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Orthodoxy in Today's North Macedonia

Historical experience and current challenges

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The Settlement of the Half-Century Dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church

Ohrid Archdiocese as an Example of Church Coexistence

Ilche Micevski-Ignat

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to briefly describe the events that occurred in the past and contributed to the resolution of the half-century dispute between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022. Starting in the 19th century, individual individuals would try to restore the Ohrid Archdiocese and fulfill the people's desire to have their own church, but those attempts would be unsuccessful. When Macedonia became a free territory during World War II and was a federal state within Yugoslavia, the initiative to restore the Ohrid Archdiocese, abolished on January 16, 1767, began again. The people and the clergy did not forget the glory and importance of the Ohrid Archdiocese, and wanted to have their own church and clergy again. A process began that lasted several years until the desire of the Macedonian people was fulfilled in the middle of the 20th century. Obtaining their own autocephalous church was not easy for the Macedonian people, nor for the other Balkan peoples. In the period that followed, the priests and the people were faced with denial and non-recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC). For half a century, dialogues were held to overcome the problems between the two churches without any progress. On one side were the Macedonian bishops who insisted on the right to have their own independent church, and on the other side were the Serbian bishops who did

not want to grant and recognize that right. However, the waiting and patience of the Macedonian bishops and the Macedonian people bore fruit. After half a century since the beginning of the dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archdiocese, a solution was found and the dispute was resolved. In the continuation of the text, we will try to briefly describe the events that are part of the history of the two neighboring Orthodox churches, the mutual dispute and of course the resolution of the dispute. Finally, we will try to identify the new challenges for the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

2. Attempts to restore the Macedonian Orthodox Church

Before the middle of the 20th century, during World War II, the Macedonian people and the Macedonian clergy made an attempt to restore the Ohrid Archdiocese. The people realized that they had their own state and wanted to have their own independent church, even though the state of the Macedonian people was within the formed federation called Yugoslavia. Although they found themselves in such a political arrangement, they still wanted to realize their centuries-old desire to restore the Ohrid Archdiocese. They decided to restore that ancient Archdiocese under the name of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese in the person of the MOC began in the liberated Macedonian territories, with the Priestly Assembly held on 20 October 1943, in Izdeglavje (Ohrid)¹. Later, a new, larger assembly was held at which the important decision to restore the Ohrid Archdiocese was made. That assembly was the First National Church Assembly, held in Skopje on (4) 5 and 6 March 1945, in the presence of over 300 delegates², priests and laymen, at which unanimous decisions were made for the restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese as the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The Assembly referred to canon 17 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, as well as

¹ Славко Димевски, *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква*, Скопје 1989, 1012; Јован Белчовски, *Историските основи за автокефалноста на Македонската Православна Црква*, Скопје 1990, 139.

² Димевски, *Историја на Македонската*, 1029; Белчовски, *Историските основи*, 141; Done Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church. The Road to Independence*, Skopje 1973, 75.

canon 38 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Canon 17 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council states that if a change occurs in the state and civil forms of government, then that change should also be followed by the church episcopacies³. The decision was voted for the MOC to be independent and have its own bishops and clergy. They decided that the future Archbishop of the restored church should bear the title of “Ohrid Archbishop”. In order to acquaint the Orthodox world with the restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese, they requested that all Orthodox churches be notified. These requests were sent to the Synod of the SOC. At the synodal session of the SOC, held on September 22, 1945, the request of the Macedonian people and clergy was considered. With the adopted decision No. 1279 and Pov. No. 81 reg. 471, the request of the Macedonian deputies was rejected and a call was sent to remain under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church⁴.

After receiving a negative response, the Macedonian side decided to hold a new assembly. On May 9 and 10, 1946, a clergy assembly was held in the presence of 200 priests. At the assembly, it was decided to propose an autonomous status for the MOC instead of autocephaly⁵. The same year, in November, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Church held a session and with the decision 10/23, 1946 AS no. 18/reg. 12, conveyed a clear message that they would not give up what they had gained in history. It was about the autocephaly of the SOC and the Tomos of Constantinople confirming their autocephaly. That is why they declared themselves against the granting of autocephalous status to a new church in the territories of the Serbian church jurisdiction: “We will never agree to surrender what history had granted us”⁶. These words were not what the Macedonian priests and people wanted to hear, but they nevertheless decided to continue the fight for the restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese.

