

The canonical structure, the ecclesial practice and the ecclesiological interpretation of synodality of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania



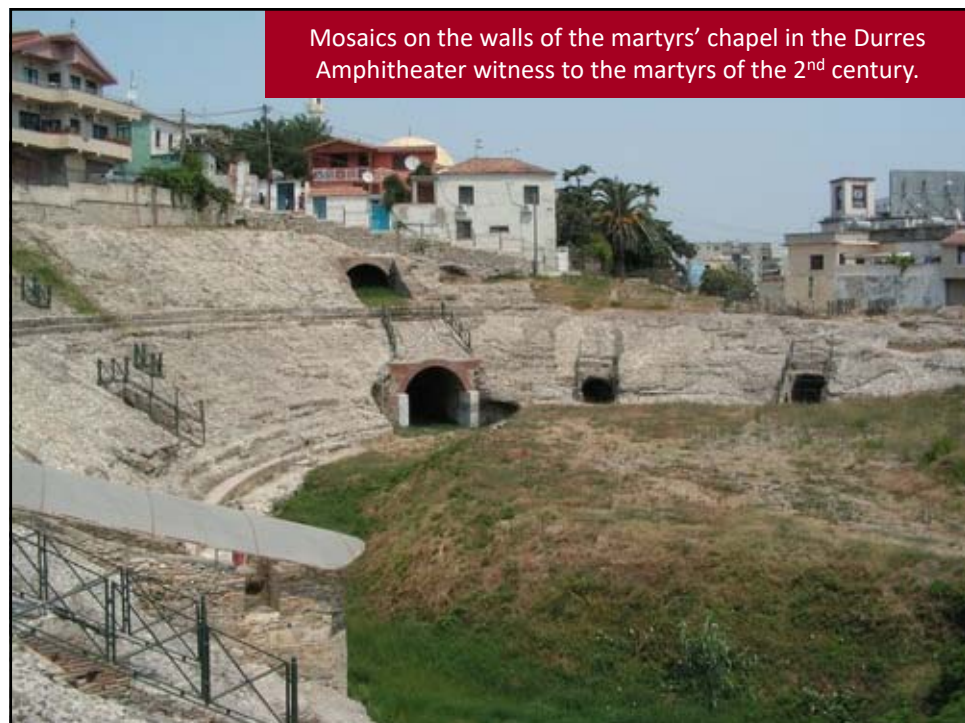
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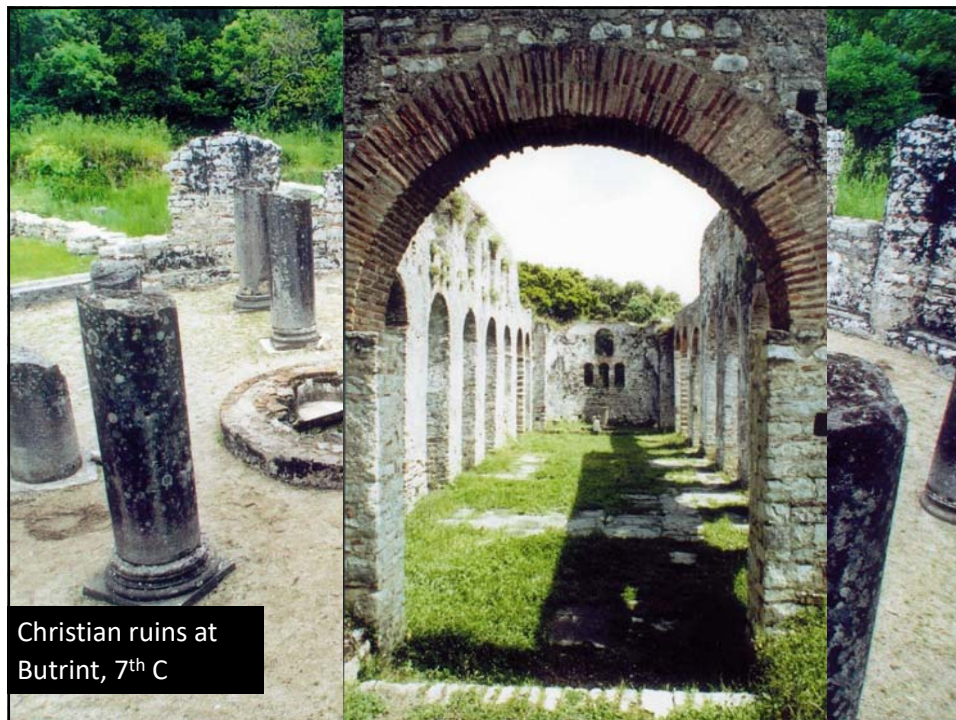


