

Being Orthodox In The City of The 21st century

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There is this story in "Γεροντικο" ("Γεροντικο" is a collection of little stories and sayings of monks of the desert during the first centuries of Christianity): a group of visitors having strenuously worked, approached a venerable father with great joy, they sat by him and started asking him about theology, about the mystery of the Holy Trinity, about the Kingdom of Heaven. He had bowed and remained silent. The visitors were disappointed. The acolyte approached him and said: "Too pity they have worked for so long. Say something to them". "What shall I tell them?" he replied. "I don't know any answers for their questions, for these are of the saints". So the acolyte meets the strangers and tells them: "He cannot talk about them. Ask him about sins, passions and spiritual struggle". And when they asked him about these, he raised his head and white the shining face started talking with them.

You know, the theologians, the preachers and generally all who take over the transfer of the word of God to the people, submit many times in two mistakes. First of all, as the tradition of the Church is full of words and meanings, it is easy to create an irresistible attraction of verbal intellectual structures. At the same time, the efforts and the blood spent to express – as much as possible – the mysteries, are forgotten. The second mistake is that they neglect the connections and the agony of their audience. I guess, the most of the times they neglect their own self. What is heard is not of them. They speak as if they don't exist and they address themselves to strangers and non-existed too.

Combine these two mistakes and you have the ideal form of a boring speech. It is an experience I have tasted many times even within SYNDESMOS. So I decided not to be a cause for you to suffer. I shall not hide myself behind complicated theological terms, not because I don't consider them valid, but because these terms appeared to answer people's questions; and I am afraid that nowadays the questions of the people are not heard¹. So the language of the Church is possibly impressive but I am not sure if it comforts enough. You have to know that a great temptation of a speaker is to appear impressive. How can I be likened to my audience? The majority of the speakers as well as the majority of the rest of the people, learn to hide, moreover, they may be ashamed of their emotions, of their dreams, fears and necessities. So, what is it to remain when everything personal is locked in a cellar? The answer is that what remains is the objective language of the intellectual analysis as well as the scientific logic. This language provides security and in fact it is questioned very difficultly. Today I have decided to take a risk, that is to let go the secure shelter of the theologian analyser and to talk as a man of the 20th century who struggles, surrounded by fears as well as hopes. On the gravestone of a very charming and multi-doubted author, Nikos Kazantzakis, is written: "I fear nothing, I hope nothing, therefore I am free". It sounds very Christian but unfortunately I'm not free yet. Nevertheless I believe in something crazy, in a miracle; that my very personal elements can be proved more ecumenical than any objective language.

When I read the theme of the proposed speech "Being Orthodox in a city today", I did not focus from the beginning on the word "Orthodox" but on the word "city". I don't know if the English term expresses the full dimensions of the Greek word "polis". I had decided to continuously use the word "polis" but I was afraid that maybe this would bring you the term "police" and you may identify the "polis" only with law and order. So, from now on I will be using the double term "city-polis".

An ancient Greek poet under the name Alkaios said: "The city-polis has houses and walls but without people this cannot be called a city". Also Plato in his famous work "Politeia" does not describe buildings but social structures, human behaviour and relationships. A city-polis is a network of relationships. A city-polis architecturally reveals, pictures, given shape to the beliefs and to the way the inhabitants are related with each other. The construction of law houses in a circular arrangement and with a view to a common open-air reveals a totally different kind of human relationships than a block of flats. The city of Constantinople which has from all its sides visible the dome of Agia Sophia believes in a different God than the city-polis of New York, which sees from all its sides the Empire State Building. So the citizen-politis is not a mere inhabitant but a ring in a chain of relationships with the fellow-man, the space and God. What unites the citizens and wakes them to be interested in their city are the common interest, the common fear and the common hope. The indifferent citizen is the private individual (in Greek "idiotis") and very successfully the English language borrows from the Greek word (idiotis) and creates the word "idiot" which describes not the mentally incapable but the socially inadapted persons. Citizens create a different kind of city than the private individuals. In every case, nevertheless, city-polis is the soul of its inhabitants in action. And this action is the most powerful truth. The possibilities and the intentions are true themselves as well. But the human history of men's cities. This history is the human civilisation. As Christ says, the tree is to be validated by its fruits, so the people are to be validated by the created civilisation.