The Macedonian people and clergy will reorganize again and form an initiative board to organize the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The formed initiative board will propose indigenous candidates for bishops⁷

³ Свештени канони на светата православна црква, Велес 2011, 130 (Serbian: Свештени каноне Цркве, Београд 2005).

⁴ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1032–1033; Белчовски, Историските основи, 142–143.

⁵ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1033–1034; Белчовски, Историските основи, 143; Ilievski, The Macedonian Orthodox Church, 77–78.

⁶ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1035; Ilievski, The Macedonian Orthodox Church, 79.

⁷ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1049, 1052.

to the SOC, but it did not accept them. Despite the promises of the Serbian Patriarch Vikentij (1950–1958), that the proposed candidates would be confirmed by the Council of Bishops of the SOC, this did not happen⁸. The game of patience of the people who tried to offer practical solutions to resolve the church issue on the territory of the then federal Republic of Macedonia, which were rejected every time, slowly came to an end. The delegates of the initiative board decided to go one step further. Well, having no other solution, at the beginning of October (4–6) 1958 the Second National Church Assembly⁹ was convened and the proposed candidates for bishops were elected. The Toplica Bishop Dositej, the vicar of the Serbian Patriarch German, originally Macedonian, was elected as the Head of the MOC¹⁰. Then, at that Council, the Constitution of the MOC, as an independent Church, was adopted¹¹. Great joy and applause filled the hall where this historic assembly was held and where the desire of the Macedonian people to have their own autocephalous Orthodox Church was fulfilled. The head of the renewed Ohrid Archdiocese and the other elected candidates for bishops, in addition to great joy, accepted the new reality of their mission with responsibility.

The Council of Bishops of the SOC agreed with the decisions of the National Church Assembly, by adopting a decision confirming that the Constitution of the SOC was no longer valid for the dioceses in Macedonia. With decisions AS no. 47/1959 and 6/1959, reg. 57 of 17 June 1959, the SAS of the SOC agreed with the decisions of the Macedonian National Church Assembly of 1958¹², announcing that the Constitution of the SOC ceases to be valid¹³: “VI. This decree abrogates all the regulations of the Constitution of the Serbian Orthodox Church referring to the eparchies and bishops within the People’s Republic of Macedonia ...”¹⁴ The unity between the Serbian and Macedonian Churches was agreed to be expressed in the person of the Serbian Patriarch, who should have had the title Patriarch of Serbia and Macedonia, that is, Patriarch of

⁸ Ibid., 1052, 1054.

⁹ Ibid., 1062; Белчовски, Историските основи, 148.

¹⁰ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1065; Белчовски, Историските основи, 150.

¹¹ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1066; Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*, 97.

¹² Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1067.

¹³ Ibid., 1068; Белчовски, Историските Основи, 151.

¹⁴ Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*, 99.

the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Church. With the proclamation of the autocephaly of the MOC, we see that the Macedonian delegates did not renounce the Serbian Patriarch, but proposed that he continue to remain the head of the church in Serbia and Macedonia. This decision of the Macedonian delegates proves that although they wanted to have their own autocephalous church, they wanted to remain in unity and communion with the Serbian Patriarch, who would also be the Patriarch of Macedonia. Their intention was not to be completely separated from the SOC. The desire was to have their own church with indigenous bishops, but always in unity with the SOC and the rest of the autocephalous Orthodox churches.

