

“Patriarch Bartholomew does not respect the sacred canons”: 12 Athonite elders address the Sacred Community in defense of the canonical Ukrainian Church

Mt. Athos, April 24, 2019



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The consequences of the Patriarchate of Constantinople’s creation of a new schismatic church in Ukraine and the granting of autocephaly to it continue to reverberate throughout the entire Orthodox world, and the monastic enclave of Mt. Athos is no exception. The issue has divided the monasteries, some of which have accepted and concelebrated with the visiting representatives of the new “church,” and some of which categorically reject them as schismatics.

OrthoChristian recently published a translation of the [opinion of the representatives of four Greek monasteries](#) that sharply criticized the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian St. Panteleimon's Monastery on Mt. Athos.

Now a letter from 12 Athonite elders from various sketes and cells has been published in Greek by [Romfea](#) and in Russian by the [Department for External Church Relations](#) of the Russian Orthodox Church. The letter is dated March 17—a month after the first schismatic delegation visited Mt. Athos and celebrated Liturgy in several monasteries.

“With great sorrow and concern we learn about what is happening in the Orthodox Church as a whole because of the non-canonical granting of autocephaly to the schismatics of Ukraine without the consent of the canonical autonomous Church headed by Metropolitan Onuphry, which continues to consider the new autocephalites as schismatics, having no communion with them and, on the basis of the sacred canons, with all of those who have communion with the schismatics,” the letter opens.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople granted autocephaly to a group within another Church's jurisdiction, in clear violation of the holy canons, the Athonite fathers write, and thus the Russian Church has broken communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In the authors' view, Constantinople's actions threaten a schism on the scale of the 1054 split between Rome and Constantinople.

The Church is still bleeding from the wounds from the ecumenist council of Crete in 2016, and now there has been inflicted a new wound, “for which the Ecumenical Patriarchate is solely responsible,” the letter reads. Further, this justification of schism places people's souls in danger of damnation because the Holy Spirit is not active in schism, the fathers write, with reference to the teachings of Sts. Basil the Great and John Chrysostom.

Heresy and schism are the work of satan, the Athonites write categorically. “When [the devil] fails to thwart salvation through heresies, then he works to provoke schisms,” they assert. The occasion of the writing of this letter, the authors write, is that they do not want to fall into this soul-destroying work of the devil.

The Athonite elders continue to recognize the schismatics precisely as such, and they reject the historical revisionism of Constantinople which claims that Ukraine has always been its territory:

We have left the world and the pleasures of the world and we use our souls and bodies for ascetic podvigs, to obtain the mercy of God. Would it not be inexcusable negligence and folly to render our labors and aspirations worthless by communing with the Ukrainian schismatics who are removed from Eucharistic communion and defrocked by the Russian Church to which they belonged for more than three centuries, according to the unchanging, continuous, and general recognition of all Orthodoxy, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate?

The fathers then point to canons from the ecumenically-recognized councils of Laodicea and Antioch to demonstrate that joint prayer with schismatics is prohibited, and that those who enter into communion with the excommunicated ought themselves to be excommunicated. Further, only the Church that excommunicates someone can receive him back—a rule clearly broken by Pat. Bartholomew, the fathers write, which according to the Council of Antioch, makes him subject to excommunication.

“In 1686, by an act of Patriarch Dionysius IV, [Ukraine] entered the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, which according to pan-Orthodox consent has remained for 333 years until this day,” the letter reads. Later, after the fall of communism, Philaret Denisenko went into schism after he lost the election for Patriarch of Moscow and was subsequently defrocked and anathematized. Thus, the Athonite ascetics reject the historical revisionism that says that Philaret was punished simply for desiring autocephaly. Additionally, the “Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church” of Makary Maletich traces not only to schismatics, but even to those wholly devoid of any apostolic succession, the letter states, and thus they are recognized as schismatic by all, except for Constantinople. However, the canonical Church remains that headed by Met. Onuphry, according to the Athonite elders.

And the problem did not begin with the Ukrainian situation: “It has long been known that Pat. Bartholomew does not have any particular respect for the sacred canons, which he has violated and violates, especially with regard to relations with heretics, and now with schismatics.”

The entire construct upon which Pat. Bartholomew’s invasion of Ukrainian Church territory is built is like a house built on the sand of inept advisors:

At first, relying on insufficiently-educated or self-serving theological consultants, he tried to justify his invasion by referring to the concept of ekkliton (ἐκκλητον), that is, that he alone, as a second pope, can accept appeals and petitions from other autocephalous Churches, as he is, allegedly, according to the recently-appeared prevailing opinion of the pseudo-theologians of the post-Patristic era, not the first among equals (primus inter pares), but the first without equals (primus sine paribus).

And further:

But this argument immediately crashed with a bang, because it contradicts the conciliar system of Church governance, in which all patriarchs and primates are considered equal to one another, with Constantinople having only a primacy of honor, not power, as claimed by the Pope. The right to hear appeals extends only to those of his own jurisdiction, and not to the jurisdiction of other patriarchs.