So, you see that "reading" the modern cities, we literally read the human souls in their activities and relationships. Pay attention to something: relating is not a human activity between others; it is the only way for man to exist. When Aristotle and later Saint Basil the Great characterised man as a political animal, they meant that relating is the only way of human existence. From the Orthodox point of view, as well, we are creations of a Trinitarian God, of a God of relationship between three persons. We don't know what God is; we know with which way He is related. This is what we mean when we say: "God is love". The same applies to the man, whose identity is the way of relating.

Christ Himself is the SYNDESMOS, the link, the relationship between God and humanity. Accordingly, this Church is the response of God in the human agony through history. A Christian is never a private individual, he is never an idiot. Mainly and above all (he) is a citizen-politis of this world. As such a citizen I am to read the city where I live. I believe that I am reading in a great amount your cities as well. I'm touching three pillars:

a. Money

The streets of the city do not lead anymore to a temple but they do lead to the commercial centre. You are what you have. Your identity is defined from the products you use. Success means the possibility to consume. The modern oracle of Delphi, the modern centre, the modern omphalos of the city is the stock exchange. The successful citizen is afraid of the poverty. The poor is non-existent.

b. Power

The man of the city is struggling for his promotion. The higher he climbs to the hierarchy of the society, the more his life conditions change. The assistant and the director live and work in different places. The higher he is in the rank of hierarchy, the higher his office is in the skyscraper of the company. It is not enough to be very rich. You have to be in the centre of the decision-making, to be someone. The successful citizen of the city of the 20 century is

directing, is moving the strings. If he is out of the centre of the decision-making, he does not exist.

c. Public relationships

The term is misleading. The term "relation" with the term public relations is so similar as if we were to compare love with prostitution. There are people who can sell their soul for a few moments of appearance in TV. The man of the public relationships literally is sold to anyone who offers him some minutes of publicity. It doesn't matter how much you have, whatever position you have got, you are nothing if you are not famous. The man of the public relations prefers to be sworn rather to be unknown. He is scared to death of the anonymity.

You don't have to try hard to match these three factors with the three temptations in the desert Christ had to face when the Devil calls Jesus to become the King of this world. You will not meet any difficulty as well if you wish to see that what pervades man and the 20th century city like the blood running in the whole human body, is fear. The fear that what has been set as a destination that he believes that gives life a meaning, might not work out.

To possess, to rule and been praised. From the moment that the Temptation persuades man that that is the way God asks, then man needs fear; fear that maybe the promise "to be like God" might not come true. God does not mean any more the source of donation but the source of power. The temptation, from within the branches of the tree of the city of Paradise, does not simply suggest another image about God. In the same time it projects another way of relationship with man and things; a new morality. Because this is what morality is about: coordination of your existence with the God you believe.

The god of the city of the 20th century is full-powered, and that is why the failure is a sin. The poor, the passed-over and the anonym are not simply the failures, they are sinners. The citizen of the 20th century has as his hell the other person and everything alive, I mean the nature, the animals, the flowers. Because everything that lives is calling for a relationship. The citizen, on the other hand, is afraid of the relationship, because his gods do not relate; they bring under, they subordinate. But, above all, the citizen of the 20th century is fighting with and afraid of death. He wants to forget it and he wants to get used to it. He hates it and is afraid of it, because he cannot coordinate his wished full-power with his grave. But ... but ... every hour, every moment the limits of the human existence are here. And these limits are experienced by pain. We come into life with pain, we live with pain and we die with pain. The advertisements on the streets of the cities talk about a life without pain.

But pain is always here. And it is not here only when we are in pain. It is also here even (when) we are afraid of the pain, because we know that sooner or later, it always comes, and when it comes (it) is double. It is not only that we are in pain; it is that the model of Superman collapses as well. It is the guilt of the failure to look like our Super-god. We are in double pain, as our god is in no way related to us. Alone we carry on our backs the fear, the pain and the guilt. God in our cities does not have a body, he is over the emotion and over the desire. He is far away from our corruption.

