our Orthodox theology and spirituality on the liturgical and sacramental ministry and responsibility of the bishop. The learned patriarch made a careful description and a precise definition of the teaching about the episcopate in its traditional-patristic meaning.

Thus, the tenth "Decision" states that in the Orthodox Church, whose Head is Christ, the bishopric is established in the Holy Ghost by the Savior Himself and is exercised in communion. Obviously, this communion is not equivalent to reducing the hierarchy and bridging the gap between bishops, priests and believers. Bishop's grace comes by succession from the Apostles through the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Ghost. Bishop is not a functionary who leads a Christian community, but he is a man chosen by God for the constitution and construction of the Church.

The episcopate is "a great mystery and a great dignity," the "main mode" through which the Lord is with us forever (cf. Mt 28:10). Thanks to his work, God "unites with us through the Holy Sacraments, whose first worker and maker through the Holy Ghost is the bishop." In brief, the "Bishop is a living icon of God on earth and through the fullest sharing of the energy of the Ghost he is the source of all Mysteries of the catholic Church through which we gain salvation"³.

¹ Revd. Prof. Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală*, Bucharest, 1993, p. 95-96.

² Trans. into Rom. V. LOICHIȚĂ, in *Candela* LIII-LIV (1940), p. 183-186.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

†Laurențiu, Metropolitan of Transylvania

Due to this calling, differences arise between episcopate and priesthood and the special responsibilities, as follows:

- the bishop is not ordained by the priest, but the priest is ordained by the bishop. Moreover, the bishop is ordained by two or three hierarchs; he is elected by the Holy Synod;

- the priest receives the grace of priesthood from the bishop, through which he may celebrate the six Holy Mysteries. “The bishop celebrates all mysteries, for he is the source of the divine Mysteries and charisma through the Holy Ghost,” having the following prerogatives: a) the consecration of the Holy Chrism; b) the ordination of all clergy in the Church; c) the power to fully tie and untie; d) the judgment of all misbehavior in the Church; e) the teaching of the Holy Scriptures; f) the defense of the true belief; g) removal from the Church of those who disobey; h) anathematizing the heretics and i) to lay down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11). “Given the above, it is evident that the bishop is undeniably different from a mere priest and without him, all priests in the world cannot shepherd or lead the Church in general”⁴.

The responsibility of the episcopal ministry is expressed in the rules for ordaining bishops⁵.

During the ordination of a hierarch, an open Gospel is put on the candidate’s head, the Gospel symbolizing Christ, the Head of the Church, showing that the bishop’s mission is to spread the Gospel and to become a component part of Christ’s work, surrendering “all his mind, word, and feelings to His will,” as St. Simeon of Thessalonica states⁶.

In the first prayer, the protos prays that the power and grace of the Holy Ghost may fall on the one who came to take the “yoke of the Gospel and of the episcopal dignity” and on whom the ordaining bishops have laid their hands. The Holy Ghost may strengthen him, anoint him and sanctify him, as he strengthened the Holy Apostles and Prophets, as he anointed the kings and hierarchs of the Old Covenant and “make him holy,” so that he should be worthy to seek salvation of his people and to be heard by God.

The second prayer, more developed, starts from the priestly essence of the episcopal dignity, as a mediation between God and man, and describes the bishop

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁵ *Arhieraticon, adică rânduiala slujbelor săvârșite cu arhiereu*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1993, p. 97-98 and 99-100. These prayers are already in the oldest preserved Byzantine liturgical codex, *cod. Barberini graecus 336*, copied around the year 700, trans. into Rom. Archdeac. Ioan I. Ică jr in *Canonul Ortodoxiei. I. Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2008, p. 979-981.

⁶ Saint Simeon of Thessalonica, *Tratat asupra tuturor dogmelor credinței noastre ortodoxe...*, vol. I, Suceava, 2002, p. 214.

The Bishop's Liturgical and Sacramental Responsibility

as a “oikonomos” par excellence of the “hierarchal grace”: because human nature cannot bear the divine being, God has placed the bishops on his throne as teachers and to offer sacrifices and offerings on behalf of all the men who share in the suffering of other men. So that his mediation may be effective, the bishop should become a transparent icon of Christ. Therefore, God is asked to make the one who is to become a bishop a true follower of the true Shepherd, willing to lay down his life for His sheep, to become adviser of the blind, light for those in the dark, support for infants, a light of the world, able to sanctify the souls entrusted to him, and thus one who will be able to shamelessly face the final judgment of God.

