

# UKRAINE: Metropolitan Ioann to head Russian Orthodox in Europe

*The young bishop, 44, is responsible for the Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in 13 European countries. The new Exarchate was revived after the break between Constantinople and Moscow over autocephaly granted to Ukraine. In the recent Synod of Moscow, the new Exarchate of South-East Asia was founded, which includes about 10 countries: North and South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore.*

By Stefano Caprio

AsiaNews (05.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2RqwjqA> – A few days ago, Metropolitan Ioann (Roščin), former vicar Patriarchal vicar and bishop of Bogorodsk, was appointed to head of the Russian Orthodox in Europe. Last November he was named administrator of the parishes of the patriarchate of Moscow in Italy, based in Rome at the church of St. Caterina, in the territory of the Russian embassy to Italy. At the end of December, when he went to Moscow for the meeting of the Patriarchal Synod, the young bishop (born in 1974) was catapulted to the new position of “metropolitan of Korsun and Western Europe”. He quickly bought a white “klobuk” (the miter of the metropolitans), he was solemnly consecrated to the new office in the Assumption Cathedral, in the Kremlin in Moscow. We met him as he was passing through Rome on his way to Paris, to ask him some questions.

**Eminence, tell us about your new assignment and about the structure you have been called to lead.**

The Russian exarchate of Western Europe was established in 1945, and remained active until the 1990s, when it was dissolved to reflect the new conditions of the Russian Diaspora after the end of the Soviet regime. It was founded by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky) in 1945 [who did not want to join the other "Tsarist" bishops, who founded the Russian Church abroad in opposition to the Soviet regime – ed.]. At first it was recognized as an independent structure by Constantinople, so it gathered around the patriarch of Moscow Sergij (Stragorodskij). At that time, at the end of the Second World War, the Russian Church once again had the opportunity to care for its faithful at home and abroad after a long period of persecutions. A part of its priests remained under the authority of the patriarch of Constantinople. For the Russians in Europe there were therefore two parallel exarcates: one under Moscow and one under Constantinople. The latter was abolished a few weeks ago, after the decision to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainians. Now, following the events that led to the breakdown of relations between Moscow and Constantinople, Patriarch Kirill decided to reorganize the care of the many Russians living abroad, in Europe in particular, reviving the Exarchate of Paris.

**How big is this exarch?**

The new metropolis supervises the dioceses and parishes of 13 States: France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland, as well as smaller states such as Andorra, Lichtenstein, Monaco and Luxembourg. There are already many parishes and 5 dioceses, those of Spain

and Portugal (newly established), then in Belgium, Holland and Italy, which are now subjected to the Metropolitan of Paris, even if they have their bishops who autonomously guide the life of the Local Churches, which will be reunited in an Exarchate Council. We will meet to discuss the various questions, both internal to the life of the Church, and in external relations with the society of these European countries. In Italy I retained the See, having obtained it only two months ago, and I'm not willing to give up this beautiful country too soon.

**How much did the conflict with Constantinople influence these decisions?**

I would simply say that this is a reorganization of existing structures. We have essentially never divided ourselves from the patriarchate of Constantinople. We have always recognized his primacy of honor and his role as mother-Church, from whom we received baptism. But with the latest events, our relations have become very complicated. In particular, with regards the pastoral care of the Russians in the Diaspora, we can not leave them without assistance, according to the Lord's command; they must be able to receive what they come to the Church for, beginning with the sacraments.

**Apparently, the reorganization does not only affect Western Europe, but the whole Russian Diaspora in the world.**

This is true. In fact, the new Exarchate of South-East Asia was also constituted, which includes about 10 countries: North and South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore (where the

Esarca will be based) and in the other Asian States where the mission of the Russian Orthodox Church is particularly active and fruitful, with the recent opening of many new churches. For now there is only one exarch, but soon the bishops of some other countries should also be named, and the exarch will probably also be elevated to the dignity of Metropolitan.

In North America there is the network of the so-called "patriarchal parishes": those churches that wanted to remain directly under the patriarchate of Moscow when, in 1970, Moscow granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of America [not recognized by Constantinople – ed.]. They represent the patriarchate of Moscow in the United States, but today they are unified in the administration to those of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which met at the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007.

In South America there is one single Eparchy, which is currently governed by Metropolitan Ignatij (Pologrudov) based in Buenos Aires, founded again in 1945. There are parishes in Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, practically in all the countries of the continent.

**It is what is called the "Russian world".**

In fact, the tragic events of 1917 have left us a legacy that today, 100 years later, we can evaluate in a positive sense. Many people have had to leave the country to escape atheistic oppression, and the Church has moved following their tracks, realizing their vocation to preach the truth of Christ, baptize and distribute holy communion, forming new Christian

communities throughout the world.

**You just recalled that in 1970 Moscow granted autocephaly to the Americans. Could not you do the same with the Ukrainians?**

Our Synod never discussed Ukrainian autocephaly, for the simple reason that it was never requested by the bishops and the faithful in Ukraine. A schismatic attempt was made by Metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko) in the 1990s, but was based more on political than ecclesial premises. If there were no political motives or pretexts of anti-monastic primacy on the part of Constantinople, we would be ready to face the question, I stress only for ecclesial reasons. If Constantinople had listened to the council that came from our Church, even in last August's meeting with Patriarch Kirill, we could have resolved the issue together, on the basis of canonical rules and mutual love.

**Does it not seem to you that there is a bit of confusion among the Orthodox on these "canonical rules"?**

The problem is that of the interpretation of these norms, which were written at the time of the seven ecumenical councils of the fathers of the Church, more than 1000 years ago. These rules reflect the situation of the Church in those times, and we are not always able to bring out the spirit of those precepts, becoming bogged down in the letter of the law. And this means that they are treated in opposing ways, especially with regard to the mission in the Diaspora: some believe that this is a prerogative of Constantinople, for others it is a duty of every single local Church. These

questions should be addressed in the meetings between the heads of the Churches, in a dialogue made of love and truth, without ultimatums and without haste. History shows us that many questions could have been solved if there had been a real willingness to dialogue. At the moment it is difficult to think of possible pan-Orthodox meetings or councils. Unfortunately, the 2016 Council of Crete was not pan-Orthodox because there were four local Churches missing.

**This break is a tragic fact, but perhaps clarity is emerging in the concept of universal Orthodoxy.**

Some contrapositions between Moscow and Constantinople, about the interpretation of canonical norms and the structure of the Churches, have always existed. Since the patriarchate of Constantinople has begun to act in a unilateral way, threatening even the canonical integrity of our Russian Church, benevolent dialogue has been interrupted, and we can not see now how we can restore it in the future.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always proposed a model of autonomous and independent local Churches, which have every right to preach the Gospel and take care of their faithful, without interference from other local Churches. The mission of the Church, throughout the world, always remains one: to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ, everything else is just a consequence. All this situation must lead only to a greater willingness to respond to this call of the Lord, not only for us Orthodox, but for all Christians of the world, to seek the unity of faith together.

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