His existence taught us to be ashamed for our body, for our emotions and for our desires. From the very first class of the preliminary school, we learn to put all of them under control, instead of expressing them. And this is because their expression would mean invitation for communication, invitation for relationship. Before someone shout "I need you", he has to

accept his imperfection. So, the last consolation of the man, like the leaves of the fig-tree Adam and Eve wore in Paradise, is the possibility of controlling everything.

The human dream is to create a city perfect in structure and order. If there is a God, (He) is a God of order. Everything must be measured and calculated. This kind of action is the last shelter from the shame of weakness. This shame makes the psychotherapists rich and this shame gives birth to the famous pill "Viagra". The one that has fallen in love, the one that is thirsty not only for acceptance but for offering also, does not need a pill. It is wanted by the ruler, the one considers himself greater than the corruption of the body. This superiority complex makes the world so small as to where my shadow ends and the time so concentrated as the duration of a lifetime. This complex cannot create a city of relationships, because such a city is made only when the individual limits are crossed over.

A contemporary Greek writer, inspired by the fall of Constantinople, writes:

"When the enemy invades a city, that time must be horrible. It is a time of a great misery. A city – our city – is built, is decorated, is beloved by us. In there exist our home, the graves of our fathers, the footprints of all our beloved persons. In there, by a hard work of our hands and our hearts, we have traced and open the streets on which we hope our children will walk on. We are interested less for our lives and more for the life of our city. There is not a single stone without a sacred meaning, there is not a single corner non-combined with some memory, there is not a point in the horizon which has discovered out of our city. Everything we have is in our city. And suddenly the enemy is invading. The hordes of some strangers, some irreverents, some barbarians are invading our city. Under which right invade a foreign city without feeling any love and any compassion for it? Only love and compassion give us the right to consider something as ours".

The man of the end of our century denies the pain, that's why he does not have a city, does not have a home. What John Lennon was imagining with his song "Imagine" – "not having to die for something" – it is now a fact. There are no cities anymore, because there is not a purpose which crosses over the individuality. Since the only sure thing is die death, why not the politician to lie, why not the policeman be corrupted, why not the tax collector to make money immorally, why not the teacher to be indifferent, why not everything, even the buildings of our city, to be demolished? Where a purpose, stronger than death can be derived from? Even the old fashion ideologies have been collapsed. These ideologies, even as mental structures could give a cause to die for the battle or to stand still in front of the firing squad. Now you don't have the possibility not even the time to be taught from a tree in a city, a tree that grows and fades, calm and quiet that has accomplished its purpose. Who can teach us to live for a purpose? The cements do not flourish. That's why the "home sweet home" is now a "home bitter home".

Now you see the meaning of Saint Paul's words. "We do not have here a permanent city but we are looking forward for the oncoming one". For St. Paul we do not compromise with "now". We live in the "now" but we are thirsty for something else. And we don't only feel thirsty, but we also struggle to taste it. But I hope it is obvious now that we are not looking for another place but for another way of life. The changing of the place, that is to go away from this evil world is approved only if it is prophetic. Leaving, as the Church understands it, is never a purpose, it is a prophecy. By saying "prophetic" we mean an action, which reveals an inner attitude, indeed a conflict with whatever is considered by the world normal, logically correct.

You remember, John the Baptist, who leaves to the desert, like Christ, like all the prophets of the Old Testament. For the world, the desert is a dead place. But for those who preferred it, it is a place of exciting events. The desert is the contestation, the turning over of the city, the looking for the purpose. When the noise is stopped, then the echo of the battle between God and Temptation can be heard. This prophetic dimension, and the sound of this battle are the things that Orthodox monasticism wants to keep alive. Nikos Nissiotis, one of the co-founders of SYNDESMOS, used to say that the monks show by their finger the city of angels. Remember the three fundamental principles of monasticism and compare them with the fundamental principles of the world of today.

