

The Apostolic responsibility and worldwide dimension of the Orthodoxy

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The 3rd Christian millennium dawns with humanity accelerating toward greater global interdependence. Every search for peace, truth, human rights and justice take on worldwide dimensions. Science, economy, mass media, sports, and art develop within a sphere that embraces the entire human race. The most critical challenge in the world today, however, is how we can move from a community of mere interdependence, to a community of mutual confidence and love. On the personal level, existential problems continue to affect all people deeply. It is obvious that despite all their astonishing developments, technology and science cannot fully satisfy humankind. In the final analysis, the greatest problems facing an people continue to be religious in nature.

The followers of Christ, the "Supreme-Man," who believe that love conquers all, can play a decisive role in this Universal quest. We Orthodox, whose faith and identity as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church have remained intact, have a particular responsibility and mission.

A

I. Religious plurality, which offers different responses to our religious quest, is one of the most important phenomena in today, s world. Worldwide statistics regarding religious adherence, despite their great relativity, shed an important light on our problem. Over the past decade, Christians comprised approximately 32.9% of the world population, Muslims 17.06%, Hindus 13.15%, Buddhists 6.24%, believers of old, traditional religions 1.97%, followers of new religions 2.22%, those who call themselves atheists 4.48%, and those considered agnostics 16.23%.

In the 20th century, those labelled as "atheists" increased dramatically 1.000 times, while agnostics grew 273 times. Of course, I repeat that one could question religious statistics. As an indication, however, these numbers should be carefully considered. Even though it is not the proper time to proceed with further statistical analysis and interpretation, let us say that these impressive growth statistics are due to various factors, including the vast difference in birth rates between Muslims and Christians peoples; the high birth rate in most African and Asiatic countries, which are usually non-Christian; the influence of atheistic regimes; and the growth of secularisation in several areas of the traditionally Christian northern hemisphere.

The religious quest certainly has not lost its influence, and even continues to shape the lives of many societies. In the economically developed countries, however, religion has generally withdrawn into the sphere of the individual. The main challenge facing missions at the start of the 21st century is secularisation, and how to hold a loving dialogue with our secular neighbour who lives with us, but does not belong to any organized anti-religious community.

The fact that we Christians make up a minority (32.9% of the total population) does not diminish the importance of our role. Enlightened minorities usually have brought about social renewal and progress. Of course, the question is to what extent do Christian communities form inspired and creative minorities within today's universal quest? Or do our communities lose their power, and even their own identity and message, as they attempt to compromise with the dominating, contemporary views?

2. In our journey toward universal interdependence, we Orthodox have no reason to be surprised by this worldwide development. Our Church unceasingly and doxologically repeats that, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein" (ps. 24:1). We have been praying for centuries in the Divine Liturgy, "For the peace of the whole world, " while saying immediately after sanctifying the precious gifts) "We offer you this spiritual worship for the whole world" (Liturgy of St John Chrysostom).

Our ecclesial self-awareness is based precisely on the faith that God, the Father of glory, has established the resurrected Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills an in an" (Eph. 1:21- 23). The key-word, repeated in the letter to the Ephesians as well as in St Paul' s other prison epistles, which sums up the framework and vision of the Church, is "*ta panta*" ("an things").

The Church should radiate and offer all that she possesses for the sake of the entire world, transforming *ta panta*. The whole world, and all creation -not only humankind, but even the entire universe - are called to participate with the Church in the restoration which was accomplished through the work of Christ, and to rediscover its destination of glorifying God. Orthodox prayer, spirituality , and ascetic struggle aspire resolutely toward this eschatological vision.

A saint of our times, Silouan of Mt. Athos, summarized this ecclesial conscience when he prayed, "O Lord, allow all peoples on earth to come to know your love... and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit, in order to forget the suffering on earth, to give up all evil, to attach themselves to You with love, and to live in peace, doing Your will for Your glory."

