

The Apostolic Responsibility of Orthodoxy and its Worldwide Dimension, Questions/Answers session

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His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania (30-08-2001)

Is there any difference between internal and external mission?

As you know, the terminology “internal mission” is an influence of the German “*innermission*”, and in it we have found a very easy excuse to persuade ourselves that we are missionaries by doing *internal* mission. And yet the commandment says clearly: ‘*and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth*’.¹ The biblical understanding of mission (*apostole*) means to leave, to accept to be in another cultural environment, to be a stranger. We must distinguish between apostolic mission and the pastoral efforts that we undertake in our local churches. The pastoral efforts and the renewal of Christian life are indeed very important. In many societies now where an atheistic influence prevails, we have to be a witness (in Greek, *martyria*), to invite to the Church people who do not have faith. However, spiritual edification within the Church is not exactly missionary effort. Missionary effort is about having the vocation to bring into the Church that which is outside of the Church. In the beginning, we had a youthful enthusiasm for the meaning of the word *mission*. Later, we discovered that these words were widely used. Then we decided to use rather the word *martyria*, witness, not mission.

How can we distinguish true mission from proselytism?

Proselytism uses all possible means (gifts, food, money and other privileges) to achieve an aim, to bring followers into a concrete religious community. This contravenes the dignity of the human person and of the Gospel, and I believe it is really not sincere. And what is not sincere, sincere both in purpose and sincere in *ways* of acting, cannot be Orthodox. For me proselytism starts when other means are used, instead of the Gospel, in order to gain followers.

We do not have anxiety about statistics and followers. The Orthodox *martyria* must be a free witness of what we believe and what we have. A sharing of the gift that we have received. If the others accept it, fine. If they do not accept it, it is their own responsibility. Please feel absolutely free to make any additional question, remark or objections. We are in a period when we must think in depth and must not passively accept the ideas of any speaker.

Is our mission to convert someone to Orthodoxy?

Orthodox mission consists in giving the treasure we have, and leaving the other to decide whether he will take it or not. If the other wants to join the Orthodox Church, you will never say “No”. Our aim is to transmit the tradition of the Gospel in all its fullness, remaining free from any anxiety to convert anyone. You cannot impose on anyone’s freedom. You are there, you give your witness; you are a candle, lighted by paschal joy, and if the other wishes to take from your flame, then of course, you will not refuse him.

In which place is it more difficult to conduct missionary activity, in a rich western society or in a developing country in Africa?

It depends. I do not like this phrase *more* difficult. Sometimes it is more difficult in a developing country, sometimes it is more difficult in an affluent country. It is not so easy to live in a developing country as a foreigner. It is, for instance, very difficult to live in Africa when there is no water or electricity. But still, it depends. Do not ask where it is more easy or more difficult; ask, “*Where does God ask me to be and to go?*” And the answer to this question is really a matter of personal vocation.

Very often I am asked where it is more difficult, in Africa or in Albania? I answer clearly in Albania. In Africa, it has never been forbidden to pray to God, or to dance for God; these things are taken for granted. Albania passed through a very terrible persecution for 23 years²: if you had the courage to express your faith you were sent into exile or to prison.

Sometimes we find ourselves thinking that missionary activity is reserved for the clergy only. Is this true?

It is very easy to say: 'This is for monks or priests and since I am not a monk or a priest, I do not have any obligation to do this', but this is a mistake. And here I insist on a theological understanding of mission: every person who is incorporated into the Church, into the mystical body of Christ, bears a responsibility for the Church. Every person has a vocation and of course he or she must see in his/her heart how this will be expressed and experienced.

Of course there are different ways of participating in a missionary effort. Not all of us shall leave our countries and go somewhere in Asia or in Africa. This was a western romantic vision of mission in the 19th century. Sometimes even in the old Syndesmos gatherings we had the impression that a missionary is a person that takes a cross, and goes to the forest announcing the Gospel. This is not the style of missionary work today.