A good cooperation began between the Macedonian Archbishop Dositej and the Serbian Patriarch German. During the visit of the Serbian Patriarch German to Skopje, accompanied by Serbian bishops and with the Macedonian Archbishop Dositej, on July 19, 1959, they performed the ordination of Archimandrite Kliment as Bishop of Prespa and Bitola¹⁵. The following week, in Shtip, July 26, 1959, Archbishop Dositej and Bishop Kliment ordained Archimandrite Naum as Bishop of the Zletovsko-Strumica Diocese¹⁶, with which the MOC acquired two more canonical bishops, in addition to the Head – Archbishop Dositej. In that way, the gracious apostolic succession in the MOC was preserved. This meant that the bishops of the renewed Macedonian Church were the bearers of the apostolic succession and could pass it on to other bishops, if there was a need to ordain new bishops. The Macedonian people acquired their own indigenous bishops who served and preached in their native language. The gesture made by the Serbian Patriarch at that time, to ordain indigenous candidates for bishops, showed that he was not opposed to the idea of the Macedonians having their own bishops and their own church. His arrival in Macedonia at that time is of great historical significance for the beginnings of the renewed church in the three dioceses formed. This meant that he accepted the proposal to be the Patriarch of the Serbian and Macedonian Churches, perhaps not officially through a document, but through his visit and the ordination of the Macedonian bishops. Although the joy for the renewed Macedonian

¹⁵ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1069; Ilievski, The Macedonian Orthodox Church, 101; Доне Илиевски, Смыслата на некои отпори против автокефалијата на Македонската Православна Црква, Скопје 1970, 20.

¹⁶ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1069; Ilievski, The Macedonian Orthodox Church, 103; Илиевски, Смыслата, 20.

Church was great, it did not last long. A new period began when that joy turned into a struggle to preserve the already established church and once again demand the right to an independent church, equal to other Orthodox churches.

3. Change in attitude towards the MOC and declaration of autocephaly

Soon after the joyful moments caused by the restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese as the MOC, a period of change in the attitude of the bishops of the SOC towards the status of the church's autonomy on the territory of Macedonia began. The Serbian bishops began to deny the autonomy of the Macedonian church. The Macedonian bishops requested that other local Orthodox churches be notified of the autonomous status they had received, but the Serbian church refused to do so, denying its decision on the already granted autonomous status¹⁷. The Synod of the Macedonian Church, led by five bishops, will seek autocephaly from the SOC in order to overcome misunderstandings¹⁸, which refused that request. Since they did not find a reasonable understanding for their demands and the misunderstandings continued, the Macedonian bishops decided to declare autocephaly of the restored Ohrid Archdiocese. That decision¹⁹ of the Macedonian bishops will be confirmed and approved by Third National Church Assembly, held on July 17, 1967²⁰.

The decision of the Macedonian bishops did not please the Serbian bishops. On several occasions, the Serbian bishops, in the printed newspapers of the SOC, would disparage the MOC and its bishops. They would lead an action to denigrate the Macedonian bishops before other

¹⁷ Димевски, Историја на Македонската, 1072–1075; Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*, 105–106.

¹⁸ Белчовски, *Историските основи*, 153; Letter No. 226 of 3.12.1966, requesting autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, published in: Цане Мојаноски, *Автокефалноста на Македонската православна црква (документи)*, Скопје 2004, 259–268.

¹⁹ For the decisions and events surrounding the proclamation of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, see: Доне Илиевски, *Архиепископ Охридски и Македонски Доситеј*, Скопје 1995, 98–108.

²⁰ Димевски, *Историја на Македонската*, 1078; Белчовски, *Историските основи*, 154; Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*, 111–112.

Orthodox churches. On May 24, 1967, the Holy Synod of the SOC at its session, through the adopted decision AS no. 44/reg. 10, would issue a warning to the MOC. In that warning, it indicated that if the MOC declared autocephaly, severe sanctions would be taken. After the MOC declared autocephaly, the Council of the SOC would not recognize the autocephaly. Moreover, they declared the Macedonian Autocephalous Church a schismatic organization, but emphasized that they would not break communion with the faithful people of Macedonia²¹.

