

Mission, Nature and Current Challenges

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A letter from Manos Koumbarelis, former President of SYNDESMOS, to the leaders and the youth of SYNDESMOS members

Reverend fathers and dear friends,

It was a conscious decision not to be in a hurry to explain openly what led me to announce to the Board of SYNDESMOS on 6 December 2000 my withdrawal from my duties as president of the Fellowship. I wanted to have time to pray and to allow the evaluation of the whole situation to become as clear as possible in my heart. The difficulties SYNDESMOS faces today, due to the insufficient participation of its members in its life, the malfunction of its Board and Executive Committee, and the temporary decreased effectiveness of the Secretariat, are not incidental. They are rooted in the present identity crisis of SYNDESMOS. The feeling that my efforts to respond to this crisis were isolated and ineffective led me to the decision to withdraw.

SYNDESMOS has a specific mission within the Body of the Church. Since its creation 50 years ago it has developed a nature and a vision. Over the years it was continuously observing, analysing, reflecting and responding to the challenges of each era by organising different types of activities. But the most important aspect of the role of SYNDESMOS is not what it does, but what it is. Today the majority of those who know SYNDESMOS - young Orthodox people, leaders of its member movements, members of its Board - are more or less able to say what SYNDESMOS does. The most informed may even be able to describe accurately its structure and way of functioning. But what SYNDESMOS is, very, very few can say. This is a sign that SYNDESMOS is progressively (and, dare I say, rapidly) becoming another ecclesiastical Institution or Organisation of the Orthodox Church. However, this is not its call. If one day this actually takes place, SYNDESMOS will be totally unable to fulfil its mission.

If I were to continue as the head of this administration until the end of its term in 2003, some good programmes would doubtless be reported to the next Assembly and everybody would be more or less satisfied. I believe that this can happen without me. This was not my aim when I was elected as SYNDESMOS president in Finland in July 1999. I had observed a deviation of SYNDESMOS from its original orientation and I hoped it could return to it. Now, one and a half years later, I realise that I have failed to inspire the Board to work towards this aim and to inspire SYNDESMOS member movements to seek to rediscover its nature. However, I do feel that my withdrawal could be beneficial. With this in mind, I will try to describe to you in the following pages SYNDESMOS's mission, nature and current challenges, based on a thorough study of SYNDESMOS's history and on a nine-year experience in the Fellowship.

I. SYNDESMOS's Mission

“Provincialism, abuse of the principle of Autocephaly, differences in languages and race, conflicts between churches and jurisdictions, are the plague of the Orthodox

world. Phyletism seems to be our practical heresy. The Church always allies with the state, the nation or the race. The Church cannot fulfil its mission on earth as long as the unity of the Orthodox is not achieved. Only when Orthodoxy is one, it may witness its faith before the heterodox. We should vigorously fight against the evils from which ecumenical Orthodoxy suffers."

[Extract from a letter of George Khodre, SYNDESMOS co-founder and present Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon, 1947]

"What are we, the Orthodox, going to do to avoid our sickness, namely, our indifference to one another, the one Orthodox Church to the other? What service can our youth offer today to the Orthodox Churches? This was our pain and yearning: How can we co-operate more effectively in our local Orthodox Churches, to help their work for the youth and to build brotherly contacts with the other Orthodox Churches?"

[Extract from a report of Nikos Nissiotis, SYNDESMOS co-founder and vice-president, on the Bossey meeting (1949) that led to the creation of SYNDESMOS]

Divisions of nationalistic or political origin still exist in the Orthodox Church and very often lead to indifference, mistrust and even hostility among local Orthodox Churches and their faithful. Still there is no worldwide permanent Body other than SYNDESMOS within the Church to feel real *"pain"* and to *"fight against these evils"*. The consciousness of the catholicity of Orthodoxy is an indispensable part of Orthodox Christian identity. It is SYNDESMOS's task to spread further this consciousness within the whole ecclesiastical Body through the youth. An administration responsible for little more than organizing successful inter-Orthodox youth gatherings is insufficient to fulfil SYNDESMOS's mission and respond to the challenges of a world more fragmented than ever. Only when those who serve SYNDESMOS prioritise pan-Orthodox Unity very high in their lives will it be possible to make a difference. A *true* SYNDESMOS will never be absorbed by the spirit of apathy of our time.

