

Earlier hesitant priests begin returning to Sourozh diocese - Interfax

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George Chabakauri, member of the council of Cathedral of the Dormition of the Sourozh diocese told Interfax-Religion about the situation that has developed after its former administrator, Bishop Basil Osborn, declared his move to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

- Now, some time after it was not clear who had what opinion in the Sourozh diocese, it is perhaps possible to make out what part of the flock would like to follow Bishop Basil to Constantinople and what part has remained faithful to the Moscow Patriarchate?

- There are many publications in the Internet insisting that most of the parishes and clergy of the Sourozh diocese have moved to the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople and that an overwhelming majority of parishioners have supported Bishop Basil.

Actually, the website of the vicariate of Amphipolis of the Patriarchate of Constantinople's exarchate of Russian parishes in Western Europe, which Bishop Basil has come to head, lists only nine priests out of 21 who belonged to the Sourozh diocese before it divided. If this list is credible, two priests who left the Sourozh diocese either have not yet decided whom to join or have moved to the diocese of Thyatira (the Greek diocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Great Britain – IF).

At present there are ten priests serving in the Sourozh diocese. At the same time, it should be noted that initially the situation was somewhat different but in recent time the priests who were hesitant before have begun returning to the Sourozh diocese. Apparently, the canonical conscience has prevailed.

- And what about parishes?

- Until the notorious events, there were 34 parishes and communities in the Sourozh diocese. At present, the website of the Amphipolis vicariate lists 14 parishes and communities, with several created after it was founded. Several vicariate parishes (including those in London) are under the pastoral care of Father Alexander Fostiropoulos, who belongs to the Thyatira diocese and doesn't seem to be in a hurry to move to Bishop Basil's jurisdiction.

Moreover, matters don't seem to stand well with those parishes which have allegedly moved the Patriarchate of Constantinople. For instance, parishes in Oxford and Nottingham listed on the vicariate's website have split approximately in half, with one half staying faithful to the Sourozh diocese.

Much has been written about the situation in Nottingham. The parish has split into two equal parts. Apparently, in order to win a majority, Bishop Basil has invited Archbishop Gabriel of Comana (head of the Exarchate of Russian Parishes of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Western Europe – IF) to visit Nottingham. Internet reports said Archbishop Gabriel was going to Nottingham contrary to the protest made by the present administrator of the Sourozh diocese, Archbishop Innokenty. Five member of the parish council including the warden and secretary asked Archbishop Gabriel to put off his visitation at least, so that a greater division could be avoided. But the parishioners' request was ignored.

Archbishop Gabriel came to support Bishop Basil to his native parish in Oxford as well. Many parishioners there, led by remarkable Father Stephen Platt, have decided to stay faithful to the Sourozh diocese and to found a parish of their own at Oxford.

By the way, I would like to stress that Father Andrew Louth, a well-known British patrologist

and professor at Durham University, has stated, following Father Stephen, that he remains with the Moscow Patriarchate.

- Is it possible to identify the principle on which the division takes place?

- It is difficult to say. Bishop Basil's supporters insist they are faithful to 'Metropolitan Anthony's legacy'. This legacy, according to them, consists of those whom Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh brought to Orthodoxy, on one hand, and seeks to build a church of the Russian tradition in Great Britain, open to all, on the other.

It should be pointed out however that today just as before most of the clergy in the Sourozh diocese are native Englishmen. They were brought to Orthodoxy and ordained by Metropolitan Anthony himself, and exactly these people do not think that what Bishop Basil does is protection of Metropolitan Anthony's legacy.

The same can be said about parishioners in such predominantly English-speaking parishes as Nottingham or Oxford. So, generally it is impossible to say that now all 'the old Sourozh people' believe Bishop Basil moved to the Patriarchate of Constantinople to 'protect his flock' and 'Metropolitan Anthony's legacy' and that they will follow him.

Therefore, the initial myth created by Bishop Basil insisting that there must be holders of Metropolitan Anthony's legacy (who have always been there), on one hand, and there were Russian newcomers, on the other, does not hold water.

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