a) *Indigence*, which means to have but not to possess. That is freedom from the property. Not simply from money but from the human tendency to consume food, things, feelings, the nature itself, as man feels that his existence finishes.

b) *Obedience*, which means that my activities do not return to me. To obey, which means that I place the point of reference out of myself. To obey which means to recognise my limits. That is freedom from self-deification. To obey is the response to the begging of the human glory. A prayer at Great Lent, after seeking for protection by God from several things, ends like this: “And finally Lord, protect me from the bitter glory of men”.

c) *Virginity*. A very crucial and very interesting subject. Virginity is to relate and at the same time to remain undivided. To be given and not to be wasted. To be fruited by my relationships and, at the same time, fresh as if I was born right now. Virginity is the freedom from the disintegration.

Freedom, freedom, freedom. Only the free person discovers his relationship with the God of love and only love can throw out the fear. These are the three – let’s say – pillars of wisdom according to the Orthodox tradition and practice. But pay attention to a paradoxical eventuality. Even these, even the Church itself is under the danger of being consumed.

I, who I am talking to you now and you, who are listening, we are all in danger from the Temptation. I have talked to you about it in the beginning of my speech. The others and we, the evil world and our magnificent Orthodoxy, the sinned cities and the holy monasteries. This Temptation of self-reliance made Peter to ask from Christ in Metamorfosis – Transfiguration – to make 3 tents on the mountain and not to get down to the world again. This self-reliance fills many eyes of clergy and laymen with condemnation, self-indulgence or pity for the world. This attitude reveals a misunderstanding.

All the ideologies create an utopia and they try to make it real. They visualise structures, norms, new mechanisms and new social systems. People have struggled and people have died for these utopias. And these fights are sacred. They were fights for the substitution of this world with another better one. The fight, the effort of the Church was and always will be for a Transfiguration of this world. An Orthodox is not only someone who preserves the true faith about the world. True and right is whatever God Himself believes about the world. And God trusts this world, hopes for this world, loves this world and shows that it is worth while sacrificing for it Christ is praying to his God father about whom who has chosen not to take them away from the world but to protect them from the Evil. With His entrance in the human history and His sacrifice, He shows that he does not despise the works of His hands and that He still recognises His seal on them. All the human desires in the history for a better world are expressions of this Holy Seal. That is why before I characterised the fights for freedom, equality, brotherhood, as sacred. Man is created to live outside the limits of his individuality. He is created more powerful than death. (Near my house I usually see races with motorbikes.

The speed is very high. Sometimes I think that there is not even one creature in the Creation, which provokes so consciously the Death and plays with Death. It looks as if man refuses to see Death as full-powered.)

I would like to remind you the 2 commands God gave to Man, when He delivered him the Paradise. The first is to *work*, that is to produce deeds, to act. So man does not get something ready, but something that he undertakes to shape, to lead it somewhere, to a purpose that exists in the Creation, like the tree pre-exists as the purpose of the seed. Saint Maximos says that God assigns to man to transform the whole universe to Paradise. But there is also a second verb: “*guarding*”. And the question is: guarding from what? What endangers this path? And the answer is one: There is a danger that the purpose of the human history which exceeds the borders of the Creation might be forgotten.

If the purpose of the history is imprisoned within the corruptivity of the Creation, the Death is stronger than the vision. In the original sin in Paradise, man gives the keys of the human history to the lord of self-deification, self-sufficiency. His dynamism is now convicted to be wasted between the walls of corruption. Any struggle for freedom, for equality, for brotherhood, any vision for a better world, the love, are signs of their heavenly origin, that is why I called them sacred. But every dream, every ideal that is been realised the same time dies while it is baptised in the baptistry of corruption. Maybe that is why the world has stopped dreaming. Probably the world can not stand any more deaths.

I will remind you of a strange piece of the Gospel: “The Kingdom of Heaven has been coming violently and men of violence take it by force.” (Mat. 11:12) You are familiar with the negative side of violence. You can meet it on the big streets of the cities where we live. It is the intervention without justice and logic against our freedom and our integrity. Nevertheless, in this verse, violence seems to be the heaven power of man for moving himself and the history towards their purpose and protecting this purpose from any danger of immobility. Violence brings about the struggle against captivity of corruption. Remember for a while the gates of Hell in the icon of Resurrection. This icon hides within an intense violence but a redemptive violence as well.