II. SYNDESMOS's Nature

"Mission is a consequence of unity. In short, if there is one Truth, we must be united in believing in this Truth. And if there is one Truth, we must let others know about it and not keep it selfishly to ourselves. In spite of all handicaps, the Orthodox Church has always carried out missions and is at present doing so. This is our chance to serve the Church. All initiative of course belongs to and will come from the Church; but at present we are the only existing pan-Orthodox body - a manifestation of the spirit of unity, which is the source of missions. We are left no choice, we must simply do it. The [missionary] Churches need material help, but [also] mainly devoted men. Not necessarily theologians and preachers, but doctors and social workers and any inspired men. What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?"

[Extracts from an introduction of John Meyendorff, SYNDESMOS co-founder, secretary and president, in the General Assembly (1958) in Thessaloniki, Greece]

"The problem of Orthodox unity among the national churches in the USA is acutely felt, especially in relation to the young people. "Will there one day be an American Orthodox Church?" is the question some of them are asking."

[Extract from a letter of Fr Alexander Schmemmann, SYNDESMOS co-founder, 1949]

“It is impossible to offer Orthodoxy separately in a world which is becoming a neighbourhood.

The problem is not merely to create a few missionary groups. The question is how the whole Church can be mobilised by this worldwide missionary vision.

The whole perspective of the ONE Church and its total needs is what should always be before our eyes...Selfish absorption in “our own” denotes that our belief in ONE Church is reduced to a mere verbal formula.

The Orthodox missionary should follow the footsteps of the first One sent by God: «who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many» (Mark 10: 45).

It is our duty to make the best use of all the opportunities and available facilities of the modern world for the extension of the Kingdom of God, but we should do this without falling in the temptation of superficial activism. Our supreme concern must be not what we should DO, but how should we BE a living witness to the presence of the Lord in the world.”

[Extracts from a lecture of Fr Anastasios Yannoulatos, SYNDESMOS vice-president and present Archbishop of the Church in Albania, in the General Assembly (1964) in Finland]

“The history of the Diaspora, especially in the last fifty years, has offered the sad picture of nationalistic divisions, political struggles, and canonical disorder. The norms of Orthodox Church structure have been ignored in many ways through the creation of parallel jurisdictions on the same territory, through divisions stimulated by political stands adopted by various groups and also by the impossibility, created by historical circumstances, of working relationships among Churches in various countries. We confess that the divine presence of the Holy Spirit, a continuous miracle expressing God’s faithfulness to His Church, has alone been able to preserve Orthodoxy from disintegration in these difficult years...

It was sorrowfully recognized that many young Orthodox are deeply frustrated by internal conflicts, which divide the Church of the Diaspora. Sometimes the youth lose interest in the life of the Church and leave the Orthodox community. Too often, those who want to join the Orthodox Church find an obstacle in these conflicts and divisions...

[Our] ultimate goal... [should] be the elaboration of canonical structures, which would reflect on the one hand the fundamental demands of organic unity, realized locally, and on the other hand the reality of languages and traditions, which do not contradict this fundamental unity...”

[Extracts from the statement produced by SYNDESMOS Consultation (1967) in Chambesey, Switzerland]

“Christian mission is never triumphalistic and never promises success, which is probably the most difficult thing to accept in our civilization, where man usually works to succeed. There is a prediction of failure in the mystery of the Cross and, at the same time, a triumph in the Cross; but neither is formulated in the world’s terms. It is a different kind of triumph, one which is eternal, true, authentic; one not expressed in terms of human success. These three elements are important: the necessity of mission, the conflict, and the absence of triumphalism.”

