

14 Σεπτεμβρίου 2013

By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew At the Formal Celebration of the 90th Anniversary Since the Declaration of Autonomy for the Orthodox Church of Finland (Uspenski Cathedral, September 12, 2013)

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Your Eminence and beloved brother Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland,
Your Eminences and Your Graces, dear brothers in the Lord,
Distinguished and blessed audience,

“Always rejoice in the Lord. ... Whoever is with God, always rejoices.”

(St. John Chrysostom, Commentary on Philipians IV PG62.283)

When the state of Finland, with the Orthodox clergy and laity at the time, approached our predecessor Patriarch Meletios the IV in 1923, seeking ecclesiastical protection and “reference” as a result of the volatile circumstances, and broader political situation in this geographical region, just as its neighboring country of Estonia also did for its own local Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate studied their appeal and acted on its obligation on the basis of the right, afforded to it by the sacred and holy canons, as well as the tradition and order of the Orthodox Church. Thus, it bestowed on the Church of Finland the status of autonomy under specific and clear conditions and presuppositions. Accordingly, it granted self-administration to this local Finnish Church, which to this day is at its peak, and continues to advance under the pastoral responsibility and nurturing care of Your beloved Eminence, dear Brother Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland.

That constitutional ecclesiastical document, the Patriarchal Tome, foresees among other things that “inasmuch as, in its newly established state, the Orthodox Church of Finland faces new forthcoming political circumstances . . . and currently lies unprotected, having approached the Ecumenical Patriarchate by means of letters and commissioned delegations to this purpose, seeking spiritual guidance and providence for the sure and canonical function and management of its affairs . . . , we declare that the Orthodox Christians and their institutions within the divinely-protected Republic of Finland, will henceforth be organized as one united ecclesiastical district, bearing the name Orthodox Archdiocese of Finland.”

Dear friends, the presuppositions of the exercise of canonical care on the part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in your particular case as well, together with the canonical demands for the organization and ministry of your local Orthodox Church, are very clear in the text of that Patriarchal and Synodal Tome. After all, it is an apostolic exhortation that we should always lovingly support one another as members of the Church, whether in joyful events or sorrowful occasions – and especially so, in the case of the spiritual concern of the Mother Church of Constantinople.

In this current year, with God’s grace, you are already completing ninety years since the bestowal on the part of the holy and Great Mother Church of the privilege of autonomy to the Orthodox Church in this beautiful land. In appreciation, then, as it is proper and right, of the fruits of the new ecclesiastical administrative condition created here, we have come from our historical See at the Phanar in

Constantinople, precisely in order to concelebrate with all of you – as our brothers and sisters in the Lord –, as well as in order to rejoice and congratulate you wholeheartedly on the achievements to this day of the blessed and constantly increasing on every level faithful people of God, who are also shepherded by distinguished hierarchs.

We are pleased to ascertain that both you and we rejoice for the pure and simple reason that we are in a communion of faith and doctrine; and whoever is in communion with God and one's brothers and sisters always rejoices.

Through this communion, as the mystical and theanthropic Body of Christ, the Orthodox Church also participates of eternity, which it beholds with great desire and without deviation, while at the same time participating in the historical changes and circumstances of its people, in the specific geographical area where it exists.

The Autonomous Orthodox Church of Finland has traversed diverse historical challenges and encountered various spiritual threats, enduring assaults with extreme patience. However, it was ultimately rendered worthy of achieving autonomy in its administration, following the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which by historical and canonical right always grants such autonomy to particular local Churches, presupposing of course the clearly predetermined appropriate circumstances and due demands.

However, the granting of ecclesiastical autonomy commands and reveals first of all the spiritual as well as administrative maturity of a local Church that is henceforth capable of managing its own affairs, without any external intervention or interference by third parties, and always in agreement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which granted the status of autonomy, and under whose jurisdiction it lies. It does so also in agreement with the rest of the Orthodox Patriarchates as well as autocephalous and autonomous Churches throughout the Lord's world, with which it shares the same faith and liturgical tradition. These presuppositions guarantee its responsible progress in the future and its journey with all local Orthodox Churches as a united Body of Christ, which has, as its final purpose and destination, the edification, salvation and deification of the faithful.