After that, he receives the bishop's vestments, over the priestly clerical clothing: sakkos, omophorion, and miter. By keeping the priestly clerical clothing and strengthening them through the sakkos, he will also keep the office of priesthood. The miter he receives shows the spiritual significance of his kingly power and of his responsibility related to the salvation of all believers entrusted to him through ordination. As perceptible organ of Christ, the hierarch has the most dreadful responsibility in relation to the salvation of souls, being called to follow Christ in humility, example of purity, unselfishness, gentleness, self-sacrifice⁷.

2. The Mystery of the Person in the Episcopal Ministry and Its Responsibilities

The main responsibility of episcopal ministry is related to the accomplishment of the mystery of communion between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and people within the Church. In this ecclesial atmosphere, God comes almost as a person, as Trinity of Persons in their state and desire for communion, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae maintains, so that He might bestow this impetus of communion and sacrificial love upon us, through the Holy Mysteries⁸. Only the love of the Three Persons of the All Holy Trinity may render human beings responsible through communion and make them advance toward accomplishment. Only a Trinity of Persons can communicate sacrificial love, for it opens to us and helps us open to it in total gentleness⁹. God wants His gifts to be brought to us in a personal way, because only personal communion entails involvement and engagement. “Before an impersonal «absolute», you cannot feel ashamed, as Father Stăniloae says, as you shiver before the Most Holy One. Only forgiveness from the absolute Person may give you total and full peace of consciousness through the

⁷ Revd. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, Bucharest, 2003, p. 182.

⁸ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

†Laurențiu, Metropolitan of Transylvania

actual cleansing of all sins. Only the absolute as a person may be clean through being and may open to you with the gentleness of total purity”¹⁰.

The All Holy Trinity makes its opening to us visible through the Incarnation, for Christ came to us as a Person and spoke to us on our level of understanding, taught us and freed us from the tyranny of sin and death to bring us back to our personal communion with the Father, as sons of the kingdom of His love. God did not want to accomplish our redemption from the distance, for only personal communion may free the human being from the limitations of selfish and individualist subjectivity¹¹.

After the Savior’s Ascension, the Pentecost brings Christ’s inner presence into the world through the Holy Ghost in His disciples. Thus, through the establishment of seen priesthood, God makes His personal commitment visible once again. Christ, the One who unites us with the Father, is the one who works now through the person of the bishop, priest and deacon. Christ must become visible through these people chosen by God, for in fact He is the one who shepherds, teaches, and consecrates the Church through them.

3. Holy Mysteries of the Church

The Mysteries of the Church are Christ’s unseen work through seen actions, through which people are united with Christ, through which the Church is built and which are performed in the Church. Father Stăniloae argues that “the understanding of Mysteries in the Orthodox Church is based on the faith in the possibility that the divine Spirit of Jesus Christ may work through a man on another man, through the mediation of the bodies and matter between them, within the ambiance of the Church, as mysterious body of Christ... That is why the Mystery is performed through the encounter of two human subjects open through faith to the Holy Ghost working in the ambiance of the Church, encounter which extends to their direct bodily contact or through a specific matter. The Mystery is not the words uttered or gestures made, by themselves, but the encounter in faith of the persons in the ambiance of the Church filled with Holy Ghost and in the actual contact between the two persons, once their belief has been expressed”¹².

Thus, the Mysteries consist of the following elements: material means through which the unseen grace is bestowed through the priest’s hand, the witnessing of the sacramental work through liturgical prayer and confessing the faith, and engaging the believer who receives the Mystery¹³.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 269.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 7-8.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

4. The Bishop's Responsibility as Performer of Consecrating Work

The Bishop is a "liturgist par excellence", whose main sacramental responsibility is to perform the Holy Mysteries. Moreover, he is Christ's representative on earth and the representative of the Church within which the Holy Mysteries are performed.