The following year, on October 28, 1968, Serbian Patriarch German sent letters to all bishops of the MOC, calling on them to repent²². The Macedonian bishops did not feel the need to respond to the call for repentance, nor did they accept to be judged for what they had done. Peaceful letters were sent several times to the Serbian Patriarch and the Synod, to which they did not respond, acting with indifference. The purpose of the letters was to explain the good intentions of the Macedonian bishops and their desire for good inter-church relations. The reason why the Macedonian bishops did not want to accept the call for repentance, nor to be judged by the Serbian bishops, is that they were no longer considered part of the SOC. From 1958 until 1967, when the autocephaly of the MOC was proclaimed, the Macedonian bishops were not part of the Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church²³. They were never invited to the sessions of the Council of Serbian Bishops and did not take part in the decisions of that Council. On the other hand, the Macedonian bishops did not take an oath before the SOC, because they were ordained bishops for the MOC, therefore they were not responsible for their actions²⁴. They referred to the decision of the SOC from 1959, which clearly stated that the Constitution of the SOC ceased to be valid for the dioceses in Macedonia that had separated into a separate church. Since the Constitution of the SOC no longer applied to the dioceses in Macedonia and the Macedonian bishops were not part of the Council of Serbian Bishops, they could not accept being tried by a body of which they were not a part and before which they had not taken an oath.

²¹ Димевски, *Историја на Македонската*, 1088.

²² Илиевски, *Смислата*, 17–18.

²³ Ilievski, *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*, 125; Илиевски, *Смислата*, 44–45.

²⁴ Илиевски, *Смислата*, 39.

4. Dialogue to overcome misunderstandings

The relations between the MOC and the SOC deteriorated and a period of refusal to talk and restore communion between the two churches began. The MOC, from 1967, when it declared its autocephaly, until 1991, constantly tried to enter into dialogue with the SOC, but was always rejected. During that period, at the level of the commissions of the two churches, only two meetings took place. One meeting took place in 1978, in the monastery "St. Prokhor Pchinjski" in Serbia. The second meeting was held in 1979, at the Monastery of the Most Holy Theotokos in Kalishta, Macedonia. Both meetings were unsuccessful. The commissions did not find a solution to overcome the misunderstandings. At those meetings, the main topic of discussion was the question of who has the competence and who can grant autocephaly. The SOC commission believed that the issue of the autocephaly of the MOC could be resolved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate or a future Ecumenical Council. Previously, their position was that the only factor that could resolve this issue and has the competence was the Mother Church. Regarding this issue, the SOC has always acted according to its current interests and possibilities.

Such behavior of the SOC continued, refusing dialogue or resolution of the dispute with the MOC. The Macedonian bishops wanted a solution to the dispute and entry into communion with the other Orthodox churches. Having been told that one of the parties that could grant them autocephaly was the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a delegation of the MOC visited the Patriarch of Constantinople, Mr. Bartholomew, in the Phanar on March 16, 1992. The meeting that took place there was also attended by the Serbian Patriarch Pavle. At the end of the meeting, an agreement was reached that in the future the issue of the autocephaly of the MOC should be resolved through dialogue between the two churches involved. The following month, on April 15 and 16, 1992, a meeting was held between the SOC and MOC commissions in the aforementioned Kalista monastery in Struga. The Metropolitan Jovan of Zagreb and Ljubljana, the president of the Serbian commission, made a proposal and a common position was accepted. The two commissions agreed to establish Eucharistic unity between the hierarchs and clergy of the two Churches, and to resolve the issue of the autocephaly of the MOC through dialogue.

The proposal of Metropolitan Jovan was accepted by the Synod of the MOC, but the Synod of Bishops of the SOC rejected it and made the opposite decision. Their decision consisted in encroaching on the juris-

diction of the MOC, appointing an administrator for the so-called Serbian dioceses in the Republic of Macedonia. However, the appointed administrator never came to Macedonia. Regardless of the violation of the jurisdiction of the MOC, the Macedonian bishops continued to strive for dialogue with the SOC. Later, the Serbian side returned to dialogue. As a confirmation of this, there were frequent meetings at the level of commissions. One of those meetings was the meeting held in Niš, at which the signatures of the working document that had been adopted were misused. The Serbian side made them public and accepted the working document as official. On the other hand, the Synod of the MOC rejected the working document²⁵. Once again, negotiations between the two churches stagnated and no solution was reached. Later, things changed when the SOC found an ally among the Macedonian metropolitans and created an entirely new church body in Macedonia.