To take a concrete example: Albania is a missionary field, at least for us who are not from Albania. Our excellent collaborators are not only priests, but also lay people. Our team is very small, in all—twenty people, half of it is lay people: professors, teachers, nurses, administrators, catechists, translators.

¹ Acts 1.8

² From 1967 to 1990 Albania was declared an Atheist state

For every person today there is a possibility to do missionary work. Mission is not only for priests or monks. It is for everybody. But it is also for priests and monks.

Are local cultures a help or a hindrance in mission. And how have you reacted to local cultures in your missionary experience?

This issue of culture is a very basic one. When the Gospel meets another culture, three things happen.

One part of culture clearly you have to accept—for instance, the language. Another part of culture you have to reject—that which does not agree with the Gospel. Some customs, vendettas, or other traditions that do not grant the same dignity to women, or to other members of the society.

And there is a third part, which you have to transform. I can say to “baptise”. To use it, giving it another meaning. And this was exactly what happened in the early Church. When the Gospel encountered Greek culture, it was not a simple change. Greek culture was a very complicated reality. We have to see that other cultures have their own dignity, their own interest and we must respect them.

When we started to think about Africa, it was in the beginning of the sixties. At that time, the general idea was that Africa was a very simple environment, tribal, primitive, and we had to go and bring European culture to it. Then I did some studies on this, and discovered that Africa is more complicated than we think.

My supervisor had asked me to write a thesis about African symbolism in relation to Orthodox symbolism. When I started my research, I discovered that I was dealing with several hundred African languages—not dialects—and that it was impossible to work on such a theme. Then I said to myself: “Let us be more humble. For all these centuries Africa was not outside the interest of God. How did He give them His witness? What are the African religion, African symbolism, the African way of relation with God?” I understood that it was important to study African religions carefully, that it is not accurate to speak about “primitives”. Our knowledge is primitive, but they are not “primitives”.

We have to accept our ignorance and be more humble in our attitude towards others.

We must accept the expressions of their feelings and their life and not say, 'This is not Orthodox!' What is not Orthodox? Not Orthodox is to be impure, to be dishonest, to be against the will of God, this is unorthodox. The African church is a joyful church, the Africans are cheerful people. This is a blessing, I believe, for Orthodoxy. Respect for cultures, respect for the dignity of others: this is the beginning, this is the Orthodox attitude. This respect was demonstrated in history, in the Byzantine period, when Cyrillus and Methodius went to the Slavic people. The Russian church also kept this tradition in approaching other peoples—and when they kept this respect for the dignity of others, they were successful. When we forgot it, the result of our own efforts was very poor.

Does the love of ones enemies extend to the enemies of one's faith, and how?

When Christ speaks about enemies, he speaks about persons. That does not mean, of course, that we have to accept the theory and style of life of our enemies. There are ways of thinking and acting of our enemy that I do not accept—and this is not a lack of love for him. We respect the person; we do not respect all the ideas and paraphernalia of this person. When we speak about love, we speak about love of other persons, not of other religious systems. We have to respect even our enemy as he or she is. But not, of course, to accept and copy his ideas and behaviour.

Those who have never encountered Christ, and may piously observe the rules of their own particular faith (for example, good Muslims), will they be saved?

You know that the understanding of the other faiths is an extremely important theological question: Is God present in them? I do not think that we can answer this question very quickly. Today we face two major theological problems. The first is ecclesiological, it is the complex problem of how we see the other churches. And the second is the understanding of the other religions. Of course we accept that God has providence and interest for the whole world. We do not know clearly how this presence manifests itself. We know clearly what is the *sure* way for salvation to follow. As far as others are concerned, we have the responsibility to pray and to give them our witness, but we cannot take from Him the last judgement and say now just how He would judge others. And we must be a little more humble than some of our brothers who know everything about God, behave like spokesmen of God: 'God will act like this or that'. Let us accept that we do not know the whole mystery of God, and we do not know about His infinite love.