Your blessed Church of Finland has demonstrated – in numerous and various ways – that it has exercised its status of autonomy very fruitfully and evangelically, organizing itself in exemplary manner and rightfully acquiring the respect and esteem of the other Christian Churches and Confessions in this country. For, as you move and advance in the peace of our Lord, the light of salvation and truth shines

on all people living in Finland.

As Mother Church, our Ecumenical Patriarchate looks to the stability of the local holy Churches of God, whose “very foundation and constitution” are its daily concern, serving and securing unity among them and with them, as a panorthodox center. Thus, it rejoices and boasts in its beloved daughter Autonomous Orthodox Church of Finland, but also in its Hierarchy and all the clergy and laity, both the living and the dead. For, you have conducted yourselves over ninety years, from the beginning to this day, in admirable fashion, preserving and increasing the faith once delivered to you, which you maintain as a precious treasure, while at the same time sharing it with those of your fellow Fins, who freely wish to embrace it personally, as we learn from the statistical information and missionary activities of the Orthodox Church in Finland.

We shall not say much more. Our delight, as Mother Church of Constantinople but also as your Patriarch and spiritual father, is complete. It is sufficient to know that only two Churches in your country are constitutionally protected and comprise legal entities: the Evangelical Lutheran Church with its numerous memberships and the Orthodox Church with barely sixty-five thousand faithful. Nevertheless, the activity and dynamic of the Finnish Orthodox Church is inverse reflection of the statistics, as Your Eminence observed some years ago in an interview, as well as in person during your visit to the Church of Greece. The conversion of Fins to the Orthodox Church is manifest, attested to by the many Orthodox churches and parishes, the holy monasteries and the theological school in Joensuu. All of these verify the culmination of Orthodoxy here.

Of course the ecclesiastical, spiritual and pastoral work of Orthodox witness being accomplished here is surely due to the faithful, as well as to its wise and experienced hierarchs, together with the sacrificial humility of your clergy. Yet, it is primarily due to the devotion and spirituality of the Orthodox Fins. It is the result of the inspiring initiatives of your fathers and forefathers, who “were not indifferent to the power of learning, but rather shamelessly and generously shared it with others,” in application of the words of Basil the Great, who added: “It is not only the voice and eyes, as the mirror reflecting the soul, that are capable of teaching, but even one’s dress, smile and manner of walking, also reveal a lot.” (On the Incorruption of Genuine Virginity PG30.741)

Hearing your voice, seeing your appearance, and beholding the piety of your soul’s dress; observing your life – namely, your smile and manner of walking, which we silently and vigilantly follow from the Phanar throughout these years; we recognize that they eloquently declare what we as Ecumenical Patriarch also witness and

proclaim that you are imitators of God and His Saints, in accordance with the strength that has been given to you.

In concelebrating with you today this historical anniversary, the Mother Church invites all of you as Orthodox Fins “to rejoice at all times and especially at this moment; for you have Christ within you, as the noblest of all benefits, whose love none of the fleshly concerns can take from you. ... Your entire soul has been once for all bound to the desire of the One that created you, whose joy and delight cannot be changed by the various falls of fleshly passions or the vanity of human affairs, but instead brings gladness where sadness prevails.” (Basil the Great, On Gratitude PG30.221) This is what the Orthodox Church of Finland – and all of you, who have matured in your autonomy of ninety years and continue to grow in your vocation and mission – mean to us and for us.

We urge, beseech and call you, then – as your Patriarch from the Phanar, who embraces all of you with special affection, love, care and interest – to continue along the same path of progress, cultivating and increasing your natural talents as well as the gifts revealed by God, such as the Orthodox faith and His saving grace. May you unceasingly be sanctified to the end of this world, looking consistently to the Founder of our Church and imitating the lives of our Saints, so that you may inherit the heavenly kingdom, surpassing the righteousness that is based on the law (cf. Matt. 5.20 and Phil. 3.4-9), the kingdom which we are all called to inherit in the boundless mercy of our loving God. To Him be all glory, might, honor and worship, now and always, and to the endless ages of ages. Amen.

Text No. 5