

Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria: The Canonical Territories of the Local Orthodox Churches

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Among the Local Orthodox Churches the principle of canonical territory was strictly observed until the beginning of the twentieth century. As a rule, the boundaries between Churches coincided with those of countries or empires. Thus, in the nineteenth century the jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate was limited to the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, while that of the Russian Orthodox Church was restricted to the Russian Empire.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to say that the Orthodox Churches never acted outside their canonical territories. Several Orthodox Churches conducted widespread missionary activities outside their canonical territories. For example, missionaries of the Russian Church in the XVIII-XIX centuries founded Orthodox canonical structures in America, Japan and China. However, Russian missionaries acted only in those countries where there were no other Local Orthodox Churches. These countries comprised that which one could conditionally call the “missionary canonical territory” of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The revolutionary events of the 1910s in a number of European countries, as well as World War I and the breakdown of the great empires, led to major geopolitical shifts resulting in significant changes in the structure of World Orthodoxy. Firstly, in the first half of the twentieth century several Orthodox Churches either declared or restored their lost autocephaly. Secondly, as a result of mass migration, a significant part of the Orthodox faithful belonging to one Local Church found themselves in territories in which another Local Church was already active. Thirdly, beginning with the 1920s the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which lost almost all of its believers within its canonical territory as a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, claimed for itself the pastoral care of the so-called “diaspora” – the Orthodox living outside their home countries – and began to create new metropolies and archdioceses in Europe and beyond. The result of all these events was the rise of parallel Orthodox jurisdictions in countries where the Orthodox comprised a minority.

Let me give as an example the situation that took shape in the second half of the nineteenth and during the entire twentieth century on the American continent (Cf. Fr. [Leonid Kishkovsky's article “Orthodoxy in America: Diaspora or Church?”](#)). Orthodoxy was brought here by Russian missionaries via Alaska. The first episcopal see in America was established by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1840, but the ruling bishop of this diocese - St. Innocent (Veniaminov) - lived in Novoarchangelsk. In 1872, five years after the sale of Alaska to America, the see of the Russian bishop was transferred to San Francisco. From 1898-1907 St. Tikhon, future Patriarch of Russia, governed the diocese. During his time the see was transferred to New York. It was he who organized the all-American council of 1907, which re-named the diocese as the “Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church in North America”. Thus began the future autocephalous American Orthodox Church.

During St. Tikhon's tenure in America a large number of Antiochian Christians arrived in the New World, for whom a Syrian-born vicar bishop – Raphael of Brooklyn – was ordained in 1903 at the request of St. Tikhon. Thus began a new, unique ecclesiological model which foresaw that bishops of different nationalities could act within one Local Church and on the same canonical territory, with dioceses being created not on the basis of territory, but ethnicity. Such a model did not correspond to the ecclesiology of the Ancient Church, but it did correspond to the new reality which emerged as a result of immigration to Europe and America. If events had continued according to the plan outlined by St. Tikhon, a Local

Orthodox Church in America could have been created in the 1920s, headed by one metropolitan, under whom bishops of various nationalities would be in submission, with each caring for the flock of his own nationality – Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Antiochians, Romanians etc.

However, as a result of the mass immigration of Greeks from the former Ottoman Empire to Europe, America and Australia in the 1920s, metropolies of the Constantinople Patriarchate appeared on these continents. As already mentioned, this patriarchate declared its jurisdiction over the entire church “diaspora”, i.e. over all countries not within the borders of historical Orthodox Churches. According to this viewpoint, practically all of Western Europe, North and South America as well as Australia and Oceania, were encompassed by this definition of “diaspora”. In America, however, there already existed an Orthodox Church headed by a Russian bishop. Thus the creation there of a jurisdiction of Constantinople introduced divisions into American Orthodoxy, which was exacerbated after the establishment of jurisdictions of the Antiochian, Romanian and Serbian Patriarchates.

In 1970 the Russian Orthodox Church, inspired as before by the vision of St. Tikhon, who dreamed of a single Orthodox Church on the American continent, granted autocephaly to that part of American Orthodoxy which was under its canonical authority. It was assumed that the Orthodox of other jurisdictions would also join this autocephalous Church, which received the name “Orthodox Church in America”. However, this did not happen, and in America there are currently metropolies, archdioceses and dioceses of the Constantinople, Antiochian and other Local Churches alongside the autocephalous Church.

In Western Europe, as a result of the revolutionary upheavals of the 1920s, a no less confusing situation has arisen. A large number of Russian Orthodox faithful ended up in France, Germany and other Western European countries as well as outside of Europe, and began to create their own Church structures. The formation of metropolies and archdioceses of the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Antioch occurred simultaneously. After World War II the Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian diasporas grew significantly and established their own church structures. These diasporas are continuing to grow to this very day. Finally, as a result of a mass exodus of Georgians from their country during the last few years, parishes of the Georgian Orthodox Church have also been created in Europe. As a result of these processes one can find several Orthodox bishops in the same European city, each one representing a different Orthodox Church.

The situation of the Russian diaspora in Western Europe and America is made more complicated by the fact that not all faithful of the Russian Orthodox tradition belong to the same church jurisdiction. Alongside the Moscow Patriarchate in and outside of Europe, there has existed the “Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia” since the 1920s, which separated from the Mother Church for political reasons and is not recognized by any canonical Local Orthodox Church. From the 1930s there has existed a church structure in Europe which brings together Russian Orthodox parishes that entered the jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate. The Moscow Patriarchate has repeatedly made attempts at uniting the Russian Church diaspora under one jurisdictional “roof”. At present negotiations on the restoration of full Eucharistic communion between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia are taking place.

To be continued.