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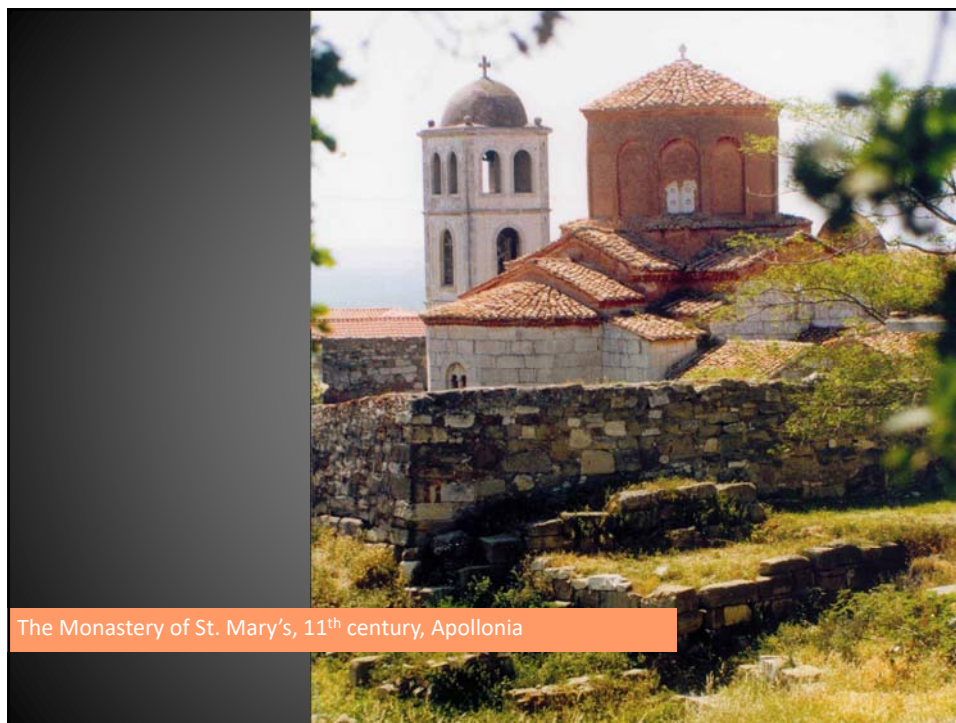
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Christian ruins at  
Butrint, 7<sup>th</sup> C

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The Monastery of St. Mary's, 11<sup>th</sup> century, Apollonia

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St. Kosmas, 18<sup>th</sup> C

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## National independence and the road toward Autocephalous

Albania declared independence on November 28, 1912. Nationalist movements in Albania began to agitate for an Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Albania, resulting in a unilateral declaration of autocephaly in 1922. There followed 15 years of negotiation. The Ecumenical Patriarchate refused to recognize the un-canonical declaration of autocephaly but recognized the need for self-government and the use of the Albanian language in worship, sermons and catechism.

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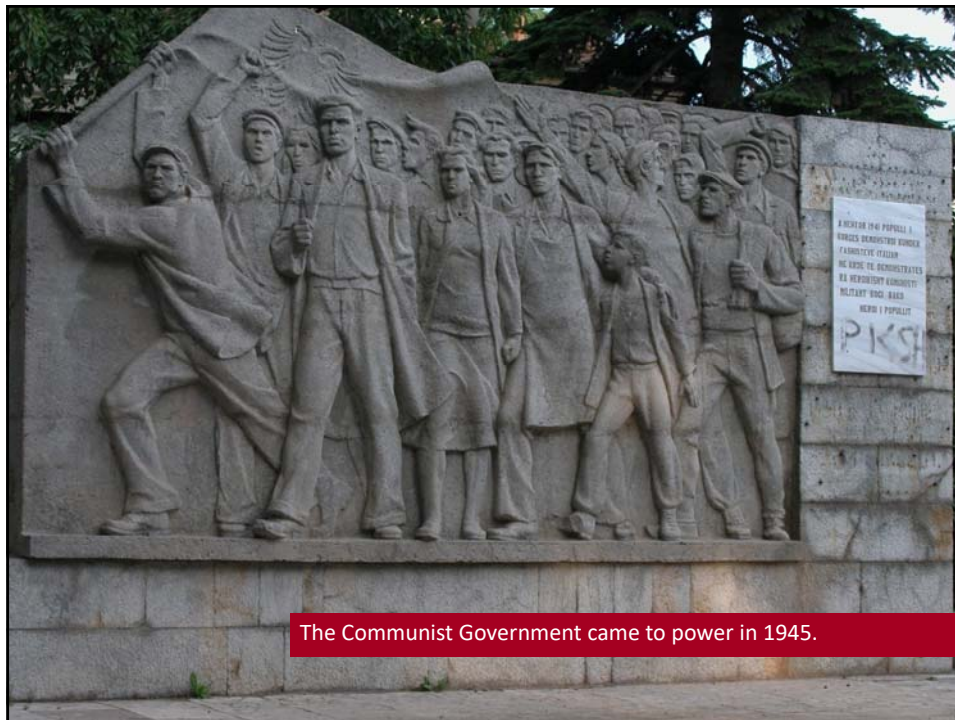
The Orthodox Church of Albania became autocephalous on April 17, 1937 when a tome entitled, "Regarding the Blessing of Autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Albania" was issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople under the leadership of Patriarch Benjamin.

