

INTERVIEW OF HIS BEATITUDE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS III TO THE JERUSALEM POST.

The following article which includes the interview of His Beatitude was published by The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition in July 2010:

The 'original' Church

The Greek Orthodox Church: Patriarchate of Jerusalem

By Dov Preminger

Quietly navigating its way through 1,500 years of history, the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem has had an unbroken presence in the Holy Land since the first centuries of Christendom. The Church considers itself to be the Mother Church of Christianity, and has preached the same doctrine since the time of Jesus.

The Orthodox Church claims its first bishop was James, brother of Jesus, and the Church counts among its holy places both the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Today its distinctive black-robed monks honor these sites with the same liturgy and ritual as in ancient times, holding fast to their traditions through the Great Schism of 1054 AD, the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem, the Ottoman rule, and the Crusades.

More recently, the local Orthodox Church has faced challenges from the Israeli government, and dissent from its mostly Palestinian-Arab flock.

But the Church continues on, led by calm and humble Patriarch

Theophilos III, who deals with modern crises the same way the Church always has. "With prayer, patience, wisdom, persistence, and firmness".

ORIGINS

Interestingly, one might regard the members of the first Christian church as the original Protestants, since the Roman Catholic pope's claim to universal jurisdiction was one of the prime causes of the Great Schism, which split the Church into Catholic and Orthodox denominations.

"Doctrinal teachings in many areas are common", said Patriarch Theophilos III of the two churches. "The big difference between Roman Catholics and [Orthodox] Christianity is the office of a Pope who claims to be the Vicar of Christ on Earth".

Daniel Rossing, Executive Director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian relations, noted another difference is that the Catholic Church has a "pyramidal" hierarchy under the Pope, whereas the Orthodox Church's authority derives from regional Patriarchates. The Patriarch of Constantinople is considered first among equals; he does not have authority over the rest.

The Orthodox religion is also different from Protestantism, despite the common absence of a papal authority "A very major difference in the Orthodox Church is that it's very liturgical", said Rossing. "It has a lot of forms, icons, candles, processions... Protestantism tends to be more mental, with less ritual. Also, Protestants don't have celibate monks".

The Greek Orthodox Church, sometimes known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, has its origins in the fracturing of the Roman Empire. In the third century, Emperor Constantine declared the new capital of Rome to be the eastern city of Constantinople. Thus began a gradual distancing between the

eastern and western halves of the empire.

As the Latin-speaking western half and the Greek-speaking eastern half drew apart, theological differences and power struggles within the Church culminated in the Great Schism, in which the leaders of the eastern and western regions of the Church excommunicated each other. They split into the western Latin Church – now Roman Catholics – and the eastern Greek Church now known as the Orthodox Church.

The word *Orthodox* is a Greek one for “correctly believing”, referring to the Orthodox Church’s view that it holds to the original, correct form of Christianity. The Greek Orthodox actually refer to themselves as the Rōm Orthodox; they were named the Greek Orthodox by “the Latins”, and the name stuck.

Today there are about 40.000 native Orthodox Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Most are Palestinian Arabs, save a small Greek clergy which leads them.

SAFEGUARDING HOLY PLACES

Some 120 monks live and worship at a beautiful monastery in the Old City of Jerusalem, which acts as the headquarters of the Patriarchate. These celibate monks are mostly Greek, and make up the core of the Church’s clergy.

The monks live a life of prayer and study (see adjacent story), and count pastoral service among their responsibilities, as well as the maintenance and veneration of the Church’s holy places.

A governing council of 18 bishops, called the Holy Synod, governs the monk’s brotherhood and the Church, and is responsible for the election of the Patriarch. In 2005 it appointed His Beatitude Theophilos III as Patriarch of Jerusalem.

“A main mission of the Patriarchate is to look after the holy

places”, said Patriarch Theophilos. “We keep the holy places accessible to everyone without discrimination”.

Perhaps the holiest place under the Church’s purview is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Greek Orthodox Church owns the land on which the site is built, though its administration is divided between six Christian denominations – the Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Egyptian Coptics and Ethiopians.

Although the Greek Orthodox Church tends to get along well with other Christian denominations, the site has a history of flaring tensions.

In 1853, the sultan at the time issued a “status quo” decree at the Sepulchre, requiring that all six denominations agree on any structural changes to the church. This jigsaw of responsibility resulted in a deadlock in which changes cannot be agreed upon, including important ones such as the construction of a fire escape to supplement the Sepulchre’s single entrance.

The symbol of the Sepulchre’s status quo quagmire is a famous ladder, which was placed against a wall during the 1800s and has remained there ever since because no faction has the authority to remove it.

Even slight structural changes have incited clerical violence. When an Egyptian monk in 2002 attempted to move his chair into the shade, it provoked a brawl with the Ethiopians, who rejected his jurisdiction over the area. However, such incidents are relatively rare, and the shared administration of the Church generally proceeds in good faith.

The Greek Orthodox Church bears the largest share of responsibility for the Holy Sepulchre, and counts several holy relics among its treasures there. Under glass can be seen what is said to be part of John the Baptist’s skull, and the hand of Mary Magdalene.

GREEK CLERGY, ARAB LAITY

Besides the Church's devotion to maintaining the holy places, Patriarch Theophilos said its responsibility is to "take care of the various Orthodox communities all over – Israel, the Palestinian territories and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan".

However, there have been accusations that too much time is dedicated to the holy places, and that the Church's flock is a secondary concern.

"Some say the Catholics, for example, do much more for educational, medical and charity work than the Greek Orthodox Church", said Daniel Rossing, Executive Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Relations. "They say the [Orthodox Church] gives too much emphasis to the holy places".

