



## 231. July 16/29, 1976

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Fr. Neketas,

Evlogeite!

Thank you for your letter, which we accepted in the spirit of love and concern with which it was written.

Father, for you everything seems simple; but many even of the points you raise in this letter are by no means as simple as you would make them. And this is not our personal opinion, but the opinion of many bishops, priests, monks and laymen with whom we have discussed them, both here and in Greece. The need to speak against the dangerous temptation on the “right side” (which you don’t seem to understand at all) has been impressed upon us above all by highly respected clergy and faithful (respected by you also) in Greece who follow the Old Calendar; I am surprised that you either do not know what they have been saying or choose to take no notice of it. If Father Panteleimon would not be making so many enemies in Greece (which may be the reason why these people no longer speak openly to you), I am sure it would help you and all of us.

We are certainly willing to admit that part of the difficulty here is our inadequate expression of some of the things to which you so strongly object. But the misunderstanding cannot be entirely our fault. It is surely unjust of you, in the context of our past work, of this issue, and of this very article to which you object—to say that this article gives “ecumenical orientation and support.” We will try to express ourselves better in future—but you should also try to see things a little less narrowly, as though it were not possible for your position to be incorrect or imprecise in even the smallest point.

We have not spoken of a “right wing” or a “left wing,” much less of a branch theory. You have read that into the article. Father, we are hurt; in this you are slandering us! We spoke only of the Patristic dictum of the “danger on the right side”—of being too correct and too precise, without the saving medicine of profound humility, which causes discord and division and only helps the work of the devil. Surely you are familiar with what the Mathewites are doing in Greece? And of how they led Fr. Basile Sakkos to his disaster? You must know that you and we are no longer in communion with the Mathewites, since they have broken communion with our Church precisely over the question which we raise in this article—the deliberate refusal of our bishops to declare the new-calendar Mysteries to be without grace?

You ask us: “Are Fr. Neketas and Fr. Panagiotes priests or are they not?” We answer: we believe you are—not because this is our personal opinion or the result of our own logic but because our



bishops accept this, and we see no reason to challenge them on this. But if you ask us further, “Does Constantinople then have grace?”—we will give you the same answer: we accept what our bishops tell us, which is—we cannot say that they do not, and there certainly has been no official breach of communion. (Separate hierarchs, as we mention in the article, have warned against and broken communion, but not our whole Church.) If you do not approve of this, you should direct your complaint to our bishops, not to us who are only reporting what they say. We can easily see how this “inconsistency” would make you personally feel uneasy, if you really did not know whether you are “defrocked” or not. I do not know any defense against this feeling (at least until our bishops shall declare an official break with Constantinople) except your own trust of our bishops: if you trust that they are true bishops and know what they are doing (even though your own logic should tell you otherwise for a time)—then you need have no doubts. Certainly, precedents in Orthodox history may be found where the Mysteries of a Church have been recognized and the anathemas of the same Church have not been recognized (as in the troubles between the Churches of Constantinople and Greece in the 19th century). There are often such mitigating circumstances that make the strict application of canons impossible, and likewise strict “consistency”—that we should be very cautious when we think we know better than our bishops how to apply the canons.

Father, we have not become “ecumenical”; this is a slander caused by your insistence on pushing your own (and not our bishops’) point of view on every point. If our words will be interpreted in an “ecumenical” light we will certainly express ourselves more clearly in future, hoping that the church atmosphere will be such that faulty expressions or puzzling statements will not be leaped upon to “prove” we are really ecumaniacs. Unfortunately, the healthy church atmosphere in which even mistakes can be made without causing schisms and charges of heresy—seems to be vanishing, largely under influence from Greece, and you yourself are participating in putting this unnecessary “tensioness” and suspicion into the air. In your well-meaning zeal you are sometimes expressing yourself too strongly; in particular, you are giving your opinions as though they were those of our bishops. I will tell you frankly that a number of our bishops do not like this, and you are in danger of pushing them to a more radical position than they would like solely as a reaction to your “pushing too hard.” (We are reasonably sure that this is a chief reason why Vladika Laurus chose to serve on Mt. Athos.) Be zealous and express yourself strongly—but do not tell everyone what our Church or our bishops think unless you have discussed it thoroughly with them yourself. I realize that communications for non-Russians are a little difficult with our bishops, and that it is very easy to leave some things unsaid on both sides—but this will not excuse you for letting vague general impressions dictate what you think (and even print) about the views of our bishops. We know one high-ranking bishop of our Synod who was very upset when he read in the Witness that (approximately) “Our Church has no communion whatever with the canonical jurisdictions.” The idea had never entered the head of this bishop that we have no communion with any of these jurisdictions—and yet here it is presented as a authoritative fact in the Witness. Do not blame this lack of mutual understanding solely on our bishops—they also suffer from the fact that “one can’t talk with our Greeks—they won’t listen to any other point of view.”

