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## **A Return to Tradition? The Marriage of Bishops in the (Greek) Orthodox Church**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the possibility of allowing married priests—and not exclusively celibate priests, as is the case today—to be ordained bishops in the (Greek) Orthodox Church, especially in light of future councils of the Orthodox Church, in which such subjects could perhaps be discussed. The paper, approaches the theological, canonical, and historical aspects of this possibility, engaging with the subject not from the perspective of a need for reform, but rather from the viewpoint of a need to return to the Orthodox Church's theological and canonical tradition, which clearly allows for married priests to be candidates for ordination as bishops.



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## Keywords

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## 1 Introduction: Relevance and Timeliness

The question of the possibility of married bishops remains relevant for today's Orthodox Church. This importance is due to the following reasons:

First, this subject is usually considered as a vital part of the ongoing discussion on reform within the Orthodox Church. However, a radical reframing of this question might be timely. Whereas the problem of married bishops seems at first to be constricted to a discussion between “progressives” and “conservatives,” this is not the case, since the introduction of such a possibility would not be a reform or a novelty, but rather a return to the earlier tradition of the Orthodox Church from which she has not strayed away on neither the canonical nor the theological level, as I will argue. Second, the matter has also been reframed by a seemingly new development—novel for the standards of ecclesial time, at least: the celibate presbyters of a given diocese currently constitute a peculiar bureaucracy, within which the prospect of being ordained a bishop appears more as administrative promotion and less as ecclesial fatherhood. This essentially novel issue (as regards its current dimensions) has become a central problem in the Orthodox Church due to its implicit pastoral dimension. Finally, the Great Synod of the Orthodox Church has taken place in June 2016, during which several decisions of importance for the future of the Orthodox Church have been reached, including the promise for the convocation of new synods. However, despite the fact that the question was almost settled in favour of the possibility of married bishops during the Pan-Orthodox Congress in

Constantinople in 1923,<sup>1</sup> the Great Synod and most of its decades-long preliminary preparations have not brought this subject into discussion.

In the present opinion article,<sup>2</sup> I will attempt to explain why a return to Orthodox ecclesial tradition—i.e., to the possibility of married bishops, as I will show—is necessary, as well as why this matter could be settled by local synods without the need for an ecumenical council. The limitations of this paper must be acknowledged right from the start: my concern is to discuss this subject in its timeliness by employing theological criteria in order to highlight a particular perspective, not to conduct new research on the historical peculiarities of the subject. As such, I will rely on studies, which have provided us with an array of primary and secondary sources on the subject<sup>3</sup> to make my theological point. The secondary sources I employ do not serve to *prove* my point, but rather to demonstrate the *continuity* and *coherence* of theological engagement with the subject of married bishops and their canonical foundations. Apart from that, I should remark that I will focus on Greek Orthodoxy, thus limiting my sources and the object of my enquiry, noting

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive reference on the matter can be found in the study by Nikolaos Th. Bougatsos, *The Married and the Celibate Bishop*, in Greek: *Ἄγαμος καὶ Ἐγγαμος Ἐπίσκοπος* (Athens: 1968), pp. 21-2, as well as in note 69.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is an abridged version of an article of mine that originally appeared in Greek as *Ἐπιστροφή στὴν παράδοση: τὸ ἔγγαμον τῶν Ἐπισκόπων*, in *Synaxi* 134 (2015), pp. 50-60.

<sup>3</sup> Studies addressing the issue through an impressive amount of historical and theological literature include Panagiotis Boumis' (em. Prof. of Canon Law, UoA) *The Marriage of Bishops and the Possibilities of its Application*, in Greek: *Τὸ ἔγγαμον τῶν ἐπισκόπων καὶ οἱ δυνατότητες ἐφαρμογῆς του*, in *Συμβολή* 9 (April-June 2005): pp. 52-67 (henceforth P. Boumis: *The Marriage of Bishops*) and N. Th. Bougatsos' *Married and the Celibate Bishop*, in which further secondary literature is to be found. Since a torrent of primary and secondary sources is accumulated in those studies, these will serve as my main references.

however that the situation in other Orthodox Churches is not very different.

