



## Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches

To the Government of Eritrea:

On the periodic scheduled meeting of May 3, 2021 the bishops of the Standing Conference of the Oriental Orthodox Churches took up several issues. Foremost on its agenda was the topic of His Holiness Abune Antonios I, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and the widely reported preparations being made by the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Church to install a second uncannocial patriarch under pressure from the Government of Eritrea.

It is to be recalled that in the official statement the Standing Conference released on October 25, 2019 as well as in other similar documents, the Standing Conference clearly articulated its position on this issue. In that document, the conference, citing the historic canons of the church, had stated the following:

“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 [the attempt to install another patriarch] 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.”

The document further noted specific canons that clearly speak of the illegitimate nature of what the secular leadership is forcing the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Church to do. It made 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. 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.”



### **Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches**

With the above canonical basis in mind, the Standing Conference of the Oriental Orthodox Churches once again condemns in the strongest possible terms the preparation that is underway to install a false “patriarch” to the patriarchal throne of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

The Standing Conference further reiterates its consistent and principled stand that it recognizes no other person except H.H. Abune Antonios I as the one and legitimate Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Moreover, the Standing Conference once again, calls upon the Government of Eritrea to release H. H. Abune Antonios, the 95 year-old patriarch, from his house arrest, which has now lasted for fifteen years and return him to his patriarchal throne.

In this and in all things, it would behoove us to remember that whatever influence the government may be able to exert upon the Synod and Church of Eritrea, as St. Peter and the other Holy Apostles declared boldly and without fear, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). It has always been the practice of the Orthodox faithful throughout history to stand for Christ and for the canonical integrity of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church that He Himself established, even to the point of martyrdom and the shedding of our blood. We must ask ourselves – as St. Paul asked – “Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). For indeed, if we are trying to please people – no matter how powerful or highly placed – then we have no right to call ourselves servants of Christ.



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