

Ex-Bishop Nikiphoros Speaks Out On The Holy Land

By Andrew T. Kopan

A defrocked hierarch, former Bishop Nikiphoros of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and a long-time critic of the deteriorating conditions that confront the Orthodox Christian presence in the Holy Land, aired his views in a recent address in Chicago. Speaking before a capacity crowd at the Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center in Chicago on August 9th, where he was hosted by the Friends of the Holy Land, an informal association of hundreds of American pilgrims who have toured the Holy Land under his direction.

After being introduced by Fr. Evagoras Constantinidis of Merrillville, Indiana, a long-time friend, and taking as his topic "The Legacy of Greek Orthodoxy in the Holy Land: Current Conditions and Problems that Threaten this Legacy," the former bishop detailed the historic role of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem as custodian of over 100 shrines and monasteries associated with the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ — some 67% of all the holy places in Israel. He spoke of the protection of these shrines, at great sacrifice, by the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, a monastic order of monks recruited primarily from Greece, who through the centuries have stood guard over the shrines, and sadly related how the cataclysmic changes of the last several decades in that part of the world, now threaten the very existence of Orthodox Christianity. Nikiphoros narrated the precarious circumstances Orthodox Christians are facing in the Holy Land. Externally, they are threatened by Muslim religious fundamentalism, by Jewish religious fanaticism, and by aggressive proselytizing on the part of non-Orthodox Christian denominations. Internally, they are threatened by the indifference and carelessness of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to the needs of the indigenous Arab Orthodox Christians who make up over 95% of the 60,000 communicants of the Patriarchate. The Jerusalem See is among the wealthiest of all Orthodox patriarchates since it is



Bishop Nikiphoros

the largest land-holder in Israel with a reputed annual income of nearly one million and a half dollars from rental of commercial properties, not to mention the million dollars it receives annually from world-wide contributions. Unfortunately, according to Nikiphoros, since 1984, shortly after the ascension of Patriarch Diodoros to the Throne of Zion in 1981, there has been no public accounting of the finances of the Patriarchate.

Under the rule of Patriarch Diodoros, the Patriarchate has been roundly criticized for allowing Orthodox religious shrines to deteriorate, as well as for entering into ill-advised real estate sales and long-term (99 year) land lease deals for commercial and housing developments, much to the consternation of the Orthodox faithful, who feel that their rightful patrimony is being eroded. It is estimated that the number of properties involved in these transactions are greater in area than the Old City of Jerusalem.

Nikiphoros attributes the deterioration of the shrines to the penurious financial policy of the Patriarchate which refuses to allocate enough funds for the maintenance of the shrines. Yet,



September 10, 1995

A Profile In Courage

Bishop Nikiphoros, shown above at his Hellenic Museum lecture, was born in Greece and at the young age of 16 went to the Holy Land to become a monk joining the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre — the official custodians of the Holy Places for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. He was enrolled in the patriarchal seminary at the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem where, in addition to his theological studies, he learned to speak Hebrew, Arabic and English fluently. Later, he was sent to the United States where he attended Florida Atlantic University graduating in 1984, majoring in philosophy and religious studies. Because of his dedication and ability, he was quickly promoted to several important positions in the Patriarchate. Upon returning from America in 1984, he was made Chief Dragoman, serving as interpreter and liaison for the Patriarchate. Later, he was made the Superior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre — Christendom's most sacred shrine built over the Tomb of Christ. Finally, in 1988, he was elevated by the Holy Synod to the ranks of the hierarchy, becoming Bishop of the Titular See of Constantine in Jordan. Since then, Bishop Nikiphoros has been attempting to carry on a dialogue with patriarchal authorities to bring about institutional and fiscal reforms to end the deteriorating conditions that threaten the very existence of the Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox presence in the Holy Land. His efforts, however, were not welcomed and resulted finally in October 30, 1994 in his defrockment and return to the ranks of the laity. From that time on, he has been conducting virtually a one-man campaign to rectify the situation in the Holy Land by appealing to world Orthodox leaders and by speaking out to the Orthodox faithful as he has done in Israel, Greece, Cyprus and now in America.

