

Business as Usual in Jerusalem

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Though recently defrocked by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, former bishop Nikiphoros spoke on August 9, 1995, before a capacity crowd at the Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center in Chicago. The Friends of the Holy Land, an informal association of hundreds of American pilgrims who have toured the Holy Land under his direction, hosted the long-time critic of the deteriorating conditions that confront the Orthodox Christian presence in Israel.

The former bishop detailed the historic role of the original, authentic Patriarchate of Jerusalem (the Latins and Armenians have pretenders to this ancient see) as custodian of more than one hundred shrines and monasteries associated with the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ—some 67% of all the holy sites in Israel. He commended the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, a monastic order recruited primarily from Greece, who, through the centuries, have stood guard over the shrines.

Nikiphoros also, however, reminded the audience of the precarious circumstances Orthodox Christians are facing in the land of their Savior. Externally, the Orthodox are threatened by Muslim religious fundamentalism, by Jewish religious fanaticism, and by aggressive proselytism by non-Orthodox Christians from the West. Internally, the Orthodox faithful are undermined by the Patriarchate's indifference and carelessness toward the needs of the indigenous Arabs who constitute more than 95% of the 60,000 communicant members of the Patriarchate.

Holy Land, Rich Land

The Jerusalem see is among the wealthiest of all Orthodox patriarchates and autocephalous Churches, since it is the largest land-holder in Israel with a reputed annual income of nearly \$1.5 million from rental of commercial properties. When added to the \$1 million or so it receives from international contributions, this amounts to a tidy sum. Unfortunately, according to Nikiphoros, since 1984—three years after the enthronement of Diodoros as a patriarch in Zion—there has been no public accounting of the Church's finances.

Under the rule of Patriarch Diodoros, the Patriarchate, it is widely alleged, has allowed Orthodox religious shrines to deteriorate and has entered into ill-advised real estate sales and long-term (99-year) land-lease deals for commercial and housing developments.

These transactions greatly disturb the Orthodox faithful, who feel that their rightful patrimony is being eroded. The properties involved in these deals may even exceed in area the entire 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. But this has not prevented the Patriarchate from investing in commercial building projects at considerable expense, only to abandon them when building costs escalate out-of-hand. Nor, Nikiphoros charges unabashedly, has the supposed

Patristic Sophia

[...] the goal of truth, to which the Christ-bearing man, the blessed Paul, was looking when he said, "I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of Jesus Christ": so that the holy man, making the good his mark, never did what was evil.

—St. Athanasios the Great
Against the Heathen, 5
(ca. A.D. 318)

cash flow problem prevented the leaders of the Patriarchate from financing the construction of a number of villas in Jericho, Amman and Ajaba in Jordan, and even in a resort town in Greece!

Another cause of the deterioration of the sanctuaries, according to the defrocked 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. Today, the monks number less than seventy—hardly enough to man all of the shrines in their care and to preserve thereby their historic Orthodox character.

Nikiphoros admitted that one of the most serious problems facing the Church in Jerusalem is the alienation of the indigenous Arab Orthodox population. The Arabs complain that they have been excluded by the Greek-dominated hierarchy from equal participation in the affairs of the Patriarchate, and that their Greek bishops have reduced the spiritual and educational services to which they have become accustomed. The Arab Orthodox vigorously protest both this discrimination and the real estate arrangements as contrary to their spiritual growth and detrimental to their economic prosperity.

Arab Exodus

Unable to obtain reasonable jobs, adequate housing, and the other necessities of life, the Arab faithful have begun to emigrate in large numbers or to assimilate to non-Orthodox religious groups that can—and

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do—minister to their needs. The exodus of Orthodox from the Holy Land and from their Holy Faith could conceivably result, within a decade, in a shrinkage of the living Orthodox Church in Jerusalem to negligible proportions.

Antiochian Critique

Lest anyone question Nikiphoros' credibility as a defrocked bishop, let it be duly noted that the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America criticized the current leadership of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem at the Antiochians' biennial convention in Atlanta, Georgia, only a fortnight before Nikiphoros' Chicago speech. The assembled clergy and lay delegates issued several resolutions on this controversial subject.

In one statement the Antiochians pledged, rather bluntly, to "support the efforts of Orthodox Christians in the Jerusalem Patriarchate to end catastrophic practices of the Patriarchate's leadership" and to "exert pressure on... Patriarch Diodoros I and his Synod to immediately stop the selling and leasing of Church-owned properties."

A second resolution requested, more gingerly to be sure, that the patriarch and his synod "cease the sale or other disposition of sacred and historic properties of the Orthodox Church for any purposes other than those which spiritually and or materially benefit the Orthodox Christian believers within the Patriarchate."

Open the Brotherhood

The third Antiochian resolution addressed the ethnic problem among the Orthodox in the Holy Land. The delegates appealed to Patriarch Diodoros and his brother bishops—all but one of whom are of Greek ancestry—to direct their "archpastoral interest, attention, concern and efforts toward their flock, especially toward the majority of Arab believers who reside within the Patriarchate's canonically defined boundaries." The Antiochians also hoped to convince the patriarch "to amend or otherwise revise the constitution of the Patriarchate" to open the episcopacy to clergy who do not hold membership in the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre. The Brotherhood is virtually a Greek monopoly, and only one bishop in the Patriarchate's hierarchy is an indigenous Arab.

What the mostly Arab American Orthodox Christians sought, their obvious kinship and perhaps even ethnic favoritism aside, was—and remains, of course—morally sound and necessary: "to permit any qualified clergy, whatever their ethnic character," to rise to archpastoral leadership in the mother Church of Orthodoxy. This was bold and surprising criticism of one Orthodox Church from another.

But it may have come too late to validate former bishop Nikiphoros' claims. His remarks clearly moved

his Chicago audience, who marvelled at such a courageous stance by an erstwhile successor to the ancient apostles. From the Windy City, Nikiphoros proceeded to St. Louis, New York City, and Baltimore to present his sobering message. Despite the obvious support of many Orthodox in America, both clergy and laity, who know him from their travels with him in Israel, it remains to be seen whether the hierarchy in Jerusalem will reconsider this daring, prophetic challenge to business as usual in the Holy Land.

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Seminary Classes

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CH 102: CHURCH HISTORY II [from the 10th century]
(3 credits) Instructor: Fr. Bazyl Zawierucha
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(3 credits) Instructor: Fr. Frank Estocin
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SEMINAR & INTEGRATIVE ESSAY
(2 credits) Instructor: Dn. Andrei Kulyk
(M. Div., Union Theological Seminary)

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UKRAINIAN NATION II
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(Ph.D., University of Illinois [Chicago])

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