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**The Lonely Path of Integrity
Spyridon, Archbishop of America (1996-1999)**

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Year in Review: Our Ecclesiastical Affairs in 2004

By Spyridon, former Archbishop of America

2004 was a year rich in church developments. Thorny issues pending for decades were addressed for the first time while other important questions were relegated to the Greek calendars. In the field of inter-church relations, Orthodox believers witnessed a remarkable gesture of goodwill by the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, the faithful experienced a patriarchal loss which, due to the tragic circumstances in which it occurred, shocked the entire Christian world. Contemporary church history will definitely bear the seal of the following 2004 developments:

The decision taken by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to revise the composition of its Synod was seen by many as an extremely positive development. The first steps in this direction have already been taken. For the past eighty years the Patriarchal Synod had been composed entirely of metropolitans residing in Turkey whereas today the Synod's make-up is 50% metropolitans from Turkey and 50% hierarchs from abroad. Of course, there is much road to be covered in order for a traditional Orthodox Synodic practice to be fully restored, i.e. in order to ensure the participation of all active diocesan hierarchs in the synodical procedures of the Patriarchate. The largest part of the restructuring initiative remains yet to be undertaken in ensuring a) that the odd distinction between hierarchs residing in Turkey and hierarchs from abroad be done away with, b) that the Synod be composed exclusively of active hierarchs in charge of dioceses, as provided for by the Orthodox Canonical tradition, c) that the synodical hierarchs be called to serve in rotation on the basis of an official list that has as yet to be established.

The effort made by the Patriarchate to secure Turkish authorization for the reopening of the Theological School of Halki, a basic prerequisite for the survival of the Patriarchate as a vibrant institution, did not result in success. The Patriarchate attempted to take advantage of a favorable political climate created by Turkey's desire to join the European Economic Community but the representations repeatedly made by the Phanar in Ankara did not bear the fruit expected. The unfortunate conclusion of such an initiative would certainly have been less negative had the patriarchal representations been simultaneously supported by some strong body (such as a well organized Greek-American Lobby) capable of convincing Washington to go beyond mere verbal statements and exercise effective pressure on Turkey's leaders.

In the field of inter-Orthodox relations it was once again the thorny "New Lands" issue that predominated. The attempt by the Church of Greece to question the prerogatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the so-called New Lands failed. The dispute was characterized by unusual verbal aggressiveness by the Patriarchate. This extreme stance led to very negative coverage in the media ultimately harming the image of the Patriarchate and intensifying its ongoing demystification. The Phanar leadership eventually succeeded in having its control over the New Lands reaffirmed –at least on paper and on a temporary basis. Of course, no observer can oversee the fact that the settlement achieved was due to the strong "mediation" of the Greek government which, in view of the then upcoming Olympics Games in Athens, imposed a setback on the Church of Greece. A victory for the Phanar? Yes, but probably only a "Pyrrhic" one.

An event that literally shocked the Orthodox world in 2004 was the tragic death of Patriarch Petros of Alexandria in a helicopter accident while traveling to Mount Athos. Patriarch Petros' reputation was that of a serious, prudent, humble and mild church leader. His death was reported extensively in the Orthodox press across the world and, as was to be expected, deeply touched the orthodox people given the tragic circumstances in which it occurred. In particular, the spontaneous manifestations of sincere respect for the lost Patriarch of Alexandria demonstrated that the people of God are capable of truly loving their church leaders when these are peacemakers and authentic personalities above self-conceit.

2004 closes with the return of the sacred relics of Saints John Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian to the Church of Constantinople. Through this initiative, the Roman Catholic Church, without disapproving antiquated forms of church policy and action, demonstrated once again the enormous importance she attributes to the continuation of a dialogue with the Orthodox Church. Certainly a note of optimism and hope for the future of the one Church of Christ!

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