3. The Orthodox Church is called to give its apostolic witness within five basic fields, each of which presents a unique milieu, in the modern context:

a) The former communist, atheistic societies, where ignorance of the Christian faith remains great.

b) The secularized societies of Western Europe and North America, where confusion about religion increases.

c) The traditional cradle of the Eastern Churches, inside predominantly Muslim societies.

d) The composite environments of the developing world -mainly in Africa and Asia - where new and important Orthodox openings have been created during the last decades.

e) The fifth field is the contemporary ecumenical Christian search, to which we Orthodox offer a theological, liturgical, and ecclesiological presence which contributes to the development of the modern Christian world. The results of this witness are immense on the entire Christian mission, and have helped western Christians revise their spiritual attitude. This field also includes encounters with people of other faiths.

In order to remain faithful to the Church 's apostolic responsibility and worldwide dimension, we Orthodox ought to give a united witness on all fronts, with prophetic boldness, ascetic vigilance and martyr-like courage. We must faithfully obey the resurrected Lord's last commandment just before his ascension, as recorded by the apostle and evangelist Luke: " And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Based on my half-century of experience within the Church, beginning with my years as a student and continuing through my years as a professor and clergyman, I can say that the main obstacle to fulfilling this commandment lies in the words, "to the ends of the earth." It is precisely, here that I would like to focus your attention for the second part of my speech.

B

More than 40 years have passed since the revival in missionary awareness began within the modern Orthodox Church. During this long 40-year period of effort and struggle, the greatest obstacle to developing a worldwide mission could be summarized in the proverb, "When your courtyard is thirsty, do not pour water outside." This simple phrase, whispered as a breeze of cold logic, extinguished that initial spark in many hearts. And today, many clergymen and lay people continue to repeat it.

This misguided logic keeps our communities absorbed in their own needs, allowing them to forget to live the apostolic responsibility of Orthodoxy in its worldwide dimension. In order to fix this attitude, which was and continues to be strongly-ingrained in the Orthodox sub-conscience, it was necessary to develop a biblical, liturgical and historical apology .I want to summarize five fundamental theological points which express the authentic Orthodox attitude towards missions.

1. Nowhere in the Holy Bible can one find the phrase, "When your courtyard is thirsty, do not pour water outside." On the contrary, the gospel text we hear at the moment of our incorporation within the Church –our baptism- proclaims, " All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go forth and make disciples of all nations..." (Mt 28:18-19). This is a clear commandment that Christ gave to his disciples, and to all members of his Church. If the first Christians hadn't obeyed, no Christian world would exist today. Christianity would have remained an unimportant Jewish heresy, if it had survived at all. The commandment to "Go forth" is a consequence of the commandment of loves in its authentic, worldwide dimension. Of course, obedience to this commandment presents many difficulties, including the loss of any kind of security. But should a commandment be less obligatory because it presents difficulties? Is it easy for someone to be humble, chaste, or to forgive and love one's enemies? And dare we lay aside Christ's commandments simply because difficulties? With such an argument, the entire gospel would be pushed aside.

The most fundamental prayer which our Lord put on our lips, and which we repeat many times a day, is: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." According to St John Chrysostom's commentary: "He did not say, "Thy will be done in me or in us, but all over the earth." In order for His Kingdom to come and for His Will to be fulfilled all over the earth, all members of his Body, that is the Church must participate...

2. Orthodox liturgical life moves firmly around the Incarnation of the Word, but mainly around the feasts of Easter and Pentecost. Easter is not simply the climax of our festal cycle, but it penetrates our entire Orthodox of worship and ethos. Every Sunday we live anew the event of the Resurrection and praise it with a joyful spirit. The commandment mentioned previously is closely related to the resurrection of the Lord. " All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore..." For this reason, preach to "all nations..." and all creation. Before the resurrection and fulfilment of His salvific work, the Lord did not allow his disciples to pass the frontiers of Israel. He commanded them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles" (Mt 10:5), because the disciples still did not know the mystery of His passion and resurrection, through which He redeemed all things. After his Resurrection, however, He no longer confined their preaching to the old frontiers.