[Extract from a lecture of Fr John Meyendorff in a SYNDESMOS meeting (1971) in USA]

“SYNDESMOS does not belong to you or to me, to the Executive Committee, nor to our member movements. It belongs to the Church, to God, and has been given to us to

be used for His Glory. Let us continue to manifest His Glory, in and for the world, in and for our Church.”

[Extract from the address of Fr Rauno Pietarinen, SYNDESMOS secretary general, in the General Assembly (1983), in Crete, Greece]

“This experience of coming together and being united by our Orthodox faith is what constitutes SYNDESMOS, or rather this gift of SYNDESMOS is given to us because of the faith we hold. SYNDESMOS’s greatest strength and potential lies with its membership. The youth movements of the local Churches and dioceses, the Theological Schools and their students, are living the life of their local Churches. Their experience and insight are the greatest resources SYNDESMOS has. Our task is to find ways to use these invaluable talents in the right way by determining how to share them with each other so that they may multiply in the process for the benefit of all.”

[Extracts from the address of Fr Heikki Huttunen, SYNDESMOS president, in the General Assembly (1995), in Cyprus]

The above extracts mark a history of 50 years; a history that teaches us what the characteristics of SYNDESMOS are and how it is called to offer its service to the Church and the world. In the following lines emphasis is given to some of these characteristics questioned today.

1. SYNDESMOS of givers, not of takers

In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, a priority of SYNDESMOS was to help the new missionary churches. Initially none of the members of SYNDESMOS came from these churches. But they did not ask the very common questions that many SYNDESMOS members ask today: “What we will get from SYNDESMOS, what will be our benefit from becoming members?” And their youth did not ask: “Where shall I go this summer?” Nor they whispered in their heart: “Isn’t it a good opportunity for me to improve my curriculum vitae by taking a position in the Board of SYNDESMOS”. What they asked in the words of Meyendorff was: “What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?” In the 1970s membership in SYNDESMOS was extended to Theological Institutions in order to allow the youth of Eastern Europe, where the existence of youth movements was prohibited, to participate in SYNDESMOS life. The Finns, to give another example, although not having brothers and sisters from the Oriental Orthodox Churches amongst themselves, were fighting the most for their rights. Western Orthodox initiated in the 1990s youth leadership training courses in Eastern Europe, recognizing the urgent needs of the local Churches. All this happened because these people were asking themselves: “What can we do to meet this need of our brethren?” Because this is surely how the Christian thinks in whatever state he is.

2. SYNDESMOS functions with the blessing of the local Churches, not under their control

SYNDESMOS by nature may not be controlled by any one of the local Orthodox Churches because it includes members coming from all of them. SYNDESMOS is of the Orthodox Church. Its ecclesial basis derives from the fact that it continuously seeks to receive the blessing of all local Orthodox churches, that its membership includes exclusively youth organizations and theological institutions that function with the blessing of their local Bishop, and that wherever SYNDESMOS organizes an activity this is done with the blessing of the local Bishop. However, a careful reader of the historical texts

above will clearly recognize that nowhere is SYNDESMOS identified with the local Churches.

Everybody knows that there are differences between the local Orthodox churches. They do not even agree on the same catalogue of Orthodox Patriarchates and Autocephalous churches worldwide. If the participants of any SYNDESMOS event or Board meeting were always expressing the official opinion of their local church then SYNDESMOS would not exist. After their election, the members of the Board of SYNDESMOS no longer represent their movement, country or local Church. They should strive to represent all the Orthodox youth they know throughout the world. For as long as a number of Board members bring to its meetings a self-understanding of a representative controlled and sent by a local Church, very little progress can be made towards the fulfilment of SYNDESMOS's mission.