The fathers then refer to the comments on the 9th canon of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the “God-moved” St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, “one of our greatest theologians and canonists,” to substantiate their argument about who has the right to hear which appeals.

The Athonite elders then point to Constantinople’s changing tactics in regard to the Ukrainian situation:

When Patriarch Bartholomew realized that he couldn’t rely upon ekkliton in his cross-border intervention within the bounds of another’s jurisdiction, then with the help of his own advisors, ready to serve him, he discovered 333 years later that Ukraine is within the jurisdiction not of the Russian, but of the Constantinopolitan Church! His inattentive or militant theologians concealed and misinterpreted many documents and opinions in order to come to the ridiculous conclusion about the temporary nature of the transfer of Ukraine to the Russian Church (a temporary character of more than three centuries!), and that now this concession is canceled.

Despite these games on the part of Constantinople, every Local Church recognizes the Church in Ukraine as that headed by the “wise and modest” Met. Onuphry, as the elders write, which did not

request autocephaly. As autocephaly was given to a minority group of schismatics, against the pan-Orthodox opinion, the autocephaly is highly problematic.

The authors of the letter also consider it unjust and devoid of basic logic to “place a magnifying glass” on the nationalistic or ecumenistic tendencies of some in the Russian Church (past and present), though not of the canonical Ukrainian Church they note, in order to justify Constantinople’s anti-canonical invasion.

The elders then testify that the majority of the fathers of the Holy Mountain rejoiced with great joy when the Sacred Community decided not to send a delegation to the enthronement of the schismatic “Metropolitan” Epiphany Dumenko or even to send him a congratulatory letter. But they were very upset by the minority of monasteries and fathers which still participated in the enthronement.

The same torn feelings were caused by the visitation of the delegation of the schismatic church to the Holy Mountain: “The exact same feelings of joy filled our hearts because many monasteries prevented the visit of ‘bishops’ and ‘clerics’ of the new false Church, but bitterness and dispassionate anger towards those, fortunately, few who courteously accepted them and/or served with them!!!”

Due to the seriousness of the issue, and for the sake of the high authority that Mt. Athos enjoys in the Orthodox world, and for the sake of ensuring inter-Athonite unity, the authors of the letter entreat that the schismatics be denied access to the Holy Mountain, or at the least that their “clerics” not be allowed to serve, until a pan-Orthodox resolution is reached, given that, despite the extreme pressure, no Church has recognized the schismatics over the past three months. This decision should be made as soon as possible given the news about the schismatics planning more visits to Mt. Athos, the fathers write.

Moreover, the founders of the Ukrainian schismatic movement are not only condemned by the Church, but also have the condemnation of civil courts for [grave moral crimes](#), unthinkable even for non-Christians, the letter reads. They are also weighed down by involvement in the recent Bulgarian schism, ties with the Ukrainian Uniates, and persecution against the canonical Church, especially after Constantinople recognized them. They also lament Epiphany Dumenko’s recent statements about [softening on the sin of homosexuality](#).

Moreover, the schismatics visiting the Holy Mountain are not spiritually, but are rather politically motivated—looking only for acceptance of their illegitimate group that they can then advertise to the Orthodox world, “and to achieve their wicked plans,” the Athonite elders write.

In conclusion, the fathers emphasize that they will not jeopardize their salvation by entering into communion with the excommunicated schismatics and that they will not promote the present schism on the local or global Orthodox level.

“We fear an inter-Athonite schism if we do not make correct and courageous decisions,” the Fathers conclude.

The letter is signed by:

- Elder Hieromonk Arsenios with the brotherhood of Panagouda cell of Koutloumousiou Monastery;
- Elder Hieromonk Abraham with the brotherhood of the kallyva of St. Gerasimos of Koutloumousiou Skete;

- Elder Hierodeacon Theophilos with the brotherhood of the cell of the Holy Unmercenaries of Grigoriou Monastery;
- Elder Nicholas of the cell of St. Demetrios of Hilandar Monastery;
- Elder Joseph with the brotherhood of the cell of St. Theodore of St. Paul's Monastery;
- Elder Savva with the brotherhood of the cell of the Holy Archangels of Hilandar Monastery;
- Elder Nikodemos of the cell of St. Nektarios of Stavronikita Monastery;
- Elder Gabriel of the cell of St. Christodoulos of Koutloumousiou Monastery;
- Elder Euphrosynos with the brotherhood of the cell of St. John the Forerunner of Koutloumousiou Monastery;
- Elder Paisios with the brotherhood of the cell of the Holy Archangels of Hilandar Monastery;
- Elder Nikodemos of the cell of St. John the Theologian of the Great Lavra;
- Elder Arsenios of the kallyva of the Holy Monk-Martyr Gerasimos of Koutloumousiou Skete.

4/25/2019

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