SOC found an ally in the person of the then Bishop of the MOC, Metropolitan Jovan of Povardar, who, with the already present title of the Head of the MOC, appointed him as "Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje" for the newly formed autonomous Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (POA), as the Serbian Church in Macedonia²⁶. Then the SOC ordained two more candidates and with them made a Serbian Exarchate in the Republic of Macedonia. A division occurred within the church and among the believers, but the majority of the faithful remained on the side of the MOC.

At the session of the Council of Bishops, in May 2005, the SOC of the so-called The POA even granted it a Tomos for an autonomous Church, and extended the Decision of 1967 against the MOC, excommunicating it, in addition to the bishops and clergy of the MOC, and the entire Orthodox people in the Republic of Macedonia, if they remain in communion with the MOC. Negotiations and dialogue between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church were once again interrupted. Only time remained to heal the old wounds.

²⁵ Јосиф Пејовски / Григориј Настески, *Автокефалноста на Македонската православна црква – Охридска архиепископија*, Куманово 2018, 122.

²⁶ For the harmfulness of the formation of the POA and the negative consequences of that decision against the MOC-OA, see: Пејовски/Настески, *Автокефалноста на Македонската*, 49, 50, 52–55, 56–57, 58, 81–82, 84, 86, 88, 122.

5. Eucharistic unity with the Orthodox ecumenism

The creation of a new church body did not bring the desired result. The believers continued to remain faithful to the MOC, which remained their church. The Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (POA) had only a small number of believers, and its bishops did not come to Macedonia to take over their dioceses. There was already a church hierarchy in the country that did not allow other bishops to take over the already existing dioceses. This is contrary to church canons. Seeing that the situation was not changing, the Synod of the MOC sent a delegation to the Patriarch of Constantinople, which would ask him, through the right of appeal, to find a solution to the church situation in Macedonia, in order to resolve the dispute with the SOC. It would take some time until the Ecumenical Patriarchate gave its answer.

The response from the Ecumenical Patriarchate will be officially announced on May 9, 2022, when, after the session of the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, they will adopt a document including the MOC in canonical and Eucharistic unity with all local Orthodox churches, recognizing it under its old name – the Ohrid Archdiocese²⁷. Immediately after the publication of the document by which the MOC is placed in canonical and Eucharistic unity with the Orthodox ecumenism by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Bishops' Council of the SOC will issue a statement on May 16, 2022, announcing that the autonomous status of the MOC obtained in 1959 is being restored, full liturgical and canonical communion is being established, and announcing that the status of the dioceses in Macedonia should be resolved²⁸.

After that Decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a joint worship service followed with the Patriarch Mr. Porfiry and Archbishop Stefan on May 19 in the cathedral "St. Sava" in Belgrade, with bishops and priests from both Churches²⁹. The joy of those moments was reciprocally expressed, as was the fulfillment of the time for the MOC to be accepted into canonical and Eucharistic unity with the SOC. In those days, a regular session of the Holy Council of Bishops of the SOC was held and a unanimous decision was made to recognize the autocephalous status of the MOC-OA. That position was announced by the Patriarch Porfiry at

²⁷ Statement of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate published in: *Весник, Службен лист на Македонската православна црква*, LXIV (2022), 5.

²⁸ *Весник*, 6.

²⁹ *Весник*, 7.

the joint Liturgy in the “St. Kliment Ohridski” church in Skopje, on May 24, 2022³⁰. The joy of the believers was overwhelming, expressed through loud applause and tears in their eyes. Those words, spoken by the mouth of the Serbian Patriarch Porphyry, were expected by the Macedonian believers for 55 years. They finally became a reality and entered the history of the MOC. Macedonian Archbishop Stefan expressed his gratitude to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and to the Serbian Patriarch Porphyry for coming forward to meet the MOC-OA and thanks to them, the MOC-OA is now a full member of the One, Holy and Catholic Church – the Body of Christ³¹. He noted that Archbishop Dositej and Patriarch German are probably also happy about the restored Ohrid Archdiocese, as are those who wanted to see it independent, but their grandchildren have come to see what they failed to achieve³². A joint Liturgy followed again and it was celebrated on June 5 in the “St. arch. Michael” in Belgrade. It was then that a Tomos was granted, recognizing the MPC-OA with its autocephalous status under its constitutional name³³.