The bishop is the "seen organ through which Christ works in the Mysteries, or bestows the grace upon those who receive these Mysteries."¹⁴

However, the bishops are not mere passive tools in Christ's hands, for they are fully responsible for their work, for "the teaching they communicate is not theirs and their hands communicate Christ's blessing, not theirs... Thus, their hands and mouth move according to their will to make them work for Christ ... and so the more they surrender to Christ's will, the more they will become worthy of an even greater honor. Their maximum commitment makes their humbleness visible, namely the awareness that the power they have does not belong to them but to Christ. That is why if Christ as a High Priest is Servant, the priests are servants of the redeeming work of Christ. Work is their only personal belonging they offer. If their offering is not complete, they fail to fulfill Christ's work of redemption as they should and, moreover, they actually hinder it."¹⁵

This is the great responsibility of episcopal dignity, namely to continue Christ's sanctifying work, through the Holy Ghost, in the Church, to teach their flock the mystery of the personal relationship with God. The bishop must be a person full of holiness who shares the fruits of his personal communion with Christ with the others.¹⁶ Through ordination, he surrenders himself entirely to God and is called to fill himself with God's holiness, so that he might mediate the communion of all believers with all the Persons of the Holy Trinity. The bishop makes personal encounter with God possible through faith, through the Holy Mysteries. Christ works through him and communicates the emotions and feelings of His pure humanity to God's people. Therefore, the hierarch has the great responsibility to make Christ alive and present in his own person in order to attract all those entrusted to him to the communion with Christ.¹⁷

The visible celebrant of the Holy Mysteries should be in a constant state of readiness, thereby accomplishing the sanctifying effects of sacramental work, even if, through *oikonomia*, for special cases, the Church teaches that the validity of the Mysteries does not depend on the worthiness of the human celebrant,

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, vol III, p. 149.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, vol I, p. 144

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, vol III, p. 31.

†Laurențiu, Metropolitan of Transylvania

and Christ Himself works through them in a mysterious way. Before the Holy Altar, during the Holy Liturgy, in which the Holy Mystery of Ordination is itself celebrated, the hierarch must be a model of ministry for clergy and the faithful, always aiming at fulfilling the dual purpose of this divine service: to consecrate the gifts for the sanctification of the believers.

The bishop is also responsible for all sanctifying work of the priests whom he has empowered through the holy antimins to celebrate the divine services. Liturgical services must be performed “correctly and completely” to ensure the participation of the receivers to the sanctifying gifts, given the fact that some of the mysteries are not repeatable. Great rush during the celebration of the Holy Mysteries is even more dangerous than routine.

For the Mystery of Ordination, the bishop has to select, through canonical research, those who are worthy of such dignity, and after ordination he has to guide and support them in their spiritual work. “The awareness that Christ himself is present and working in this Mystery unites in a deep shudder and responsibility the celebrant of the Mystery with those who attend, on the one hand, and the recipient, on the other. In this encounter of souls, imbued with the awareness of the presence and work of the same Christ, the shift of Christ’s power from his older to newer servants takes place”¹⁸.

Another responsibility of the hierarchs is to ensure the uniformity of the liturgical service throughout the entire Church, especially since the modern pastoral resources of the Romanian Patriarchate, such as the Trinitas Radio Station and Television Channel provide us with a high and normative standard for the celebration of the Holy Liturgy and Mysteries.

A synthesis of the entire patristic tradition on the liturgical and sacramental responsibility of the bishop, who is in a continual obedience to Christ, the Church, the Gospel commandments, the voice of consciousness and the confessor, is given by Father Dumitru Stăniloae who argues that the bishop “must be overwhelmed more than any man by the fact that even though he is a mortal like all the others, or probably weaker than many others, has been chosen to be the vehicle of Christ’s most complete redeeming work. He must be overwhelmed by his responsibility for the Church, but at the same time, he must also be aware that, in order to accomplish his assignment, he must also suppress his pride, and totally surrender himself to Christ. He must seek to humbly identify his will with Christ’s will, instead of using Christ to attain his personal goals. The more he manages to make Christ present and worshipped, the better he will be at accomplishing his work.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.179-180.

The Bishop's Liturgical and Sacramental Responsibility

Bishops are bound in the spirit of humility through the fact that none is a stand-alone leader or master of all, but they take part in the communion of all bishops, in order to preserve Christ's teachings and the unified liturgical and canonical order of the Church, the only body through which Christ works and through which salvation is made possible."¹⁹

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 151.