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## The Italian invasion

- The new Autocephalous Church had a Synod of four bishops led by Archbishop Christophoros of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania. This new structure had only two years to consolidate and establish its leadership before the invasion of the Italians on April 7, 1939 resulting in Albania being governed as a province of Italy. This had serious ecclesial and synodical consequences. There was an attempt to unify Albania with the ecclesial structures of Italy. Many Roman Catholic missionaries were sent to traditionally Orthodox lands in southern Albania in an attempt to absorb them into the Roman Catholic Church. Archbishop Christophoros did not have the political power to directly oppose this move but was able to employ delaying tactics until 1943 when Italy was defeated bringing this experiment to an end.

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The Communist Government came to power in 1945.

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## Communist persecution

The Communists came to power on November 29, 1944 under the leadership of Enver Hoxha. This initiated the darkest phase in the history of Christianity in Albania. The communist persecution can be divided into two equal parts of 23 years each. During the first phase the government followed policies similar to those in Russia and other parts of eastern and southern Europe. The government gradually suppressed religious practice and gained control over religious leaders. Archbishop Christophoros was forced to resign on December 25, 1945. He died under house arrest in 1958. He was replaced by the Bishop of Korçë who served until his death in 1966. This created the opportunity for the communist government to appoint Damianos, who had been a member of the communist resistance, as Archbishop. With this step the ground was prepared for the next phase of persecution.

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In 1967 the regime proclaimed  
complete atheism

All church properties were confiscated

All clergy were laicized

All the bishops died

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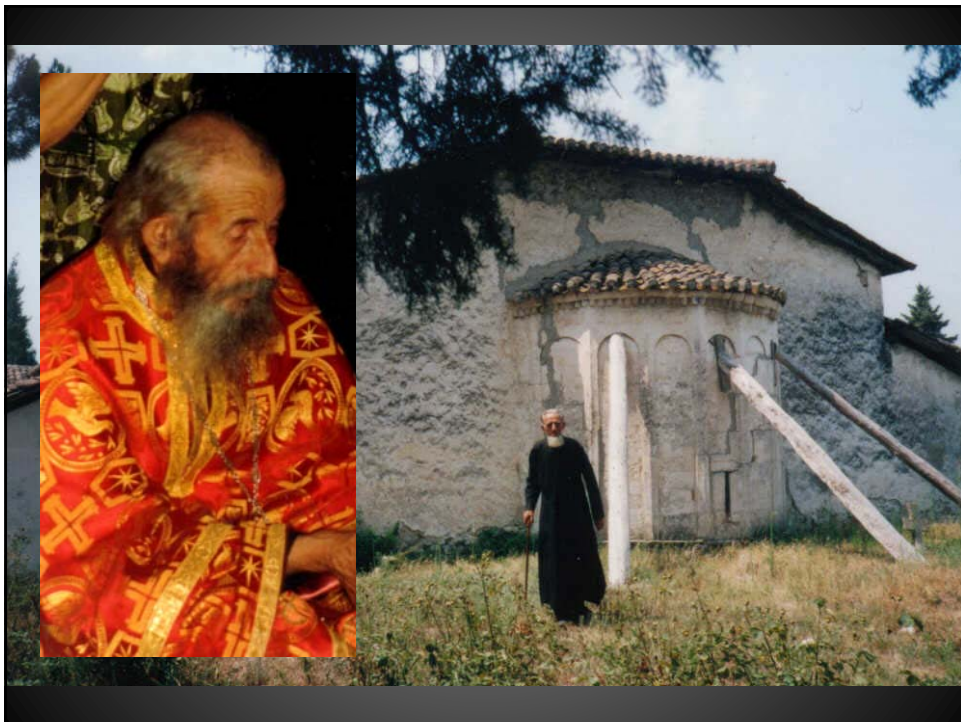
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## Reestablishing the first structure for Synodality

In 1991 when the patriarchal exarch arrived in Albania there were many who had kept their faith secretly and who had begun to worship openly again in whatever way they could, but there was no synodal structure to the church. Reestablishing this structure was the first concern of the patriarchal exarch. He arrived in Albania on July 17, 1991 and immediately organized a General Clergy-Laity assembly on August 1-2. Fifteen clergy and 30 lay participants from all the ecclesial dioceses of Albania participated in this assembly.

