

# CULTURAL SCIENCES

## THE FUNCTIONING OF THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX APOSTOLIC CHURCH IN THE DIASPORA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GEORGIAN EPARCHIES ABROAD

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### Abstract

This paper examines the history, canonical foundations, and pastoral strategies of the Diocese of Western Europe of the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church, established on October 17, 2002, with the blessing of Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II and by decree of the Holy Synod. This ecclesiastical development responded to the spiritual needs of thousands of Georgian faithful living in emigration and marked a significant milestone in the modern history of the Georgian Church.

The author emphasizes the multifunctional role of the Church in the diaspora: it serves not only as a refuge of faith but also as the primary institution for preserving national identity, ensuring the transmission of Georgian language, culture, and traditions to future generations. The paper discusses the importance of Sunday schools, Georgian-language schools, and cultural centers in maintaining national-cultural identity.

Particular attention is devoted to the institution of catechesis and the problem of scriptural comprehension in diaspora contexts. The author argues that the use of comprehensible language in liturgical practice is essential for authentic knowledge of faith. The paper also addresses the necessity of clergy training, cooperation with local Orthodox jurisdictions, and preservation of memory regarding Georgia's occupied territories.

The research draws upon both ecclesiastical sources and contemporary scholarly literature on diaspora studies and Orthodox identity.

**Keywords:** Georgian Orthodox Church; Diocese of Western Europe; diaspora; emigration; pastoral care; national identity; catechesis; liturgical language; Georgian culture; Orthodox Christianity

### Introduction

On October 17, 2002, with the benediction of His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, and by decree of the Holy Synod, the Diocese of Western Europe was established within the jurisdictional framework of the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church. This ecclesiastical act marked a significant development in the modern history of Georgian Orthodoxy, responding to the spiritual exigencies of thousands of Georgian faithful residing beyond the national borders. The establishment of this diocese represented a canonical recognition of the diaspora as an integral component of the Church's pastoral responsibility and ecclesiological self-understanding.

The subsequent administrative subdivision of this diocese—with the creation of the Dioceses of Great Britain and Ireland (2009), followed by the Dioceses of Germany and Austria, and Belgium and the Netherlands (2014)—reflects both the quantitative growth of Georgian Orthodox communities in Western Europe and the ecclesiastical maturation of the diaspora. Prior to this structural development, only three parishes functioned under patriarchal blessing: Strasbourg, Brussels, and Munich.

### The Ecclesiological Significance of Diaspora Ministry

The founding of Georgian eparchies in Western Europe constitutes a unique ecclesiological development in the recent history of the Georgian Orthodox Church. By establishing dioceses under its direct jurisdiction, the Georgian Church articulated its theological and pastoral orientation toward tens of thousands of

compatriots living in emigration. This development positioned the Georgian Church within the broader Orthodox ecclesiastical landscape, assuming a fraternal canonical place alongside the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Orthodox Churches of Russia, Serbia, and Romania, all of which maintain diocesan structures in the Western European region.

The stated objectives of this ecclesiastical structure encompass both spiritual and national dimensions: the pastoral care and spiritual protection of compatriots residing within diocesan boundaries, the preservation of their national and religious self-awareness, and support for Georgia's European integration process. These objectives reflect the dual character of Orthodox diaspora ministry, which simultaneously addresses soteriological concerns and cultural-identitarian preservation.

### Demographic Context and Human Resources

Within the diocese encompassing the Kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands, approximately ten thousand Georgian compatriots currently reside. This demographic includes representatives of scientific and artistic professions, business entrepreneurs, and students pursuing higher education. This population constitutes a significant human resource capable of contributing not only to their countries of residence but also to addressing Georgia's economic challenges. However, as the text notes, the effective management of human resources requires substantial education and experience—a recognition of the complex dynamics of diaspora communities.

### Historical Continuity and Contemporary Challenges

The phenomenon of Georgian emigration possesses historical precedents that inform contemporary ecclesiastical practice. From ancient times, Georgians abroad established educational centers and church-monastic institutions, receiving donations for their maintenance while enriching their homeland with spiritual achievements. This historical paradigm demonstrates that emigration, when properly oriented, can exert considerable influence on the future of the Georgian state and provide spiritual reference points for identity preservation.

Since the 1990s, Georgian emigrants have shared in both the sufferings and joys of their homeland—experiencing war, displacement, economic hardship, and spiritual crises. From this shared experience emerged cultural, social, and religious interests that subsequently gave rise to the formation of Orthodox communities. This organic development reflects the intrinsic connection between religious identity and national consciousness among Orthodox Georgians abroad.