What follows is a brief presentation of the situation as it currently stands in the Orthodox Church. Both a married and a celibate member of the laity can be ordained as deacon and presbyter (i.e. priest). However, the married presbyter is excluded from the possibility of being promoted to the episcopacy. This possibility is reserved only for the celibate presbyter, whether he is a priest-monk or not. However, in the past, this was not always the case—despite the fact that most bishops have been celibates and that a majority would most likely continue to be celibates as was always the case, even if the possibility of married bishops would be eventually restored. We know St Gregory of Nyssa was most probably married, as was Gregory of Nazianzus (the father of St Gregory the Theologian), St Spyridon Bishop of Tremithus, St Synesius, bishop of Ptolemais, and many others. The presence of married bishops up until the twelfth century in the Orthodox Church is well documented, while 1 Timothy 3:2 has never been disputed. Furthermore, exceptions are to be encountered in later times as well.<sup>4</sup> A most recent case is that of the late Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II, who was ecclesiastically married on the eleventh of April 1950 to Vera Alekseeva, daughter of a presbyter, and was ordained a deacon and a presbyter on the fifteenth and the seventeenth of the same month respectively.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> N. Th. Bougatsos, *Married and Celibate Bishop*, p. 18 and footnote 53. A selective index of married bishops from the end of twelfth century up until today can be found on pp. 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ökumenische Rundschau* 58 (2009), p. 110, as well as the article in Telegraph “His Holiness Alexy II—Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church during an era of profound change.” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/3567608/His-Holiness-Alexy-II.html>. See also: Замужем за патриархом—Патриарх Московский и всея Руси Алексий II был женат и, возможно, уклонялся от службы в армии, <http://www.rusglobus.net/komar/index.htm?church/patriarh.htm&1>. Alexy II and his wife divorced a year later, a

It should also be noted, according to ancient historians of the Church, the question was already put forward during the First Ecumenical Council, which considered the subject settled “for bishops, presbyters, deacons and sub-deacons,” with St Paphnutius calling marriage and married intercourse “honourable and undefiled.”<sup>6</sup>

## **2      Bishops, Celibacy and Marriage: Canons and Tradition**

Despite the fact that, on the level of theological literature, the matter is more or less clear, there is a sort of confusion in the manner by which the celibacy of the bishops is instituted and justified in Orthodox Church. For, not only most faithful lack any knowledge on the matter, but even some bishops and metropolitans that are to be counted among the intellectuals often misapprehend the facts and think the canons of the Orthodox Church impose the *celibacy* of bishops. More particularly, the celibacy of the clerics as allowing them to be ordained as bishops (along with the celibacy of the bishops themselves) is often presented as having been instituted by the Quinisext Synod in Trullo (691 AD), through its twelfth (and indirectly by its thirteenth) canon—an impression widely held. However, the twelfth canon of the Quinisext Synod does not state exactly that. It is worth citing it:

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fact that does not annul the married status of the later Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, since it is marriage in general—and not simply marriage in effect—that seems to stand in the way of episcopacy. Widows (and not divorced presbyters) *can* become bishops in the Church of Greece, but this happens most rarely and only under further special circumstances.

<sup>6</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, MPG 67, 925. See also Charles Joseph Hefele’s *A History of the Councils of the Church: from the Original Documents, to the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock 2007), pp. 435-7.

“Moreover this also has come to our knowledge, that in Africa and Libya and in other places the most God-beloved bishops in those parts do not refuse to live with their wives, even after consecration, thereby giving scandal and offense to the people. Since, therefore, it is our particular care that all things tend to the good of the flock placed in our hands and committed to us—it has seemed good that henceforth nothing of the kind shall in any way occur. And we say this, not to abolish and overthrow what things were established of old by Apostolic authority, but as caring for the health of the people and their advance to better things, and lest the ecclesiastical state should suffer any reproach. For the divine Apostle says: Do all to the glory of God, give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Greeks, nor to the Church of God, even as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me even as I also am of Christ. But if any shall have been observed to do such a thing, let him be deposed”.<sup>7</sup>

One can discern a certain apologetic tone,<sup>8</sup> given it clearly conflicts with the fifth canon of the so-called Apostolic Synod: “Let not a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, put away his wife under pretence of religion; but if he put her away, let him be excommunicated; and if he persists, let him be deposed”<sup>9</sup> (the fifty-first Apostolic canon is of interest as well). It is, therefore, evident that the decisions of the Quinisext Synod are reached exceptionally and in accordance to a certain ecclesial

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Schaff & Rev. Henry Wallace, eds, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, Volume XIV* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 370.

<sup>8</sup> On the difficulties of the canon's interpretation and on the way they effect the subject under examination, see N. Th. Bougatsos, *Married and Celibate Bishops*, pp. 15-8.