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## The election of Archbishop Anastasios

- The faithful Orthodox Christians of Albania, that had just survived one of the harshest and most thorough anti-Christian persecutions in world history, found themselves in a very anomalous canonical situation. The church had been granted autocephalous status but after the persecution it had no bishops and no mechanism for re-establishing its hierarchy and synodal structure. The patriarchal exarch immediately began the search for persons qualified to assume the responsibility of hierarchical leadership in the Orthodox Church of Albania. It is a strong testimony to the effectiveness of the atheistic persecution that no qualified candidates of Albanian ethnicity could be found either in Albania or anywhere else in the world. The very difficult situation in Albania required leadership from a person with great spiritual depth, solid theological training and practical experience. In this crisis the Orthodox faithful of Albania turned to the patriarchal exarch that had come to them in their moment of greatest need.

In 1992 when the patriarchal exarch should have concluded his mission in Albania, a delegation from the General Ecclesial Council traveled to Constantinople to request that he be elected as the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Albania. On 24 June 1992, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate unanimously elected the Patriarchal Exarch, Anastasios Yannoulatos (who until then had been the Metropolitan of Androusa) as Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania.

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## Challenges to synodality

In order to preserve the canonical synodical structure of the Orthodox Church of Albania the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate also elected metropolitans for Korçë, Gjirokastër and Berat as had been done in 1937 when autocephaly was first established. From a canonical perspective, this was the correct course of action, but it was politically impossible to implement in the context of Albania. The Albanian government accepted the election of Archbishop Anastasios who had been working in Albania for one year and was now known and trusted by them. The government categorically rejected the election of the three other metropolitans feeling that this would irrevocably place the leadership of the Orthodox Church of Albania in foreign hands, to the detriment of the Albanian Church and people.

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## Government opposition

- It is clear that one of the primary problems in this situation was a false conception about the Orthodox Church on the part of the Albanian government and many non-Orthodox Albanians. The church was conceived on ethnic and nationalist lines, which caused them to believe that the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania must have bishops that are ethnic Albanians. There is no understanding of the basic New Testament precept that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, but all are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). It must be admitted that this misconception on the part of the Albanian government has also been fostered by practices of ethno-phyletism in the Orthodox Church. Seeing Orthodox churches organized on ethnic and cultural lines in different places in the world it is not surprising that they would assume that Albania too should have an autocephalous Orthodox Church organized on strictly ethnic and cultural criteria. This is not the appropriate place to go into this problem in detail, but we can observe that practices of phyletism badly undermine proper canonical synodality in the Orthodox Church around the world.

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## Crisis averted

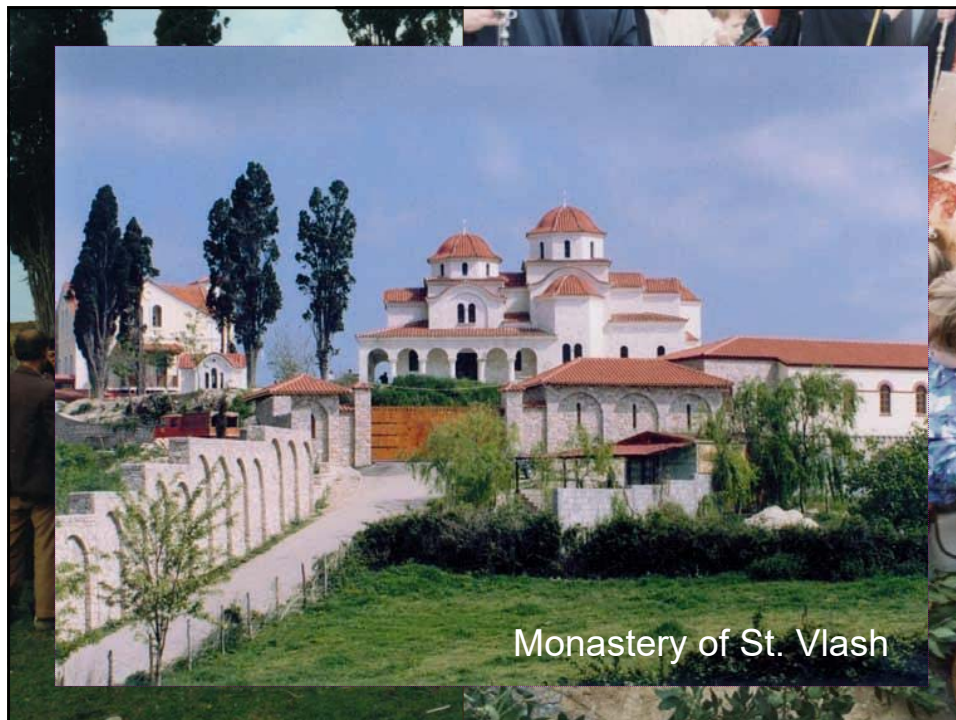
- The crisis in Albania was averted by applying pastoral oikonomia. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church was reestablished with the Archbishop as the only member of the Synod until other candidates could be found that were both qualified and acceptable for the Albanian government. Synodality was maintained by the fact that the Archbishop was in full communion with all the other primates of the Orthodox churches around the world through being placed in their diptychs, after a 40-year absence of the Orthodox Church of Albania, and the sending and receiving of letters of communion. The Archbishop also preserved synodality, in the absence of other bishops, by performing his episcopal ministry in synergy and consultation with his flock both informally and through established structures.