#### **Canonical Integration and Ecumenical Relations**

The hierarchs governing Georgian dioceses in Western Europe have consistently participated in the Conference of Orthodox Bishops of their respective countries, functioning in accordance with the decisions of the IV Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambésy (2009). This participation demonstrates the Georgian Church's commitment to pan-Orthodox unity and its recognition of the canonical order established by Orthodox Patriarchs for diaspora administration.

#### **Pastoral Infrastructure and Cultural Preservation**

Currently, of the seven parishes within the region, three possess their own church buildings. The diocese maintains Sunday schools and art studios, promoting Georgian spiritual culture while providing pastoral care for students and migrants. The text identifies the necessity of increasing clergy numbers to meet pastoral demands—a practical concern that reflects the challenges of ministering to dispersed communities.

The multinational and multiethnic environment of Western Europe, particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands, provides a context for intercultural dialogue that enriches both host societies and diaspora communities. This dialogue enhances value-based capacities, renders public goods more accessible, and fosters respect toward local communities while maintaining Georgian identity.

#### **Catechetical Imperatives and Theological Education**

The institution of catechesis receives particular attention as a matter of critical importance for diaspora churches. The text argues that catechetical education assumes even greater significance abroad than in Georgia itself, where dioceses possess general education schools and gymnasiums. In foreign contexts, faith must be supported by knowledge; the believer engages in constant cognitive process regarding self and surrounding world, for which catechetical schools provide essential formation.

The text poses rhetorical questions regarding baptismal preparation: How can candidates become acquainted with creation history, human history, and messianic prophecies without systematic catechetical instruction? Without reliance on catechetical schools as the tradition for transmitting teaching, and without systematic educational processes within every parish, gaps in divine knowledge cannot be adequately filled through Gospel reading and liturgical interpretation alone.

#### **Scriptural Comprehension and Liturgical Language**

A significant theological reflection concerns the comprehension of Holy Scripture. The text notes that the Apostles wrote Scripture in Koine Greek—the most widely spoken language of their time, easily understandable to contemporary audiences. This observation raises fundamental questions about language in Christian proclamation: without hearing, there can be no understanding; without understanding, no true cognition of salvific teaching.

The text advocates for careful attention to liturgical language, emphasizing the importance of hearing the Lord's proclamation in understandable language—so that what is heard does not require subsequent translation and theological interpretation. This reflection addresses a tension within Orthodox liturgical practice between preserving traditional liturgical language and ensuring congregational comprehension.

The text laments that contemporary practice often distances the faithful not only from Scripture in understandable language but also from liturgical poetry—those pearls articulated by holy and God-bearing Fathers through inspiration of divine knowledge. This concern reflects broader discussions within Orthodox theology regarding the relationship between liturgical tradition and pastoral accessibility.

#### **Multifunctional Role of the Church in Diaspora**

For diaspora Georgians, the Church represents more than a refuge for faith and ecclesial life that assists in acquiring Christian values. It has simultaneously assumed social, cultural, and educational functions. Pastoral practice has demonstrated that diaspora representatives require not only support in social and civic integration but also the establishment of Georgian-language institutions: schools, kindergartens, and courses in folklore, history, song, dance, theater, literature, and the arts for preservation of national-cultural identity and unity.

#### **Practical Ecclesiastical Initiatives**

The text enumerates specific areas of ecclesiastical engagement in the diaspora:

1. Sunday schools and religious education
2. Cooperation with diaspora youth and students
3. Support for Georgian statehood within diaspora communities
4. Preservation of memory regarding occupied territories (Abkhazia and Samachablo)
5. Engagement with penitentiary services abroad
6. Cooperation with local humanitarian associations, hospitals, and repatriation services
7. Collaboration with local Orthodox jurisdictions and associations

8. Support for research into historical and cultural legacy of Georgian emigrants
9. Organization of concerts, cultural evenings, and public activities
10. Support for church choirs, Georgian chant, and folklore preservation
11. Establishment of Georgian libraries and cultural resources

### Conclusion

The experience of Georgian Orthodox dioceses in Western Europe represents a significant development in the modern history of the Georgian Apostolic Church. Through these structures, the Church addresses the spiritual needs of its diaspora while preserving national identity and cultural continuity. The challenges of catechetical education, scriptural comprehension, and liturgical language reflect broader theological questions facing Orthodox churches in diaspora contexts. The ultimate objective remains the salvation of the faithful—wherever they may live—and their formation as successful, strong bearers of value-based culture: good citizens, peacemakers, lovers of neighbor and homeland, and glorifiers of God.

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