

## **The Proposed Charter: Progress and Potential**

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Over the past few years extensive and critical efforts have been made by special committees of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Ecumenical Patriarchate to review the existing 1977 Charter of the Archdiocese and to prepare a Charter that reflects the organization, direction and potential of our Orthodox Church in this country. This article is presented to provide a brief overview of the necessity and importance of the Charter process and of the Charter itself for the work and future of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese.

### **What is an Ecclesiastical Charter?**

An ecclesiastical Charter first defines the relationship between the Mother Church, i.e. the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Second, it is a grant of rights and privileges by the Patriarchate to the Archdiocese.

That the Charter is a grant is made clear by Article 23 of the existing 1977 Charter which states in part that it was the Ecumenical Patriarchate which "granted it (i.e. the Charter) in its present form to the Archdiocese." However, the Charter is not a grant made by the Patriarchate without thorough discussion. On the contrary, as it happened in our case, during the past 18 months the Patriarchate and the Archdiocese have entered into extensive and detailed discussions on the contents of the Charter with constant attention to the needs of the Archdiocese, as well as its present and future status. The resulting document, the proposed Charter, is the product of those discussions.

### **Why the need to update the Charter?**

The existing 1977 Charter was granted to the "Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America." Since the time of the grant, Canada, Central America and South America have been made separate Metropolises. In addition, the Archdiocese has changed its corporate name to "The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America." These changes together with the need to provide a proper foundation for continued growth and dynamic ministry at the Archdiocesan, Diocesan and parish levels necessitated the process of updating the Charter.

The proposed Charter has been carefully designed to provide a framework for the structure of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese today as well as for its mission in the foreseeable future. This could not be accomplished with "amendments" or "revisions" to the 1977 Charter. Thus, the process began in earnest over six years ago and reports were given to the Clergy Laity Congresses in Orlando (1998) and Philadelphia (2000). Shortly after his arrival in 1999, Archbishop Demetrios appointed a committee to continue the work on the Charter, the committee to be guided by the goal and vision of producing a document that would acknowledge the progress of the Archdiocese over its eighty years of existence and manifest the potential of our Greek Orthodox Church for offering faith, quality ministry, and true life in Christ in America and throughout the world.

### **What is the status of the Charter process?**

The intense labors a) of the original committee consisting of Hierarchs, priests, and lay people, b) of our Eparchial Synod, c) of the enlarged committee including representatives of all of our Dioceses in accordance with a recommendation of the Orlando Clergy Laity Congress of 1998, and finally, d) of the mixed committee comprising 18 distinguished Hierarchs, Canon Law and legal specialists from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Archdiocese who met 4 times at the Patriarchate for 2 days each time, resulted in a proposed text of the Charter that was presented to the Archdiocesan Council at its meeting in New York on November 30 and December 1, 2001. The discussions at that meeting acknowledged the tremendous value and the decisive significance of the proposed Charter. At the same time, attention was drawn to some points of concern related to specific articles. These points of concern consisted of an affirmation of the integrity and unity of the Archdiocese, of issues related to the election of the Archbishop, the Metropolitans and the Auxiliary Bishops, and of the extensive lay participation in the administrative process of the Archdiocese. In February 2002, these points of concern, together with a brief summary of the history of the Charter process and the texts of the proposed Charter and the 1977 Charter were sent to all of the parishes of the Archdiocese with a request for responses in the form of constructive comments and positive contributions. This request for input was viewed as a necessity given the ability and maturity of the Church in America and the recognition of this fact by the Ecumenical Patriarch.

At the recent spring Archdiocesan Council meeting in Chicago, a report was given on the status of the Charter process since the Council meeting in the fall of 2001, including the responses to the request for constructive comments from the parishes. As of May 6, 2002, 185 out of over 500 parishes had responded to that request by the Council after having relevant parish council or general assembly meetings. Of the written responses received by these parishes by either fax or letter, the majority concurred with the points of concern issued by the Archdiocesan Council. In contradiction to erroneous reports and rumors propagated from outside of the Archdiocese, less than 10 of a total of 185 parishes stated that they "rejected" the Charter text or process. Most of the parishes offered substantial thoughts and opinions that were either alternative suggestions to those of the Council or expressed concerns with various articles of the Charter. Following this presentation at the Chicago meeting, remarks were made by members of the Council affirming the process and showing widespread support for its continuation and completion.

The next step in the process is the careful review of the responses of parishes and individuals and the verification that input has been provided from as many who wished to offer it. At the upcoming Clergy Laity Congress in Los Angeles a report on the proposed Charter including the responses from the parishes will be presented. All concerns regarding the proposed Charter will be submitted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for consideration and decision.

### **What is the significance of the Charter for the future of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese?**

As stated above, the Charter is critical to the present and future of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The reasons are several. First, the process itself has

revealed much about the level of maturity of the Church in America. Discussions on the Charter in the meetings of the Patriarchal and Archdiocesan committees revealed the expertise, concern, and visionary thinking of our Hierarchs, clergy and lay people. The Charter presentations at the Archdiocesan Council meetings have been characterized by respect, moderated concern, and deep compassion for the proper existence and function of the Archdiocese. All of this is a witness to people throughout the world of the proper and godly way of conducting the affairs of the Church.

Second, the proposed Charter strengthens even more the existing bond and unity between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, a unity vital for the accomplishment of the mission and work of the Church in our contemporary world.

Third, the proposed Charter is a progressive step in the Charter history of the Archdiocese. The text is composed of a clear theological language. It helps those outside of the Archdiocese to understand its structure and function. Further, the Charter addresses issues that are not included in the 1977 Charter (Metropolitans and Auxiliary Bishops, Monasteries, etc.)

Fourth, the Charter provides the foundation and opens the way for the revision of the Regulations of the Archdiocese, so that they address contemporary needs and reflect the true spirit of the Gospel and our mission. These Regulations relate to the work of the Eparchial Synod, the frequency and role of Clergy Laity Congresses, and the function of Councils, Assemblies, and the Parishes of the Archdiocese. This will involve an extensive work that is primarily the responsibility of the clergy and laity of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Finally, the proposed Charter text not only upholds the necessity of having both clergy and laity administer the Archdiocese, but it provides the foundation for even greater relationships and synergy between clergy and laity in ever-increasing our focus on the mission of the Church in the world. Progress has been made and will be furthered by this Charter; but, more importantly, attention must be given to the potential we have as a strong, unique, and vibrant Archdiocese in offering our faith to the people of America and in supporting ministry around the world that brings the message of salvation to all who are in need of our Risen Lord.