

Q. All my life I have heard Metropolitan Theodosius mentioned at the Divine Liturgy. Now that he has retired we are mentioning Metropolitan Herman, who was just elected. This has made me wonder just what a “Metropolitan” is, and why we call the Metropolitan “His Beatitude.” Can you explain this?

A. The basic unit of the Church is the Diocese. Simply put, a diocese is all of the Orthodox Christian clergy and people in a city, town, or even a village and countryside, gathered around their Bishop. In America a diocese may be much larger. Our own Diocese of the West covers a good portion of the United States, but the norm is for them to be much smaller. In some places such as North Africa or Egypt, there were hundreds of Bishops: one for every town and village. In other places such as Palestine, local deans who were often called “Country Bishops,” but who were actually Archpriests who served under a Bishop of a larger near-by town or city, headed churches in smaller towns. Still, it seems that from the beginning of the Church, St Ignatius of Antioch’s rule was observed, “Where the Bishop is, there let the people be gathered as where Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

Still, Bishops did not act alone. While each one was head of his own diocese, each also was part of a synod, or gathering of bishops within their region. Very early in Church history a rule developed which became part of the Holy Canons. This rule required all of the bishops within a region or country to meet at least twice a year in a Holy Synod under the presidency of the Bishop of the important city within the region. This person came to be called “Archbishop,” which is something like “Leader of Bishops,” and which gave him special dignity and honor, such as presiding at a synod, and at the ordination of new bishops, writing letters to other archbishops and Churches on behalf of the bishops of his synod, hearing accusations against brother bishops and giving judgment, and, later, presiding at the Consecration of the Holy Chrism and distributing this to the local bishops.

As the Church structure developed, certain ancient or centrally located cities were recognized as possessing great dignity because their antiquity and world wide network of communication provided them with a greater likelihood of holding and possessing the fullness of the Faith without error. When, for example, the Fathers of the first Council addressed their letter to the Bishop of Rome, it was to inform him of their decisions not to ask his approval. They say, “It seemed right to inform you who sits in the city which witnessed the blood of two of the foremost Apostles.” Some of these great old cities, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, and, later, Constantinople, or “New Rome,” were designated as Patriarchates, because their bishops presided over very important synods.

The term “metropolitan” was used for bishops of important cities. In other places titles such as “Catholicos” (Georgia) and “Pope” (Rome and Alexandria) were granted to indicate special jurisdiction and authority.

In the more modern Greek system, “Metropolitan” is the title of almost every bishop of a large regional city or “metropolis”, while “Archbishop” is the title of heads of newer self governing Churches or important regions.

In the older Russian system which was brought there by the early Greek missionaries, the title of “Metropolitan” was one of dignity second only to that of Patriarch. Of course, there was no Patriarch in Russia for the first several centuries of Christianity there. Later, as “newer” Churches became “Autocephalous,” or “self headed,” they often bestowed the title of Patriarch upon their chief Metropolitan. Examples of this are the Churches of Russia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Other independent churches, such as Greece and Cyprus, elect Archbishops who are the senior Metropolitan of their Church.

Generally, metropolitans who are the primates, or first hierarchs, of autocephalous Churches are addressed as “Your Beatitude,” and are described as “The Most Blessed.” “Beatitude” denotes blessedness, or spiritual joy.

When our O.C.A. was granted autocephaly in 1970, it was understood that the head of the Church in such an expansive land should be a Patriarch. Nevertheless, because of the lack of canonical unity among the many missionary jurisdictions, humility suggested that for the time being the title of Metropolitan should be retained. The address of the primate, however, was changed from His Eminence to His Beatitude. At the last All American Council, Archbishop Demetrius, head of the Greek Church in the U.S., addressed Metropolitan Herman as “Your Beatitude,” which was the first time I can recall a Greek Chief Hierarch using this nomenclature.

Finally, there is the question of what the Metropolitan is for, what does he do. At first glance, it would appear that his function is more one of being President, or First Among Equals, of the Holy Synod. He also has a function of providing a center of unity for the entire O.C.A., and of dealing with other Orthodox Churches, but beyond that he is no more of a bishop than any other, and exercises only such authority within any other ruling hierarch’s diocese as courtesy and custom suggest. In final analysis, it is the people’s place to remain in communion with their bishop, the bishop’s job to remain in the unity of the Holy Synod and with its metropolitan, and the metropolitan’s office to maintain the communion of the Orthodox Church in America with all of the other Orthodox Churches’ hierarchs and throughout the world.