<sup>9</sup> Translated by Henry R. Percival, 1899. [www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html](http://www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html)

*economy*,<sup>10</sup> with the peculiarities of the situation that caused it in mind: the married bishops of Tunis and Libya were cohabiting with their wives, a fact that—although quite common elsewhere—scandalized the flock, which as it seems was less mature from an ecclesial point of view. It seems the people of these lands could not reconcile the ministry of the bishop and its holy character with marital cohabitation (a matter on which Apostolic canons five and fifty-one are quite clear, as we saw above). In order for this unnatural feeling of scandal to be appeased, and until ecclesial conscience in the aforementioned lands was mature enough, it was decided that ordained bishops could not any longer live together with their wives—and this decision was “not a breach or subversion of the apostolic canons,” but was reached within a spirit of “ecclesial economy” and for the sake of the “salvation of the people.” (It is worth mentioning the forty-eighth canon of the Quinisext Synod also treats questions of divorce in a manner that could appear deeply problematic even today.) The concern for married bishops expressed in the canon is a victory of ecclesial economy (*oikonomia*) against preciseness (*akribeia*)—it expresses a spirit of ecclesial economy and not one of accuracy—it is not only made apparent in the justifications of its incompatibility to the Apostolic canons, but also in the canon that follows immediately after. The thirteenth canon emphatically insists on the firmness of the presbyters' and deacons' marriage, as regards both cohabitation and intercourse. Whoever violates the canon faces deposition and excommunication.

Whether or not the twelfth canon of the Quinisext Synod is universally valid, whether or not ecclesial economy, within the spirit of which the canon was implemented, holds eternally or *until an opportune time*, the fact remains the canon indicates what should take place when already married presbyters are

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<sup>10</sup> See P. Boumis, *The Marriage of Bishops*, pp. 54-61.

ordained as bishops. In other words, neither does it exclude married presbyters from archpriesthood, nor does it reserve archpriesthood exclusively for the celibates, but essentially regulates what happens after a married presbyter is ordained as bishop. Yet even if it did make such an exclusion, as it had the discretion to do so consciously and against the decisions of a former synod (and not simply any synod, but an “Apostolic” one), so a future synod would also have the discretion to do the same against the decisions of the Quinisext. In any case, it should be noted that Professor of Canon Law P. Boumis has argued that the twelfth canon entails its temporary character along with the possibility of its revocation.<sup>11</sup>

However, was there ever in the history of Eastern Church a “final” decision on the celibacy of bishops? Well, there was - and not simply one, but many. On the sole difference that these decisions were taken by the *state* and not by the Church herself: during a long succession of centuries, the (Eastern) Roman state persistently attempted to legislate the obligatory celibacy of bishops—take for example Justinian’s *Nearai* (6.1 235 and 123. 1 546).<sup>12</sup> These repeatedly failed attempts in part of the state to impose itself upon the Church eventually succeeded, but not without exceptions, since cases of married bishops can be observed until at least the twelfth century. In one respect, the history of the bishops’ obligatory celibacy in the East is a story of confrontation between state power and ecclesial conscience, with the state being the final winner. The reasons why the state aimed at the complete celibacy of bishops were most probably practical, and had to do with practical matters of administration and inheritance: cases of nepotism should not have been uncommon, with the son of the bishop “inheriting”

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<sup>11</sup> P. Boumis, *The Marriage of Bishops*, p. 59 and secondarily p. 63. On the reasons and the conditions under which the canon was revoked, see pp. 64-6.

<sup>12</sup> On this subject see N. Th. Bougatsos, *Married and Celibate Bishop*, pp. 15-7.

the diocese, whereas blurred lines between the personal property of the bishop and the property and assets of the diocese would create problems in attributing the inheritance to the bishop's descendants (see Bougatsos, p. 14). Of course, it should be noted that canons against such incidents had already been legislated by the first Apostolic Synod (see its fortieth and seventy-sixth canon). However, even today similar arguments are mentioned by some as sufficient reasons for depriving married clerics of the possibility of episcopal *diakonia*—submitting the sacraments of the Church under bureaucratic administration and asset management, and thus indirectly advancing, for the sake of “practical reasons,” a theologically bizarre incompatibility between the sacrament of marriage and the great sacrament of priesthood, rendering to Caesar what is God's. The question here does not concern, of course, whether married presbyters should or should not have the “right” to ascend to the episcopacy: this would constitute a politicisation of the matter. Rather than that, the question consists in shedding light to the apparent *incompatibility* of the ministry of the bishop and the sacrament of marriage, an *incompatibility* that, if perceived as such, goes against the canonical and theological tradition of the Church.

