

Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches

October 23, 2019

To the Clergy and the Faithful of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church in North America who are Standing with His Holiness Abune Antonios I:

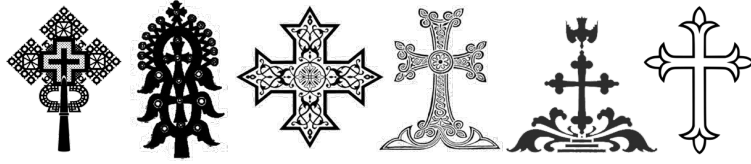
Grace and Peace,

It was with great joy that we received the news that your group – which represents a significant portion of the priests and deacons of your Diocese – has not only resumed commemoration of His Holiness Abune Antonios I in the Divine Liturgy, but has also called for the release of His Holiness from house arrest and his return to the full dignity of his position. We also understand that you have joined the rest of the Orthodox world in calling upon the government of Eritrea to cease from interposing itself into the affairs of the Church, and we glorify God for this.

Please be aware that the Oriental Orthodox Churches commemorate His Holiness Abune Antonios I along with the other canonical Patriarchs of our communion every time we gather to concelebrate the Liturgy as a single body in Christ. Please also be aware the Coptic Orthodox Church commemorates His Holiness Abune Antonios I in the diptychs of every Liturgy without fail, having done so since His Holiness was consecrated as Patriarch by the hands of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III in 2004.

We are aware that the Eritrean government – speaking through what remains of the Eritrean Synod – has declared that the name of His Holiness Abune Antonios I, “should never be mentioned and remembered and those who do will be punished severely”. Nevertheless, we encourage you and all of the faithful to stand firm and keep the faith, regardless of the persecution and the interference of the government. The Oriental Orthodox Church as a whole – and the Coptic Orthodox Church in particular – has always stood ready not only to bear witness to the truth, but also to assist and to pray for those among the Eritrean Orthodox faithful who are willing to do the same.

Sadly, it has also come to our attention that what remains of the Eritrean Orthodox Holy Synod intends to appoint another bishop to replace His Holiness Abune Antonios I as Patriarch in the coming months, despite the fact that His Holiness is still alive and has not been formally convicted of any heresy or immoral act. As indicated in our previous letter – dated July 23, 2019 – this violates the ancient canons common to us all which dictate that a Patriarch cannot be removed without a formal ecclesiastical trial and not merely at the behest of a secular ruler. Specifically, we make reference to canon iv of the Council of Sardica (AD 347) and to canon xcvi the Council of Carthage (AD 418), which declare that while a bishop is still living and sitting in his chair, and enjoying the episcopal honor, another bishop is not to be appointed. Further, a bishop is on no pretense whatever to be made for a church, the bishop of which is still living and enjoying his proper honor, unless first he of himself renounces the episcopate.



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For it is necessary that first a bishop should be regularly tried and deposed; and then only another may be appointed in his room.

These canons are in concord with the Letter of the Fathers of the Holy Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (AD 431) to the Holy Synod of Pamphylia concerning the case of the bishop Eustathius. Further, concerning the trial of a bishop – per canons lxxiv and lxxv of the Holy Apostles, canon vi of the Second Ecumenical Council, Constantinople (AD 381), and canons viii, cxxviii, and cxxix of the Council of Carthage (AD 418) – the bishop may not be charged by heretics, schismatics, the anathematized, immoral persons, or those who are themselves accused. If accused by faithful witnesses – and not the aforementioned heretics, schismatics, and immoral persons – the bishop is then to be summoned before the Holy Synod where he can make a full and formal defense against any and all charges. A bishop may not be deposed by two or three bishops alone, nor by the civil authorities in any respect, but only by a lawfully convened Holy Synod, per canons xiv and xv of the Council of Antioch (AD 341), canons iii and iv of the aforementioned Council of Sardica (AD 347), and canon lxxiv of the Holy Apostles.

Once again, we fully approve of the principled stand which you have chosen to make in support not only of His Holiness Abune Antonios I as your lawful Patriarch, but also for the canonical integrity of the Church itself.

Finally, to effect unity and overcome the division within the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches strongly urges you to sit down with the representatives of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Diocese of North America overseen by our brother bishop – His Grace Abune Makarios – in a dialogue facilitated by the Standing Conference. In accordance with Our Lord's prayer "that they may be one" (St. John 17:21), we are happy to facilitate such a dialogue at any of our churches in the region.

With Love in Our Savior Jesus Christ and on behalf of
the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches,

Bishop David

President of the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches of America

Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of New York & New England

Acting Patriarchal Exarch, Coptic Orthodox Archdiocese of North America