

## **That we may be one: the big issue**

**A paper by Father Michael Harper**

Growing up as a boy, it did not take me long to realise that the Church of England was divided into various parties, Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and Liberal, to name the largest. But the Church did not have different Bishops for each party. There was only one Diocesan Bishop for all parties, the only division was geographical – into Dioceses.

The same is true for the Roman Catholic Church in this country. For example there has recently been a massive migration to this country of Poles, most of whom are Roman Catholics, but it has never been suggested that there should be a Polish Jurisdiction in this country to serve them. They have just had to slot into the existing structure.

To be fair to the Orthodox, the circumstances have been somewhat different. But the principle is the same, and the issue was raised by Bishop Kallistos at the Pan-Orthodox Conference at Swanwick in 2004. Since then he has raised it again at a Conference at the St Sergius Institute in Paris organised by the OPRTWE (Orthodox Parishes of Russian Tradition in Western Europe) or Rue Daru as it is more popularly called.

The issue is the uncanonical nature of Orthodoxy in most of Western Europe of which probably the worst example is the United Kingdom and Ireland. I am referring to the plethora of jurisdictions. Bishop Kallistos in Paris put it bluntly:

...in any given place there can only be one Bishop. Our current situation in the West with an Orthodox Church divided into different jurisdictions, with a multiplicity of Bishops in each big city is not just an inconvenience, an embarrassment for our pastoral and missionary activity, it is not just theoretically anti-canonical, but at a much deeper level, it is a fundamental contradiction of the very being of the Church as a Eucharistic organism, it is an ecclesiastical sin, an absolute transgression and violation of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The only division in the Church acceptable to God is geographical – the human impossibility of all meeting in the same place at the same time. Paul highlights this when he wrote “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. “ Gal 3:28 It is striking that in the Book of the Revelation, which is much neglected by the Orthodox, in chapters 2 and 3

Christ addresses the “angel” usually interpreted as the Bishop, of a geographical area or city – Ephesus, Philadelphia etc.

In Paris, Bishop Kallistos clearly states that the issue is “clear and uncontested”; the problem is what to do about it. I, therefore, do not want to take up any more space on the Big Issue, because I am quite sure that all of us agree with what is wrong. But what can we do about it?

The Bishop sees unity coming “from above and from below”. Frankly, it is my strong conviction that in the UK and Ireland nothing will ever come or be done “from above”. So to be equally frank, it is up to us “from below” to do something about it.

### *What should we do?*

Let me first of all say three vital things. First, the spirit of our endeavours should never be rebellious or disrespectful. We should show the utmost respect for those who are “above” us in Christ. Secondly, we need to be strong and not wimpish in how we address the matter. To get anywhere we need perseverance. We need to make it clear that we are not going to give up. We see something that is wrong, that is a hindrance to the Kingdom of God, and we are determined to see the matter is put right. And thirdly, we should all be involved. Bishop Kallistos puts the burden on all of us – “it is the responsibility of every one of us without exception”.

### *Some suggestions*

- 1 Engage the support of all like-minded Priests and Laity across all the jurisdictions.
- 2 Press for a meeting to be held at least annually of all Bishops of the canonical jurisdictions. This should be done by personal approaches NOT letters, which will never be answered. Editor’s note: Such meetings are now taking place.
- 3 Urge the setting up of a pan-Orthodox strategy committee to work on the strategic placing of parishes and chaplaincies.
- 4 Urge the setting up of a pan-Orthodox Press Office.
- 5 Work towards a pan-Orthodox Committee to handle Prison, University and Hospital chaplaincies.
- 6 Press for an annual united Divine Liturgy, or Liturgies in various parts of the country – perhaps to take the place of Pan-Orthodox Vespers. Bishop Theodoritos is keen on this.

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