The Resurrection formed the starting point for extending the disciples' mission from Israel to the entire globe. Those who continue to move only within the limits of even the new Israel of grace, the Christian Church, act as if they live in the days before the Resurrection.

Such people live before Pentecost, as well. The descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost broke all ethnic and linguistic barriers, and extended the horizon of Christian preaching beyond any one country, like Judea, or, beyond any other Christian place today. It extended it to the entire, world. The gift of languages is given so that the Word of God can come to all peoples. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not offered to the early Church as a gift for individuals, but for the sake of the entire ecumene, all creation. The fact of Pentecost continuously emphasizes the universal character of the Church.

It is a shocking contradiction, therefore, when we Orthodox insist that we are pre-eminently the Church of Pentecost, on the one hand, yet remain enclosed within our circles of fear and reluctance to enact our global, apostolic responsibility, adopting instead a provincial

mentality .How could a Church truly be Orthodox if it denies in practice the most immediate consequences of the Resurrection and Pentecost?

3. We speak much about Orthodox spirituality. Unfortunately, we often forget that this spirituality is inseparably linked with the worldwide, apostolic experience. Christian spirituality loses its genuineness when these elements of apostolicity and universality are missing. The theology, which gave birth to Orthodox spirituality, came from the mission field. The New Testament, which forms the standard sure and clear foundation of Orthodox spirituality, is a missionary book written by apostles within a very clear missionary framework.

The central aim of the spiritual life remains the words of our Lord, "Abide in me, and I in you. ...If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (Jn 15:4, 10). To live in Christ means to think, to feel, and to will like Him. It implies having "the mind of Christ" and "the affection of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16) (*splaghna*, Phil. 1:8). And yet, how does the Lord see the world? Obviously, we cannot limit His interest to one city, one nation, or even the so-called Christian world. Does He not "desire that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth?" (1 Tim 2:4) He does not remain indifferent to the billions of people who live "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2: 12). Thus, what type of Orthodox spirituality can flourish without this desire, this sense of responsibility for the life of the world?

St. Paul 's spirituality can be summed up in his words, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). His mission was a steadfast, inner requirement, "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). He felt "under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (Rom 1:14). He was under obligation to offer the priceless gift he had received, the living experience of the resurrected Lord.

Orthodox mysticism did not isolate man from the ecclesial community and any historical sensitivity .For example, the prayer of the heart focuses on the name of the incarnate Word of God. It brings Christ, "who invested the entire Adam," (Ode 3 in the Canon of the Transfiguration) to the depth of the heart, according to the measure it has been grafted into the mystical Body of Christ through baptism and the holy Eucharist. The Orthodox mystical experience, saturated with Biblical thought, keeps an intense and worldwide sense of history. Renowned representatives of this experience, such as St. Gregory Palamas, lived this combination in the most creative way - with deep theological thought, asceticism, defence of dogmatic truths, struggle for social justice, and edification of Christ's people. St. Gregory did not even hesitate to interact with Muslims, leaving one of the most beautiful initial texts of Islamic-Christian dialogue. The experience of universal Christian salvation, and the Church 's obligation to share this with every human being, remains the centre and criterion of orthodox spirituality, this, according to many centuries of Orthodox tradition.

4. "Yes, but, what can we say about the many internal problems our Church faced?", many Orthodox insist; Let us briefly recall that when the apostles Peter, Paul and Andrew came o Europe, the troubles of the Church in Jerusalem and Palestine remained unsolved; In

the 9th century, as well, when the Thessalonian brothers, Sts Cyril and Methodios, were making their way to the Slavic peoples, the Byzantine Church faced immense internal and external problems and changes. Imagine what disaster would have occurred had they not gone. If the Slavic peoples, who were in search for their identity, had not heard the Orthodox faith, it is very likely that they would have adopted Islam. In this case, surely the history of not only Russia, but even of Europe and the entire world would be completely different today.