3. SYNDESMOS serves the worldwide (=ecumenical) vision of the ONE Church, not a sum of regional visions - SYNDESMOS is ONE family

For four decades SYNDESMOS organized very few events each year. However, these were organized by the Board as a whole, by people coming from different countries and jurisdictions. This was very time-consuming, but all these events preserved the pan-Orthodox nature of SYNDESMOS. Nobody saw himself or herself as a guest in another's event. Everybody was both guest and host everywhere in the world knowing that *"here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come"* (Hebr. 13: 14).

In recent years, we have started organizing a lot of events each year. Very often, however, despite the fact that modern means of communication and transport have made internationally organized events much easier than in the past, several of these events preserved a strong local character. At the same time, being unconsciously influenced by a recent secular trend of strengthening international bonds among neighboring countries with common social characteristics (regions), Orthodox people, and soon SYNDESMOS members, developed a regional self-consciousness (for example, in the Balkan peninsula, North America, the Middle East, Western Europe and Northern Europe).

Initially this seemed to be a positive development because it increases efficiency, widens the spectrum of impact of SYNDESMOS on the youth and strengthens inter-jurisdictional relations among youth with common cultural characteristics. But soon it proved (unfortunately, only to the very few who realize it) to threaten seriously the very existence of SYNDESMOS by introducing a new mode of division that is all the more dangerous for its seeming harmlessness. In 2000 only 3 out of 16 members of the Board of SYNDESMOS participated in and organized events outside of their own region. In many cases our youth fulfils its need for living pan-Orthodox Unity by participating in a regional substitute for SYNDESMOS life, decorated by a few guests from other regions. A fragmented SYNDESMOS (= bond of Unity) is nothing but a self-contradictory organization with no long-term perspective.

There is an urgent need to return to the experience of the ONE worldwide SYNDESMOS family. This is not a call to return back to an era that some call elitist. It is a call to go forward to an era in which some youth from all over the world will experience the authentic vision of SYNDESMOS, in which they will be deeply inspired and will dedicate themselves to inspire other youth in their local churches towards the same vision. Only then, like in the past, people will be sensitive enough to understand the problems of

their brethren everywhere in the world. “*What comes upon me daily: the deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not burnt with indignation?*” (2 Cor. 11: 28-29)

4. SYNDESMOS works in neglected fields of Church life

Examples taken from the past may help us again to identify the fields on which SYNDESMOS focuses its work. When in the 1950s and 1960s SYNDESMOS worked on “external mission” and founded the Missionary Centre “Porefthendes” (= “Go ye”), the local Orthodox churches were doing very little in this field. SYNDESMOS contributed significantly to moving things forward and today, although much still remains to be done, several local churches have organized structures that constantly support the missionary churches. When SYNDESMOS spoke openly in the 1960s against the canonical irregularity of jurisdictions in the “Diaspora” nobody was officially accepting to discuss the issue. Today it is a core part of an official, permanent dialogue among local Orthodox churches. Furthermore, official dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches was also initiated long after SYNDESMOS introduced the participation of youth from the Oriental Orthodox churches into its life (even as early as 1949 in Bossey). Today, we are called to interpret the spirit of the SYNDESMOS tradition and not just to try to imitate its past. International events that may be very well organized by a member movement or a group of member movements are highly valued and should be supported by SYNDESMOS through promotion. But they are not true SYNDESMOS events. SYNDESMOS should always seek to identify new needs, not prioritised by the local churches, and to take initiatives by showing ways to meet these needs. When this is done and once local churches themselves begin to meet these needs within their own structures, the role of SYNDESMOS finishes. This is SYNDESMOS’s service to the Church if it is to continue to “belong to the Church”. Otherwise SYNDESMOS risks becoming a para-ecclesiastical organization.

5. SYNDESMOS, a prophetic voice, a voice of freedom and independence

At a glance, one understands from the above-cited historical SYNDESMOS texts, that SYNDESMOS does not hesitate to touch burning issues. Its word is bold and clear. There is no hesitation to “*put the finger into the print of the nails*” (John 20:25). There is no compromise.

