

Mission, Unity, Diaspora

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Until recently the word "mission" evoked primarily the activity of professional "missionaries" active in "non-Christian" countries with the help of their own mother Church. Before 1917, among the Orthodox churches the Orthodox Church of Russia was practically alone in a position to support this classical missionary activity both within the classical borders of imperial Russia and beyond (Japan, Korea, China, Alaska etc.), and made wide use of "missionary" methods. However the word mission had rather negative connotation among the peoples of the Middle East, because it was used to designate Protestant proselytizing, unsuccessful among the Muslims but quite active among Eastern Christians. Today the time has come to rethink the various meanings of mission, in an Orthodox perspective and in the light of the contemporary needs of the Church.

Historical developments of the twentieth century led to drastic changes. Most Christians recognize that there are no more "Christian" countries whose duty it is to christianize "pagans" beyond the seas. They discovered that the "world" in need of Christ's gospel is at their very doors. The traditionally Christian countries in the West and in the East have been transformed into secular countries with Christian minorities. Yet it appears that the Orthodox at least in their accepted vocabularies and official attitudes have not yet fully accepted the new situation. They still often speak and think in terms of Orthodox countries and of an Orthodox "diaspora", implying a "normal" situation in the first case and a sort of transitional, peripheral existence in the second. The situation is harmful for two reasons. First it shows an obvious lack of historical realism. Neither the new secular societies established in Eastern Europe, nor the Orthodox communities of the Middle East, nor even Greece, can be seen today as Orthodox Christian societies in the traditional and accepted sense of the word. Practically the Church represents a minority in all these areas, and in some of them this Orthodox minority has all the sociological characteristics of a foreign diaspora quite detached from its immediate milieu. This does not mean of course, that all these ancient Churches cannot envisage missionary possibilities for the future. On the contrary! Sometimes their minority status has actually enhanced their spiritual potential. This is certainly the case in some Churches in Eastern Europe. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, deprived of its originally political basis, can recover (or acquire) a supra-national prestige, which will give greater reality to its primatial diakonia. The Patriarchate of Antioch processes a great potential for carrying on the ancient tradition of Arab Christianity within the Moslem majority.

The same can be true of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, if it consciously and totally assumes its missionary responsibilities in Africa. But these potentialities will bear fruit only if the Church, abandoning the myths of the past, recognizes itself as "the little flock", "a seed" thrown into a fertile field, and identifies itself with its mission for the salvation of humanity. The second aspect which must lead the Orthodox to abandon the opposition between the purportedly "native" Orthodoxy and the diaspora, is that this opposition represents a grave theological mistake. The word "diaspora" refers to an Old Testament concept. In the Old Testament, God acted through the mediation of a "chosen people", Israel, to which He granted the promised land of Canaan, where Solomon built a temple and where the Messiah was to establish His reign. The Chosen People was called to cultivate this land and possess it, and any exile from it was seen as cursed by divine wrath. But the actual coming of the Messiah, born in Bethlehem and crucified outside Jerusalem's walls, revealed to humanity a new "promised land" in heaven, a new Jerusalem, expected to come "all prepared" (Rev. 21:2), and showed the whole world to be a mission field. "Believe me, said Jesus to the Samaritan woman, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem worship the Father...when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth (Jn. 4:21-24). Where is the "diaspora" then? The only acceptable answer to this question is that all Christians, whether they find themselves in Jerusalem or in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, are in diaspora, and that they reach the promised land only within the eschatological anticipation of the Eucharist and of prayer. Like the Jews of the diaspora, they are anywhere in the world, "sojourners and pilgrims" (1 Pet. 2: 11), having "no continuing city" and "seeking the One to come" (Heb. 13:14), but also knowing that in Christ and only in Him they are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). This is why the technical term " diaspora " is used in the New Testament only in the traditional Jewish Old Testament sense (Jn. 7:35; Jas 1: 1; Pet. 1:1), and it never appears in Orthodox canon law. Indeed was it not St. Paul's major preoccupation to affirm that the new Churches established by him in the midst of the pagan world were full fledged Churches, recognizing their spiritual ancestry from the Mother Church of Jerusalem, but in no way inferior to her in terms of the power of the spirit and the presence of Christ wherever two or three gathered in His name (Mt. 18:20)? Orthodox canonical texts all aim at accommodating the fundamental structure of the Church to changing political and social circumstances, but never compromise the essential principle that the Church, as such comes first. St. Paul, when the Corinthians wanted to split their community into several Eucharistic assemblies, indignantly catholicity asked the question: "Is Christ divided?" (Cor. 1:13). Similarly, the canons upheld the unity of the Church in every place; this was a way of maintaining Christians in their quality of "sojourners and pilgrims" and of reminding them that their true "dispersion" (diaspora) is a separation from the Kingdom of God, not from some earthly cultural home.

