

A Seed is Buried: Metropolitan Alexander of Nigeria (1960–2023)

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It was Great Saturday morning, 2000, in Lagos, Nigeria. Holy Week was coming to its Paschal culmination. The services were celebrated in the Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Resurrection, where a diverse congregation consisting of Nigerians, Greeks, Cypriots, and Orthodox immigrants from various other countries came together to participate. My wife Eleni and I were spending time in Lagos as Bishop Alexander's guests. We stayed with him at the diocesan headquarters, engaging in extensive discussions and traveling together in an effort to comprehend the Nigerian context and gather invaluable, first-hand material for my missiological research.



As we were preparing for the celebration of the Resurrection, Alexander informed us that both he and we had been invited by the Greek-Cypriot association in Lagos to partake in the traditional festive and joyous Paschal lunch on Sunday. Alexander told us he had cordially thanked the association for the invitation but stated that he would accept it only on condition that eight young Nigerians—members of the tiny theological seminary, who also resided in the headquarters and served as chanters and altar boys at the church—be included as well.

The bishop's condition was promptly accepted. Consequently, on the following day, the lavish Paschal banquet took place outdoors in a suburb of Lagos, under a warm and friendly sun, with the participation of numerous Greeks, Cypriots, and other Caucasians, seated around a dozen or more tables. There was only one table that stood out, the table where the eight Nigerians were seated. No, let me correct myself: it was nine Nigerians, the eight seminarians and their bishop. Alexander was already in the process of assimilating into

Nigerian culture, not through a formal legal procedure, but rather through an incarnation of sorts.

Alexander's exodus into the vast and open horizons of Christ's incarnation as a *modus missionis* marked a significant turning point in his life and service. He embarked on a journey of theological deepening and courage. Born George Gianniris, he was ordained to the priesthood in 1988 and received the priestly name Alexander. For a period of nine years, he served in the Metropolis of Johannesburg, South Africa. In 1997 he was ordained Bishop of Nigeria and embarked on a challenging pilgrimage to understand the Nigerian identity and context. His approach was remarkable, as he undertook this journey without the burden of Greek nationalism but also avoided the distorting lens of orientalism, which is often present even among well-intentioned missionaries. He was deeply fascinated by Saint Maximus the Confessor's statement that "God's Word, being God himself, desires the mystery of his incarnation to be effectuated in every place and time."¹ We journeyed in collaboration for almost twenty-five years. He appointed me a member of the "Mission Work and Evangelization Committee" of the Orthodox Church in Nigeria (this is the name of the local church, rather than the "Greek Orthodox Church"), and we had frequent deliberations on various aspects of missiology and missionary praxis.

Besides wholeheartedly embracing the theological perspective that mission is not a secondary activity but an integral part of the Church's essence, Alexander exemplified what someone who has chosen Africa as his true homeland can do. He demonstrated a genuine willingness to listen attentively and respectfully

to the diverse voices of sub-Saharan West Africa, avoiding simplistic and essentialist generalizations. In 2004, the bishopric was elevated to a metropolis, encompassing an incredibly vast territory, including the states of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Niger. From his contemplative immersion into African realities, I will highlight four emblematic areas of his concern:

1. He fearlessly and consistently opposed the "Prosperity Gospel," which is sweeping various churches. He recognized that this ideology not only legitimizes social injustice by placing the blame on the poor and the marginalized, but also glorifies individual success, neglecting the mystery of the cross. Even as Alexander's health condition began to irreversibly deteriorate, he responded with a humble prayer, "Your will be done." It made me recall his sermons on pain as a mysterious way of God's concern, not of God's disapproval, as the "Prosperity Gospel" claims.
2. He was one of the very few who recognized the significant revival of the sub-Saharan Africa's pre-colonial tradition. This is a situation of great importance, as it signals the osmosis of the traditional with the modern, rather than tradition's being subsumed into the modern. Quite the contrary: the traditional seems to be gaining renewed strength, adapting fluidly to the current conditions. In light of this understanding, Alexander grew increasingly critical of prevailing missionary practices, and of an ecclesiastical bureaucracy that idolizes Byzantine etiquette and neglects the essential principle of incarnation.
3. As the years passed, Alexander articulated a brave and deeply