Another argument against the marriage of bishops is that a bishop “would not have enough time” to share between his wife and his diocese. I hope supporters of this argument do not also hold that this is sufficient reason for excluding the likes of a Gregory of Nyssa from the bishop's ministry. In any case, the usual reply of several theologians to this objection is quite valid, despite its humorous overtones: “Should we therefore assume that the President of the United States has the time to share with his wife, while a bishop does not?” In any case, it is true that the demands of a diocese call for (and will continue to call for) a greater number of celibate bishops. However, this is something entirely different from *a priori* excluding the possibility of married ones.

All this suggests something deeper lays behind this insistence on celibacy, a latent religious view suggesting the sexuality of married life is in itself incompatible to the holiness of the bishop and that it is essentially impure, despite being tolerated in the case of the simple presbyter. The Church, however, has repeatedly affirmed its position towards such views on marriage, which can even lead to deposition and/or excommunication. Asides from the fifth canon of the Apostolic Synod, the fourth canon of the Council at Gangra in Paphlagonia (341 AD) brings *anathema* to those who practically discriminate between married and celibate presbyters and regard them as impure and unworthy.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the forty-seventh canon of Basil the Great refers to the heresy of those “who despise marriage” - a Canon also mentioned by Photius the Great.<sup>14</sup> The fifty-first canon of the Apostolic Synod has been referred to above, but let it now be quoted: “If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the sacerdotal list, abstains from marriage (...) not by way of ascetic practice, but as abhorring them, (...) and blaspheming the work of creation, let him be corrected, or else be deposed, and cast out of the Church. In like manner a layman.”<sup>15</sup>

### 3 Modern Challenges: An Administrative Celibacy

We can, therefore, pose the following question: what is needed in order for the episcopacy of married presbyters to become a possibility again? Given the current situation has not been the exclusive outcome of synodic decisions, but has been shaped by

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<sup>13</sup> “Εἴ τις διακρίνοιτο παρὰ πρεσβυτέρου γεγαμηκότος, ὡς μὴ χρῆναι, λειτουργήσαντος αὐτοῦ, προσφορᾶς μεταλαμβάνειν, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.”

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from the epistle of Ecumenical Patriarch Photius I, *To the Thrones of the East* (867).

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Henry R. Percival, 1899. [www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html](http://www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html)

state intervention on the matter, as well as through a certain care for practical matters of administration and inheritance, and given that exceptions are still met today, I assume the decision of a local Synod to ordain a married bishop would simply suffice. This also happens to be Professor Boumis' position on the matter<sup>16</sup>.

All of the above arguments might well advocate for the possibility of married bishops, but they are not directly related to the importance of the issue in modern times. This modern aspect has to do with a seemingly recent mutation (for the standards of ecclesial time) that affects a part of the celibate clergy in the terms of modern urbanization. In my view, this mutation should be conciliarly addressed, in order to be decided whether it belongs to the natural development of the Church or whether it is a major deviation therefrom.

Monastic ascetic life near populated areas or the presence of celibate clerics in cities are not, of course, novel phenomena. What is relatively new is the *de facto* formation throughout the world of a distinct class of celibate clerics, which form the "administrative mechanism" and the bureaucracy of the dioceses and from which future bishops almost exclusively derive. "There were always celibate priests/clerics in Orthodox Church. However, only today, and particularly within the confines of the Church of Greece, have they constituted such a distinct and powerful body."<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon is as much *political* as it is *ecclesiastical*—or even more so.

We are, therefore, not dealing with a case of monastic asceticism (or with a case of interrupted asceticism), but with an entire class of "ecclesiastic executives," the only ones entitled with the prospect of a bishop's career—a prospect that

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<sup>16</sup> See P. Boumis, *The Marriage of Bishops*, p. 65

<sup>17</sup> Stavros Zoumboulakis, *Archimandritism, a disease of the Church*, in Greek: Ο αρχιμανδριτισμός, ασθένεια της Εκκλησίας, in *Kathimerini* newspaper, 27/02/2005. [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/kathimerini\\_arximandritismos.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/kathimerini_arximandritismos.htm).

often becomes a conscious strived-for goal. Their only difference from the rest of a diocese's clerics is the choice (or the qualification) of lifelong celibacy, the rejection of the prospect of marriage—which in their cases does not entail a choice of monastic life, but merely a virtual inscription in a catalogue of monks residing in monasteries. Of course, the emerging and self-reproducing administrative system does not exclude the emergence of excellent celibate presbyters of exquisite luminosity. However, that fact does not by itself solve this major ecclesiastical problem, at least for those who recognize it as such.