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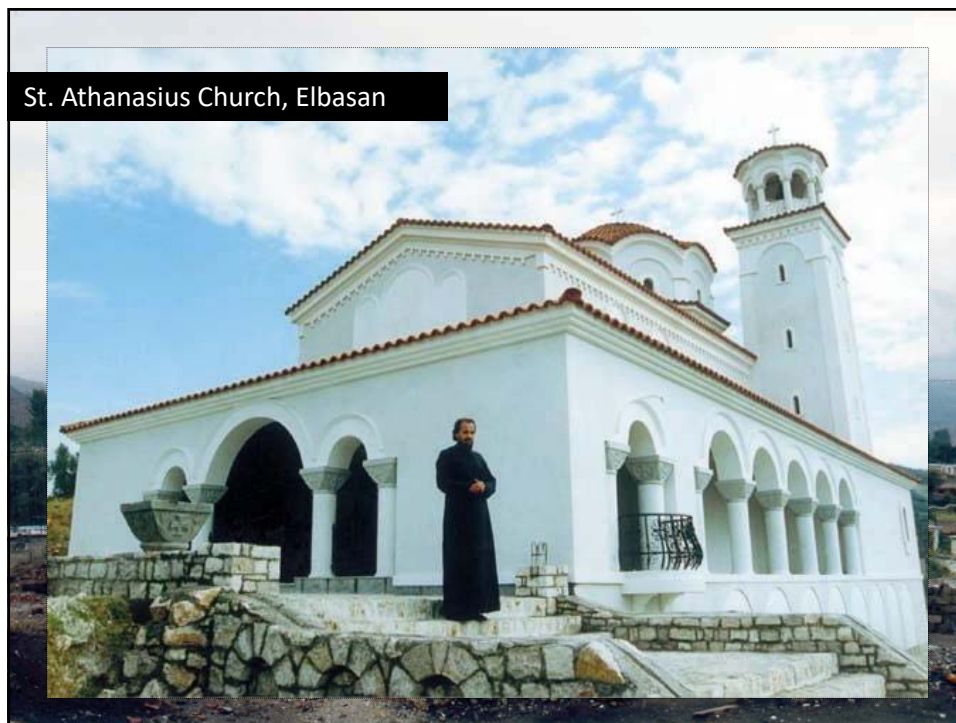
## The enthronement of Archbishop Anastasios

- There is another interesting case for the study of synodality in the Orthodox Church connected with the enthronement of Archbishop Anastasios. Some elements in Albania were unalterably opposed to the enthronement of an Archbishop of Greek ethnicity on nationalist grounds, despite his acceptance by the Albanian government. These people attempted to use their limited knowledge of Orthodox canon law to derail the enthronement of the Archbishop. Knowing that Orthodox canons require that a new Bishop be elected and enthroned with the consent of the people that he will shepherd, and knowing that this consent is often expressed by the “Axios” of the people present at the enthronement, they thought they could invalidate the enthronement by appearing and shouting “anaxios.” This action displayed either a very superficial understanding of synodality in the Orthodox Church, or what is more likely a cynical attempt to misuse the normal procedures of life in the Orthodox Church for their own ends. These people entering the church and disrupting the enthronement ceremony in no way undermined the canonical validity of the Archbishop’s election and enthronement.
- The synodality of the election and enthronement of Archbishop Anastasios was expressed in many ways. The full consent of the people was evident from the fact that the General Ecclesial Council requested the election of the Archbishop. The Archbishop was unanimously elected by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate which, in the absence of any episcopal structure in Albania, was the only competent ecclesial body to perform this election. The Archbishop sent and received letters of communion from all the primates of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. At the enthronement ceremony in Tirana the Archbishop received the “Axios” of all the faithful present in the church. The fact that some people who were not part of the church chose to disrupt the service at the end has absolutely no bearing on the legitimacy of the enthronement. Only those that are organically part of the Church through baptism and worship can legitimately participate in the internal life of the Church. All who wish to join themselves to Christ are welcome in the church but those whose interest is only external and political cannot impose their will.