¹Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86), 91:1084C–D.



spiritual message, far removed from the ridiculous triumphalism that often haunts missionary enterprises. He spoke about failure. I think this notion has two dimensions. First, it reveals a blessed awareness that what may matter to God is not necessarily what we experience as our achievements and grandeur, but other criteria that we tend to undervalue. What will ultimately be proved to be gold—or, on the contrary, chaff—in the fire of the Spirit will only become clear to us at the end, at the eschaton. Second, he planned to implement reforms to establish genuinely Orthodox and authentically African local churches. One of his suggestions to the Patriarchate of Alexandria was to divide his vast metropolis into two dioceses: one English-speaking (like Nigeria) and one French-speaking (like Benin). Regrettably, he died before he was able to submit this proposal in written form.

4. He advocated for the meaningful inclusion and active participation of the churches of the Global South in the deliberations of the worldwide Orthodox Church. Alexander actively supported the work of the Holy and Great Synod held in Crete in 2016 and represented the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the Synod's Secretariat. However, he also criticized the Synod's hesitancy, which stemmed from chronic misconceptions that are deeply rooted in the Orthodox world. He pointed out that the leaders of the Orthodox churches in the Global North think of the African churches only as *recipients* of theology and culture, and do not acknowledge them as agents.

In this regard, Alexander openly advocated for a decisive reconsideration. However, he did not view this reconsideration as the privilege of ecclesiastical “enlightened absolutism”. Instead, he perceived it as the responsibility of the entire Church. He stated that “the ever-renewing All-Holy Spirit invites us to adopt new attitudes and to pay special attention to the prophetic voices of clergy and laity alike, men and women, which increase in our days and invite us to a change of direction, to a change of mind, to *metanoia*.”² Alexander raised a series of critical and urgent issues that have been fervently discussed in theology but have not yet entered the official agenda of Orthodoxy. On several occasions, he highlighted the need for reactivating the female diaconate, articulating doctrine using African conceptual tools, incorporating African art and musical rhythm into ecclesiastical life and worship, using local food (other than wheat bread and grape wine, which are not relevant to African reality) as elements of the Eucharist, and so forth. On some

of these issues, such as the contextualization of fasting and liturgical adaptations, he made official recommendations to the Synod of the Patriarchate.

In addition to these issues, Alexander also developed a profound understanding of political theology. He was a strong critic of neocolonialism, which involves the subjugation of the sub-Saharan countries through the creation of massive public debts and the imposition of authoritarian regimes. This criticism was directed mostly at the Western powers engaged in such practices. However, he also denounced the recent intrusion of the Church of Russia into sub-Saharan Africa and the establishment of distinct and antagonistic ecclesiastical jurisdictions, which mirrored political imperialism in the region.

Alexander, a man endowed with exceptional wit, which he could

eloquently express in genuine Nigerian English, endured the last months of his earthly life in excruciating pain, a pain that defies human understanding. However, those who were close to him sensed that the apostle to Nigeria was experiencing a mysterious spiritual advance. Perhaps he experienced a personal encounter with the profound words of our Lord: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). The day before his passing I spoke with him on the phone. Breathing so heavily that he could hardly speak, he did not forget to whisper words of concern and greetings to my family. He departed on the day of the Holy Apostles (June 30). During his funeral the following day, both an Ibo and a Yoruba expression accompanied my awe and my prayers: "*Kristi Ebiliwo! Kristi Jinde!*" Christ is Risen, Your Eminence! ✠

² Metropolitan Alexander, address on the enthronement of George, Metropolitan of Accra, January 23, 2011 (in Greek).



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