We have always been sure that Fr. Panteleimon knew such elementary facts of life in our Synod



and would have told you about them; but he is either misinterpreting things himself, or simply hiding things from you. Please do not judge us too harshly if we are the first to tell you of them. We do not blindly believe anything just because some or most of our bishops believe it; but we treat their opinions with the utmost respect and try to understand why they think that way. Perhaps in future, and especially after the “Thyateira Confession,” our bishops will find it necessary to issue more precise statements and to formally break communion with Constantinople (and perhaps other Patriarchates); but up to now they have not done this.

You may ask, Why are our bishops so slow in doing this, when the progress of apostasy seems so clearly to be destroying these Churches? Without pretending to speak for the bishops, I can give you several reasons which should make you less insistent that they should have broken communion by now: (1) the abnormal, often anarchic conditions of our times, which tend to make the bishops think more in terms of maximum “economy” rather than emphasize “strictness”; (2) the “temporary” nature of the Russian Church Abroad, which makes it disinclined to make sharp or final decisions about Pan-Orthodox questions; (3) problems of language, psychology, etc.—including the presence in Greece of a group which has been identified by other Old Calendarists themselves as “fanatics,” “legalists,” and as giving justification for the comparison of the Old Calendar Churches in Greece with the Russian Old Believers. (These are not our words.) You seem to be constantly preoccupied with “what they will think in Greece” of the words or acts of our Synod or some bishops. But since you are in our Russian Church, you must at least try to realize that our bishops do not act on such a basis, but on the basis of the needs of their own flocks.

Father, it is your and our duty to remain in and hand down the spirit of true Orthodox doctrine and piety; but it is not for either of us to usurp the position of our bishops and speak our opinions in their name. If we think their position should be stronger (and we sometimes think so also), we will bring this about much better by not “pushing” them. We should be tolerant and patient when we think they are not strong enough in their statements, realizing how we also can be guilty of errors in the many complex questions that beset us today. We should be aware of how much more difficult their position is from ours and yours: we are free to have no communion with the “canonical jurisdictions” on our local level; but the bishops must examine the repercussions of such an act on the whole Church, where it is much more difficult to make such “simple” decisions. If you are going to insist that only your position is Orthodox, and everyone who falls short of your logic and precision is “ecumenical”—then it seems only a matter of time until you follow Fr. Basile Sakkos in his unfortunate “consistency” (unless, of course, you can force the decrees you need from our bishops, which is highly unlikely). The very fact that you did not follow Fr. Basile is already a sign that you are not totally “consistent” yourself (for our bishops would not give him precisely that which you regard as so necessary: a statement that all new-calendarists are heretics and that we have no communion with them).

Once again, we are not preaching to you “blind obedience to bishops”—but we are asking you to be a little less sure of yourself when you see that no less zealous Orthodox (including some of your



own bishops), while in substantial agreement about the state of Orthodoxy today, advocate a humbler path. The position of our bishops, which I believe we have accurately described in the article to which you object, while of course “inconsistent” from the point of view of absolute “strictness,” seems to us to be a good enough starting point, out of which a stricter and more precise position can come later with the minimum of divisiveness which the pressing of your view would cause at the present time. Again, please learn humility from the example of Greece today: does not each one of the bickering parties there believe that it is “correct” and the others wrong? (I speak of the Old Calendar parties). Do you seriously think to impose the views of one group of Old Calendarists on our Church, when this group cannot prevail over the Old Calendarists even in Greece? And surely you know that the question of the grace of new-calendarist Mysteries is still much disputed by Old Calendarists themselves, and that the decision of the Auxentiite Synod in 1974, being prompted by political motives, has not at all brought peace or resolved the question? (Many of the bishops have since changed their mind about it.)

By the way, with regard to Moscow, you should realize that the cause for the break in 1927 was not for any of the reasons you mention, but was a much subtler thing. “Sergianism” in 1927 was not a question of ecumenism, modernism, the new calendar, the acceptance of non-Orthodox Mysteries, violation of canons, or teaching of new dogmas; and it was not of course a question only of politics, either. What then is left?—something very difficult to define and which the Catacomb hierarchs of 1927 in their epistles usually identified as the “loss of inner freedom.” (To be sure, new factors have entered the situation in recent years.) Before such a subtle temptation it is precisely a feeling for the spirit behind the phenomena which is the decisive factor, and not merely “correctness” in canons or dogmas. Several highly-respected Old Calendarists in Greece have written us that it is precisely the “fatal disease of correctness” which has caused such anarchy there now in the church situation—a “disease” which they place second only to ecumenism itself as a destroyer of souls. Do you have any idea what this means? If you don’t, there is something very much lacking in your awareness of the Orthodox situation today, and this should make you all the more humble and cautious and unsure that everything you say and think is right. You must try to see things as other sincere zealots of Orthodoxy see them, or else your godly zeal will only end in causing divisions and strife and you yourself will be helping the devil’s work of destroying Orthodoxy. We all (we as much as you) must be ready to see that we do not have “all the answers,” that we are sometimes wrong or express ourselves poorly. Let me give you a few examples.