One can also draw another conclusion by considering the past. The text of the Consultation of 1967 on the Diaspora was bold but careful and respectful to the Church. That is why it was received well and contributed to a process of progress that is slow but exists. The letter, addressed to all Orthodox Bishops by the SYNDESMOS Festival (1988) in Spetses Island, Greece, spoke the truth, but in some areas with unsuitable language. It was received as disrespectful and failed to be a voice of the youth heard by the Bishops of the Church. Since then SYNDESMOS did not dare to make any similar attempt. What we say is extremely important. How we say it is important too, if we want our word to be constructive.

The one who signs this letter said in a small address to the last Assembly: “Lately we have started to pay too much attention to be smooth and pleasant. SYNDESMOS should always continue working under the blessing of the Church, but should also retain its freedom and independence. I dream of a SYNDESMOS who acts in the Church like a

mature teenager within a family. Challenging everything with respect. Making small revolutions. Struggling for renewal”.

One may say that after 50 years of life SYNDESMOS is too old for this. If SYNDESMOS is or has become ‘of this world’ then it grows old, it partakes in the corruption of the world, it tastes with pleasure the sinful power of this world and will soon die. If it is part of the Body of the Church, then it partakes in the mystery of the Church that is always kept new and youthful. Times change, challenges change, our responses change, our activities change, but “*Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever*” (Hebr. 13: 8). So is the Church and so too should be SYNDESMOS, if we still want it to be ‘in the world’ but not ‘of the world’. SYNDESMOS is in God’s hands, but He has entrusted to us its responsibility. Let us pray that His mercy will not allow us to be proved unworthy of it.

6. SYNDESMOS of humbleness

SYNDESMOS was always humble, powerless and poor. But Lord’s “*strength is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Cor. 12: 9). This was the price of freedom and independence, and a price that is worthy to pay. I am sure that several administrations in the past have tried to change this, as it is difficult to resist the temptation of the easier life of an established organization. But thanks to God they failed.

Lately, the temptation has come back more strongly. The world wants to absorb SYNDESMOS. Some people who have a great estimation of high status, even within ecclesiastical structures (ignoring the fact that it is incompatible with the spirit of the Orthodox Church), try to achieve such status for SYNDESMOS or offer it to SYNDESMOS as a gift. In several cases a false witness of the SYNDESMOS spirit is given to young people who experience SYNDESMOS life for the first time. SYNDESMOS should remain humble. Otherwise it will lose its spiritual value and its existence will become meaningless.

III. SYNDESMOS present challenges (Future actions?)

“[The board member] is supposed to bring people together, so that Orthodox (young) people from his/her region understand deeply why they should meet, have common activities and seek for unity. SYNDESMOS projects are glamorous in a way, whereas daily church life is not. It is not that difficult to persuade people that a trip to Albania is good for their spiritual growth or their Orthodox self-awareness. But it is quite a challenge to find a way to give them the motivation needed to go and meet the Greek or Romanian Orthodox in the church round the corner. What is true for inter-jurisdictional relations on a local level is also true for relations within one jurisdiction. Many people (young and not so young) just don't feel they need to go and meet other Orthodox in their own town or region.

I don't want people to feel they are working for SYNDESMOS, or for Orthodox unity, or Orthodox youth. I want them to do things and feel inspired while doing them, even if it is washing the dishes, driving someone to the airport, making phone-calls, or writing thank-you letters. And I know it is only possible through mutual respect, trust, and friendship. I know that if I am inspired, if the people with whom I am doing things are inspired, the inspiration will spread, and doing things for SYNDESMOS or Orthodox youth or Orthodox unity will always be a blessing, not a burden. I would like to make it so

that it is exciting to prepare and run a SYNDESMOS project. And I know it is possible, even if it is difficult.

Everything I said about the local work of a SYNDESMOS representative, I believe also applies to the work of the board. If the members of the board don't feel they grew spiritually as a result of the decision-making procedure, the whole thing is a failure. We absolutely must bear in mind that if we don't know/trust/respect/love each other in the board, SYNDESMOS cannot work properly on an international level.