The dispute between the MOC and the SOC finally found its solution in 2022. Thanks to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the understanding of the Serbian Patriarch Porphyry, the issue of the autocephalous status of the MOC-OA was resolved after 55 years of dispute. We cannot know the true motives from the past that contributed to the dispute not being resolved. Perhaps it was a matter of politically motivated parties or the personal convictions of individuals. But it would be wrong for this to happen to persons who are, first and foremost, bishops of the Holy Church and should be an example of love, patience and understanding. We can say that such was the will of God and now the time has come for the recognition of the autocephalous status of the MOC-OA. After the recognition of the autocephalous status of the MOC-OA by the SOC, relations between the two local churches are at the best level ever. The understanding shown by Patriarch Porphyry in resolving the half-century-old dispute is a reflection of the love of a true shepherd who cares for the good of the Church and the salvation of the faithful. His initiative to finally resolve the dispute and the peaceful manner in which it was resolved, give us an example of how disputes should be resolved. The results are seen in the community that was instantly created between the

³⁰ Весник, 8, 20.

³¹ Весник, 22.

³² Весник, 23.

³³ Весник, 10, 30–31, 58–59.

two churches, as if the dispute had never existed at all. Patriarch Porphyry and Archbishop Stefan showed that all problems can be overcome if there is goodwill and a desire for peaceful dialogue. The concern for the salvation of the faithful shown by the two Hierarchs is particularly important, a salvation that is possible only in the Eucharistic community of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Both Hierarchs set an example of coexistence of two local churches and how others should also get along and live fraternally, as true Christians. The resolution of the dispute is an example of church coexistence that all local Orthodox churches should undertake. All problems and disputes have a solution, only there should be goodwill for dialogue and, above all, a lot of love. Only through the love that we have among ourselves will we and others know that we are Christ's (Jn 13:34–35). Time has shown that Patriarch Porphyry and Archbishop Stefan were the right persons at the right time when the dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches was resolved.

6. The Macedonian Orthodox Church in front of new challenges

Having received the status of an autocephalous church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archdiocese begins a new era with new challenges. Now the MOC has turned a new page on which it will begin to write its history as a local church accepted in canonical and Eucharistic unity with all Orthodox local churches. In addition to the community and church coexistence with the SOC, from now on the MOC will need to have more frequent Eucharistic community with other Orthodox churches as well as church coexistence. If until now it was partially isolated from church coexistence with other Orthodox churches, now it is in community with everyone and the doors are open for mutual cooperation. The new opportunities that await the MOC-OA also assume new challenges in life and existence in community with other churches, but also personal development and growth. We will try to identify just a few of the challenges facing the MOC-OA, which we believe are important for its personal development.

The first challenge is to resolve the autocephalous status with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Serbian Orthodox Church granted

the Tomos of Autocephaly to the MOC-OA with all the canonical rights arising from that document, with a note that the MOC-OA must resolve the problems with the Hellenic-speaking churches³⁴. The Patriarchate of Constantinople does not recognize the document issued by the SOC, claiming that only it has the right to grant autocephaly. To date, this issue has not been resolved and a solution is expected as soon as possible. We hope that the Ecumenical Patriarch, in dialogue with the Macedonian bishops, will find a solution to resolve the full autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese. Good church diplomacy and respect for church canons are needed.

The establishment of relations and cooperation with other local Orthodox churches, as well as with other Christian denominations, is necessary if good relations are desired. This is another challenge for the MOC-OA. It is necessary to establish a Bureau for Foreign Affairs, which will be responsible for relations with other churches and institutions outside the state of North Macedonia. This bureau will help facilitate communication between the MOC-OA outside the state, as well as foreign institutions in cooperation with the MOC-OA. Of course, the external relations of the MOC-OA are good even without the existence of a Bureau for Foreign Affairs, but we believe that the conduct of foreign diplomacy will be greatly facilitated by the establishment of this Bureau.