(1) Bishop Petros. You think it is a terrible scandal and inconsistency that he is allowed to serve with us, and in your ignorance you blame this all on Vladika Laurus. Have you even tried to understand what others think of this? Fr. Panteleimon says he presented his “evidence” on Bishop Petros to our bishops; well, our bishops were not convinced by this “evidence,” and frankly they have good reason to believe, as many Old Calendarists in Greece believe and say, that this is primarily a matter of mutual jealousy and power politics. You insist that our bishops choose your side—but why? Bishop Petros was in close contact with our Synod before you and Fr. Panteleimon were, and Vladika John himself told us in 1965 that logically you and Fr. Panteleimon should be under him; you were granted an exception by our Synod—in order to form a second group of “Old



Calendar Greeks" in America, a very dangerous thing—and yet you continue to insist that we "get rid" of Bishop Petros. I'm not saying who is right or wrong here—I'm only saying that you must view things logically and reasonably and try to understand things as others see them, and if necessary reconcile yourself to the fact that you cannot always have your way.

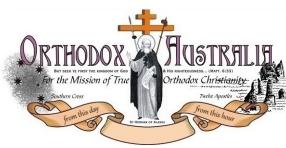
In 1974 Bishop Petros was cut off from the Synod of Archbishop Auxentios, and our bishops have been given no proof that this was for anything else than his refusal to declare the new-calendarist Mysteries to be without grace. Our bishops likewise refused to do this—are we then to cut him off because of his agreement with us? Does church politics require such stabs in the back? You say that we must be "canonical" and accept the decrees of the Auxentiite Synod—but did Fr.

Panteleimon think that in 1971 when he dealt with the Mathewites behind the back of the Auxentiite Synod and thus aroused tremendous anger and resentment in Greece? This turned out to be a bad blow against our Church. Who is being "consistent" here? You blame Bp. Laurus for letting Bp. Petros serve—but we know that many of our bishops are weary of this "Greek fighting" and want no part in "taking sides" in it, and we know for certain that it was Metropolitan Philaret himself who made the final decision to allow Bishop Petros to serve at the funeral of Archbishop Averky.

We ourselves are not "taking sides" in this matter—but since no one else seems to do so, we must tell you that your over-zealousness on such points is giving you many enemies in our Church and among Old Calendarists in Greece. If your objections against Bishop Petros are indeed sound, then we and many others would be much more inclined to believe you if you acted with more sense and moderation. Your very violence and "demonstrations" on this subject make it indeed look like a battle over "who is to rule the Greeks in America"; our bishops don't want any part of such a battle, and if they sometimes "back down" before your demands, it is solely because they treat you as spoiled children who might get violent if you don't get your way. Is that the role you want for yourselves? Is that true zeal? Be humbler!

(2) Your comments on "awful catechisms," the "heretic" Augustine, etc. show very poor taste, great immaturity, an insult to the very bishops under whom you are placed (who think differently, and you did not even think of asking their opinion, did you?), and a work of undermining the authority of the great Fathers of recent and even ancient centuries with whom you are not in agreement. Father, there are usually kernels of truth in your comments—but you take those kernels and blow them up with violent language that totally misses the point. Our Russian theologians of the past two centuries have handled the question of Augustine (with all his errors) very soberly—but you don't think of asking their opinion, because you regard them all as "polluted" and in "Western captivity." Be humble enough to see that your zeal is not always godly, but is sometimes the result of your personal prejudices and faulty points of view and a "Western captivity" of your own. If you can't see this, your Orthodoxy will become narrow fanaticism, with disastrous results; you will destroy many souls.

Believe me, Father, this letter is written with blood. There is time for you to step back from the path of fanaticism, and we will be 100% with you if you do; we ourselves will willingly accept correction



from others who are on the same path with us, together with our bishops. But if all this letter tells you is that we are “misguided” and totally off the right path—then may God help our poor American Orthodoxy, for the future is dim!

I don't know what more to say at this time. We will continue to be outspokenly anti-ecumenist. But we pray that you too will begin to realize some of the more subtle temptations that lie before us. On basic points concerning ecumenism and the apostasy we do not disagree with you; our emphasis and desire not to lose contact with our more cautious bishops is different, but no more. You say: “All the Patriarchates have lapsed into heresy”; we would prefer to say” “Are lapsing and let the bishops decide the moment when the lapse is irremediable.

Please forgive our frankness if it is in any way offensive to you. We know no other way to make you see things more objectively before it is too late.

With love and respect in Christ our God,  
Seraphim, monk