SYNDESMOS, SYNDESMOS board, SYNDESMOS members are witnesses of Christian love, and must never forget it, no matter how difficult it can sometimes be, no matter how big the various temptations can be.”

These words of a member of the current Board of Administration describing in the beginning of the term her vision for the work in SYNDESMOS constitute the greatest challenge for SYNDESMOS today: the challenge of the spirit in which we should BE and DO: the spirit of love, trust, respect, friendship, sincerity and inspiration.

In the following lines I will try to describe briefly some of the current challenges of SYNDESMOS, starting by those referring to its internal life. I repeat that any effort to respond to them without the above spirit will be in vain.

1. Membership

In the period 1953 - 1989 SYNDESMOS membership increased slowly, carefully and progressively from 7 member movements to 48 (average growth: approximately one member per year). In 1992 (General Assembly, Moscow) twenty-six (26) new members were accepted in SYNDESMOS and in 1995 (General Assembly, Cyprus) forty-five (45). This growth of 71 members in six years (12 members per year) means that for every two members SYNDESMOS had three new ones. Almost everybody thought at the time that this was a sign that SYNDESMOS's service to the Church had at last reached recognition. The revival of youth work in the Orthodox Church was reflected in SYNDESMOS and huge new perspectives were opened. However, there were some significant drawbacks that nobody predicted at that time:

a) Until 1992 the expansion of SYNDESMOS allowed the new members to be integrated into the spirit of the Fellowship through their contact with the majority of the old members. After 1995, when the new members suddenly became the majority, the life of the Fellowship becomes dominated by an overall confusion of identity. Often in a SYNDESMOS event there are very few people who can say what SYNDESMOS is. Worse still, some people transmit an image of SYNDESMOS that does not correspond to its nature.

b) Several new members have never really participated in SYNDESMOS life. They do not send youth in SYNDESMOS projects, they do not try to seek for ways to communicate and co-operate with other Orthodox youth etc. Often their youth is not informed about SYNDESMOS life and the leadership keeps the information sent by the Secretariat for itself. Additionally, very limited financial support is offered to SYNDESMOS, which is falsely considered by some movements to be a “rich western organization from which we should aim to get some help”.

This situation has to change and the following suggestions may be examined:

a) To perform a thorough survey of SYNDESMOS membership. Members that are generally inactive or have no real interest in participating in SYNDESMOS life, or their structures do not allow them to, should after common agreement withdraw from membership. Today there are about 50 out of the 126 SYNDESMOS members that do not comply even with the most basic criteria for SYNDESMOS membership. They come from all regions all over the world.

b) New members to be accepted with great care. In general, membership to be granted only to youth organizations that have already shown continuous active participation in SYNDESMOS life for at least 3 years. Anyway every organization may send participants to SYNDESMOS events without being a member of SYNDESMOS.

c) To initiate a seriously coordinated effort to strengthen the understanding of SYNDESMOS among the youth of the active members. The only way to achieve this is to organize visits to their meeting places in their countries of small teams of experienced SYNDESMOS people, who will directly talk with the youth.

2. General Secretariat

The expansion of SYNDESMOS, the new potentials and demands combined with the limited resources of SYNDESMOS make it impossible for the General Secretariat to fulfil properly its duties for as long as it functions in the way it has functioned up until today. The following proposals may be examined, given that it is not realistic and maybe not desirable that more than two people work in the secretariat:

a) Specific tasks (editing publications, preparation of the first stages of “SYNDESMOS News”, selling SYNDESMOS publications, web site management, writing applications for projects etc) to be officially assigned to young people or youth groups, who do not work in the secretariat and are willing to offer voluntarily their services under the guidance of the secretariat. This will practically constitute the support of the secretariat by the members.

b) The Board members to be able to assist the secretariat. Objective criteria for their election to be set, as it is mentioned in the following paragraph.

c) The term of the secretary general and the assistant secretary not to end simultaneously so that when a new person enters the secretariat, he/she can cooperate for at least a year with an experienced one. In general, the function of the secretariat has to be radically reconstructed in order to meet the current needs of the Fellowship.