We live in a time where information is transmitted very quickly and it is important that that information is transmitted by appropriate individuals. Formation of a bureau for relations with the public and with the media, for better communication of the decisions and messages of the Bishops and the Synod of the MOC, with trained persons (spokespeople) in the field of journalism. The Church should ensure that its message is conveyed quickly and accurately to believers and other interested parties. It should prepare appropriate individuals who will engage in journalistic activities and clearly convey the messages of church figures. This is also necessary for easier monitoring of events in the life of the Church as well as social developments in the country, their recording, archiving and publication.

Also, several aspects of the internal mission of the MOC-OA need to be improved. It is necessary to develop its own Christian television and radio station, which will broadcast not only local or international news, but most importantly the word of the Holy Gospel. Macedonia is filled

³⁴ Весник, 30–31.

with a rich Christian cultural heritage that deserves to be promoted and exhibited before the domestic audience, as well as with a rich Christian history. Content will be created for every taste, for the youngest to the oldest, in order to be introduced to the teachings of the Christian faith so that they can know their faith better.

It is necessary to improve the catechetical activity of the church for adult believers and to pay attention to the mission with young people. Catechetical classes for adults are needed, since most of them do not know the teachings of the Orthodox Church well and do not understand the meaning of the sacraments in the Church. Therefore, catechesis will help them to better know their own faith. Young people are the future not only of the state but also of the Church. If young people are not present in churches, then how will the Christian faith be preserved and transmitted to future generations? There is great potential for working with young people and the MOC-OA should make sure to use it.

There is also potential in the social and humanitarian work of the church. This activity has existed for many years in the Macedonian church, but there is always room for developing the potential and providing assistance to more people.

MOC-OA already have the activity of translating and publishing theological literature, but it should be enriched with more books for children and young people, as well as with translations of the works of the Holy Fathers and teachers of the Church and by contemporary theologians. And this is one aspect that can be greatly improved in the future.

In reality, there are many challenges that a church faces, but we believe that the above are the most important ones that the MOC-OA should pay attention to in the future. Each challenge brings its own struggle, but if the end result is communion with God and with our neighbors, it deserves to be embraced.

7. Conclusion

It is difficult to describe events that took place over the course of 55 years in a small number of pages. That is why there are books that describe those events in more detail, and here only the most important moments were briefly mentioned. For half a century, the Macedonian people and clergy, together with their bishops, awaited the resolution of the issue of the autocephalous status of their church. Their wish to have their own

church in the renewed Ohrid Archdiocese as the Macedonian Orthodox Church was fulfilled. With great patience and expectation of receiving a positive response from the Serbian Orthodox Church for 55 years, the Macedonian bishops did not give up their goal of obtaining autocephaly for their church and to be in Eucharistic communion with the Serbian Orthodox Church and the rest of the Orthodox churches. The dispute between the two churches not only divided the believers of the two countries, but ultimately managed to bring them closer together. Although both sides went through many trials, through mutual non-recognition and denial, they still realized in the end that only together can they have a common coexistence.

The resolution of the dispute between the MOC-OA and the SOC in 2022 became a great joy for the two peoples of the Balkans and strengthened their mutual respect. The example set by the heads of the two churches on how disputes between Orthodox churches should be resolved should be an example of church coexistence and love for all Christians. Disputes have existed and will exist, but we should take care to resolve them in a timely manner and through love and dialogue. The resolution of the problems between the MOC-OA and the SOC, although they lasted half a century, can serve as an appeal to resolve the contemporary misunderstandings that exist in the community of Orthodox local churches. If the resolution of the misunderstandings is approached in a timely manner, there is a possibility that the divisions that have begun to occur between the Orthodox churches, motivated by canonical or political reasons, will end more quickly. Canonical and Eucharistic unity is of great importance for Orthodox churches if they want to be part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Our Savior Jesus Christ should be our example, Who did not come into the world to bring divisions, but to unite all in one (Jn. 17:21–23). If for half a century the Macedonian bishops faced the challenge of fighting for an independent church and met it, today they are faced with the new challenges brought by the modern world. We believe that every time brings its own personalities who can bring solutions to contemporary problems and challenges. Therefore, we think that the bishops of the MOC-OA can and have the ability to respond to the challenges they will face in their pastoral activity, leading the faithful towards communion with the Lord Jesus Christ.