The Georgian Church Question

From “Slovo”, St. Petersburg, 30 Nov./13 Dec. 1908

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Translated from Russian by Marjory Wardrop

The tragic death of the Exarch of Georgia, Archbishop Nikon, has brought into prominence the question of the administration of the Georgian Church: are exarchs to be sent to Georgia as before, or should the Georgian clergy and laity, in answer to their petitions, be permitted to elect a Catholicos who, on his approval by the Sovereign, might enter upon the discharge of his duties as administrator of the affairs of that Church in accordance with the ancient canon?

Everyone who is well acquainted with the past and present position of the Georgian Church, clergy and laity, and sincerely wishes to bring among them lasting peace and order, advises without hesitation the latter settlement of the question, for there is no foundation for the supposition that the mission of the future Exarch can be more successful than the mission of his predecessor, the late Exarch, or the mission of those who preceded him; to continue the religious struggle for victory, as some pugnacious priests and their supporters advise, is hardly desirable or reasonable.

But how is the whole question to be settled?

Very simply, and on a perfectly legal, canonical basis. When in 1811 the last Georgian Catholicos Antony II retired, by an Imperial ukaz the administration of the Georgian Church was entrusted to the Holy Synod, which henceforth began to send its Exarchs to Georgia.

Thus in 1811 it was only the subjection of the Georgian Church government to the Department of the Holy Synod which took place by Imperial command. The question of the unification or incorporation of the Georgian and Russian Churches was not raised, for in order to effect the union or the separation of Churches there exist [pg 2] certain clearly defined canonical bases which in the present instance are lacking, since in order to replace the Catholicosate by an Exarchate and to subject the Georgian ecclesiastical administration to the Holy Synod no use was made either of the decisions of the Georgian and Russian ecclesiastical councils or the sanction

of the Oriental Patriarchs or the Oecumenical Church of which the Georgian (Iberian) Church had been a member since the IV century.

Consequently, the re-establishment of the former canonical order of government of the Georgian Church, after an unfortunate century-long experience of Exarchical government, can be effected in the same way in which it was changed, i.e. by an Imperial ukaz.

The words of the Imperial ukaz, issued in answer to the Georgian petition for the re-establishment of autocephaly, of August 11, 1906, "to let the Council decide on the autocephaly of the Georgian Church", evidently does not mean "to discuss the abolition or liquidation of the Georgian Church". For such a step as that the Russian Church Council cannot be authorized either by the Church Universal or by the civil power, but the Council is bound, not diminishing "the honour and the power" i.e. the rights and prerogatives of the autocephalous Georgian Church, to discuss the means of restoring autocephaly, and with this aim to work out a modus vivendi for the mutual relations of the Georgian and Russian Churches, which was already provided for by the VIII article of the Russian-Georgian Treaty of 1783, and such "special article" has not yet been drawn up, with the result that the relations between the two Churches, from the point of view of canon law have not yet been regulated or legalized by the Church Universal.

Elected and approved by the Sovereign, the Catholicos of the Georgian Church has the canonical right [pg 3] to delegate to members of his Church the preparation, in association with Russian delegates, of a scheme for the mutual relations of the two Churches, which scheme in due time, when the Council is summoned, will be submitted to it for consideration and sanction. In this local Council representatives of the Georgian Church would willingly take part, since they can be present enjoying equal rights as members of one of the most ancient Churches, just as they were present in olden days at the Moscow local Councils, e.g. 1666-7 and in still more ancient times at Oecumenical and local Councils of the Greek-Oriental Church. Otherwise, i.e. in the character of defendants, the Georgians could hardly go to the Council, or they would soon have to leave it, as they were forced to leave the II Department of the Sessions preliminary to the Council.

At first, even under a Catholicos, the mutual relations of the Churches, as well as their budget might temporarily remain without essential change.

It is evident that there are no obstacles in theory or practice to the re-establishment of the Catholicosate; that the Georgian Church received autocephaly & realized it during the course of many centuries is an undoubted fact; from 1783 to 1811 there are dozens of Imperial charters and other official clerical & lay documents in which the Georgian protohierarchs are called "Most Holy Catholicos -- Patriarch of all Georgia" etc. The autocephaly of the Georgian Church never met with any doubt on the part of the Russian Church, the Patriarch Nikon (the initiator of the removal to Moscow from Athos of the copy of the Iberian Ikon of the Virgin and the founder of the Iberian Monastery in Valdai Hills) and FIlaret (Metropolitan of Moscow) always placed the Iberian Church on a level with the Greek as regards antiquity, honour, purity & steadfastness in Orthodoxy. [pg 4]

Thus always did the Greek Church also look upon the Iberian Church, according to the evidence of Procopius, the VI century historian, the Patriarch of Valsamon of the XII century and others.

The method here proposed for the settlement of the Georgian Church question cannot of course in any way diminish the prestige either of the ecclesiastical or civil authorities, on the contrary -- it would be received by all right-thinking people as an act of wise precaution: prévoir, préparer, prévenir.