I told you before that monasticism is a prophetic action, an action that clearly reveals the way with which the transforming city, that St. Paul awaits, works. This kind of monasticism, as the Orthodox tradition understands it, is a city of violence. A harder and bloodier violence than the worst war. Because every war, every revolution is against human enemies, against flesh and blood, as St. Paul writes.

But history is full of tyrants, ex-revolutionists. History is full of bevel gears of the system, ex-resistants. Just remember which were the visions of the Resistance here in France and in Greece as well and generally in all Europe and see Europe of today and the kind of society which is shaped. Sacred is the wish of man to activate his deepest powers at his existence, but in the eyes of the Temptation, as we have met him at his 3 assaults against Christ in the desert, all these struggles, these efforts, look like simple rearrangements in the cage of the human capture. The Orthodox monasticism shows the way out from this cage. Because it clearly declares the war against the only enemy of the human race: the evil vanity and evil self-deification.

I am going to say this again: monasticism is not the alternative solution of Christianity about the social problem; it is the image of the world we live in, in its authentic function. It is good

to remember that as an institution, monasticism was created when the church stated to face a danger of being alloyed by the world when the world tried to make the Church part of itself, that is to secularise it. You must by no means read the Epistle to Diognetes to realise what was in danger to become lost and what is the meaning of the image of the Christians as the salt of the world.

Because this world is one and only. There is no emergency exit. There are no far-away paradises to escape to. This world is the future kingdom of God. The people around us are its future citizens. Look at the world around you. It is created very well, as Genesis book says. Look at the people. They are wonderful, they are the images of God. The divine prototype, our prototype, has united the creation and included then in a Universal harmony in such a way, the people, His images, transform the planet into a universal city.

In such a way, the people, His images, transform the planet into a universal city. In Tokyo you have a decline in yen in the Stock Exchange, and there is panic in Athens. Our heavenly prototype is acting. Christ reveals the face of a god, who comes out of the altitude of his individuality and starts relating. So the people, His images, act, go on, transform, designate. They make history, they do not stand the stability. Feel it. God became a man, wore *this* flesh and “dived” in *this* history to show us that the game is played in *here* and *now*. Every fight for freedom is a proof of the existence of the God’s breath in ourself.

Tito Hollander writes in his book “The Way of The Ascetics”: “World is whatever does not know God yet”. In other words, world is a child of a forgotten father and adopted by a being of disintegration and misery, by a being incapable for relationship. The Devil is like that, so is his hell. Remember the stories of the desert. A monk asks a skull in the desert “What were you?” It answers “A priest of the idols”. “Where are you?” “I am tortured in hell”. “How are things there?” “We are tied with our backs facing one another’s and we can not see the face of the other person tied to us”. This is the city of the 20th century. A city full of strange “others”. Every other person is our hell. We desire to meet the others and we don’t know the way. The world is not bad. It is a world disintegrated between its specifications and its decisions. In the movie “The Lion King”, the young Simba chooses to live singing “Akuna Matata” which means no worries for the rest of your days. With the interference of old Rafiki (who has many characteristics of a monk) he hears his father Mootasha, who is dead, saying “Remember who you are”. Wonderful phrase: “Remember who you are”.

Christ is not only the revealing of God to the people. He is also the appearance of a true human. And above all the Creator God if the man is a God of love. By the term “love” everyone can mean anything, but for us Christians the meaning is given by God’s behaviour himself. We believe in a God comate in the human pain, in the human passion. We believe in a God of compassion. Apostle Paul uses the term “*graftage*”. He says: (Rom 11:17) “You, being a wild olive tree and grafted and you partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree”.