I fully understand of course that the word "diaspora" is used colloquially, and does not carry with it any conscious betrayal of the fundamental Christian vocation to be citizens of God's Kingdom. Furthermore, I do not want at all to minimize the spiritual riches and vigour of such authentic Orthodox "roots" as can be found in traditional Orthodox piety in Greece or in Russia and which stand in so obvious contrast to the shallowness found in so many Westernized communities of the "diaspora". I am only speaking of the unconscious spiritual mistake, so often made, which consists in envisaging the present and the future of Orthodoxy as inseparably

bound either to vestiges of a Byzantine political system, or to its illegitimate child, the secularized ethnic identification between nation and Church, occurred in the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

It seems obvious that if the contemporary Orthodox world is to recover an authentic missionary consciousness, it must overcome this spiritual mistake and recover that catholicity of mind which was so obvious in the apostles, the fathers, the saints, and which remains quite alive today in all authentic forms of the Orthodox tradition.

Our times witness a real revival of missionary spirit among many Orthodox. Participation in the ecumenical movement and a certain healthy emulation spurred by it have led to new ideas and concerns. But quite a substantial role in this revival was played by SYNDESMOS. Its original founders were already aware of the necessary connection between Orthodox unity-which was the main purpose of SYNDESMOS - and the Orthodox missionary responsibility. Indeed, it was at the Fourth General Assembly of SYNDESMOS, held in Thessaloniki on September 4-7, 1958, that a formal decision was taken to create an "International Orthodox Missionary Society". A provisional committee was appointed and a Secretariat was set up, headed by Anastasios Yannoulatos. The result of this decision was the establishment of the Centre *Porefthendes* in Athens. Since that time, the Centre and various initiatives have borne good fruits in East Africa and elsewhere.

However, the fundamental goal of SYNDESMOS was Orthodox unity; mission was seen as more than starting specialized missionary activities. Such activities were the necessary and creative expressions of a new spirit in serving the Church and in understanding Orthodox responsibility in the contemporary world. The remarkable vitality of SYNDESMOS in the following years; the constant support and blessings it received from the Ecumenical Patriarchate as well as from other Orthodox Churches of which the various groups affiliated with SYNDESMOS were members; the geographical expansion of the membership, which today includes representatives from the entire Orthodox world. These all place SYNDESMOS in a truly unique position for understanding what Orthodox mission to world means.

As the resolutions of the New Valaamo Assembly (1979) show, SYNDESMOS had already become fully aware of the fact that one of the most obvious obstacles to the credibility of the Orthodox witness today is the lack of canonical unity in areas where the Orthodox Church is most visible, where it is being observed and judged both by its friends and its critics alike, and, most importantly, by a secularized world in need of Christ's truth.