The perception of celibacy as an asset for landing a position in administration (how terribly un-ecclesial a phrase!), which is, in turn,, a prerequisite for a career as a bishop, is explicitly endorsed by the constitutional chart of the Church of Greece. According to the chart, a condition for entering the list of eligible candidates for the episcopacy<sup>18</sup> is a five-year service in different positions of the Church's administrative mechanism.<sup>19</sup> Those familiar with the Church's issues are well aware that this situation often poses an impious and wholly unorthodox dilemma to several ambitious clerics, who otherwise have nothing against heterosexual marriage nor an inclination *away from it*, between marital life and, to phrase this as it truly is, career opportunities. It is certainly not good news for the quality of future clerics when, under such a dilemma, one consciously chooses to sacrifice marriage *for the sake of* what he perceives as "career opportunities" (may God shield His Church from such a prospective/future bishop). As opposed to older days, the fact that the median marriage age in today's Greek society, for example, is significantly higher to the average age of ordination (which is very often lower than what has been

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<sup>18</sup> This can be accessed here: [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/katastatikos\\_xarths\\_ekklhsia\\_ths\\_ellados.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/katastatikos_xarths_ekklhsia_ths_ellados.htm)

<sup>19</sup> "The administrative mechanism of the Church," a surprisingly non-ecclesial phrase in itself!

officially/canonically instituted in the Church, *viz.* thirty years for the presbyter and twenty-five for the deacon<sup>20</sup>), along with the fact that any candidate for married clergy must already be married and cannot do so after his ordination,<sup>21</sup> aggravates this very tangible problem even more.

Under such conditions, there emerges a peculiar administrative centre of the metropolis or archdiocese, staffed by the most ambitious members of its bureaucracy. This administrative (due to its very nature and structure) centre cannot but function as a training ground for the cultivation of particular “virtues”: virtues of public relations, of careful networking, of “profile building,” of alliances and professional competition, of political affiliations, of self-interested submission—virtues that have nothing to do with the toil of ecclesial fatherhood.<sup>22</sup>

An extreme consequence of this rationale is the phenomenon of titular and auxiliary Bishops: priest-monks (monastics) *without a monastery*, which are then ordained bishops *without a diocese*, thus completing a novel, decaffeinated ecclesiology. All this is in many respects, and as regards its current dimensions within Orthodox Church, a relatively new phenomenon (i.e. not an aspect of tradition), which emerged under the novel conditions

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<sup>20</sup> In the article mentioned above, Zoumboulakis makes an interesting proposal: a five-year increase in the maximum acceptable age, especially for the candidates coming from celibate bishops (on the condition that the measure will be effectively implemented). This proposal is made in order to allow for more mature decisions on this very serious dilemma.

<sup>21</sup> Let me note here that a number of Orthodox Churches (e.g. the Church of Russia) apart from the Church of Greece allow, within a spirit of ecclesial economy and under the discretion of the bishop, the marriage of deacons.

<sup>22</sup> Let me remind here that the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, in the sacrament of priesthood and in the sacrament of ordination, does not guarantee the capability, the maturity, the inclination, the virtue or the gift of episcopal or priestly fatherhood—an awareness that remains alive in the Church, during the two thousand years of its history, as shown in the Patristic testimony.

demanded for the organization of modern collective life. Its foundation lays in rewarding the renunciation of marriage (and indirectly but decisively treating it as an abomination), a sacrament that can only be compared to Christ's union with the Church (Ephesians 5:32). Of course, not everyone treats marriage as an abomination: the reader may find an impressive number of bishops (including Saint Nectarios and several Ecumenical Patriarchs) who, among others, have advocated for the possibility of married bishops in modern times.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4 Conclusion: A Return to Tradition**

Concluding, I would like to sum up my argument as follows: (a) a series of particular and relatively recent developments in Orthodox Church have urgently brought the question of married bishops back to the fore; if we decide to overlook it, more and more deviations will gradually emerge, both in theory and in practice; (b) At the same time, there are arguably no serious and particular theological, canonical, and pastoral reasons against this return to tradition, as the secondary literature exhaustively shows; (c) For such a return to be made possible, the decision of merely a local synod or an autocephalous church would suffice, as there would be no need for a decision of a synod equal to an Ecumenical Council. I sincerely hope this argument finds an echo in the ecclesial body of both clerics and laity and contributes to relevant discussions.

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<sup>23</sup> See N. Th. Bougatsos, *Married and Celibate Bishop*, pp. 22-26.