The graftage is a very familiar operation to the farmers. They stick a tame branch to a wild tree and by a while the whole tree tames. But for this to succeed two wounded branches, two painful branches must come together. A wound can’t be joined only with another wound. For ages the humanity is in pain. We know that doctors consider the physical pain a blessing. It is a message of the body for a malfunction. A message that the biological borders have been crossed. The physical pain can give us a relevant picture of everyday pain, in all its kinds. If it was not there in Paradise, it is the most precious gift that man took on leaving. We have been taught to consider it as a curse that with pain we will be born, but we forget that this pain is

our shield against the lie of the Devil about our sufficiency. The pain is to remind us about our limits. The pain is that which crashes the picture of God man has for himself.

For centuries the humanity is bleeding and keeps on bleeding day by day. And this river of blood ends to the grave. But on the Cross, the open wounds of the world were combined with Christ's open wounds. The kind of love Christ has taught us, is a love of open wounds, a bleeding love. Only this love can beat Death. This love empties the graves. This kind of love is the only stable size in human history. From it, the laws, the prophecies, the ideologies and the political visions are hanging. This love defines the quality of the cities, of the policy, of the civilisations but also the quality of every parish, every diocese, every jurisdiction, of the whole monasticism, of the whole Church. Anything else doesn't seem to be the Church but a school of compassion for the world but also for ourselves. The command "love your neighbour like yourself" shows that the greatest obstacle of love is the rejection of ourselves. That is why the fast, the prayer, the obedience, the indigence, the virginity, the theology have a meaning only as exercises of approval of our limits; approval of the fact that we are not Gods. Outside this dimension, all these are walls that separate us from the world. By using them, however, as ways of accepting our weakness and imperfection, we can fully realise why the Holy Eucharist – that means "Holy Thanksgiving" – is the final stage of the spiritual life. Actually there is only one kind of prayer: the very common but also very comprehensive "Thank God". The only natural situation of the human being seems to be the absolute gratitude. During the Holy Liturgy around a common table we receive love as a divine gift and not as our achievement. At the same moment we can perceive also ourselves as a gift for the whole world. Only then there is a serious reason to speak all the languages of men and angels to possess the whole knowledge even to burn our bodies, as Saint Paul says.

Love is the only reason and as a gift from Heaven is placed above any human law and morality; still, it is the only source of morality and whatever comes only from this love can heal wounds. The time we receive Holy Communion, the Christ's body and blood, secretly we receive the body and blood of a bleeding humanity. Realising that, the only dream somebody can have for himself is to be an open road for passing to the world the God's action. That is why the Virgin Mary is for the Orthodox Church a key-person. It is she, who gives God space to put on flesh and enter the human history. In many icons she shows little Christ holding on her knees like saying: "Let Him act in your lives". This "permission" is the essence of Orthodox Tradition.

Recently I read the remark of a famous theologian that in none of the icons of the Resurrection we see Christ laughing or having a triumphal expression as it happens in many western icons. And this is because He will be in pain until the end of the human history, for as long as there will be human pain. The time we walk on the streets of our cities, wearing this small cross underneath our clothes, we carry about the open wounds of Jesus as well as ours, which ask to be joined with the world's wounds. This is to me the only way of existence of an Orthodox person in a contemporary city. It also looks to me that this small cross overturns the most inhuman system more successfully than the bomb of the most activist terrorist ⁱⁱ. Without the compassion of the Cross, every form of Christian life, either a parish or patriarchate or even SYNDESMOS itself, simply serves the system and many times offers it a beautiful alibi of its inhumanity.

I would like to thank you not only because you have listened to me, but also because you were a cause for a personal evolution. I wish I was a cause for you to make a tiny step forward on

your trip. If I have not succeeded in it, I give myself one more chance: A while before going away for this trip, my little son fell on some stones. So he came towards me and raised towards me his wounded hands, being sure that the pain will disappear as soon as I kiss them. Just imagine for a moment this scene. Believe me, better depiction of the most natural, most authentic, most ideal attitude of the humanity towards God I have not to give you.

Thank you.

ⁱ from us, supposed being inside the Church

ⁱⁱ Note of the transcriber: Mind you, this text is written prior to Sept 11, 2001!