I have underlined earlier in this paper the basic ambiguity of the term "diaspora", which is so often used to describe the situation of the Orthodox communities in countries like Australia, Western Europe and America. My contention -based, I believe, on unquestionable biblical evidence -is that as long as these communities understand themselves as "diasporas", they will be unable to fulfill their mission as Churches. This does not imply at all, as many would think, that Orthodox immigrants in those countries lose their regional cultural identity and forget their ties with their motherland. Did not St. Paul boast of being "the seed of Abraham" (2 Cor. II/22), a faithful Jew, willing to die for his people? And still it is he who wrote and

preached in Greek to the Greeks, and became the one, of all the apostles, to be "the apostle to the Gentiles". Through him indeed the spirit of God transformed the small group of Jesus' disciples into the Church Catholic.

But can one require everyone to be a new St. Paul? Is every Orthodox Christian up to such an apostolic consciousness? On an individual basis, of course not. But the Church herself necessarily accepts the model given by St. Paul as a practical example of her mission to the world. Otherwise, she simply cannot be a Church any more. This is why true mission is always directed not only to those who are formally outside the Church, but to insiders also. The mission can -and should - always show some accommodation and flexibility, as Paul "made himself servant to all that he might win the more" (I Cor. 9:19). The Church has always adopted historical ways and ethos of the various nations. She adopted their languages shaped their cultures. Quite legitimately she became Serbian in Serbia, and Georgian in Georgia...Similarly in pluralistic societies, like contemporary America, she can and must reflect the country's pluralism, and therefore serve the immigrants as well as the native Americans. However -and this is crucial point -she must be in mission, serving all people without being enslaved to anyone. St. Paul could become "servant of all", only because he was "free from all men" (Cor. 9:19). This freedom is precisely what is lacking when the Church identifies totally with ethnic "diasporas", in fact renouncing the mission "to all". The problem is not that it helps the immigrants to preserve their human and religious identity, but rather that the Church accepts to be limited by the immigrant particular interests and goals which in turn are defined and supported by foreign ecclesiastical or political interests. The problem is not whether these interests are legitimate or not -they often are- but that they transform legitimate pluralism into division.

To make my thought quite clear on this point, I would like to stress the difference between the necessarily pluralistic society, and the disaster of the divided Church which loses its capacity to accomplish its mission. There is nothing harmful in an Orthodox ministry to the Russian émigrés in France, or to Greek speaking Americans in America; but the mission of the Church is obscured when native Frenchmen or Irish Americans are called to become Russians or Greeks when they join the Orthodox Church and when the Church itself, officially and vociferously, defines itself as "Russian" or "Greek".

It is at this point that my original objection to the term 'diaspora' is, I hope, clarified. The problem is not whether de facto ethnic "diasporas" exist or not -they obviously do, although they lack the theological and spiritual dimensions of the Jewish diaspora- but the problem is whether the Church as such is able to stand above them, to unify them, to exercise her pastoral ministry for them, leading them to the Kingdom of God -in other words whether she exercises her mission as One Holy Catholic and Apostolic.

As is well known, the issue appears on the agenda of the forthcoming Holy and Great Council. However, open discussion of the subject is continually delayed. The positions of the various autocephalous Churches have been made public. These positions do not always coincide with each other, but Orthodoxy does not recognize any other way to solve disagreements than the way of conciliarity. On the other hand it would be quite naive to think that a Holy and Great Council- when and if it meets -

will be able to solve the issue without the preliminary debate and serious preparation. It is my strong belief that SYNDESMOS can and should actively contribute to this debate. Actually, it began doing so at the Valaamo Assembly.

Personally, if I were in a position to make a formal proposal to the forthcoming Council, I would move that the following text be adopted, implying a special responsibility of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for its implementation:

"In areas and countries where two or more Orthodox autocephalous Churches are sending clergy to exercise a permanent ministry, canonical order requires the establishment of a united Church. Procedures to be followed are to be elaborated by consultation between all parties involved on the universal or local level. Pluralism of languages and traditions will be maintained and guaranteed wherever necessary, through the establishment of appropriate structures organized on a temporary basis."

Such a text-or asimilar,corresponding to the nature of the Church – would insure that the Orthodox Church will really assume and pursue its mission in countries where its existence is mistakenly seen today as one of a foreign-orientated "diaspora".

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