

Moscow move threatens to split Orthodoxy

The Orthodox world is reeling from the Russian Orthodox Church's decision in mid-October to split from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over its steps in recent weeks to recognize an independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The move breaks sacramental union between two leading Churches in Eastern Christianity, and it places the other 13 autocephalous, or independent, Orthodox Churches in the awkward position of being in union with two patriarchs who are no longer in communion with each other.

"Will the other Orthodox Churches have to line up on one side or the other? There are a lot of unresolved questions," said Father Ron Roberson, a Paulist priest who serves as associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Father Roberson told Our Sunday Visitor that the Russian Orthodox Church's move to cut ties with Constantinople – considered to be the spiritual authority of the world's Orthodox Christians– complicates the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and Orthodox Christianity.

"Moscow has said it will not attend any meetings of dialogue where the Orthodox chairman is the Bishop of the Ecumenical Patriarchate," Father Roberson said. "That would seem to indicate that the international dialogue can no longer meet until that has changed, because it would mean that the Church of Russia would not be represented in the dialogue. And that's pretty serious, because it's by far the largest of the Orthodox Churches."

Another schism?

At its root, the break between Moscow and Constantinople – which some observers have suggested could be the biggest split in Orthodoxy since it broke off from Roman Catholicism in 1054 A.D. – deals with who has authority to ordain Ukraine's bishops.

On Oct. 11, the Ecumenical Patriarchate rescinded a document from 1686, when it granted the Patriarch of Moscow the right to ordain the Ukraine Church's leaders.

"Russia's position is that every other autocephalous Church is really independent and runs its own affairs, and Churches don't trespass on each others' territory. They have a very territorial understanding of the Church," Father Roberson said.

In addition to rescinding the nearly 400-year-old document, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, reinstated two Orthodox bishops in Ukraine who were not recognized by Church leaders in Moscow. To form an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, those bishops will need to join their churches with those of the Moscow-approved Orthodox Church in Ukraine. But it is unclear how many bishops, priests and faithful would split from Russia to form a new unified and independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

"The Russians will say none of them do, and the Ukrainian nationalists and supporters of Constantinople will say most of them do. I think the honest answer is we don't know," said George Demacopoulos, the co-director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University. Demacopoulos told OSV that an autocephalous, self-governing Ukrainian Orthodox Church threatens the Russian Orthodox Church on several grounds, one being that Ukraine contains about a third of all the parishes in the Russian Church.

“Overnight the new Ukrainian Orthodox Church would become the second largest Orthodox Church in the world with about 12,000 parishes,” Demacopoulos said. In addition, the cultural and civilizational heritage of the Russian Orthodox Church is rooted in modern-day Ukraine. Vladimir the Great, the prince of the empire then known as Kievan Rus, converted to Christianity in 988 A.D. in Kiev.

“Moscow’s own religious identity is deeply tied to Ukrainian soil,” Demacopoulos said, adding that a separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church also undermines the notion of the “Russkiy Mir” – the Russian world – promoted by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.

Structures of Orthodoxy

Given those factors, perhaps it was little surprise that Moscow cut off sacramental ties with Constantinople. The move prohibits the Russian Orthodox faithful and clergy from participating in liturgies and rituals with Churches under the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s jurisdiction.

“We don’t yet know the repercussions of that decision and how that will play out. ... We also don’t know how the other Orthodox Churches will react,” said Father Stefanos Alexopoulos, a Greek Orthodox priest who is a professor of liturgical studies and sacramental theology at The Catholic University of America.

Father Alexopoulos told OSV that he has not received any directives from his bishop on how to deal with related pastoral situations that may arise, such as the mixed marriages in the United States where spouses belong to the opposing Churches.

“This is all still in the process, and we don’t know how it will evolve,” Father Alexopoulos said. “My sense is that the Ecumenical Patriarchate will not move to a reciprocal

announcement, but we'll see how it works out."

Claiming around 150 million followers – half of the estimated 300 million Orthodox worldwide – the Russian Orthodox Church is the largest autocephalous Orthodox Church. In recent years, Russian Church leaders have challenged the authority of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who is considered the "first among equals" in Orthodoxy.

"The Patriarchate of Moscow's tendency has been to challenge and undermine the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church," Father Alexopoulos said.

In 2007, Moscow – amid a disagreement with Constantinople over whether the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church had a right to be represented – declined to sign the Declaration of Ravenna, a joint Catholic-Orthodox document that recognized the bishop of Rome as the head of the early Church, though the parties disagreed on the extent of the pope's authority. In 2016, the Russian Orthodox Church backed out of participating in a pan-Orthodox Council.

"There is a move by the Moscow Patriarchate to be a major player in the Orthodox world, directly challenging the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate," said Aristotle Papanikolaou, the other co-director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University.

Global power dynamics

Papanikolaou told OSV that the Russian Orthodox Church has also positioned itself as a guardian of Russian interests, setting up churches in territories where it's not really clear it has jurisdictional authority to do so.

"In 2016, they built this huge cathedral in Paris, where there are actually very few Orthodox Christians, as a way of projecting Russianness in Paris," Papanikolaou said.

Under Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has also waged an aggressive foreign policy, particularly in Ukraine, where Russian forces invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014. That, along with ongoing Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, has alienated many Ukrainians to the point of not being able to see the Patriarch of Moscow as their spiritual leader.

“I think there’s a big pastoral issue here,” Papanikolaou said.

Father Roberson said he believes relations can still be mended, and he noted precedent. In the 1990s, Moscow broke off relations with Constantinople after it recognized the Orthodox Church in Estonia. Church leaders in Moscow and Constantinople later reconciled.

“I suppose it was only a matter of time that something would come up that would really bring this issue to a head,” Father Roberson said. “Hopefully, as cooler heads prevail in the future and tensions calm down, there will be some hope of reconciliation.”

Brian Fraga is an Our Sunday Visitor contributing editor.