Internal problems within each local Church certainly exist, and will continue to exist. These should not be disregarded. Yet, the most critical, internal problems will remain, whether we take our faith seriously and keep the entire Gospel, or choose to add or subtract from its commandments according to the priorities and needs of our own era. Our most important, internal problem, in the end, is whether we truly believe that Christ is "the way, the truth and the life" (In 14:6) for the entire world.

Understanding the Orthodox apostolic responsibility and worldwide mission is of vital importance because it broadens our horizons, and the visions of those to whom we address our missionary effort, and places us before the entire vision and purpose of the Church.

5. The issue of external mission, or better, worldwide mission, directly relates to our ecclesial self-conscience. We continuously repeat during liturgical gatherings, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." We consider this statement obvious, and often refer to it in our discussions with other denominations on the meaning of the Church. And yet, how can we profess this creed while taking our own parish, or our region, as our sole focus, totally cut off from the entire Church? The one Church, together with all its problems, must be continually before us, forming the theme of our prayer, acting as the criterion of our longing and actions. If we sincerely wish to live in an Orthodox way, then when we say "our Church", we are obliged to think of the Church, as mentioned in the Holy Eucharist, "from the one end to the other of the ecumene" (St. Basil).

Finally, what is the Church? We are not simply a group of pious, struggling followers of Christ. We are members of the Body of Christ, "which is the Church, the fullness of him who fills all in all." What is accomplished within us when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ? In this sacrament, we do not offer only an individual penitence, but become living cells of the mystical Body of Christ -people who think, suffer, and act like Him. In that understanding lies the essential problem of our ecclesial self-awareness.

Every ecclesiastical community needs to participate in the global responsibility of the Church, while simultaneously remaining local. In each concrete situation, the local Church represents something specific, through which it glorifies God and offers its witness. At the same time, however, it is of primary necessity that the local element, together with the global aspect, be experienced in a proper manner by each diocese and every parish.

Our Church is "apostolic" not only because of apostolic succession, but also because it continues the work of the apostles, keeping the apostolic spirit and flame which preaches the gospel to all creation. The Lord entrusted the Church with the continuation of His redeeming work, and the salvation of the entire world.

We conclude these theological points by saying that as inconceivable as it is for the Orthodox Church to have no liturgical life, so it is inconceivable for her to have no missionary life. The issue of missionary revival is related to rediscovering the meaning of the Church, and clarifying our ecclesial self-awareness. Mission is not simply some external practice, but the proper inner attitude which helps us live our Orthodox faith in an essential way, within its proper worldwide dimension.

C

In the third part of this paper, I would like to clarify how I feel we should live our apostolic responsibility within the world today.

1. Mission needs to be re-experienced as a dynamic movement of *freedom and love* in Christ's way - a movement of liberation from ourselves and our preconceived notions, fears, and prejudices, towards an acceptance of God's will with a wholehearted faith. We must be ready to follow the God of surprises, who is never given to dullness or boredom. True mission is always related to a "going out", and an acceptance of danger. This march presupposes a departure from our place, where we live and feel safe. We should do so for the love of God, and with the love of Christ. Christ Himself revealed that whoever follows Him, who is incarnated Love, discovers that nothing is freer, more powerful, and greater than unselfish love. Speaking to Him and about Him, with our tongue, in our silence, and through our activity, prayer, and even our own existence, forms the most precious and essential thing we can experience.

The World Council of Church's Commission and Evangelism, held in San Antonio, Texas in 19 brought forward the theme "Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way." Through the Orthodox contribution, this issue was given a deep theological dimension. Mission in Christ's way was presented as a mystery of unselfish and sacrificial love, which is revealed to us in the life of the Triune God. Mission is completed within the mystical presence and cooperation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22). The one who transmits the gospel enters personally into the mystery of the Holy Trinity's love. Through this entry, one's freedom reaches its culmination and perfection.