Another concern is that the Arab laity is not well-represented in the Church's leadership, which tends to be mainly Greek.

Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee said it's an ancient problem. "There has been historical tension between the leadership and the laity [regarding this issue]. It is the only Christian denomination in the Holy Land whose leadership is not from its rank and file. All the churches led by Arab clergy, except for this one".

Rosen suggested that the clergy remains overwhelmingly Greek because the Church sees its mission as a continuation of original Christianity. "If you ask the leadership, or the Church anywhere in the world, they will tell you it's an historical Church, and its significance goes far beyond the local ethnic constituency. It's part of its historic identity and responsibility.

"But if you ask the majority of the Orthodox faithful in the area", he continued, "they think the clergy should represent the ethnic community. This has been a source of tension for as long as anyone can remember".

Patriarch Theophilos called these claims “totally untrue”.

“In the past there have been problems, but it doesn’t mean the Patriarchate is not looking after its flocks. We’ve taken initiatives to promote education, to built schools.

“Right now there are two members of the Holy Synod who are Arab”, he said. “It’s just a matter of time”.

A notable figure fighting for Arab rights in the Orthodox Church was Theodosios, originally named Atalla Hanna, who was appointed Archbishop in 2005. He was only the second Palestinian to hold that rank in the church’s history.

Although Theodosios declined to comment on the current relationship between the Arab laity and the Greek clergy, before his appointment as Archbishop he was an infamous figure in Greek Orthodox circles.

Theodosios gained popularity with the Arab laity for his fiery denunciations of the Israeli occupation, to the point that in 2002 he was briefly arrested by the Israeli authorities on suspicion of “incitement” and links with terrorist organizations.

The Church clergy was unhappy with Theodosios stance, seeking as always to maintain good relations with the authorities in control.

“Our position here has been always to contribute as much as we can to peace, mutual coexistence, tolerance”, said Patriarch Theophilos.

But despite its best efforts to remain neutral, the Church has sometimes been caught up in the turbulence.

The most recent crisis was about land.

LANDLORD

The Greek Orthodox Church is the largest landowner in the Old City of Jerusalem. It owns much of the land from the Jaffa Gate down the street of the Greek Patriarchate, all the way to the Holy Sepulchre.

Besides owning the land on which many holy places and adjacent properties stand, the Church counts among its holdings the land under the Israeli Prime Minister's residence, and under the Israeli Knesset.

The land has belonged to the Church since ancient times. Patriarch Theophilos explained that the Church "is the inheritor not only of great spiritual heritage, but also natural, fiscal heritage".

After the Muslims occupied the Holy Land, then-Patriarch Sophronius remained the ethnic and religious leader for the Christians there. The Greek Orthodox Church inherited the churches, basilicas and adjacent lands that had belonged to the conquered Byzantines. During the course of its history, the Church acquired even more land.

When both the Israelis and the Palestinians place such a high value on Jerusalem, the Church's extensive land ownership has sometimes put it in a delicate position.

CRISIS

In 2005, then-Patriarch Irenaios sparked outrage within the Church after he reportedly sold some of its land to a group of Israeli investors.

The clergy was incensed that the Patriarch would sell Church land, and the Arab laity even more so, because they felt that *their* land had been sold to Israelis. In response, the Holy Synod stripped Patriarch Irenaios of his position, replacing him with the current Patriarch, Theophilos III.

This began a difficult two-year stretch for the Church.

Besides the controversy within the Church, external problems surfaced as well.

The Israeli government refused to recognize Irenaios's removal, citing the need for government approval for the action. By the same token, it refused to confirm Patriarch Theophilos as Irenaios's successor. Some accusations said figures in the Israeli government blocked the Patriarchate's recognition in order to gain valuable church properties.

As Patriarch Theophilos labored to restore the Church to its previous calm, he was challenged with a government freeze of the Patriarchate's bank accounts, the funds of which were needed for maintaining the holy places and the Patriarchate's school system.

The following year, the Israeli government refused to renew visas for many of the Greek clergy, which would have necessitated their exodus from Israel.

Even the Jordanian government, whose Christians fall under the Jerusalem Patriarchate's authority, for a time refused to recognize Theophilos either.

But Theophilos weathered the storm, appealing to the Israeli Supreme Court for recognition. He won his battle in 2007, and was confirmed in his role by the governments of Israel and Jordan.

Asked how he overcame the crisis, Patriarch Theophilos said he did it "with prayer, and with patience. With wisdom, persistence, and firmness. I myself knew what it was all about. I knew that all the problems were stemming not from the government itself, but from certain key persons who had a vested interest". Theophilos declined to name particular persons.

TO THE FUTURE

Having weathered its recent crisis, speculations arise on the challenges the Church will face in the future. Rabbi Rosen sees the shifting ethnic makeup as a driver of future change.

“One fascinating thing about the Orthodox Church is the change of attendance over the past 20 years”. He said, referring to the mass immigration from Russia and other former Soviet countries.

Under Israel’s Law of Return, any person with at least one Jewish grandparent is entitled to make aliya – to immigrate to Israel. This has resulted in many Russian immigrants who may have a Jewish grandparent, but practice as Orthodox Christians. Estimates of the number of these immigrants vary, but Patriarch Theophilos says there may be as many as 50.000, which is greater than the native Arab Orthodox population.

Patriarch Theophilos acknowledged the new constituents, but was not concerned. “On the contrary”, he said, “this is something that’s repeating itself from 70, 100 years ago. We had a great influx of pilgrims. We’re very glad for the [immigration]... people are returning from former Soviet republics, communist countries. They feel at home because the Patriarchate represents all of them”.

If history is any guide, the Orthodox Church will welcome these new immigrants and continue to chart its course as it has since the earliest days of Christianity.

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