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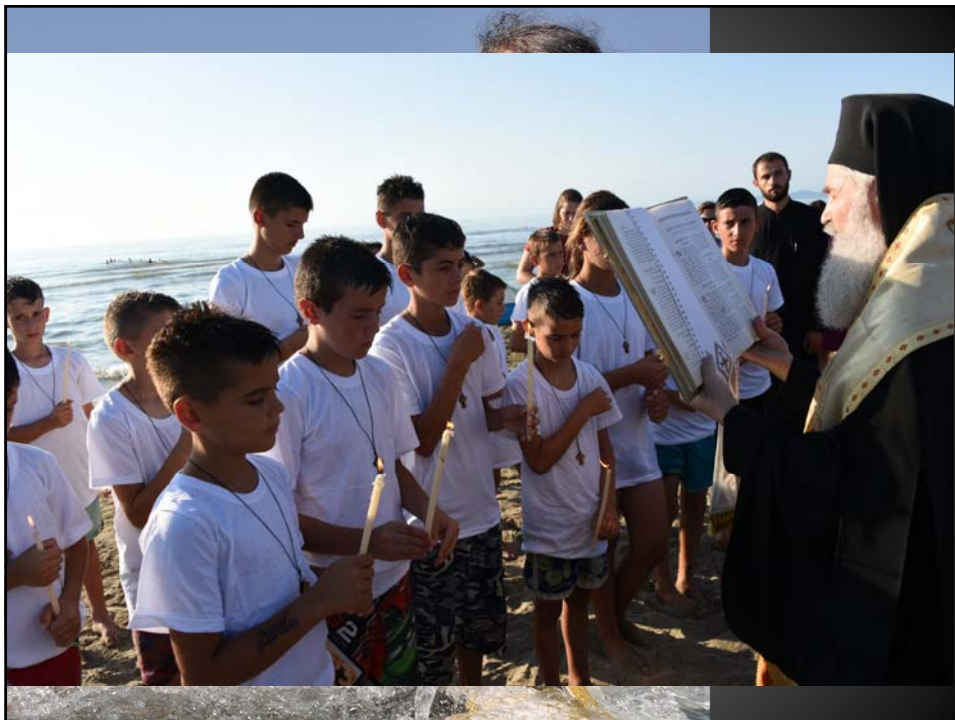


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Thousands of baptisms

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## The Establishment of the Holy Synod

- In 1998 it became possible to regularize the canonical situation of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania. Through extended negotiation with the Albanian government and the Ecumenical Patriarchate an agreement was reached whereby Metropolitan Ignatios who had been elected and consecrated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate was enthroned as Metropolitan of Berat on July 18, 1998. Archbishop Anastasios and Metropolitan Ignatios then constituted a Synod which elected Archimandrite John Pelushi as Metropolitan of Korçë and *Oikonomos* Fr. Kosma Qijro was elected as Bishop of Apollonia. This provided the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania with a functioning synod of four bishops. Bishop Kosma fell asleep in the Lord in July 2000.
- Three additional Hierarchs were elected and consecrated in November 2006. Finally, 2 more Hierarchs were added in January 2012.

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## The Holy Synod of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania



### Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania

His Eminence, Ignat, Metropolitan of Berati

His Eminence, Joan, Metropolitan of Korca

His Eminence, Dhimiter, Metropolitan of Gjirokastra

His Eminence, Nikolla, Bishop of Apollonia and Fier

His Eminence, Andon, Bishop of Elbasan

His Eminence, Nathaniel, Metropolitan of Amantia

His Eminence, Asti, Bishop of Bylis.

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- The Holy Synod of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania consists of the Archbishop, all of the Metropolitans and all of the Bishops. The Holy Synod meets regularly every three months and extraordinarily when needed. All members of the Synod have the right to vote. In practice, the vast majority of decisions of the Holy Synod are made unanimously by consensus.
- Candidates for Episcopal consecration are nominated by the Clergy-Laity Ecclesiastical Council. The Holy Synod elects and consecrates new Hierarchs according to the holy canons.