We must develop an understanding of other religions from an Orthodox point of view. We need to see this in the Trinitarian perspective and not only the Christological. In some protestant circles it happens that they see this in Christological terms only. But in the Orthodox Church we consider that God's covenant has always extended to other peoples, to the whole creation. We also understand that the Spirit works in a freedom that we do not know.

What is the missionary task of Syndesmos, and could you give us some specific advice?

I believe that the revival we have in Orthodox mission is a fruit of the boldness of the vision of Orthodox youth. And I still believe that we are in the prehistory of the revival of Orthodox mission. We do not have real, well-organised missions. Mission means persons, studies, serious devotion. Thanks to God we are on the right path.

Let us consider some ideas that we had from the beginning of the sixties:

First, the inter-Orthodox collaboration: In our times, we should not have Greek, Russian, Rumanian and American mission—even though it is hard to have pan-Orthodox collaboration in missions. It is an idea that was born in Syndesmos. And it is not theological theory: it is an experience that we must, and *can*, give together as our witness. When we started to speak about this, it was not very successful; many countries in Eastern Europe were under strict regimes and were not free, so immediately we found difficulties.

Yet there is a first fruit of this collaboration in America. All the Orthodox, not only the Greek archdiocese, participate in the 'Orthodox Christian Missionary Centre', within the SCOBA³. We see positive results of this in Albania—we have people of a variety of origins, and the collaboration is absolutely wonderful.

The second idea was exactly what I mentioned before, that not only priests and monks are involved. I can give a few examples. Father Luke Veronis came to Africa in the beginning as a layman, after finishing his studies in mathematics and physics. Then he decided to become a priest and after some time he accompanied me to Albania with his young *presbytera*; they have two children, both born in Albania. There is also another couple: the husband is a theologian and the wife is a very capable person in the field of publications, having studied the arts. There is also a medical doctor, Charles, who left his home and came with his wife Maria, and they have five children. And recently another couple came. The lady was a successful lawyer in California, and her husband a capable architect. This team is already an answer. I do not know how long they will stay.

One can give ten years. If you don't like ten, give five, even two. There is this possibility: think about it in the future. Everybody is welcome to participate in this mission.

Another question we had during these years was finances. How shall we live on the 'front'? In the Roman Catholic Church they have special missionary orders. In the Protestant world they found their own solutions with the mission societies. In our discussions we proposed another solution. When a couple wish to go to a mission front, they can have supporters. Let us say a hundred individual supporters who, not having the possibility to go themselves to a hard place, can support those who can go. This experience is working in America. In Europe we are a little slower, we are still under the typical organised structure of the established churches and their financial systems.

Nowadays we are in a more flexible situation and we must find solutions. We mustn't say, "this is difficult, we cannot face this". It is possible to solve financial problems for Orthodox missions.

In Syndesmos think a little more about mission because I am sure that it will give a new flame, a new vision, a new vitality. Missionary responsibility has always been on the agenda of Syndesmos from the beginning. Keep it on your agenda, and think of concrete solutions.

If we are in a Christian country and a Jehovah witness knocks on our door, how should we react ? Should we close or open the door?

You talk about Jehovah witnesses, a very concrete style of people. Perhaps you know that those who go to different doors are clearly employed with a very concrete aim. I do not think that you must be impolite to anybody. You can be very polite, but since we know their methods well, I think it is not very wise to waste your time under the illusion that you will invite them inside and start a discussion with them. It depends. I do not like to give general advice for this. It depends on the persons and the country. But I think specifically for Jehovah witnesses, the most wise thing is to say, 'Thank you very much indeed', and to smile. With other people it is different, you have to enter into dialogue. But I do not think that Jehovah

³ Standing Council of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America

witnesses have much interest in dialogue. They know some verses from the Bible by heart, and they switch on their internal microphone and they speak. Their idea is not really to engage in dialogue. But it is not necessary to be impolite to anybody.