this has not prevented the Patriarchate from investing in commercial building projects at considerable expense, only to abandon them when building costs escalated out-of-hand. Nor

Continued to page 2

Bishop Nikiphoros

Continued from page 1

has it prevented it from building a number of villas for the Patriarch in Jericho, Amman and Aqaba in Jordan, and even in a resort town in Greece. Another contributing factor in the deterioration of the sanctuaries according to the former bishop, is the failure of the Patriarchate to recruit young men to replenish the dwindling ranks of monks in the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre who number today less than seventy, not enough to man all of the shrines, a factor which has profoundly altered the religious nature of these venerable places.

Nikiphoros admitted that one of the most serious problems facing the Jerusalem Church is the alienation of the indigenous Arab Orthodox population who feel that they have been excluded by the Greek-dominated hierarchy from equal participation in the affairs of the Patriarchate and in the reduction of spiritual and educational services to them. The Arab Orthodox protest this discrimination as well as the real estate arrangements as being contrary to the spiritual and educational services to them. The Arab Orthodox protest this discrimination as well as the real estate arrangements as being contrary to the spiritual growth and detrimental to their economic prosperity. The Arab faithful face severe difficulty in finding jobs, housing and the general necessities of life, and as a result, are driven to emigrate in large numbers elsewhere or to assimilate the non-Orthodox religious groups who can and do minister

to their needs. Authorities predict that the exodus of Orthodox from the Holy Land and from their Holy Faith, will result, within the decade, in the extreme diminution if not the extinction of the living Orthodox Church in Jerusalem.

Because of constraints imposed on his talk by Museum officials, Nikiphoros did not specifically mention Patriarch Diodoros. But it is clear from his previous presentations and as expressed by him in the public media, he holds the Patriarch accountable for the worsening conditions in the Holy Land. In an interview with Frank Schaeffer in the Vol. 4 (1994) edition of *The Christian Activist*, Nikiphoros accuses the Patriarch of "mismanagement" brought on by his "dictatorial rule." According to him, the Patriarch "refuses to respect anybody, not the synod, not the brothers ... we do not have any financial organization ... everything is controlled personally by him ... the Patriarch spends whatever he pleases." It was such criticism prompted by the attempts of Nikiphoros to persuade the Patriarch to institute reform measures, that led to his expulsion from the Holy Synod — the nominal governing body of the See of Jerusalem and later, his defrockment.

When asked what could be done by the laity in this matter, he urged that protests should be made to the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Greece, Russia, to Archbishop Iakovos for the Americans, stating that the situation in the Holy Land is unacceptable. Patriarch Diodoros must "clean up his act, or resign and let someone else who can do it, do it." Failing

this, a major synod must be convened to force him out. This would be not unlike the major synod convoked by Patriarch Bartholomew at Istanbul in 1993 which forced Patriarch Diodoros to abrogate a project which conflicted with the prerogatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, under threat of expulsion from his See. The mechanism to do so exists. When asked if funds were needed for the Holy Land, he replied negatively. "It is not a question of finance," he said, "but the mismanagement of finance — that is the scandal."

The ex-bishop's remarks clearly moved those in attendance who marvelled at his courageous stance. A few days later, he was able to amplify his remarks more fully in a taped interview conducted by Chicago's nationally recognized Orthodox Christian advocate, Katherine Valone. The 35-minute tape was aired on August 24 on the Panos "Grecian Spotlight" TV program. From Chicago, Nikiphoros moved to St. Louis and the West, then to New York and Baltimore to carry on his message. Despite the obvious support of many American Orthodox and some priests who came to admire him from their travels with him in the Holy Land, it remains to be seen if the hierarchy will offer a sympathetic ear to this daring challenge of ecclesiastical authority at so high a level, a rarity indeed, in the hierarchical-structured Orthodox Church.

Dr. Kopan is a professor emeritus at DePaul University in Chicago and an Archon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. He has made three trips to the Holy Land, 1953, 1981 and 1994.