2. Mission will always remain a continuous assimilation of the mystery of the Cross - a sacrificed love and humility in the struggle against individual and social egocentrism. Living the cross on a personal level differentiates the Christian experience from any other experience. All things originate and reach their climax at this point in mission. At the Cross, universality and fullness intersect -universality represented by the horizontal piece of the cross, with the fullness embodied by the vertical. The Cross summarizes the worldwide dimension and missionary responsibility of Orthodoxy. In the Christian East, the ascetic ideal finds its most characteristic expression in monasticism. Nevertheless, we cannot limit it to this. This ideal penetrates every dimension of life and imbues the Christian community in various forms. It constitutes one of the most absolute imperatives of Christian life. "The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force" (Mt 11:12). In our era of deceptive prosperity and comfort, especially in the technologically developed

countries, we need to rediscover this spiritual "violence," this narrow way of abstinence and self-control, which completes the description of the Holy Spirit's fruit, which begins with love (Gal 5:22).

For the new century and millennium, I hope that the monastic vocation will more and more be combined with our apostolic responsibility, and vice-versa. The ascetic ideal which pushes a person to abandon all things and follow Christ with an intense eschatological anticipation, can be harmonized with mission, which itself emanates the expectation of God's kingdom coming to every human being at every corner of the earth.

3. Mission has to do with a continuous struggle for holiness. It is a radiation of holiness. The most efficient missionaries were the saints, who lived in the past as well as in the present, saints both known and unknown. The saints were people who repented with their entire being, having a deep sense of their sinfulness and powerlessness. Yet having surrendered themselves to the mercy and grace of God, they searched for inner purity and sincerity, uniting their thoughts, attitudes and will to the divine will. Their presence among us makes the presence of the God-man obvious. They radiate a theophany, giving the most decisive and steady witness. All who struggle to live in Christ -and this is exactly what saints do -hold all things, love all things, possess all things, and embrace with their love, sorrow, and prayer the entire world. All things are beneficial for them (Rm 8:17), and they do good to all.

St. Silouan, whom I mentioned before, prayed in the solitude of his skete, "If I could help but one person be saved, I would bless God to the end of the ages. But my heart suffers for the whole world. I pray and shed tears for the entire world, so that all people may repent and know God, and live in love, enjoying the freedom of God." And his disciple, the elder Sophronios, writes about him, "The Holy Spirit taught Silouan the love of God, and in that way made him worthy to truly experience love, and assume the life of all humanity. His prayer, which reached the fullest measure of intensity, was accompanied by abundant tears for the sake of the whole world. This made him familiar with, and bound him to, the entire Adam. For one who had experienced the resurrection of his soul, it was natural to recognize in every person his eternal brother." How much Orthodox witness is indebted to such prayers of the saints!

It is time for us to rediscover the holy enthusiasm of the saints, who at any given moment discovered the inaccessible beauty of the Beloved, the uniqueness of the Word, and counted everything as "refuse" (Phil. 3: 8) in order to gain and serve Christ. Such people were ready for the most audacious and daring tasks, ready to go even to the most remote places and face the greatest dangers.

4. It is time to intone the Gospel as *an abundance of gratitude and joy*, for the light, hope and fullness of life brought by His Resurrection. (Col. I: 12-13). He calls us to become his ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20-21), ambassadors for the kingdom of love.

This deep experience of joy, which pulsates within the heart of the believer, cannot be kept within the narrow limits of oneself. It radiates when offering the secret kernel that it forms, the Gospel. Through this we express thanksgiving to the Father more directly and

existentially. The central sacrament of the Church, the Divine Liturgy, that recapitulates and doxologically summarizes her faith, is a Divine Eucharist. It is a thanksgiving experienced in celebration. The strongest wine is the wine of the Divine Eucharist, which intoxicates us with unselfish love and sober joy which no one and nothing can take away from us (Jn 16:22).

All of us who consciously share in the liturgy must then return to our daily routine ready to continue another type of liturgy -"a liturgy after the liturgy" (a motto I had proposed in Etchmiadzin in 1975). This ongoing liturgy must be offered on the daily altar of our personal responsibility, performing our duty in the local setting, while looking at a universal perspective.