If you enter into dialogue with atheists, you will be affected by their views. What is your opinion about the dangers or not to our faith? What influence does this bear on our missionary attitude?

I can say clearly: yes, there is a danger. But even to live, to go by car, there is a danger. There is an element of danger in everything. What does that mean? Of course you must be careful, and above all, be clear in the following: Missionary duty and endeavours means to learn more and more everyday about Christ, about this God in whom we believe, to know our faith more deeply. It means to love Him more: only when you love Christ you feel secure. It also means to serve Him more humbly, because only when you are humble you have the grace of God.

When Christ sends us, he does not send us into a secure environment. He even said to his apostles that they would go to places where there will be snakes and scorpions. But he added, *“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”*⁴ I do not believe in this style of Orthodox security: that in order to be secure, we stay at home, in our churches under our *ieronda*, whom we ask on our mobile telephones: *“What do I have to do?”*

I believe that we have to be vigilant, and have this spirit of repentance and longing for Christ more deeply every day, and everyday to say: “Lord, deliver me from myself, and give me to yourself”. And only in this spirit you can go. If you go with the arrogant conviction that you are pious, you are lost.

In summary, I would like to remind you that when Christ gave to his disciples the last commandment in the three last verses of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, his first statement was: *“Every authority has been given to me in Heaven and on the Earth”* (Mt 28, 18). He is not simply a man amongst many. He is the one with ultimate authority. It is not the politicians or the wealthy who have authority, it is He. We must believe, and when I say to believe, I mean to have confidence, not only in our mind, but with all our senses.

His second statement: Go, don't stay in your beautiful Jerusalem, go! (Mt 28, 19)

And His third statement, about security: What do you want - that a bank of the Holy Spirit or a powerful State pay for you? No, *leave, and*, [the *and* is important] *I shall be with you until the end*” (Mt 28, 20). It is enough. Go, and I shall be with you. I shall not be with you in order for you to have mystical visions, I shall be with you in your mission, in your way.

Sometimes, even in our church life, we forget this, and we must rediscover this dimension within our own church. In the sixties, on my appointment to the newly created desk for Orthodox missions at the World Council of Churches, Metropolitan Nicodim of Leningrad⁵ approached me and said: “Fr Anastasios, you know we are not so much interested in mission. We are more interested in social issues of the WCC. But since we love you and we have confidence in you, we shall vote for you”. Thirty years later, the council of Orthodox bishops of the Russian Church discovered that mission is a first priority. And this is what I

⁴ Matt 14:7; 17:7

⁵ Met. Nicodim was then President of the External relations department of the Russian Orthodox Church

would like to emphasise for you. It is a first priority for the whole Orthodox Church. That does not mean to leave our local obligations, but it means, I repeat, to be at the same time local in your effort, and to have in your spirit a world-wide and eschatological perspective.

To conclude: Somebody once asked me: How did you decide to go? It was at the beginning of Syndesmos discussions in 60-63. I remember it was very much a period of dilemmas for me. Shall I leave my country which I love so much and where I have so many friends and people that I like and who like me? To go where? To Africa ?

Then in the Christmas period, during a long retreat in Patmos, a critical answer came with one question. Is God enough for you? If God is enough, go. If God is not enough for you, stay where you are, you will have more safety. But then came the answer with a second question. "If God is not enough for you, then who exactly is the God whom you believe in and in whom you have your confidence and to whom you give your life?" These two phrases were the key for the beginning of my missionary endeavour. And always, in all difficulties, the same question arose: "*Is God enough for you? If He is, continue, if He is not enough for you, go back*". It is an adventure; but I believe that the most important thing is that it is an adventure of love. It is the adventure of faith, of joy, and an adventure of hope. We have to accept danger, as there is no adventure without danger. And Syndesmos must always be a movement of love, and faith and joy and adventure. Do not lose this dimension.