Antiochian Distinctions

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Believers often ask me about the distinctive characteristics of the Antiochian Church or what constitutes the "Antiochian spirit," especially during my pastoral visits. In my most recent meeting with the youth in Los Angeles, the question was posed: *"What are the key theological principles that distinguish the Antiochian Church?"*

To begin with, there are no doctrinal or faith-based principles in the Antiochian Church that differ from those of other canonical Orthodox churches. Theology, faith, doctrine, spirituality, and liturgy are unified across them all. What appears to be distinctive lies in the way the Christian faith is lived and expressed, which is inseparable from the character, mindset, and philosophy of the people, as well as from the history of each church and how the Holy Spirit has shaped it through various trials and ruling civil authorities.

One of the most important characteristics of the Antiochian Church is that it has been, since the beginning of Christianity, a multicultural church. In the early centuries, the geographical reach of the Antiochian Church was vast, stretching from the southern Taurus Mountains (modern-day Turkey) in the north to the Sinai Desert in the south, and eastward as far as India. This is why it still bears the title "Antioch and All the East." The Georgian Church was under its jurisdiction until the fourth century, which is why the Antiochian patriarchal *phimi* (title) still includes mention of the "Georgian lands."

As a result, the Antiochian Church never faced issues with language or culture. Its faithful prayed and expressed themselves in Greek and its culture along the Syrian coast (which then extended along the entire eastern Mediterranean), in Syriac and its Semitic culture in inland Syria, in Armenian and its culture in the north (Cilician Kingdom), and in Arabic and its culture in the south (the Arab province), in addition to Assyrian and Persian beyond the Euphrates.

One example of this cultural diversity is Saint Saba the Sanctified (439–532), who gave Armenian monks in his monastery near Jerusalem a separate church so they could perform their daily prayers in Armenian, while the rest of the monks prayed in Greek.

The Levant – the heart of the Antiochian Church – has historically been a battleground for great power struggles, which exposed it to constant interaction with various civilizations and cultures. This helped shape the Antiochian person as someone open to others, unafraid of dialogue, and accepting of differences without coercion—while still distinguishing between their own thoughts and those of others. This cultural cross-pollination fostered intellectual richness, creative thinking, and a resilient identity that could engage flexibly with others. It is no coincidence that the Antiochian Church has played a mediating role among Orthodox churches and in interfaith dialogue with non-Orthodox churches and Islam.

Moreover, its long history under non-Christian rule since the seventh century purified it from the dream of establishing a Christian kingdom on earth. It never adopted the theory of *symphonia* (harmony between church and state, symbolized by the double-headed eagle). The succession of calamities and wars—first between Byzantines and Muslims, then with the Crusaders, and later under foreign rule until the end of the French Mandate in the twentieth century—shaped a theology of incarnation as the primary spiritual identity of the Antiochian Church. This led to an eschatological (eternity-focused) outlook, as continuous hardships and persecutions drove it to seek consolation, steadfastness, and protection from God. History freed it from ethnic and nationalistic entanglements, resulting in a theology untainted by a fusion of religion and nationalism.

This allowed the Church to seek Christ first and organize its existence around Him, cooperating with other Orthodox churches that could offer support at certain times. This freedom from ethnocentrism made it the first Orthodox church in North America to open its doors of evangelization to converts to Orthodoxy. This was no coincidence, but the fruit of a heritage refined by God through a heavy historical journey. History did not allow it to pursue missionary work for centuries, as it was preoccupied with survival and nurturing its faithful. But once circumstances allowed, it quickly took the lead in evangelism.

Because it lived for centuries under non-Christian rule, Antioch avoided the temptation of using Orthodoxy for nationalistic purposes, resulting in a pure ecclesial theology. I vividly recall the positions of its senior metropolitans and theologians in the 1970s regarding the future of Orthodoxy in North America. Their

vision was rooted in Orthodox ecclesiology. Unfortunately, that dream now seems distant due to the current geopolitical conflicts affecting Orthodox churches and nations.

Living under non-Christian rule since the seventh century exposed the Church to various persecutions. Yet, wherever possible, it engaged with its surroundings, rulers, and citizens of different sects, remaining a witness to its faith and spirituality while playing a significant role in the advancement of the societies in which it lived.

During the Umayyad period (662–750), religious freedom still existed, and public religious debates took place in the squares of Damascus. Christians played roles in translation, finance, and even served as departmental ministers. In the Abbasid period (750–1258), they were instrumental in transferring knowledge and sciences from Greek and Syriac sources to Arabic, and many of the rulers' physicians were Christians. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their numbers increased, and they played a major role in cultural, political, and civilizational awakening. Their schools spread everywhere, and they continue to bear witness to their faith with all the strength, ability, and grace they possess.

A quick glance at this article reveals how much our Antiochian Archdiocese in North America resembles the experiences of the Antiochian Patriarchate—from diversity in culture and language to nationality not limited by ethnicity. How beneficial it is to learn from these experiences and draw inspiration from them as we face the many challenges confronting our Archdiocese today.