Drawing constantly from the well of Eucharistic inspiration and power, mission becomes a doxological movement declaring the final hope for humanity's future and that of the entire universe. Blessed are those whose hearts and faces are illuminated by the light of the Lord, who look toward Jesus and walk with Him, living in the power of the Resurrection, Blessed are those who have learned to accept labor, scorn, and persecution with hope, for the sake of witnessing for Jesus. Blessed are those who rejoice and are glad, "for righteousness' sake" (Mt 5:10). Blessed are those who offer kindness with a loving smile, giving the hope of Christ to the despised and poor of the world -even to sinners as well as to those who suffer despair even in their wealth.

The radiation of this essential joyful hope, a joy which quietly and absolutely overcomes sin, suffering and disdain, has been characteristic of a genuine Orthodox life and an authentic Christian community from the beginning. It is only with joy -the joy of unselfish love and the joy of the resurrected Christ's permanent presence -that the Church proceeds victoriously into the world. And if she loses this joy, she also loses the world.

In summary , I remind you that the world today has become a huge city, with the interdependence of peoples steadily increasing. More than ever, there exists the need to realize the apostolic responsibility of Orthodoxy within its worldwide dimension. We must look at history, and understand" our own duty, within a larger, universal and holistic dimension. We must act in a concrete place and time with a vision of the whole (*katholou*), with an Orthodox universal and eschatological vision. The whole Church must offer the entire Gospel to all the world, both to those near and far. She must care for all human beings, and for every expression of human life.

I conclude with a personal experience from Africa. After the inauguration of a new church in a mountainous region of Western Kenya, a deacon quietly told me: "Dionisia, the daughter of Fr Paul, died at noon. Will you tell him?" We arrived late at night at the house of mourning. The little girl, stricken mortally by malaria, was lying on a big bed, as if sleeping peacefully. "She was such a good child. She was always the first to greet me," whispered the afflicted father. We read a short funeral prayer, and I offered a few words of consolation.

Later, as I sat atone in an oil lit room of the school-house where we were staying, the rain fell off the banana leaves and zinc roof. I reflected on the days' events. I could hear a

drum beat away in the darkness, at the house in mourning. In my weariness, I wondered why I was here. Various thoughts about mission; filled my mind - preaching, love, education, civilization, peace, development. Suddenly, a light flashed and the essence of the matter lit up my exhausted mind. We bring the good news, the hope of resurrection. Every human being has a unique worth. They will rise again! Herein lie human dignity value and hope. Christ is risen! We teach them to celebrate the resurrection in the mystery of the Church, and offer a foretaste. And in a fleeting moment, I saw the little African girl running up to greet me, as was her custom, helping me to understand more precisely the kernel of Orthodox mission.

We live similar experiences, with slight variations, in Albania. With the Paschal greeting, "Christ is Risen!" we began the new era of democracy which followed the dark experience of living under the "shadow of death " for 23 years of absolute atheistic persecution, And the Orthodox faithful cheerfully responded, "Truly He is Risen!" The Paschal candle became the symbol of religious freedom for overcoming violence and respecting the human rights of all peoples and communities.

Here is the key to Orthodox witness - to fill people with the truth and hope of the resurrection, and to teach them to celebrate it within the Church.

What our brothers and sisters long for in their depression and loneliness, whether in the isolated corners of Africa, or in the outskirts of our large and rich cities of Europe and America, are not vague words of consolation, some material goods, or crumbs of civilization. They yearn, consciously or unconsciously, for human dignity and hope which will transcend death. In the end, they search for the living Christ, the perfect God-man, the one who is the way, the truth and the life. Human destiny culminates in the possibility of every human person being transfigured by the light of the Triune God, proceeding to "*theosis*" through grace.

Everyone, regardless of their age or class, whether rich or poor, obscure or famous, illiterate or learned, longs to celebrate the resurrection in his or her heart of hearts. Herein culminates the offer of the Orthodox presence and its paschal witness.