3. Board of Administration

Since the Board continues to have serious problems after five years experience of following the governing model of SYNDESMOS introduced in the General Assembly of Cyprus, such a model proves to be insufficient. The following proposals may be examined:

a) The number of vice-presidents to be reduced from 4 to 3 and of the representatives from 11 to 7. A Board with 16 members, apart from the secretaries, cannot

function properly. One with 11 members will have more chances. Sub-regions not represented in the Board to be created.

b) The members of the Search Committee that carry out the elections in the General Assemblies and the regional representatives to have participated in at least 3 international SYNDESMOS events in the last 4 years before the Assembly.

c) The president and the vice-presidents to be active members of a member movement of SYNDESMOS, to have organized at least 3 international SYNDESMOS events in the past and to have performed successful fundraising efforts for the benefit of the Fellowship.

d) When objective reasons do not allow a member of the Board to fulfil his/her duties for more than a year, his/her position is automatically removed.

4. Regionalisation

It is true that during the past years about half of the regions have strengthened their internal links and work. This has seriously weakened the overall unity of the Fellowship. A dynamic balance between the strength of the regions and the unity of the body of SYNDESMOS has to be found. At the moment there is an urgent need to support the body as a whole. The Board members have to co-organize events in regions outside of their own. Inter-regional events have to be organized by the initiative of the regions or member movements coming from different regions. The pan-Orthodox vision of SYNDESMOS has to be emphasized and realized at every opportunity. It is important to inspire the youth to feel the need for this once again.

5. Integration of the youth of the Oriental Orthodox member movements

Great emphasis has been given over recent years to the membership status of the members from the Oriental Orthodox churches. SYNDESMOS has also been involved in the theological dialogue and thought that could even press the churches to accelerate the process towards the restoration of full unity. The results were rather poor. At the moment this procedure is stuck. However, SYNDESMOS has a much more important role to play now: to focus on the integration of the Oriental Orthodox youth in its life. Those Orthodox people who live in societies where the two families do not coexist, do not even know how the others really are in their ecclesiastical life and what they believe, while the Synods of their churches discuss the possibility to accept or reject the restoration of full unity. SYNDESMOS's task is to serve the need of bringing together open-minded young people of the two families in all SYNDESMOS events and ask them to share when they return home their experience with their communities.

6. SYNDESMOS contribution to Christian unity

Since its very first steps SYNDESMOS has been seeking to witness the Truth and the Orthodox way of life to the heterodox in order to promote the efforts for visible Christian unity. In the recent years, Orthodox participation in ecumenical events has not always been prepared with a sufficient sense of responsibility. Today SYNDESMOS needs to contribute further to the efforts of preparing Orthodox young people for a responsible representation in ecumenical events. It should select carefully in the beginning of each year the events to be represented and send experienced youth of diverse ethnic origin to the most official of them, while introducing less experienced youth to ecumenical life in events where wider youth participation is possible. Participants should

be well instructed in the faith and tradition of the Church in order to serve as living witnesses. At the same time a series of bilateral youth programmes should be initiated, in which Orthodox youth from traditionally Orthodox countries and those from newly established churches will have the opportunity to learn about how the youth of another Christian church experience their ecclesiastical life and faith, and share with them their own experience. The time has come for people to be prepared to participate in the ecumenical dialogue, knowing each other well and being free from prejudice and misconceptions.