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## Governing Documents

The life of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania is governed by the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Canons and the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Under these there are three other documents that give structure to its life: The Tome of Autocephaly issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1937, the Charter which was approved by an Extraordinary Clergy-Laity Assembly and ratified by the Holy Synod in November 2006, and the official Agreement with the Albanian government that became law in 2009.

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## Tome of Autocephalous

- The Tome of Autocephaly officially establishes the canonical status of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania and her relationship with the other autocephalous Churches. There are several points that should be noted regarding the synodality of the Orthodox Church of Albania from the Tome.
- The Tome reads “Therefore, synodically, we decide in the Holy Spirit, define and proclaim in this blessed hour and moment, namely all the Orthodox Dioceses and communities which are located within the God-saved new Albanian State to belong united from hereon in to the one independent and autocephalous ecclesiastical organization.”

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## No extraterritorial communities

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania does not have any extraterritorial communities outside of its canonical geographical jurisdiction in Albania. There are parishes of Orthodox Albanians in North America, but these are under the pastoral care of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church in America. The problem of synodality in many places around the world where multiple Orthodox jurisdictions have overlapping territory, would be greatly simplified, if this basic canonical principal followed by the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania would be adhered to more broadly.

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The Autocephalous Orthodox  
Church of Albania also uses  
2 calendars and  
many liturgical languages

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## Charter of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania

- The synodical life of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania is given form and structure by its charter which was adopted in November 2006. There were two previous charters adopted in 1929 and in 1950. Both were imposed and highly influenced by government regimes hostile to the church. The first by the Islamic influenced government of King Zag and the second by the atheistic communist totalitarian government of Enver Hoxha. Both granted unwarranted control of the internal life of the Church to the government. The legal authority of both was revoked by the law of November 11, 1967 that disbanded the church and made religion illegal. It was this anomalous situation that faced the Archbishop and the reconstituted Ecclesial Clergy-Laity Assembly in the early 90s. In an extraordinary meeting of the Assembly on January 21, 1993 it was decided to provisionally adopt articles from the 1950 Charter, which were not contrary to the present conditions, for the transition period until a new charter could be written. The election of Archbishop Anastasios was specifically and unanimously accepted by this assembly. It was decided to wait to draft a new charter until the country had adopted a new constitution so that the Charter could reflect the provisions of the Constitution.

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## Charter adopted by the Clergy-Laity Assembly and ratified by the Holy Synod

- The new national Constitution, which was ratified in November 1998, provided for a secular state that safeguarded the religious freedom and independence of the religious communities. A new Extraordinary Clergy-Laity assembly was convoked at the Resurrection of Christ Theological Academy in November 2006. This Assembly was a special manifestation of the synodality of the Orthodox Church in Albania under the leadership of Archbishop Anastasios. There were 257 participants that included the Holy Synod, all of the clergy and many laypeople, among whom were men, women and youth. This assembly made it possible for the entire church to participate in the process of adopting the Charter which was finally ratified by the Holy Synod.

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## Parish Councils

On the local level, each parish is administered by a parish council consisting of the parish clergy and 4 -10 lay members appointed by the presiding hierarch according to the size of the parish. The lay members should include women, men and youth from the parish. The Parish Council also participates in the election of lay members of the Clergy-Laity Assembly.

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## Archdiocesan and Metropolitan Councils

- In the Archdiocese and in each Metropolis the hierarch presides over a council of five clergy and five laity convened to support the work of the hierarch. Members are elected for four-year terms and include an equal representation of men, women and youth. The responsibility of these councils is to care for the spiritual, pastoral and social work of the church. They also elect clergy and lay members of the Clergy-Laity Ecclesiastical Council and participate in the election of lay members of the Clergy-Laity Assembly.
- The Charter also provides for the assembly of the clergy in the Archdiocese and Metropolises every three months.

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## Clergy-Laity Assemblies and Ecclesiastical Council

- The Charter provides for 3 other structures to facilitate synodality on the national level of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania.
- The Clergy-Laity Assembly consists of the Holy Synod, two representatives from each monastery, the members of the Clergy-Laity Council, and 20 clergy and 20 lay members from the Archdiocese and each Metropolis. Lay representatives are to include men, women and youth.
- The Clergy-Laity Ecclesiastical Council consists of the Holy Synod and 12 members; 8 elected by the Archdiocesan and Metropolitan councils and 4 appointed by the Holy Synod. From this body a five-member executive committee is elected.
- The Charter provides for an Assembly of all the clergy of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania every two years to address current issues, renew the spiritual life of the clergy and strengthen them for their mission.
- It is important to note that laypeople including men, women and youth participate in the governing bodies that administer the life of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania on the local, regional and national level.

