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Onassis Marriage Defended as Valid By Orthodox Prelate

Special to The New York Times

GENEVA, Nov. 8—A high-ranking Orthodox churchman said today that the former Mrs. John F. Kennedy and Aristotle S. Onassis were partners in a valid marriage and were to be regarded "not as sinners but as Christian spouses deserving of all due respect."

The statement was issued by Metropolitan (Bishop) Meliton of Chalcedon, Dean of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, while on a visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

Metropolitan Meliton is the principal Orthodox representative in the negotiations for a healing the nearly century-old split between his church and the Roman Catholic church.

But the statement he published here clearly underscored the difficulties that can still arise between the two churches in connection with "mixed marriages", or marriages by partners of different faiths.

Onassi Held Free to Rewed

The statement was apparently prompted by the recent comment in the authoritative Vatican weekly L'Osservatore della Domenica that Mrs. Onassis was a "public sinner" because she had married a divorced man.

Mr. Onassis, the Metropolitan said, was free to marry again in the eyes of his church since his Orthodox first marriage had been dissolved in accordance with Orthodox canon law.

The present Mrs. Onassis, a Roman Catholic, was likewise free to marry again under the canon law of her church since she was a widow, the statement continued.

For these reasons, the Metropolitan said, the Kennedy-Onassis union was a mixed marriage that came within the category that the Vatican now recognized when performed by the Orthodox Church.

Having been performed by an Orthodox minister on the basis of a license issued by the Greek Orthodox Church, the marriage was a "fully lawful

mixed marriage valid for, and to be defended by, the whole Orthodox Church," he commented.

The Orthodox Churchman said that he believed that the "very delicate points" he had raised in his statement explained that no ecclesiastic authority of the Roman Catholic Church had made "any responsible negative comment" on the Kennedy-Onassis marriage.

Until now, he added, "only personal views have appeared in the papers."

Couple Continue Cruise

ATHENS, Nov. 8 (UPI)—Mr. and Mrs. Onassis cruised the

Aegean Sea on their yacht Christina today.

The couple, married Oct. 20 on the Isle of Skorprios, sailed early today from Glyphada, a fashionable Athens seaside suburb on the second leg of their cruise. Their yacht had been anchored off Skorprios until yesterday morning.