7. Discuss again the challenges our Church faces today - Express openly an opinion

The situation in our Church has once again reached a critical point. I believe that SYNDESMOS should take again an initiative to allow the youth to express itself more clearly and constructively. Certainly not only with a new, short, clear and respectful letter to the Bishops, but also by new methods through which the youth may influence directly their communities. I would dare say that there is time for SYNDESMOS to speak:

a) Again on **Panorthodox Unity**. The tensions among the local churches, even of the same ethnic origin are getting worse and worse. The schisms are multiplied together with a general confusion. Our spiritual and ecclesiastical life is affected by this situation, which we cannot accept any longer. We need once again to speak up loudly, but humbly. Church politics, power games, ambitions to take ecclesiastical offices, are foreign and malignant elements for the Body of our Church and they have to be expelled from It. We should constantly and sincerely pray to God to give us again the gifts of Unity and Humbleness.

b) On the crisis of the **contemporary Orthodox Theology**. Despite a long history of contribution to Orthodox Theology in the past, SYNDESMOS has not played a significant role in the promotion of theological thought in recent years. Contemporary Orthodox Theology suffers from a crisis. The great Orthodox theologians of the 1950s, '60s and '70s contributed to the Church the rediscovery of forgotten resources of Orthodox Theology, they applied the teachings of the Fathers of the Church to the problems faced by their contemporaries in their everyday lives and at the same time they managed to be in a dialogue with the People of God, with each other and with the "average", well educated, but less "creative" theologians. These three elements, more or less, do not wholly characterise their younger successors, who are often less willing to listen than to speak, do not very much enjoy interaction, and although great scholars, they are not equally experienced in Church life. Today we witness the existence of "islands" of rather isolated, theologically active circles. SYNDESMOS needs to bring together some eminent, young representatives of these circles and to contribute to the creation of an international network of people able to speak on Orthodox theological matters with a global perspective and capable of proposing to Orthodox youth, who struggle to live in Christ, a modern pastoral interpretation of Orthodox dogma.

c) On **new-conservatism and isolation from the world**. The youth that live in the Church progressively become more and more isolated from the rest of the youth, especially in the traditionally Orthodox churches. We develop our own terminology that even "traditionally Christian societies" do not understand any longer, we live in our sheltered environments, we socialize with those who agree with us and we consider others strange, but we do not pray for them day and night. We teach our people to live in the fear of those who threaten us and we constantly want to protect our secular rights. Even when

we have the sincerity to deny that we express the Church of Christ, “others” still think that we are the Church. They feel that the Church is not open to them, that we like to criticize and condemn them, that we are full of sorrow and unable to love. The missionary spirit of the Orthodox Church, without which the Door of Paradise will not be opened to us, does not characterize our life.

This attitude dominates plenty of Church circles. It does not describe SYNDESMOS and any newcomers to the Fellowship should understand this from the start. SYNDESMOS is a child of openness, of the desire to witness to the world and to gather all the children of God around Christ. Dialogue is the air that it breathes; Truth is the ground that it steps on.

A few months ago I was in a SYNDESMOS programme in a traditionally Orthodox country. A journalist insisted on meeting me personally and alone. When we finally managed to find a gap in the programme he told me: *“I write for the local newspaper. I am an atheist and I come from an atheistic family, but your group impressed me. You are normal; you laugh; you even sing; you are so alive. You are not very much like the Orthodox I know. I want to know about you. Is SYNDESMOS always like this or this is by chance?”* The world needs love, hope and joy. Let us pray that SYNDESMOS will continue to witness the Resurrection of our Lord in the world.

A little over a year ago I wrote to the SYNDESMOS Board: *“I have recently been thinking a lot again of those who were before me in the position I hold now in SYNDESMOS. Maybe some of them didn’t do much, but with their presence they were of great spiritual benefit for many people and they offered great services to the Church. For the Christian has first to be and then to do. I feel very strongly that I lack this spirituality and I would like to ask you all to forgive me for any of my past actions that were not characterized by a Christian spirit. I would like to ask you to keep me always in your prayers and to help me and forgive me in the future too when my weakness will misguide me.”* Once again I make the same request to the members of the Board, especially those towards whom I have behaved with a spirit of criticism lacking in patience and love.

I ask for your forgiveness too. Please pray for me.
May our Lord Jesus Christ guide and strengthen you in your service to His Church.

With much love and respect

Manos Koumbarelis