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## General Regulations of Administration

- One of the remaining challenges for the synodical life of the Orthodox Church of Albania is the drafting of General Regulations of Administration. These regulations are referred to in the Charter, but it has not yet been possible for the Church to complete preparation of this document. General Regulations of Administration were adopted by the Church in 1929 but it is no longer applicable in the current context.

48

## **The Agreement with the Albanian government**

- The official Agreement between the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania and the Albanian government, which became law in 2009, is of tremendous significance for the Albanian Orthodox Church which had endured savage and prolonged persecution from the government. For 23 years the Orthodox Church of Albania had been harassed, persecuted and manipulated by the Albanian state and for 23 more years it's right to exist had been absolutely denied. Today, the Constitution of Albania and the Agreement with the government provide complete freedom of conscience and religious practice as well as organization and worship for the Orthodox Church of Albania.

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## **Synodality and relationships with other Christians**

- Under the leadership of Archbishop Anastasios the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania has rejected the temptation to withdraw and focus exclusively on itself during this extremely challenging phase of rebuilding after the communist persecution. The church moved immediately to join the World Council of Churches for which Archbishop Anastasios has served as president and the Conference of European Churches for which the Archbishop has served as vice president. The Orthodox Church of Albania is a founding member of the Interconfessional Bible Society of Albania for which the Archbishop serves as president.

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## Pan-Orthodox Activities

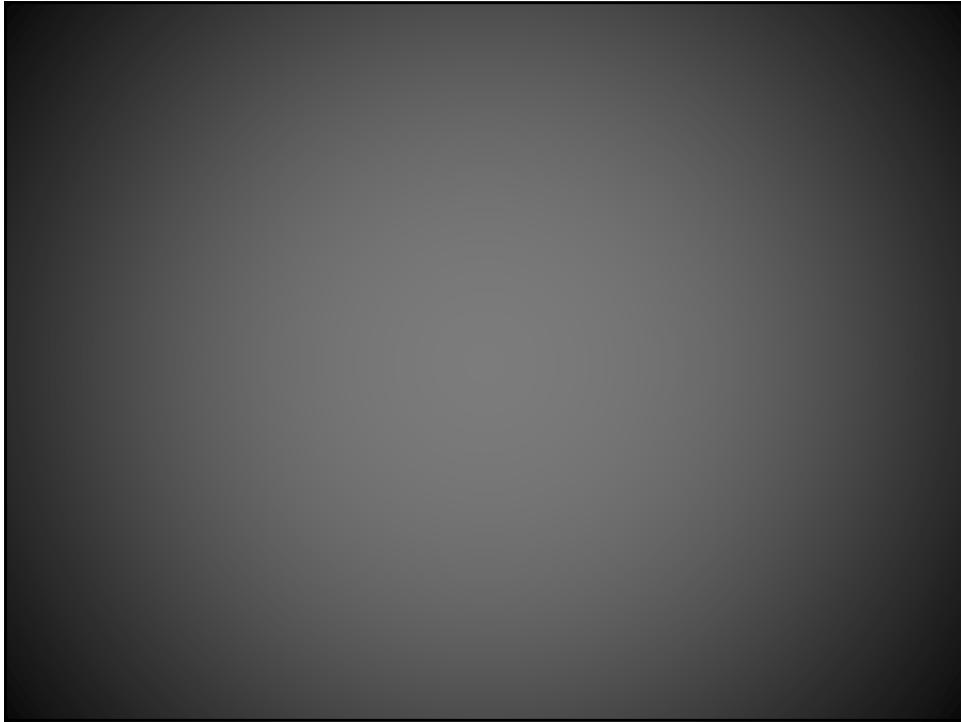
- The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, despite being one of the smaller and younger of the Orthodox churches, participates fully in all Pan-Orthodox activities as well as the bilateral dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation. The Orthodox Church of Albania has hosted meetings of these dialogues and other major international conferences including the Global Christian Forum conference on the persecution of Christians in 2015.
- The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania participated fully in the preparation for the Great and Holy Council held in Crete last year. Archbishop Anastasios played a major role in the deliberations of the Council, helping to draft the Message that was released by the Council. It was also at the insistence of Archbishop Anastasios that delegations to the Council included the participation of laypeople as well as clergy.

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Thank You

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# Matthew 28:18-20



- All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
- Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
- And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age

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120 new clergy in 10 years.



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